



# Nerd Jock Hockey (Heartbreak Hockey)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Ari Meyer is the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and I hate him for it.

Jocks like Ari Meyer don't go for geeky nobodies like me. When he bats his dreamy eyes in my direction, I assume that it's a prank. His fellow hockey goons wouldn't hesitate to pick on the glasses-wearing nerd behind the concession stand, why should I expect differently from him?

I want it, though. I want him so fucking badly.

Is it really so far-fetched to think that the Adonis on hockey skates might be into me?

Irrationality prevails, and I find myself falling right into his beefy, hockey-stick-wielding arms. But it's not that I don't recover from rejection or heartbreak well. I don't recover from it. Like, at all. It's a monumentally bad idea to let myself have this much hope. What little self-esteem I have might never recover if this goes sideways. I'll turn into one of those crotchety old men who yells at people to get off his lawn, bitter and alone.

Someone please tell me how to say no.

A sweet novella-length story set in the Heartbreak Hockey Universe, several years before book one, featuring these tropes:

Nerd/Jock \* Forced Proximity \* Grumpy/Sunshine \* He's mine, so back TF off \* Opposites

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

One

Cody

Ari Meyer is the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and I hate him for it. Tall, of course. I don't know exactly how tall, but a lot taller than me. Maybe six feet—at least six feet. He's a wall on the ice—muscles for days, shoulders that could damn a river. The amount of tone the man has in his biceps alone is ridiculous, but it's not just the way he's sculpted, he moves with the kind of sure confidence someone like me can only dream of. He's comfortable in his skin, standing with his chest held high, his mess of tawny hair flopping away as he adjusts his ball cap. And his fingers. What would they feel like, trailing up my torso?

Meanwhile, everything about me is boring. Dull. Flat brown eyes. Lackluster dark brown hair. And I wear big nerdy glasses to boot. I work out, so I'm in shape, but they're fairly useless gym-wrought muscles. I can lift shit and put it down, but I could never move on the ice like Ari does. I could take up yoga, maybe. Would that help? I dunno.

I slump.

Man, I wish I couldn't see him from where I'm sitting—where I'm slumped—either. And that's from behind the concession stand where I work, sitting on a stool, waiting for them to finish up so that I can serve them.

Five nights a week, I work at the rink's concession stand, adding hot dogs to the roller grill, pouring beers and sodas, and ringing up candy purchases. Two times a week, Ari and his fellow hockey goons rent the rink for beer league hockey. I can't go home until they're done. And they are done playing, but they've taken their sweet-ass time getting off the ice, goofing around, talking.

Hurry up already.

Maybe if I scowl in their direction long enough, they'll take a hint. Probably not, though. I know all about "jock" types from my days of being bullied in high school. They're self-absorbed, highly unaware, competitive assholes.

I thought—for a minute—that Ari was different, but he isn't. If he was, he wouldn't be friends with an asshole like Doug.

God, they're making a lotta fucking noise over there. If they don't stop, I'll kick them out. I'm not just any employee, I'm the night manager. Their voices echo through the otherwise quiet rink, disrupting the peace. Ari's using the puck like a hacky sack off his stick. One, two, three, four, five ...

He gets ten in before his idiot friend Doug knocks it away from him. I'd be pissed. Ari laughs. Mr. Carefree. Guess there isn't much to care about when you're that beautiful.

Finally, finally , they disappear into the locker room, and I can finally hear myself think for the thirty minutes it'll take them to shower and change, watching the hot dogs roll, the whirr of the Slurpee machine vibrating between my ears. I rub my hands together, blowing hot air into my cupped palms. I do up the top button of my sheep's wool mackinaw, trapping the heat against my torso, and pull my toque to cover my ears.

I hop from my stool as soon as they emerge, storming my stand. It's a frenzy to get them fed and hydrated, but at least I've got an idea of them, of their likes and dislikes. I know how many hot dogs to put on the grill, and how many Red Bulls to stock the fridge with.

Ari's last. He leans on my counter, resting on his forearms, his hair curling from under the sides of his backward hat, full lips smiling all the way to his cornflower blue eyes. Even though he's usually fair-skinned, he's retained some of the tan leftover from summer that only ended a couple of weeks ago.

His lips twist his smile just enough to hint at a thought that's crossed his mind. What's he up to?

"Hiya, Codes."

I whip my cloth at him. "Get off my counter. I just wiped it."

He removes himself. Why am I like this? I liked how close he was, but my skin jitters when he's near me.

"Well, aren't you a snappy little turtle?" he says, but he's still smiling. Flirting. Maybe.

"What do you want?"

"Licorice and a soda."

All sugar. I frown and shove a hot dog at him along with a bottle of water. Might not be the best thing for him, but it's better than a bucket of sugar. "That'll be fifteen dollars."

“This is the strangest looking licorice I’ve ever seen,” he says, but accepts the items and pays me. The way he’s staring at me, trying to figure me out, long enough for my heart to pick up the pace. “Any chance of me gettin’ a small package of licorice? I love it so.”

“No.”

“How about a date, then?”

A date? That is so not the same as licorice.

Words catch in my throat. Ari’s a God. Gods don’t ask former science geeks out on dates with them. And sure, high school was six years ago, but it was such a living hell for me that it might as well have been yesterday. Hell, I’m not even a former science geek. I have an undergrad degree in engineering with a physics major. I work here because Mom needed the help while Dad recovers from a minor knee surgery, and I don’t know what I want to do with my life yet. I’m taking a pause.

Ari’s fucking with me. He’s got to be fucking with me.

“I’m ... I don’t. No.” I swallow. Can I take my no back? Would it look weird? I think what I actually want to say is yes, but I don’t know. Are you allowed to respond to that question with an “I’ll think about it?”

Maybe he’d touch me during our date with those strong-looking hands. Bet they’d be rough. I wouldn’t like gentle hands. I’d get bored. Ari wouldn’t be boring. I bet he’d be a confident and savage lover, even though he’s not like that in person. Well maybe a bit, but you’d miss it if you didn’t look close enough.

And I’m always looking closely at Ari.

Doug wanders to the counter, licking his greasy fingers. Yeah, that Doug. The asshole. He puts an arm around Ari and my nails dig into my palm. He kisses Ari on the cheek. My nails pierce skin.

“Stop,” Ari says. “I’m trying to convince Cody to give me a chance, and you’re ruining it.”

Doug raises an incredulous brow. “Really? Him? Didn’t think that was your type.”

That. I’m a that.

And he’s ruined it. Ruined everything. Ari’ll realize that he made some sort of tactical error asking me on a date. I said no, but somehow he knew my “no” was about as real as the meat in that hot dog sitting in front of him. Rocks of ice sink to the bottom of my gut, anchoring me to the floor.

Ari shoves him. His friend. “You’re a real charmer, Doug. Either apologize or get the fuck outta my face.”

“Option two,” he says. “I’m not apologizing to nerd boy.”

My cheeks flame. My eyes find the ground interesting.

“I’m gonna beat his face in for that once we get to the parking lot. He’s a real shithead sometimes,” Ari says. “So? What do you say? I’d love to take you somewhere. Bet we’d have fun. I’ll let you tell me what to eat.”

I almost smile. I want to smile. I won’t let myself smile.

I don’t want to like Ari as much as I do.

“I’m taken,” I lie.

“Taken as in, you have a person already?”

“Is that so hard to believe? Too hard to believe that someone like me has a person?” I let my eyes meet his, or force them to more like, so I can lie straight to his face.

“No. I thought the whole hot dog thing was flirting. I took it as the sign I was looking for so I could finally work up the courage to ask you out.”

Courage? Why would he need more courage? The man is a lion full of courage. I’ve watched him play hockey. The things he does on a sheet of frictionless frozen water. Sometimes, I’ve feared for his life.

“You eat horribly.”

“So do the other guys, don’t see you refusing to sell them licorice.”

Shit. I have nothing for that because he’s right. I could give a fuck about his stupid friends. I’m only worried about his insides. “Yeah, well, guess you can go now.” He needs to go before my lip trembles; before the tears come. He’s the last person I wanted to look stupid in front of, but thanks to Doug, now I do.

“I need a job,” he says.

I scrunch my brows. “A job?”

“Uh, yeah. Thanksgiving’s coming up, and I have a big family to feed. You know there are a few of us Meyers.”

There were at least three of them, including him, that went to our high school. “What

are you doing spending fifteen dollars on hot dogs if you need turkey money?”

He shrugs. Does he ever not smile like the world’s happiest golden retriever? “In my defense, I was only going to spend four dollars on licorice and soda.”

I bite my lip. “Um, sorry. I’ll ask Rita if there are any openings to make up for that.” Rita’s my mom. I’m not sure if I want to tell him that.

“I’d appreciate it. Let me know on Thursday.”

“Wait,” I say before he can leave. “How were you gonna take me on a date without money?”

If he wants to take me on a date, he needs to arrange that. I’m not dating a man who can’t be romantic.

“Plenty of things to do for free.” He winks. My heart picks up again. Doug’s forgotten.

I nod. “I’ll let you know Thursday.”



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Two

Ari

The first thing I do after I leave Cody—heartbroken Cody—at the concession stand, is head to the parking lot and pound on Doug. Some might say violence isn't the answer, and I'd usually agree with those some, but this is the only way to get through to someone like Doug. It's not the first time I've warned Doug to quit bullying Cody. It's like the man's emotional maturity never left high school.

“Fuck, Meyer. You and your damn iron fist.”

“Leave him alone.”

“I hate that grouchy little prick. He stuffed jalapenos into my hot dog bun. Nearly burned my mouth off.”

If I don't bite my lip, I'm gonna laugh my face off. Doug fucking deserves every fiery jalapeno, but Cody is a grouchy thing. I find it adorable. Besides, I know it's a front for something. A protective shield. I want to crack it open so badly and make him smile.

I've caught him smiling. Smiling at me. I know he likes me. Maybe not as much as I like him, but there's a spark there. Pretty sure his boyfriend's fake because he was uncomfortable after what Doug did. All I could think up on the spot was that job

thing. Canadian Thanksgiving is three weeks from now. I have that long to get him to date me—or think up another reason I need to keep my concession stand job. If that’s the only way he’ll let me be close to him, I’ll work there forever.

It wasn’t a total lie. We could always use the extra money in the Meyer house. Currently, there are six of us, and with the way Dad multiplies, there could be news of another Meyer any day now. He has a new girlfriend, so it’s a matter of when, not if. I just spent my last fifteen dollars of spare cash. The rest of what I have has to go to gas for my truck.

And that date, if I get it.

