RACHAEL NICOLAS

Frozen Currents

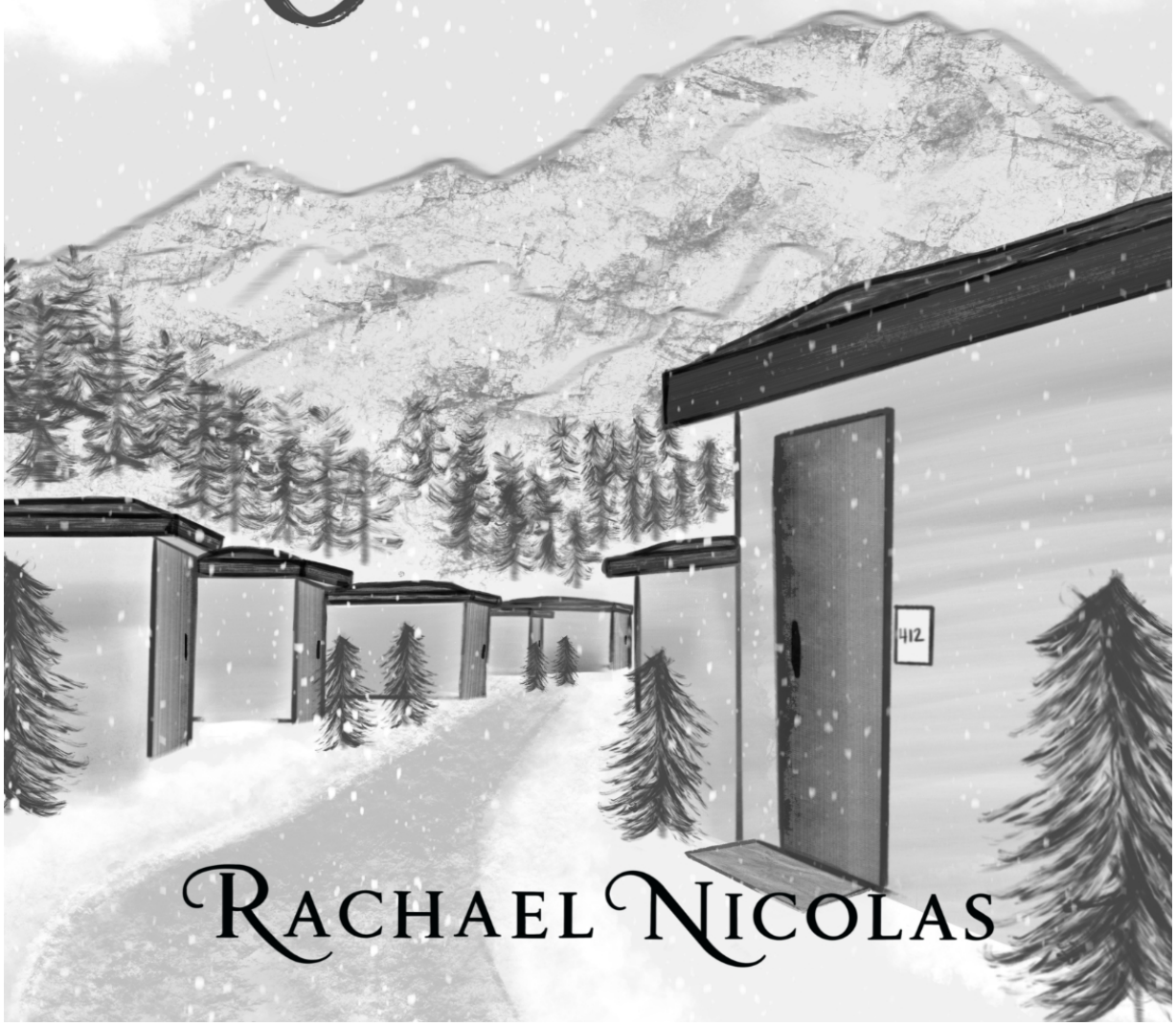


Frozen Currents

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BEYOND THE ICE • BOOK ONE

Frozen Currents



RACHAEL NICOLAS

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For my momma.

You always told me I would write a book, and I finally did.

I love and miss you every single day.