There is some cool free shit we could do around town, but I’d love to take him for dinner. Cody deserves something special.

“Talk like that to him again and you won’t have to worry about jalapenos burning your tongue because I’ll rip it out.”

“Fuck, okay. I’ll leave him alone.”

“Was that so hard?”

“Just ... don’t punch me for this,” he says, holding up his hands. “But what do you see in him?”

An image of Cody pushing his black-rimmed glasses up his nose tugs my lips into a smile. The dark feather of hair that falls over the lenses, hiding his shy eyes from me. I ache to push that hair off his face. Even his sour expression when our team meanders over to his stand sends my heart skating across invisible ice. There’s something else too, though, tugging me in his direction. Something too sad. Something too painful.

It holds him back. Robs his potential. Crushes his spirit.

“I see starlight.”

Brilliant lights scattered through utter darkness.

“You’re fucking odd, Meyer,” he says.

Don’t I know it?

Pretty sure Rita’s Cody’s mom. They have the same pretty brown eyes. She gives me the job because I’m charming. I have to be charming. Merc sure as hell ain’t the charming one, so I gotta be. Merc’s the eldest of us Meyers. He looks after us, even when he’s away. Or, well, looked after us. I’m twenty-four now and don’t need looking after, but we band together as a family to look after each other.

Since hockey’s on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I work full-time during the day, I tell Rita that I can work Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings.

“I need someone to sweep and mop the arena and help Cody with whatever he wants. Think you can handle that?”

I salute her. “Yes, ma’am.”

She likes me. I know she does. That shine in her eyes says so. “Also, he’s always walking to his car in the dark. Don’t like that. You look like a strong guy, Ari. I’ll pay you an extra hour’s wage to make sure he gets to his car okay.”

“Mom,” Cody complains.

Knew she was his mom. “On it,” I promise. “Free of charge.”

She didn't have to ask. I never would have let him walk to his car on his own in the dark. Cody's not even the smallest guy I've ever seen, but he doesn't have a fighter's build.

Cody scowls at me from the other side of the concession stand. I lean against his counter, still holding onto my mop. "Any chance I can get a soda?"

"No. Do you have any idea how much high-fructose corn syrup they put in those? It literally erodes your arteries. Besides, you can't afford it."

He says no a lot, but he's so cute spitting those nutritional facts that I don't mind. I work on sweeping and mopping. He helps customers. I watch him from afar because I can't help myself. He doesn't smile, he isn't friendly, but he works with precision. He's quick and gets through a long lineup of people without any hiccups.

Most everyone's gone by ten pm. I saunter over to Cody's counter, adjusting my hat. I was given a dark blue cotton button-up to wear over my shirt, but other than that it's my jeans, ballcap, and a pair of boots. I wipe the sweat off my brow with the back of my hand and undo the top buttons of my shirt, noting Cody's blue checkered mackinaw and black toque. He's not sweltering in that thing?

"Need any help? No," I say at the same time he does.

His mouth opens and then he closes it. "I don't need help."

"Okay, then I'll sit here and wait for you."

I hop my ass onto the counter. If smoke could escape his pores, he'd be a little dark rain cloud. Finally, he settles a hand on his hip. "Go home, Ari."

"No. You're not walking out to your car by yourself."

He says I can't have soda; I say he can't walk to his car in the dark.

"You're infuriating, you know that?"

"I've been told."

"I walk to my car by myself all the time."

I shrug. "You don't anymore."

"I existed before you, you know?"

"Debatable." I smirk.

He scowls, spinning away from me to lock the rest of the concession items away. I stare the whole time. I don't think the man knows how hot he is. Does he do Pilates? Because damn, that ass in those jeans.

"I don't have a person," he admits as we're walking out of the building. "Keeping up the lie is exhausting."

I haven't asked him about it, so I'm left to assume he was experiencing some kind of internal dilemma about it.

"I knew you didn't—not because you couldn't," I add just in case he goes there again. "You flirt too much with me."

"I do not flirt with you."

"Yes, you do."

I close the door to the rink for him, and he locks it behind us. Cody's position is somewhat managerial. His parents own the rink. Didn't know that. But it does beg the question, why didn't Cody play hockey?

"Do you skate?"

"N-No," he stutters.

We step into cool night air that only feels warm by comparison to being in an ice rink for the past six hours.

"Why not?"

"Leave it, Ari."

"Okay, but I need to know this kind of information. What if I'd chosen the rink for our date? That would have been embarrassing."

"Just because I'm not dating anyone, doesn't mean I'm dating you." We pause by his car and have a stare-off.

"Alright, fine, but will you at least tell me why I'm not good enough for you?"

"It's not that ... it's ... look, I've gotta go. Thanks for escorting me." He's in his car so fast, and I'm left with nothing but his taillights.

My first week at the arena passes quickly. Cody still hates me, or he at least pretends to hate me. I don't want to be that guy, the one making creepy assumptions, but he's too obvious. His gaze is forever searching for me, needing to know where I am. Sometimes I wave, one hand on the mop, chin rested on that hand. Other times I let him stare without interruption.

I always walk him to his car at the end of the night.

I'd ask him out again, but I already have so many times that doing it anymore feels wrong. If I'm going to ask him out, it's got to be when I'm sure he'll say yes, so I shelve that and settle for his company, giving myself the end date of Canadian Thanksgiving. If my charm doesn't work on him by then, it's never going to work, and I'll have to accept that he's not into me past mild flirtation.

Monday night is the arena's fall grand opening. Even though the small rink's been around for over two decades, they do a grand opening for fall every year to celebrate the start of the hockey season. It's a lot quieter around the rink in the summertime.

We get slammed, and Cody needs me behind the counter with him.

"Tell me what you need. I'll do whatever you say, Codes."

He almost breaks his vow of not smiling—a vow that wasn't said aloud, but I know he must have taken one with how stringently he refuses to smile in my presence—at the nickname and maybe because he gets to boss me around. He can boss me around behind the counter all he wants. When he's in my bed—if he ever gives me that honor—I'll be the one in charge.

Cody puts me on the till, claiming that only he knows how to properly run and stock the concession stand. I do my best, and whoa! People are generous with the tips around here. I haven't been paying attention to things like that. My attention's always on Cody.

"So, hot stuff, you get off soon?" one of the pretty ladies says as I'm handing her the bag of chips she asked for.

I get hit on a lot, so I've got plenty of lines in my arsenal to turn people down nicely

without making them feel like shit, but I don't get the chance. Cody has his whippy little cloth out.

“Shoo, she-devil.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Sorry, didn't know he was yours.”

Cody doesn't accept her apology or forgive her ignorance. He doesn't correct her either. All she gets is a murderous glare potent enough to send her running. Her friend is left standing there, jaw dropped.

“He bites,” I say, shrugging.

Once the rush is over, I attempt to show Cody how full the tip jar is, but he's silent. Won't talk to me. Barely looks at me.

“Did I do something?”

“No.”

“Then why are you pissed at me?”

Some might be annoyed by such behavior, but the pain is plain on his face. An ache freezes me, pounding into my chest—his pain is my fucking pain.

“Never mind. Doesn't matter.”

I step toward him, and he stiffens, breathing carefully. He backs against the counter, and I use a knuckle to nudge his chin upward.

“It matters to me.”



He twists his lips but doesn't move away. My heart's about to explode. I want to kiss him so bad. I'm dying to suck on that sturdy jaw of his.

"She was really pretty," is all he says.

"You're prettier."

His hands clench. "Don't lie to me just to get into my pants."

I let go of his chin. "I won't lie. I do want in your pants, but I definitely think you're prettier. I think you're the prettiest man I've ever seen."

That gets me a gorgeous blush and a smile. "Be for real, Ari."

His body leans toward me and his delectable-looking jaw is so much fucking closer. "I think I should kiss you," I whisper. Normally, I'm an attack-first kind of guy, especially when I'm getting the kind of signals coming off of Cody that I am. But this is different, he definitely wants me to kiss him, he's unsure if he trusts me enough to let it happen.

So, I wait.

He bites his lip.

He nods.

Was that a fucking nod?

"What are you waiting f?—"

I steal his breath, his last word, catching his plush lips that are a little scratchy from

the cold. Fuck, I want these wrapped around my cock. The way they'd scrape the sensitive skin of my shaft...

Delicate fingers dig into my scalp. I jump just a little—didn't expect that—but he claws deeper, not letting me go anywhere.

I'm good with that.

Teasing him with my tongue, I test the waters. Will he let me inside? His lips part easily, and I slip in. Our lips continue to move as I suck and tug on his tongue with mine, coaxing it into my mouth. I've spent a long time watching these pretty lips, wondering what it would be like to have them against me anywhere, everywhere.

It's so much better than my imagination could have dreamt up. A tornado corkscrews through my center while my body seeks his, still not close enough. He inhales a huge gust; his chest inflates enough to press against mine.

Our hearts just touched, and no one can tell me different.

I'm going to kiss this man forever.

There's a loud fucking crash down the hallway. We jump away from each other. What the fuck? We're supposed to be the only two people here.

"Let me go check that," I say, still catching my breath.

"No." That's a different kind of no. "What if it's an intruder with a weapon?"

"Then I'll kick their fucking ass."

"Not if they have a gun."

I roll my eyes. “They won’t have a gun. It’s probably one of the neighborhood kids.”

Cody picks up a broom, following after me. His lips are swollen, and there’s some redness chafing his perfect jaw because of my scratchy face. Yeah, I’m gonna need to fuck him as soon as I make him all mine.

Down, boy. Loud noise. A maybe intruder. Focus.

Right.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I ask.

“Coming with you.”

“No, you’re not. Stay here.”

“What if that noise was a distraction and the real plan is to come after me when you’re not here? No way am I staying here alone.”

I might like that hero position a little too much, and now I’m just gonna be thinking about him being taken. “Alright, fine. But stay close.”

Creeping away from the concession stand and down the hallway, we make our way in the direction of the noise. All my cleaning shit’s been toppled, the mop strewn across the walkway, dirty water everywhere.

Muffled scuffles skitter across the rubber flooring. Cody jumps, his hand latches onto my biceps, his front presses against my side. He’s gone from prickly, bite-y Cody to terrified, “I need Ari to protect me” Cody.

Fucking score. Maybe our date should be watching scary movies.

“A-Ari.” His lip trembles.

“C’mere, sweets. I’m not gonna let anything happen to you.” I let him curl into me as I relieve him of the broom. That’s when I spy our culprit, a fury, narrow-nosed interloper with claws. “Awww, look at him. He’s frickin’ adorable.”

“What is?”

“The raccoon.”

“Raccoon? That’s worse .” His arms find their way around me, and while that kiss was epic as fuck, I might like this even better.

Yeah, no. I can’t think of anything about this situation I’d call “worse”, not when he’s right where I wanted him all along. “How is that worse?”

I enjoy the warmth of him while it lasts. How do I get him to stay like this?

“They attack when they’re cornered. Fuck. Get rid of it! I can’t look.” He hides his face in my chest.

“I’ll get him out of here,” I say. For his part, the raccoon’s unbothered. He must encounter humans often while he’s ransacking the neighborhood. “You might have to let go of me, though.”

He nods, reluctantly letting go.

“Wait. Don’t go near him. He could have rabies.”

The raccoon studies me, probably wondering if he can go on about his business.

“He’s more afraid of me than I am of him,” I say, even though I’m sure this raccoon isn’t afraid of anything. I’d keep him as a pet if Merc would let me. But Merc still hasn’t forgiven raccoons because of the family of raccoons who turned our outside garbage bins into an all-you-can-eat buffet. We missed garbage pick-up because of it and with a family as big as ours, inconvenient doesn’t cover what we went through that week.

I shake the broom in his direction, in a coaxing manner rather than threatening. He’s well-fed and flipping adorable. Beauford—I’m calling him Beauford—slinks by us and out the back door.

I step forward, hoping Cody’ll let me hold him again. He’s shaking, removing his glasses to wipe his eyes, fighting to steady his breath.

“I-I-I had a dog once ... raccoon killed it.”

Okay, fair. Raccoons are cute, but they’re still wild animals.

“Come back here.” I hold out my arms for him.

He stares at my open arms for so long that I think he’ll take me up on the offer. Instead, he snuffles. “No. I ... lock the back door next time.”

“I will. I will, Codes. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s o-okay. I gotta go.”

He rushes from the hallway toward the front entrance. You can practically see the cartoon smoke.

Shit. I still have to lock that door and?—

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath. “Cody, wait. Just a second!” I chase after him, wanting to reach out and yank him to me, but that’s not gonna go over well just now. Cody’s left the building literally and figuratively.

Nothing’s locked. He has the keys to the arena, which I usually borrow from him to lock the back.

“Cody, please.”

He won’t listen, feet pounding the pavement. He hops into his car, and then he’s gone, and I’m left with an unlocked ice rink.

And a raccoon.

Beauford slinks from the darkness, his back curved like a rainbow, walking on quiet feet. He stares up at me.

“You don’t have rabies, do you, buddy?” I sure as fuck hope not, or Cody will never talk to me again.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Three

Cody

H alfway home, I pull over. Goddammit. I left Ari with no key and an unlocked arena. Fuck. I don't want to go back. How can I look at him ever again? What kind of grown adult flips out over a raccoon?

... being in his arms was a little too comfortable.

I lock the doors, turn the car off, and place my sweaty palms flat on my thighs, rubbing back and forth over the rough denim.

This is so fucking embarrassing. He's going to regret ever liking me. At first, I thought he was fucking with me. I only asked Mom to give him the job because I'd feel awful if his family didn't have a turkey. Mom only said yes because—bless her—she's a meddling mother and she picked up on the fact that Ari might be into me.

Mom's so intuitive that it's annoying sometimes. I told her that he's probably just doing it as a bet to entertain his asshole friends. There's that, too. On the long list of why it would never work between us, how would I hang out with him and his friends?

But the more we worked together, the more I got to know him, and the more I wanted

him. I see the way everyone looks at him. And not just because he's gorgeous. Ari has magnetic charisma. Everyone wants him. I thought he knew it, but he doesn't. He doesn't get that when he's behind the till, we rake in the tips, everyone ready to splash the cash to impress him.

When people look at him, I want to rip their eyes out. And yeah, I know. So inappropriate, considering I've told him no every single time he's tried to ask me out.

But I've ... I've ... I've come to like that while everyone has eyes for him, he doesn't have eyes for anyone but me. The more I push him away, the more he does to show me he's serious about us.

Us.

I love the sound of us.

I'm not a game-playing asshole, either. I don't like what I'm doing. But I'm so fucking scared. I'm terrified that saying yes will ruin all this. That he only likes what he sees on the surface, and once he gets to know who I am—with all my weird-ass quirks—he'll run the other way. I'd never get over it.

Never.

This feeling in my chest, the one that must be what it's like to have a fifty-pound anvil compressing your ribcage, threatening a life without breathing the same ever again, would be my life without Ari in it. Dammit, I could kill him for this. I didn't know what falling in love felt like, never thought I'd get to know. Because of Ari, I do and now I know what it would be like without him.

Even with my narrow experience with relationships, I know that's not healthy. Maybe love isn't?



But his cologne is here, and it does things to my insides, melting them. It only took a few short moments in his arms for the scent to cling to me, follow me home. Ari's not in the car, but he's in the car.

My fingers find my lips, still puffy from his teeth. That kiss. It ruined me forever. I'll never be the same again and I wouldn't want to be. Fairytale kisses aren't supposed to exist, but somehow, I got one.

Fuck. Ari gave me a magic kiss, and I abandoned him at the ice arena.

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

Drive back and tell him how I feel? I don't know if I'm ready.

You don't have to decide tonight, Cody.

True, but I also can't keep stringing Ari along. I have to put a time cap on this. It's a week until Thanksgiving. He'll have his turkey by then, and he won't need the extra job. He already works full-time as an apprentice house painter.

He already works full-time, and he opted to work more, mopping dirty floors just to be with you.

Fuck, yeah, okay. I've got to either commit or stop sending signals. Chasing off the people who ask for his number is definitely a particular kind of signal.

Mine.

You're mine.

One week, then. But in the meantime, I pick up my phone. "Mom?"

“Yeah, honey?”

“I need a huge favor.”

Mom promoted Ari to skate sharpener, and no that wasn't the favor I asked of her. I asked her to lock up the rink so that Ari could go home, and this is my punishment. Mom wouldn't call it that, she'd call it divine intervention.

And every time I say, “You're not a god, Mom.”

She says, “A Mother is God in the eyes of her child.”

I'm not religious—and neither is she for that matter—but I can't argue with her on that one. Maybe she's annoying sometimes, but she really is the best. And she's joking. Mostly.

But anyway, Ari's all the way over at the skate sharpening station, and it's consistently busy, which doesn't allow opportunity for him to lounge around my concession stand. He's also the kind of man who has to do a good job no matter what it is. So there he is, smiling at everyone, taking his time with their skates, sharpening them to perfection. And yeah. It's just Mr. Jones and his two daughters, but he's all the way over there and I'm all the way over here.

He's barely even looked this way. He apologized profusely to me when he got here—yeah, apologized to me for not locking the back door, even though I stranded him here—and then he got straight to work.

Maybe he's hungry. I should bring him a hot dog. And a soda—he should get a soda today. He hasn't had one in a while, surely his arteries won't erode if he has one once in a while. Maybe the licorice, too.

It doesn't seem real to be this fucking anxious over a small decision, but rejection anxiety is real.

He doesn't want you bothering him. He's finally realized what a loser you are. He's stopped thinking you're anything special.

The last one is the loudest because if I'm not special, why does he need me? He could be with anybody else. Special people. Ari is special and can have the special-est person.

What I can do is stop looking at him. Stop thinking about him. Forget this whole thing ever happened. That's what I did before, when I'd fall too far down rabbit holes of obsessing over Ari.

But it's not as easy to do those things as it was two weeks ago before he loitered in front of my concession stand when he was supposed to be mopping. Before he leaned against the counter watching me work. Before he smiled at me like I was the world and he was just living in it. Before I knew what it felt like to be in his arms.

The kiss that lives rent-free in my head.

Fuck. I'm fucked.

I guess.

Well, I guess.

I guess I have nothing to lose by bringing him a hot dog. There's always a lull in business once people have made their way onto the ice, so I put up my "back in twenty minutes" sign and head to Ari, bearing food, drinks, and snacks.

The last person makes their way onto the ice as I let myself into Ari's booth. He jumps.

"Gah, didn't see you behind me. What's all this?"

"Uh, thought you might be hungry?"

"Hungry? I'm starving! I get soda and licorice? What did I do to deserve all this?"

What hasn't he done? He deserves everything, and I'm the worst. "Thanks for the raccoon thing," I half mumble. "It was kind of heroic."

That's when it happens. The smile. Not just any smile, but the one he smiles for me. Rays of sunshine bust through the dark forest of my insides, unearthing things like hope and optimism that have been buried for years.

He doesn't smile at the people who try to flirt with him like that. He definitely doesn't smile at his asshole friends like that.

Just me.

My lips twitch at the corners. I look away briefly but force myself to meet his gaze again. I don't want to miss that smile for anything. "Here."

I hand him the goods. His knuckles brush mine, sending fizzy electricity through my hand. He pauses—did he notice that too?—and licks his lips. I don't think he's thinking about hot dogs.

Or well, not the kind you eat.

Oh. God. Fuck. Why does my brain have to be so fucking dirty?

I drop the damn soda, and it explodes on the worn rubber flooring. We don't replace the flooring in here as often, and it's hard enough to crack the can. Grape fizz sprays from the small can like rocket fire.

"I'm sorry! Fuck, I ruin everything." I turn to run.

"Oh no you don't. Not this time." He grips my wrist, and it's not just his strength holding me here—though there is that—but my lack of desire to leave. My skin burns under those fingers, but I want to burn with him. My heart beats so fast I might die. Still holding the hot dog in one hand, he spins me toward him, making me face him. "Please don't leave. I don't care about spilled soda."

I'm in his arms again. I like being right here. Taking a shallow breath, I nod. I'm in this now, with everything to lose.

Bubbly fizz leaks from the busted can as the whine of carbonation hisses in the air. Ari laughs, but I'm gonna need to pick that up. Sticky soda's gonna be everywhere. It's a dilemma—I don't wanna go anywhere, but my damn fingers itch.

"You wanna pick that up, don't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"You're as stiff as a two-by-four. Here, I'll grab it."

I'm forced to let him go as he bends for the soda. It's spraying like a compressed garden hose. "Here, you need to..." I help him crack the can open to release the pressure, grape soda soaks my hand.

His palm cups mine and assists with a toss into the garbage that I never would have landed without him. I don't have that kind of hand-eye coordination.

It hits the bottom with a thud, and he stares at the space over the trash can.

“Me and that soda are simply not meant to be. C’mere.”

He sits and pulls me into his lap. The long pieces of his caramel hair fall into his cornflower blues, and it’s instinct for me to push them out of the way. But shit, my fingers are sticky with soda. He’s still beaming, and I’m biting my lip.