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2026 OLYMPICS

CANADA

MEN’S ICE HOCKEY

FORWARDS

Elias Mercer — *Montreal Royals*

Jonathon Harley — *New York Apples*

Cam Kelly — *Toronto Sixes*

Tanner Point — *Colorado Peaks*

Carson Timmins — *Carolina Flight*

Connor Myers — *Edmonton Magpies*

Nick Stone — *Boston Beacon*

Walter Miller — *Toronto Sixes*

Carter Wood — *Florida Glades*

Ryan Temple — *Boston Beacon*

Jeff Howden — *Edmonton Magpies*

Jordan Hunt — *Colorado Peaks*

Nolan Hart — *Winnipeg Currents*

Tom Johnston — *Vancouver Ports*

DEFENCE

Marko Vuković — *Seattle Emeralds*

Noah Price — *Ottawa Timber*

Ben Lowry — *Dallas Steers*

Jamie Wilson — *Vancouver Ports*

Dylan McCann — *Calgary Shift*

Zach Ingram — *Minnesota Iron*

David Brown — *Ottawa Timber*

Brad Smith — *San Jose Orcas*

GOALTENDERS

Logan Clarke — *Detroit Horsepower*

Owen Roy — *Dallas Steers*

Scott Goodrow — *Tampa Bay Herons*

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Prologue

ELIAS

December 30, 2025 · Montreal Royals @ Florida Glades

In his humble opinion, the week between Christmas and New Year's should at minimum be cold enough to see your breath outside. Snow was preferable, but not a requirement. Either way, whatever humid heat Florida decided was acceptable was only making Elias feel like it should have been summer.

Warm weather in December never stopped feeling just a tiny bit unsettling.

The energy in the locker room was buzzing with excitement from the win. After a physical and challenging game, the Montreal Royals had just barely won 4-3. Florida was always a team that relied on physicality as well as skill, and they were damn good. The last two Stanley Cups were proof enough of that.

But Montreal was a good team, too.

Elias had just gotten his pads off when he heard his name. "Mercer, media's ready for you."

Elias bit back a sigh. Media was his least favorite responsibility as captain. He understood why he was chosen for availability that day, but that didn't make him want to do it any more than usual.

The reporters held up their mics and started with the same generic questions they always asked. Elias gave his standard non-answers. Finally, one of the younger guys asked the question that had been on everyone's mind.

"Mercer, congratulations on being named captain of Team Canada for the upcoming Olympics. How are you feeling?"

Elias smiled, genuinely this time. “Yeah, I’m super excited about it. The team is full of talented players and I’m looking forward to playing alongside them.”

The same reporter asked, “Tonight you had a three-point game: one goal and two assists. Are you hoping to carry that energy with you to the Olympics?”

Elias nodded. “Obviously, yeah. All the guys on the team want to do well, so we just have to find lines that click and make sure the puck goes in the net.”

A second reporter asked how he felt about the team’s chemistry and if he was nervous about the chemistry on ice. Elias barely held back an eye roll. He gave his media-approved answer about how everyone would be there with the same goal in mind.

One of the female reporters spoke up then. “Elias, you’ve been the face of Canadian hockey for years now. Did it feel inevitable that you would be named captain?”

Immediately Elias shook his head. “No, of course not. It’s always an honor to be selected to represent Canada, and I would never expect the C. There’re a lot of guys in that room that are phenomenal leaders.”

She furrowed her eyebrows, clearly annoyed that she wasn’t getting the sound bite she wanted. She continued. “Have you had a chance to speak with your family? Are they proud of you?”

Elias kept his face neutral. But inside, he was wondering what kind of question that was. *Is your family proud of you for being the captain of an Olympic team?* It was the same as asking if the sky was blue.

Out loud, he answered, “I did have a chance to speak with them earlier today,” intentionally skipping the part about his family’s pride.

The reporter pursed her lips. Elias didn’t know why they even tried anymore—he gave the same answers every time he did media.

Correctly guessing they weren’t getting much more out of him, they turned their attention to the Royals rookie defenseman who had blocked a shot beautifully during the game. Elias heard the beginning of the question as he made his way back to the locker room.

“As a rookie, did you feel any extra pressure playing against the defending Stanley Cup champions tonight?”