“Sorry. I don’t think I got any in your hair.”

“But just in case,” he says and proceeds to lick my hand, sucking the stickiest finger into his mouth. I die inside. My palm burns from the base to the tips of each finger. He sets the hot dog down so he can use one of the towels meant for wiping off ice slush from used skates to dry my hand.

“This one’s clean,” he assures me.

But my hand’s not. It’s dirty. So, so, so dirty. The good kind of dirty.

“I’m, uh, it’s fine,” I murmur.

He brings the knuckles to his chapped lips, pressing a chaste kiss there that’s a sharp contrast to the way he inhaled my finger. A sight that’s on repeat, but my imagination’s got him swallowing a very different digit. My cock strains behind the zipper of my jeans.

This is how I die.

“Now, I’m gonna eat this here hot dog, and you’re gonna tell me about you. Or you can just watch me, if you prefer. Fair warning, you’re going to have dirty thoughts.”

Too late. I've already had several dirty thoughts.

He's so ridiculous, though. I almost laugh. I take option two—watch him—but it's not long before the nerves and the little critical voice return, reminding me of all the things I could be doing to make him stop liking me.

You don't want to look too interested—that gives desperate. But you need to appear interested enough, or you're just a cardboard cutout in his lap. Oh, God. You're too rigid. Do something. You're bad at this.

I just want to be a quarter as cool as he is. What will you do when you're his boyfriend and he wants to have sex with you? You're gonna be so awkward and foolish.

Boyfriend? Whoa. Way ahead of yourself, Cody. We haven't been on a date yet. This doesn't mean anything.

But also.

Yes, it does.

To me it does.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Four

Ari

This definitely means we're boyfriends now. It has to, right? Will I look like a fool for not saying anything?

Problem is, the raccoon was less afraid of me than Cody looks right now. Shit. Did I force this? I only want to force him in the fun way. You know? The shove him against the wall and kiss the daylights out of him kind of way.

But only if he wants me to. Meyers only take willing victims.

I inhale my hot dog—the hot dog he brought me—and eye the rope of licorice hanging around his neck.

“Do you not like this? Being here with me?”

His hand fists into my plaid jacket. I don't think he realizes he's doing it. “No. I like ... like it here. With you,” he adds.

I rub his thigh. “I like hockey,” I tell him.

“I know that,” he says, fighting a smile.



“Also, like hot dogs.”

“Ari!”

“And licorice.”

“Stop—”

“And you, darlin’.”

He freezes, swallows, takes a breath. “I like you, too,” he whispers. “So much.” I barely hear the last two words.

“So ... then we’re boyfriends,” I dare to pronounce.

Cody laughs. It’s the first time I’ve gotten him to laugh. It’s not the first time I’ve heard it—just the first time it was because of me. My heart skips a beat.

“Don’t you think that’s moving kind of fast?” he says.

“It’s not fast enough. I want to snatch you up before someone else does.”

He fiddles with my collar, intermittently flicking his brown eyes to mine. “I’ll think about it.”

“Think about it? What’s there to think about? I’m a great guy.” I slip my hand into one of his. He uses the thumb of his free one to continue rubbing the collar of my shirt.

“You’re a great guy,” he agrees. “Or I wouldn’t bring you hot dogs.”

Don't I know it? I've worked my ass off to win him over. I've never had to work this hard to get anyone to give me the time of day.

"But you're okay to sit here with me like this?"

He nods. "For ten more minutes and then I have to get back to work."

Damn work . I wanna hold him here forever.

But I get ten minutes.

"Or," he says.

I like or. I like or a lot. "Yeah?" Tingles of anticipation pepper my skin.

"The hockey locker rooms are empty. No cameras in the back."

Fucking, A! I yank him up so fast, dragging him away from the ice. Away from the public. He's so damn shy, I didn't peg him for someone who'd do depraved shit in a public locker room, but maybe he's not shy so much as he's timid. And it seems that the real Cody comes out as he gets braver.

I don't waste time. As soon as we're out of camera range, I slam him against the wall just like I wanted to. I grip his wrists in one hand, pinning them overhead, and now he's at my mercy. First thing I do, suck his neck. His heavy mackinaw's in the way, though. My frantic fingers find the buttons, popping them with quick flicks. I push the heavy wool off his shoulder, enough for me to feast. My teeth tease the sensitive skin at the base of his neck, pulling a filthy moan from him.

"I wanna suck your cock. Wanna make you moan like that again for me. You want that, darlin'? Want me to make you cum so hard?"

His giant eyes analyze me, the spell of lust broken for the smallest fraction of a second. "I should see if you're any good at it before I decide if I'm gonna date you," he says.

"That's right," I agree, breathing against his skin, sucking a bright hickey onto the underside of his jaw. "Test the merchandise."

"P-Please."

He's still watching me with careful eyes, but the white-hot desire is clear. Somehow, the conflict reminds me of the way he was stiff in my arms as if he didn't know what to do with his body.

That's okay, sweets. I'm more than happy to guide you.

My body eclipses his, crowding him further into the wall. I make a point of pressing his joined wrists into the wall. "These stay here. Got it?"

"Yes."

His body stiffness evaporates. My knees hit the worn rubber floor, and I unzip and pop the button of his jeans.

I pull his hard cock out, letting his balls hang heavy over the elastic waistband of his boxer shorts, and pull those down enough to expose his ass. I grip a handful of each cheek, and suck the middle of his shaft, right over the crooked vein zig-zagging up the front.

The fucking sound that comes out of his mouth. Pre-cum dribbles out of my cock, soaking through my cotton boxers.

“That’s it, I wanna hear you, Cody.” We’re far enough away from everyone, no one will hear him. I don’t want them to hear him. Today, those moans are for me.

I lick my way up the shaft, falling immediately in love with the taste of him. I inhale a gust of his clean, soapy scent, letting my tongue swipe over the purpling head. Cum is supposed to be salty, but not his, it’s sweet. I slurp the slippery cum away and then swallow his cock into my hot mouth.

Cody lets out a curse.

I suck a few more times, then let my tongue drag over the base, to the underside of his nuts. I roll them in my hand and suck some more, fucking him slowly with my mouth. His balls draw up, he’s about to come.

I pull off his cock.

“Ari!”

I chuckle. That may have lost me a point, but not only can’t I help myself, it’ll be better for him if I draw it out a little. I stroke his wet cock and anguished little pants rush from his lungs. He’s got his hands where I put them like a good boy. I stroke slowly until he’s away from the edge of an orgasm, then I suck him into my mouth to bring him right back to it. He cries out, threats to my good name spill from his lips.

“That’s right,” I say, after the fifth round of edging the fuck out of him. “You come when I want you to. You wanna come?”

“Please ... please, Ari.”

Him begging like that owns me. It’ll convince me to do fucking anything.

His hips search for my mouth in a desperate attempt to get off, and my jaw aches from sucking him for so long, but I'd keep us in this limbo for a lot longer if we didn't have jobs to get back to.

"Look at me, baby. Watch while I suck your fucking soul through your cock."

I suck hard, his balls pinch, and I don't pull off this time. Cody scrabbles against the wall, but his hands stay where I left them as I suck down his cum like a starving man, giving his nuts a gentle squeeze. Just like with the soda on his fingers, I make sure he's clean before making my way up his body and shoving my tongue into his mouth.

It's rough at first, as if the last remnants of our passion have to work themselves out, but it slows into something soft and romantic.

"How was that, baby?" I'm gonna have to live through the rest of our shift with a dick that's hard as a hockey stick, but the debauched view I'll get for the rest of the night is worth it. Do I tell him he's a hot wreck?

There's a sly smile on his lips. His hands finally slip from the position they've been glued to for the past eight-ish minutes so his hands can grip the lapels of my plaid jacket.

"It was alright."

"Alright?" I screech. "You look like a sleepy kitten."

"Yeah. Alright. I think the only way to know for sure is for us to do that again."

Again. He wants to do it again. We have to get back, so it can't be now, but there's gonna be an again.

I have two more shifts until it's Thanksgiving. Things progressed in a big way last shift, so do I change my timeline? That's the big question. Maybe we need more time. At least I know he's interested, but it wasn't a yes. Sexy times do not a relationship make.

I need more than "interested".

A Meyer needs a certain level of commitment. Mom left us when I was eight. As far as I can tell, she was going through something, and as an adult, I respect that, but shit like that leaves scars behind.

Intentional or not.

I'm so far in with Cody already. I've never felt like this before. He's the one for me. I know it in my heart of hearts. I'm the arrogant shithead that assumed he'd be just as into me. But what if he's not? What if I moved too quickly? Cody's timid as fuck. Jesus, Ari Meyer, you just had to put his dick in your mouth. He seemed pretty into it, though. Will he retreat? I guess it depends on how into me he is.

This is the first time I've considered that he might not be as into me as I am him. I was in a damn bubble with my head in the clouds.

But that blowjob. It was toe-curling.

Hesitant as he may be, he's still a dude. It can't really be a bad thing, can it?

Ugh. Fuck, I dunno.

"Earth to Ari," Mercy says. "I'm leaving at seven to take Dad to that appointment with the lawyers I can't afford. You said you'd watch the kids."

Fuck. I had said that, but I fucked up. When I said it, I'd totally planned on asking Rita for the night off, but I forgot. Shit. The hockey season is about to start, he had exactly two days to fly in for this appointment. My brother's keen to make it as a coach in the National Hockey League. He was able to land a coaching job with the Canadian Hockey League this year, so he'll be in and out of town.

I've been hellbent on showing him that we're fine without him.

"Um, yep. Night off, bro. You're all good," I lie. Mercy doesn't need that kind of stress—Dad brings him enough of it—so I'll figure something out.

"Thanks, man."

Once he's gone and the kids are fed, I get them dressed to go out. The rink's a public place and they all know how to skate. Even the littlest Meyer—Rachel—can get around okay using one of those ice skate trainer thingies. We're a hockey family. We live, sleep, eat, and breathe hockey. I'll wear a pair of skates with skateguards while I work. That way if they need me on the ice, I can be there in a jiff.

It's totally gonna be fine.

"Where we goin', Ari?" Dawson asks.

"Skating."

"Sweet!" He pumps his fist.

"Our bedtime's at nine," Bryce says.

"Not tonight." Merc'll understand. But just in case ... "Keep this between us and I'll buy you an ice cream at the rink."

“Deal.”

When Cody sees how many Meyer children I’ve brought, his eyes widen and then narrow. But at least it’s because of the children and not because of the sexy times.

I think.

“Hi,” Rachel says. “Ari said we could have ice cream.”

Shit. Cody raises a judge-y brow.

“These are my little brothers and sister,” I explain. “I was supposed to babysit, but I forgot.”

I was on the verge of something with Cody, but this looks bad. Hell, I guess it is bad, and I’m flushing any chance I had down the drain.

“They can skate,” I explain. “Bryce and Dawson both play hockey and Rachel’s in lessons.” I don’t mention that those lessons are taught by Merc and yours truly, but we’re professionals. Kind of. We know what we’re doing, anyway.

“We’re pretty damn awesome,” Dawson says.

“Kids who swear?” Cody asks.

“You guys,” I hiss. “Outside manners.” We have different manners inside the house than we do outside. It was the best we could come up with. When you don’t have a real parent, you get the rules your older siblings invent out of necessity.

Cody nods. “I’m trusting you, Ari.”



Dammit. Pressure. So much pressure.

Things seem okay, though. I give him a special smile. Bam! Instant blushing, blooming in his cheeks. Adorable.

I help all my siblings with their skates to some degree. Bryce needs help tightening his better. Dawson gets his skates on, but can't tie them at all, so I do it for him. Rachel puts them on the wrong feet, so I get her fixed up, sliding her foot in and then holding the skate between my thighs while I lace her up. I make all of them wear helmets, elbow pads, and knee pads, much to Dawson's dismay.

"Don't get injured," I warn them before they head out on the ice.

"Why would we?"

Because you're Meyers, I don't say. "Look after your little sister."

"I can skate, Ari," she says, crossing her arms. So feisty, that one. I think she's gonna grow up to be tough and confident like Mercy.

"I know you can, sweetheart."

I keep my eyes on them, which means there's less time for staring dreamily at Cody. That's probably good tonight. I doubt he'll have any loving gazes to send my way after springing something like this on him. I sharpen skates and make sure the boys are keeping Rachel upright. They're good older brothers and they do a good job with her. Us Meyers mature a little faster than the norm. We have to.

With the last skate sharpened, it means everyone's out on the ice and the concession stand can take a break. I expect to see Cody looking my way, but he's gone.

The sexiest man alive skates onto the ice.

Or, well, he tries to skate onto the ice. Oh, Lord. He cannot skate. He hasn't even done those skates up properly and he's gonna bust his ankle. Was he so worried about the kids that he rushed out there as soon as he could? I don't know why he would. They're fine. Rachel notices him struggling and skates over to assist with her skate trainer. Cody declines, clinging to the boards instead, his eyes darting in every direction.

Fuck, I've got to get out there. I rip off my skate guards, hop over the boards like a maniac, and rush to his rescue. I think I like rescuing him a bit too much.

I grip under his wrists to hold him upright, catching him just before he hits the ice. He collapses against me. "Lemme fix your skates, eh?"

Cody flushes pink, barely able to look at me, but nods.

"They'll be okay," I assure him, referring to my younger brothers and sister.

"I see that."

Um, okay. Isn't that why he risked his neck to skate out here?

I take him off to one of the benches and do as I'd done for the kids, holding his skate between my thighs, lacing him up nice and tight, then lead him onto the ice.

I skate backward, encouraging him with a smirky smile. He totters a bit, but bravely attempts to glide.

"There you go, baby. Bend your knees. Don't try to walk, push your foot away from the center like you're trying to draw a sharp C."

He practices that for a full lap with me as his human skate helper. I keep watchful eyes on him and the kids at the same time. In a Meyer house, you learn to do a lot of things while also watching children.

“Wanna go another lap?” I ask.

He smiles. “Yes.”

I take us into a second round.

“You’re good at this,” he says.

“I’ve had some practice.” I wink, and I’m loving this, but I can’t help my curiosity. Why didn’t he learn to skate? His family owns this rink. It doesn’t add up.

“I know what you’re thinking, Ari.”

“How?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“I respect if you don’t wanna to tell me.” Even if it’s killing me. I can tell it’s something bad. I want to smash all the bad for him. Make it go away.

“Sorry, you can’t punch this enemy, Ari. It’s ... I wanted to. I grew up here. I watched all the other kids skate. I tried. But I wasn’t a natural—didn’t have the Meyer skating magic around then, I guess.”

“I am so mad that we lived on the other side of town back then. If I were here, I’d have given you Meyer skating magic.”

“Are Meyers born on ice skates?” The corner of his lip hitches into a half smile.

“Pretty much.”

“Well, I wasn’t. The kids made fun of me. Knocked me down. Pushed my face into the ice. Mom and Dad tried with lessons stuff, but it was too late. My little brain already believed what those kids said about me.”

I skid to a backward stop. He collides with my torso, and I wrap my arms around him in his thick mackinaw. “Do you still believe whatever those mean little dicks said?”

He looks away. “Well, no. Not exactly. It’s just ... it didn’t stop there.”

Oh, I see. People bullied him until he retreated to the only safe place he knew of—inside himself. All his protective layers make sense. We’d moved by the time I hit high school, and I definitely saw him around, but I was a jock, and he loved science. I spent high school either playing hockey or trying to get schoolwork done in between helping Merc look after our younger siblings. I didn’t have time for much else.

“And it’s weird how it all works in your head. Those voices—ones that don’t even matter—become a soundtrack of criticism from which you base all your decisions. I’ve learned to block a lot of them out.”

But some are harder to ignore than others. He doesn’t say it out loud, but the words hang in the air anyway.

“Ugly things grow from those voices, weeds nobody planted. They wrap around you and suffocate who you could have been. Those beliefs become real, too. An identity you don’t like or want, but you’re trapped in.”

Okay, he's right. I want to punch all that in the face, but it doesn't have a face to punch. It's a faceless demon he's been fighting alone.

Not anymore. I'm here. Maybe I can't magically make it all better, but I can support him.

"I swear I didn't know, Codes. I fucking swear, or I would have pounded the shit out of whoever was saying shit to you."

He laughs, and the tension coiling in my gut relaxes. "I know that now. I see that you had other priorities."

His gaze lands on the kids. Rachel's slipped to the ice, her brothers help her up, but I should go over there. I pull him into me, so I can hug the fuck out of him.

"Think you can skate beside me if I hold your hand?"

"If we go slow," he says.

"Of course."

I take his hand for the rest of the way back, and my quick little lesson has paid off for him. He'll still need practice, but he's already got the hang of the basic skating movement pattern.

"You fucking did it," I say into his ear.

Cody shivers. Yeah, that kind of shiver. It goes straight to my special places, and I have to beg my dick not to get a boner in the middle of the family night skate while I'm next to my younger siblings.

“Meyer magic,” he whispers.

“C’mon, Rach. Let’s practice those drills Merc showed you,” Bryce says. Merc calls them drills for Rachel’s benefit—she wants to be like her big brothers—but they’re just simple skate techniques.

Cody clings to me, watching her. “She’s really good. Not even just for her age. I know I can’t skate, but um, I watch a lot of people skate,” he clarifies.

“Yeah, we think she’ll make it into a women’s league. She loves the ice. We have a hard time pulling her off.”

“Wish I could skate half as good as she can.”

“You will. I’m gonna make sure.” I give him a goofy grin.

Dawson tugs on my jacket. “C’we get ice cream now, Ari? You promised.”

“Yeah, c’mon.” I lift Rachel to my side, and Bryce returns her skate trainer. I hold Cody’s hand, and we slowly glide our way off the ice.

Cody watches me differently. I detect some awe, but there’s something else too. I hope to fuck it’s him falling for me as much as I already have for him. I don’t know what I’m gonna do if he rejects me after this. Never step foot in this rink for starters.

I’ve got the kids on a bench in front of the concession stand, set up with ice cream. That’s how Mercy finds us. And boy is his frown deep. Whoa. I might have misjudged his “okayness” with this.

“You said you had the night off.”

“Which I used to take them ice skating.” He crosses his arms. “Okay, fine. I forgot to take the night off, but we had fun, didn’t we guys?”

“We got ice cream,” Rachel says, proudly showing him her dripping cone.

“Yeah, at nine o’clock at night. I see that. No one’s going to sleep tonight, dude.”

“I’ll stay up with them,” I promise.

He sighs, and my stomach plummets to the bottom of an invisible cavern. This is exactly what I didn’t want—a stressed out Mercy. He’s got so much going on. All I want to do is take a load off him, but now I’ve shown him that he can’t trust me. I’m just another person who’s let him down.

Cody rushes over. “Sorry, sorry, um, Mr. Mercy, is it?”

“Mr. Meyer,” Mercy corrects.

“Yeah. Meyer. Mr. Meyer. I’m Ari’s manager and it’s my fault he had to work tonight. The guy that was supposed to work for him called in sick. I yelled at Ari so he’d come here. That’s ... super bad workplace etiquette. It won’t happen again.”

Merc’s brows pinch together. He looks between Cody and me because, okay, it’s pretty obvious that a guy like Cody isn’t gonna intimidate a guy like me. He doesn’t look like he yells much, either. But Merc has no idea how much Cody’s icy glares affect me. Cody wouldn’t have to do much to get me to do anything for him.

Meanwhile, I’m over the moon that Cody would even try to get me out of hot water with my brother. I love Merc to death, but he’s fucking menacing at the best of times.

Great, now I’m staring at Cody, swallowing, licking my lips—my cock’s urge to be

inside him won't dampen until it gets what it wants—finding it impossible to fight the urge to be closer to him. So I don't, moving next to him just so I can live in the airspace around him. Merc doesn't miss any of that, and his brows raise in a new way, settling into a smirk.

I'm so fucking busted.

“Yeah, guess I can't be too mad at you for coming in to work. Okay, c'mon little Meyers. We're going home.”

“Wait!” Rachel says. She bounces over to Cody, signaling for him to lean down, planting a wet, ice-cream-stained kiss on his cheek. Oh, man. That's gonna bother him. He doesn't like icky and dirty things. “Thanks for the ice cream.”

“You're welcome, sweetheart,” he says.

There's a sticky white lip imprint where she kissed him. He doesn't react, doesn't say a word about it.

We wave bye as they file away from us, and I lean into Cody. “It's driving you crazy, isn't it?”

“She's adorable, but it's so sticky,” he complains.

“Here.” I reach across Cody to the concession stand and grab one of the wet nap packages, opening and unfolding it. Taking his chin between my fingers, I maneuver his face so I can gently wipe away all traces of drying ice cream. “There.”

With my heart beating in my stomach, I press my lips to his freshly cleaned cheek. My lungs heave, filling with the simple joy of touching him.



I pull away; he melts into a smile. “You’re in so much trouble,” he says.

“Why?”

“Bringing your siblings to work?”

“I brought them to family skate night. I just also happened to be working,” I say.

His smile grows. I can’t be in that much trouble.

He grips the lapels of my shirt, pulling me to him, returning my cheek kiss with a kiss of his own, planting his lips against my jaw. My body rushes with currents. My cock wakes up, ready for action, and my hips jerk involuntarily. My skin fucking burns under those lips. Stunned doesn’t begin to describe how my face must look.

And there are people around now, filing off the ice. One of the pretty women who’s offered me her number before is nearby. Was he marking his territory? Fuck that’s cute. He can mark me anytime he wants.

I definitely want to mark him.

“We have one shift left before Thanksgiving weekend,” he says. “I’ll tell you my answer then.”

“I think my chances are good,” I say. Tonight erased any worries I had.

He smacks me. “Don’t get cocky. My answer’s still up in the air, anything could sway it one way or the other.”

“I’m a Meyer. We come by cockiness naturally.” He’s totally gonna say yes. I lean in, pushing my luck, letting my lips brush over his forehead. He closes his eyes and

sinks into the kiss. He lets me pull him into my arms. I want to kiss his lips again so badly, but I'll wait until he's officially mine.

Yeah, come this time Friday, Cody's totally gonna be mine.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Five

Cody

I should have skated onto the ice because I was worried about his siblings, but Ari was right. They were capable skaters, definitely more capable than me. And Ari had them set up in view of his skate booth, so it was easy to keep an eye on them. A family skate is structured so that families with various aged children, can skate all over the place or set up in one spot on the ice. Much different than the teen skate in which they barrel around the ice for sixty minutes at the speed of light, playing their own game of Frogger.

But I didn't brave the sheet of slippery death for the kids.

I've never been drawn to ice skating, but I was that night. Never have I wanted to skate more. I wanted to be part of them. I wanted to be in Ari's sphere. He's not just a guy who plays hockey with the local beer league. It's a family tradition. Threads of his DNA.

It's Thursday, which means beer league hockey night. Ari's here. He stopped by before he went to the dressing room, trying to get my answer a day early.

"C'mon, Codes. You're killing me. What's one more day?" he'd said.

"Hmm, impatient," I'd said. "Another strike against you."

“Strikes? You makin’ a list?”

“Yes,” I said, though the real answer was sort of. I can’t deny having been through all the pros and cons, but my only real cons have nothing to do with him, and everything to do with my own inadequacies. But I have to—at the very least—try to move past them. Ari’s showed me the road to sunshine, shouldn’t I take a small detour with him?

He frowns. “I didn’t make a list about you.”

“I—” My words caught in my throat. I wasn’t actively trying to hurt his feelings, but I think I might have. I didn’t know what to say after that, and I guess he didn’t either because he grunted a “see you later” and left with his giant hockey bag for the changerooms.

Because they’ve got the ice rented for themselves, I have nothing to do but sit behind my counter, pretending to clean, and serving the girlfriends and boyfriends of the players who’ve come to watch. But what I’m actually doing is stewing. Kinda panicking, too. If Ari’s hurt, I’ll be crushed. I’m too far into this to back out now. Maybe I should have just told him yes? But I was trying to be flirty. I suck at flirty. I need to stay in my lane. My lane is open, honest communication. Know what? I’m gonna start right now. The rest of the significant others will be in the stands watching the game, and they won’t need anything from me till intermission.

I pour myself a hot chocolate and meander over to a group of girls who look like they might be friendly. My free hand clenches. I’m so not good at making friends. What if I’m a bother? What if they reject me? What if I look stupid?

But I want to be with Ari bad enough to say words.

“H-Hi. Mind if I sit?” I ask.

One of them raises a brow. “Do you know someone on the team?”

Alarm bells go off. Mistake. This was a huge fucking mistake.

No, she asked a simple, normal question. Answer the damn question, Cody.

“Yeah. My, uh, my ... Ari’s playing. Ari Meyer? I know him. Do you know him? I’m his boss.”

Fuck do I sound like an idiot. There’s nowhere to hide, either. I’m at the mercy of their kindness if they have any.

“His boss watches his hockey games? Weird,” she says. I die inside. “Guess you can sit if you want.”

At least she’s talking to me. The other girls—who I clearly misjudged as friendly—don’t bother with me.

“How do you guys know Ari?” I ask. Maybe a little kindness will break through their iciness.

“I’m his girlfriend,” she says.

My chest squeezes, pain hammers a drumbeat against my ribs. No way. There’s just no way.

“You are not, Liz,” another one says. “You wish you were his girlfriend.”

I can breathe again. Not well, but air fills my lungs slowly and my body fills with the desperate need to put my mark on him, to let everyone know he’s mine and not theirs.

If I didn't ruin things.

Loud elephant-like stomping echoes along the bench seats. A herd of Meyers storm toward me. Little Rachel Meyer picks up speed when she sets eyes on me.

"Cody!"

I set the hot chocolate down as quickly as I can, catching her. She squeezes around my neck.

"Sorry about that," Mercy says, taking a seat, and directing the boys to sit. "Rachel begged me to bring her here to see you. Fair warning, she expects another ice cream."

To see me?

"Ari said you were gonna be his boyfriend," Rachel says. Loudly.

"He did, did he?" I don't argue it, though. I do want to be his boyfriend.

Liz huffs. She might have also muttered something like, "So his boss hangs out with his family, now?" It's easier to ignore her when I'm surrounded by Meyers.

"I'm Bea," Ari's older sister says.

"Yes, I remember you from high school."

"I wasn't sure if you would. Do you mind if we sit with you?"

I tell them to sit anywhere they like. Rachel stays in my lap. "Look, look! They're coming," she says. "I'm gonna be a hockey player when I grow up."

Ari skates onto the ice. His eyes widen when they spy his family—guess he didn't know they were coming—and he shows off a little for the kids, spinning, doing a fancy hockey stop, and playing with a puck.

My heart might burst. He's even handsome in all his gear, shaggy hockey hair curling out of his helmet, goofy grin showing all his teeth, and the exuberance of a puppy.

Somehow, this is where I belong.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Six

Ari

He made a list.

I know how lists work. Lists have pros and cons on them. Mom had a list, too. Found it after she left. I never showed it to anyone. No one else needs to live through pain like that. It was her “should I stay or should I go” list.

There was a long list of pros. There was only one con. One. That’s what made it so scary.

You can have a hundred reasons to stay, but it only takes one to make you go.

It’s why the Meyer motto is to jump ship at a whiff of trouble. Leave before you get left.

I don’t look where I toss my bag down. It lands at the feet of Doug Abernathy. He’s not the most patient human alive.

“What the fuck, Meyer?” He kicks my bag out of his way, sitting on the bench to tape his socks.

“Sorry. I have shit on my mind.”



“I saw you hanging around that geeky kid. That what you have on your mind?”

Fire lights my hand. Oh, how I’d love to pound on him again for saying a single thing about Cody. But there’s something heavy on my chest and that heavy thing’s making it impossible for me to lift my arms. All my wind’s been sucked away. All my purpose. Punching Doug might shut his loud mouth for a second, but there would be nothing after that.

Because it’s all dark inside me.

But I’ve decided on something I’ll tell them later. This is my last game with this team. The other guys are all right, but Doug isn’t. It’s the right decision, but it only reminds me that one bad thing is all it takes. One bad thing to make someone leave. One bad thing can overshadow all the good things.

Chill air hits my face as I glide onto the freshly Zambonied ice. I shouldn’t look for Cody, but it’s the first thing I do, my gaze landing on the concession stand where he dutifully sits. Usually. But he’s not there.

Maybe he’s writing out his list.

They say “punch in the gut”, but this is a punch in the heart, stealing the life force from my limbs. No more blood going to them, oxygen, happiness, nothing. Just saggy bones hanging, dragging me down. If there was any chance I thought that what I felt for Cody was just a crush, that empty concession stand is a fucking metaphor for my existence without him.

But he makes lists.

Lists.

Fucking. Stupid. Family-wrecking. Lists.

I spin around and he's there. All of them are there. Cody's got Rachel in his lap. Merc waves at me, smiling for once in his miserable life. The boys stampede the stands, earning dirty glares from the other on-lookers.

Cody's not at his concession stand because he chose to watch me instead. He's never done this before.

Bea's smug as fuck, using her eyes to point out what I can already see.

The darkness that had crawled under my skin fades away, releasing the strain weighing on my muscles. The ice becomes the most buoyant thing in the world, and I float over it. Hop, skip, and jump over it, leaping into the air. I almost fall on my face. I'm sure the kids will laugh at that.

Then I play hockey. I don't think about lists, or leaving, or morons like Doug. Instead, my movements are dictated by heartbeats. By hearing one prickly voice in my head. By imagining what he looks like when his head's thrown back, laughter peeling from his lungs.

I score a goal and fuck it; I blow Cody a kiss. Rachel catches it and sticks it to his face.

As soon as the game's over, I walk up to the team's organizer. "That was my last game," I say.

"Your last...?" His eyes flick to Doug. He knows. Everybody knows. Nobody does shit about fucking Doug because he's a good player. They don't care enough about Cody, but I do. "We'll talk later, Meyer."

My shower is rushed, but I want to smell nice. I'm gonna sit with Cody in his concession stand. He'll be working, I'll be making a statement.

I'm too late by the time I make it to the concession stand. Rachel's already with him. Yeah, there's room for me, but my little sister being there says everything for me. I join my family at a table.

"You have competition," Bea points out.

Cody smiles at her, but then he smiles at me. The smiles are completely different.

There's no competition.

It's just me and Cody. He wouldn't let me do anything, so I'm watching him put stuff away and lock up. He joins me at the table, reaching across, almost locking his hand with mine, pulling back then purposefully, finally, placing his hand on mine. It's an ice block, so I use both of my oversized palms to cup it, willing my warmth to infuse with his skin. A chill runs through him.

"I hurt you. I'm sorry."

Lists. People who make lists. Mom. Leaving. Cody makes lists, too.

I remember all that.

Every instinct wants to pull my hand away. I can't bring myself to do it. What's wrong with me? All I know is, instead of running from the tiger that wants to eat me, I'm placing myself in his damn mouth.

Not a tiger, Ari. Just Cody.

That's worse. All a tiger can do is eat me. Cody can break my heart.

"It was ... was nothing," I force out, voice rasping as if I'm using the last of my oxygen.

"It was something. Any chance you'd tell me so I can never do it again?"

Does he mean that? He'd do that for me?

His teeth chatter.

"C'mon. I'll drive you home."

"My car's here. How will I get to work tomorrow?"

I shrug. "Guess I'll have to pick you up." The longer I keep him with me, the longer we get until the goodbye comes.

His teeth chatter some more. "Kay."

I have to heft my hockey bag onto my shoulder, but I don't let go of his hand. "It's gonna sound so dumb," I say as we walk.

"Try me."

"Lists are..." How do I say it? My mom made a list, too, and she's been gone since I was eight. That's too heavy. "Maybe you don't make a list about us? Ever. "

I toss my bag up and over. It lands in the bed of my truck with a heavy thuck sound. I open his door like a gentleman, then get in the truck, turn it over, and crank the heat for him. I'll die of heat stroke, but he'll be nice and cozy.

“I won’t, Ari. No lists. No lists about us. Lists about other things, are they okay?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Like a grocery list?”

“Fine.”

“Adventure goals?”

I crank a brow for his benefit. Because adventure? Him?

“I could. I would ,” he insists. “I want to go places. Someday.”

“Alright, I guess that kind of list is fine.”

“Deciding my next hobby?”

He almost gets a smile from me. “Is that something you do?”

“I like lists, Ari. I make a lot of lists.”

That heavy sensation sinks into my gut, stirring up the bile. Cody likes lists. He squeezes my hand.

“I’ll never make a list about you again,” he promises. “Never.”

We slip into the silence for a bit, nothing but the truck engine knocking and clunking. Might need a new fan belt by the sounds of it.

“Do you want to know what was on the list?”

So, so much. And. Not at all. “Okay.”

“I think you’re handsome, and before you tell me that’s superficial, I don’t find many people handsome, so that kind of stuff stands out for me.”

Keeping my eyes on the road, I bring his knuckles to my lips and press a kiss to them.

“And just who else are you calling handsome but me?” I tease.

“No one,” he lies. “Okay, fine. Kevin Bieksa.”

“Kevin Bieksa’s hot as sin. Guess I can let that one go.” Kevin Bieksa’s one of the finest professional hockey players ever to grace the ice. “Is he handsomer than me?”

“Never.” Cody smiles. “But wait, there’s more than just handsome.”

He goes on to tell me things, like, how warm and safe he feels with me. The way I make his heart speed up and slow down. How his body tingles like fizz when I touch him.

“And I suppose I can’t say that I know a lot about you, yet, but I know you’re a good man, one I’d like to get to know. I know that you ...” His voice falters. “Doug.”

“Doug,” I repeat.

“You stuck up for me. I liked you before that, but then you stuck up for me. Nobody’s ever done that for me before, well, except my parents, but they don’t count.”

I pull into the driveway of his parents’ house and kill the engine. I turn to face him, trying to read the rainbow flash of expressions coloring his eyes.

“What’s your con?” I don’t say cons. There only needs to be one.

“Mostly your friends. They’re assholes, Ari. Or, well, Doug is. I can’t say I know the rest of them, but they let Doug be an asshole. I didn’t know if I’d be able to handle that in the long run.”

“I quit the team. Tonight. Because of Doug.”

“What? Ari, you shouldn’t have done that for?—”

“I did it because it was the right thing to do.” And because, one of these days, I wasn’t going to stop at a couple of punches. It was better that I remove myself.

“Then there is no con. Not about you.”

Maybe that con has been removed, but a new one could show up. He could decide that I’m not enough to handle in the long run.

Fuck, why did I start this thing with Cody? I might not be a relationship expert, but I know that’s how relationships work. You can only try. Things might not work. Hence why I’ve avoided a real relationship like the plague.

But then, Cody.

His pretty brown eyes. His shy disposition. His six hundred and eighty-two facts about the damage sugar inflicts on our arteries.

Something unnamable pulls me to him.

I had to have him.

“Do you want to know why I made the list?” he says.

“Yes.”

“Because I’m terrified. I want this. I want you. But a relationship is the equivalent of a vat of angry vipers to a guy like me. The list was meant to talk me out of it.”

He’s scared, too? I mean, I get that Cody is a timid guy in a lot of ways, but he’s also not. He’s always so sure of himself. Most would cower from a guy like Doug, but he never has, even though it cost him.

When he breathes there’s a visible puff of air. Now that the truck’s off, so is the heat.

“We should get you inside,” I say.

He nods. “In a minute. I want to finish this. No matter what I put on my list to convince myself to tell you to fuck off, I couldn’t.”

“There were other things?”

“A few. They never lasted. I mentally erased them and tried to replace them with new things.”

Awesome. My worst fear come to life.

“But that’s my whole point, Ari. Nothing chases me away from you. Nothing. If something did, I’m not for you.”

“But you said nothing did.”

“I did.”



“Soooo it must mean you’re for me.”

He bites his lip, nodding.

Something else could show up on the list tomorrow, a voice hisses from the darkness.

It could.

“You said there aren’t any cons left about me. What are the other cons about?”

“They’re about me.” His bottom lip trembles. “I’m so fucking worried you’re gonna wake up and see what everyone else saw. I don’t even know what I did to make them hate me so much, but it’s gotta be something. I used to think I could find it and get rid of it, but after a lot of searching, I never found anything. So I blamed teenage high school idiots, but I’m not in high school anymore. The Dougs of the world seem to find me anyway.”

My heart fractures. A lone tear snakes down my cheek. He wipes it away with his thumb.

The list wasn’t about me at all. It was about his fears. Fears too dark to deal with, so he made a list to convince himself to retreat again so he wouldn’t hurt again.

Maybe it was the same for Mom, too. Maybe one con was all it took because her fears were mighty.

Cody’s teeth chatter.

“We need to get you inside,” I repeat.

“Okay, but you’re coming with me.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

Chapter

Seven

Cody

My stiff fingers clutch his wrist, acting like a thread of yarn in the dark. Something guiding him into the light.

Back to me.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that there's something deeper behind the lists thing.

"Your parents won't mind me coming in?"

"I'm a mortgage helper, Ari. As an adult. My suite is my suite." Admittedly, Mom and Dad charge me far less than the going rate in Vancouver, and I suspect that they've been banking my "rent" for me for when I do get a place of my own. But I come and go as I please. I can have men over as I please.

I just ... don't, really. It's easier for Mom to notice something like that while I live in their laneway house. Mom will meddle. Dad stays out of my love life.

"Okay."

Inside we kick off our shoes. Ari's quick to shed his jacket, but I keep mine. I keep

the lights off because I'm bringing him straight to my room.

I don't know what the morning will bring, but tonight he's mine .

It's a loft-style laneway house. I tug him up the stairs as he looks around, getting the lay of the place.

"This is some set up, Codes," he says.

"I like it."

The living room spreads out below, with the kitchen at the North end, below the bedroom. The floors are hardwood and the walls are white brick. There are two large windows on the west side, one above the other, divided by a ledge filled with plants.

"We're in your bedroom," Ari says. "That's your bed."

"Uh-huh." I unbutton my Mackinaw, already heating up.

"But we're not?—"

"Do we need to be boyfriends to fuck?"

"Well, no, but?—"

"Just take me to bed, Ari."

"As you wish."

He pushes me onto the bed. And then he's above me. Rough fingers ghost over my face. His nose almost touches mine, our lips only a hair's breadth away from each

other.

“Cody? I’m gonna kiss you now.”

I thought I was ready. I wasn’t.

I fall.

Through the clouds, spiraling toward Earth at an inhumane velocity. I forget where I am, but also find my way home. His tongue curls around mine, and I don’t bother fighting for control, I want him to have me. He’s already shown me how much he wants me, that he can be trusted. I’m ready to dive from the ledge with him.

Ari tastes like beer and man. I take a deep inhale, filling my lungs with his minty shampoo scent.

“Mhm.”

“Yeah, baby,” he says barely lifting his mouth from mine, latching on again.

Baby.

His hands explore me. Everywhere. Finding the hem of my t-shirt and sliding up, over bare skin. Ari’s fingers are as coarse as I imagined, the unshorn flesh of a man who works with his hands. They scratch over my ribcage, sending tingles straight to my quickly filling cock.

He pulls his lips off. “Fuck, Cody. I want to defile you.”

“Yes.”

“I want to make you all mine.”

“ Please. ”

“I don’t have condoms,” he says, leaning his forehead against mine. “Please say you have ‘em.”

I nod. “Yep. Bedside drawer,” I say between kisses.

He frowns. “I have mixed feelings. Happy you have them for us, but?—”

“Jealous?”

“You get jealous, too.” Is that a pout I spy? Ari’s so tough and manly all the time, seeing him pout is fucking adorable.

But damn right, I get jealous, too. If those pretty little puck bunnies flirt with him ever again after this, they’re getting jalapeno hot dogs.

“They’re old—but not expired.”

He pops the buttons on my jeans, ripping them open. “I guess that’s acceptable. I’ll just have to erase everyone else from your body. No big deal.” His lips mouth over my cotton-covered cock. I’ve never hated boxer shorts more than I do now. My fingers claw the sheets as he moves up, his lips suck the sensitive area of my torso, brutalizing the skin there.

New sounds slip from my lips, needy sounds. God, I’ve never been so desperate for one man, but it makes sense, I’ve been aching for him. Every word between us was a tease. Every accidental touch. Me trying to catch his gaze from across the rink—I can admit that I did it a lot—was our version of foreplay. But he—the cocky

fucker—totally responded on purpose, waiting for just the right moment to look up from his floor mopping, enough to send my heart galloping.

He pulls my boxers down slowly, letting my heavy cock bob out. “Look at me, Cody. I want you to watch me swallow you down.”

“Ari, fuck.”

Hot. Wet. Suction from sexy hell. Jesus. I swear to fuck my cock squeezes, just the small muscles, enough to put me in danger of coming too soon.

“Sl-Slow down. Gonna come,” I croak.

His mouth pops off my wet dick, a string of saliva connecting his lips to the head. “No, you’re fucking not. Not till I’m inside you.”

Oh, God.

And this is where I get to see Ari’s dark side. He’s sweet and kind until he gets a hold of my cock, apparently. Now, he’s just fucking diabolical—like when he edged me in the locker room. He made ten minutes feel like an eternity.

His tongue drags over the shaft as he sucks. I moan.

“Please, Ari. Want you. Want you in me.”

“Soon.”

Ari sucks me until I’m near to exploding, then backs off only to repeat his special brand of torture. My hips buck, chasing his mouth. Sometimes they land the mark and sometimes I hit nothing but air. God fucking damn him.

He laughs. “You ready for me to fill you, Codes?”

Fingers toy with my hole, not dipping inside, only circling, fucking teasing me to death.

“Yes, dammit. I don’t care about foreplay tonight.” We’ve had enough foreplay. “I want to feel you in me, all over me.”

“Clothes. Off.” His eyes darken. “I’m gonna destroy you for anyone else, baby. Make you all mine.”

I’ve seen peeks of Ari’s body. His abs when he lifts his arms over his head. His ass when he wears his tighter jeans. The trail of hair leading down to his crotch when he wears loose gray sweats.

But I’ve never seen his cock.

He yanks his t-shirt off, peeling it from his body, unveiling a long row of chunky abs that flex and contract with his movements. The collar of his t-shirt catches on his hair. It poofs and floats downward, some stray bits sticking up because of the static. He shakes his head so that it falls.

Ari’s brows raise.

Right. Clothes off. But I don’t want to miss watching him undress. I keep my eyes glued to him while I shuck my jacket from my arms and tear my t-shirt off like it’s burning me.

He loses his pants quickly, but everything’s still covered by his cotton boxers—seriously, boxers are the villain of the night—but there’s a clear outline. He’s hard for me.

Ari rubs a hand over his cloth-covered cock. “Are you thinking about it? About my cock deep inside you?”

“Yeah-huh. I want you to fill me, Ari. Please.”

Since I’m slow to do it, he grips the hems of my jeans, removing them in one swift motion. My boxers are quick to follow. He stares, stepping between my legs.

“God, you're gorgeous.”

When Ari says it, I actually believe him. I quirk my lips. “You’re not so bad yourself, stud.”

He knows he’s handsome.

A warm hand slides to cup my face. “Didn’t care much about being handsome until you, but now I’m worried I’m not enough by comparison.”

Is he for real? He’s got to be joking. Ari’s so hot the sun’s jealous.

Our lips meet again, and he sucks the bottom one into his mouth, toying with it between his teeth.

“Now, how do I want you?” he muses out loud. “I want to look into your pretty eyes, but I can pound you harder from behind.”

My cock throbs. “I want it hard.”

“I fucking knew it. It’s always the quiet ones.”

“Not that quiet. I chased away plenty of your admirers.”



He smiles into another kiss. “You sure did. I like you all protective and jealous of me. Lay down. I’m gonna make both our wishes come true.”

He’s gonna whaaa?—

Ari pushes me down since I don’t move fast enough for him. He waggles his brow and then his boxers are gone. I finally get to see his cock. It’s worth the wait. Fuck. Leaking, a fat mushroomed head, purpling around the edges.

Crack!

The sting of a heavy handprint blooms on the side of my ass.

“Stay there.”

He’s back quickly, there’s a snick and his hand maneuvering my bare foot over his shoulder.

“This is how you should be always, spread open for me. I’m gonna make you feel so good.”

Cool lube soaks my crease. The greasy lube highlights the rough ridges of his fingers, makes me more sensitive. I’ll forever know those fingers in the dark.

“I’ve been picturing it, the way I’d make you scream when I took you for the first time. Do you think you’ll do that? Can you be loud for me, baby?”

Those fingers are torture, teasing around my hole, sinking in to the first knuckle.

He slaps my ass. A prompt to answer the question.

“Yes! I can be loud. Ungh. ” He twists the finger, still not all the way inside, but it’s thick enough to inflict pleasurable pressure.

“Then let’s hear you.”

I exhale a loud hiss as one of those rough fingers slips inside and my muscles clench around it. He slides it in and out, twisting and gliding. Ari works me open, slowly, but with enough force to burn on every stroke, letting me know he’s there. Taking over my soul.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.”

He adds another finger, scissoring into me, and then a third, punching a yelp from my chest. On the edge of the bed, as I am, it’s like I’m hanging onto nothing but him, nothing but him to keep me tethered to reality. At his mercy. I’m already panting with anticipation as my nuts throb—what more does the bastard want from me?

Ari must notice the emotions on my face. He chuckles. “Frustrated, baby?”

“Yes, dammit. Wait until it’s my turn to tease you.”

“All I hear is I’m gettin’ a second round with your ass. Fine with me.”

“You’re the most infuriating man on the planet.” But he thrusts his fingers in deeper and my words cut off abruptly when he finds my prostate. I choke on a broken sob, back arching, never wanting this to end, but wanting his cock more.

Ari’s fingers slip away, and I whine, making my displeasure clear. It’s so empty without him in me. I didn’t think I was gonna be like this with him. So desperate and needy.

But I should have known.

Ari's the place I've been waiting for. The shoulder I can rest my head on when the world makes me too tired. He makes the loud quiet, and the quiet an adventurous place to live. He's the place where my heart speeds up and my insides burn. He's every wish I've ever made. He's mine.

He rubs a condom-covered cock over my rim. I suck my bottom lip into my mouth. The moment simmers with importance, and I take a shaky breath.

"You okay, baby?" Ari murmurs, the back of his knuckles grazing my cheek.

"More than okay. I just ... I'm glad you picked this position." I stare into his cornflower blues.

"Had to. I want to see you fall apart on my cock." The head breaches me as tiny butterflies flutter in my stomach, swirling like a whirlwind. I'm nice and open for him, all it takes is one swift thrust to fuck his way inside me.

I moan in pure relief.

"I'm home now, Cody," he says. His lips capture mine in a filthy kiss just before he pulls out and fucks into me again, scraping, rubbing my prostate. He picks up the rhythm, gradually building until he's sure I'm comfortable. "I'm fucking your beautiful ass just like I told you I would."

He did.

"Now, I'm gonna make you come so hard. Tell me how you want it."

I'm already breathless, my brain too lost in a sex-filled haze to find words. "De-

Deeper. I want deeper. Harder. More. More of you.”

Ari secures the ankle of mine hanging over his shoulder and then he grips my other ankle, spreading me wider. He’s buried deep, so deep.

“Keep making those noises, I wanna hear them in my sleep.”

If I’m making noises, it’s because of his massive dick, scraping them out of me. Little mewls, and breathy sounds. I teeter on the edge of the bed, on the precipice of insanity. He fucks me as hard as I wanted, the obscene sound of skin slapping skin rings off the walls as the bed rocks beneath us.

Every hit to my prostate sends jolts of white-hot lightning to every limb.

“Cody.” It’s growled low from his throat, but it curls into my veins. I love that. I fucking love that. It gives me a feeling that I could subsist on in the absence of air, food, and water.

“Fuck me. Fuck me harder, Ari.”

He uses those powerful hockey hips to thrust like a madman, obliging my wishes. Sweat drips down his brow, and I struggle to keep up with my own demands, muscles burning, clenching around his cock and milking it for all it’s worth.

Then his hand wraps around my cock. I’m doomed. All those sandpaper-like imperfections make themselves known, grazing over the silky skin of my already throbbing cock. “I think we need a little more lube.”

There’s a short pause while he drowns me in lube, but then he’s back and oh fucking god. That hand is going to be my undoing. He drags it up and down at a leisurely pace, slowing the thrusts of his hips, making the whole experience incredible torture.

“To think there was a time I liked you,” I complain.

“Whatever, you’re loving this.”

I am. I might try to deny it with words, but everything else betrays me—my body, the pleasure cries, the rock-solid hardness of my dick.

Somehow, he’s able to quicken his thrusts, timing them with the pace he’s stroking my cock. I’m overloaded with sensations, but I catch Ari’s gaze, our worlds colliding into one, and my breath catches.

He’s it. He’s gonna be it for me.

“C’mon, baby. Fall apart for me.”

It’s the true meaning of falling apart. My body convulses, short circuits, and then jolts into action again. The sounds that come out of me. They’re sinful. Unrecognizable. Heedless. I can’t even help myself. Cum spurts and dribbles from my cock, forming a hot river, cascading over my abs.

“Fuck. Oh fuck,” Ari says. He falls overtop of me, hands landing on either side of my head. He falters then shudders as he loses his perfect rhythm. His lips land on my collarbone, and he sucks, groaning out an orgasm, all the while pushing harder, trying to get deeper, deeper. As close as he can get to me.

He keeps sucking, making a point, a mark. Leaving something behind.

We don’t stop at one time. We fuck until dawn. Until orange Autumn sunlight filters through the windows. Until my voice is a throaty raw thing. I notice the time just before I’m drifting off to sleep.

“M’kay, Ari. I’ll be your boyfriend.”

“Heard that,” he mumbles, halfway to dreamland, tightening his hold on me. “All mine. No takebacks.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:34 am*

### ONE YEAR LATER

Cody

Should I be carrying boxes in, too? Yes. Can I carry them in myself? Yes. But it's a thousand times hotter to watch Ari carry them in. Ari's got his shirt off and tucked into the back of his jeans. Sweat's glistening, dripping from pectorals I'm sure were carved by magical elves. He sets the box down, wipes his brow with the back of his arm, and smiles at me like I'm a wonder of the world.

"Hey, baby."

"You need help?" I ask, but only because I know what he'll say.

"Nah. I got this. Besides, I know how much you love watching me work—don't deny it." His eyes light with mischief. "Also, those new glasses make you look like Superman. Just sayin'."

I can't figure him out. He genuinely thinks the world of me. It took me a while to accept this as fact, but after some time, it was hard to deny.

His sister Bea said one day, "Do you know that when you're not here, all he does is talk about you?"

I hadn't known that. To prove it, she listed off a bunch of my favorites, including the exact title of the comic book I saved for a long time to buy. Clearly, Ari had spent a great deal of time gushing about me. He somehow made me sound like I'm some

kind of hero as if I'm out there saving the world, curing incurable diseases.

“And you snore a little while you sleep, but he loves the way you snore,” she added.

He might gush about me a little too much, but even the slight sting of embarrassment didn't temper the gallop my heart took off at. Ari's a little obsessed with me, and I'm not mad about it.

Ari hasn't moved. He's leaning against the countertop, dripping sweat onto my clean floors—er, our clean floors now—staring at me as if he's seeing me for the first time.

“How do you do that?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“Look at me like you're falling for me all over again.”

He takes a step toward me. His thick fingers sink into the waistband of my jeans, pulling me toward him. Heat pours off him, stifling the air around us.

“Because I fall in love with you every day.”

“I love you, too, Ari Meyer. So, fucking much.” There's a sting of tears, glassing over my eyes. How did I get so lucky? How did I capture the attention of the world's most tenderhearted man? I may never know, but I'm keeping him forever.

“Those are all of my favorite words,” Ari whispers.

He yanks one of my legs around his body until it's locked around him and then his lips descend.

That's it for these guys! I hope you enjoyed this little peek into the Heartbreak



Hockey universe.