“Oh, absolutely…” The rookie’s voice faded as the locker room door shut.

A few minutes later, Elias was turning the shower head on. He only ever allowed himself three minutes per shower: one to think about life under the comfort of the hot water, one to target any aches, and one to actually get clean. When his mental timer went off, Elias reached back to turn the water off before wrapping his waist in a towel.

Elias sat down in his stall of the visiting locker room for a moment to catch his breath. He didn't let his body fully unwind, not yet, but the day was rapidly settling into his bones. The adrenaline of the game always kept the exhaustion away, but as soon as he was off the ice, his body knew it didn’t have to perform anymore.

A few of his teammates were laughing and making plans to go celebrate the win. Florida was always a good stop to go out in. Combine that with their victory, and Elias knew the vast majority of the guys would be taking advantage of their afternoon flight the next day. He just hoped they wouldn’t go too crazy before inevitably going out in Raleigh the next night for New Year’s Eve.

Powell, one of their fourth liners, called out, “Captain Canada, come out with us tonight! Let us treat you!”

Elias wiped his towel over his face. “Pow, you’re still on your ELC. How are you planning to treat me?”

Powell turned fully toward him with a dramatic hand over his heart. “I will treat you with nothing but love and respect for the rest of my days.”

“Not what I meant, kid.” Elias laughed under his breath. “Anyway, I’m not sure I’m up for going out tonight. I’m honestly looking forward to some good sleep tonight.”

Powell pouted just barely, but didn’t fight him. Elias went out with the team often enough. He wasn’t much of a partier, never had been, but he’d learned early on that the guys didn’t trust you enough to pass you the puck if you never shared a beer and listened to them rant about their girlfriends.

Elias turned toward the TV in the background, hoping to catch the scores of the other games played tonight. Instead, one of the sports reporters was recapping a story.

“If you haven’t heard by now, we unfortunately lost recently retired David Trafford. His family reported that he was in a snowmobile collision with a tree. His death was completely unexpected and his family has asked for their privacy during this difficult time.”

Elias stilled. This was the first time he was hearing about Trafford's death. He couldn't believe he had missed it. He'd played against Trafford several times, but he hadn't known him well off the ice. Mostly, Elias just knew him for his skill as a player.

Before Elias could think about it much more, he heard one of his teammates say to another one, "Sucks, bro. He was one hell of a player. Now everyone is just gonna remember how he died."

Elias shook his head to himself as he finished getting dressed to head back to the hotel. *Jesus. What a way to go.*

The thoughts about Trafford followed him the whole way there. He finally felt his body fully relax as soon as the chilled air of his hotel room hit him. By now, Elias had the makings of his perfect hotel room down to a science. The hotel beds weren't always guaranteed to be comfortable, and the pillows were not usually his favorite, but hotel rooms tended to be damn good at keeping a low temperature. It was also a welcome change from the muggy air outside.

He changed into his sleep clothes and turned the television on to his hotel go-to: a home renovation show. You could always count on a hotel TV to at least have that or a cooking show.

Elias settled back against the almost-too-flat pillows. This would be his first time playing in the Olympics. The Olympics. Wow. Elias remembered being a young kid watching the games with his parents. He must've only been around six years old the first time he thought to himself, *Wouldn't it be so cool to be an Olympian?* In a way, it felt like his whole life had been working toward this.

Even though he was almost thirty-two, sometimes he still felt like the six-year-old kid wide-eyed in front of the TV watching the magic of the Olympics. Other times he caught himself staring out at his snow-covered lawn the same way Martin Stuart down the street did.

Elias started his usual routine of mindless scrolling to calm his brain down. He had never been one of the guys who could fall asleep as soon as he shut his eyes, so usually social media and stupid videos helped quiet his thoughts.

Before he got too far into his home page, he opened his messages app to find an unread text.

MARKO

Congrats on the C, man. That kid in Winnipeg was grinning like he won it himself.

Elias smirked to himself. He'd known Marko for most of his career and was looking forward to getting to spend some time with his friend for more than just a few minutes during warmups.

ELIAS

Thanks man you too. Can't wait to see you at the games.

Marko gave the message a thumbs up, and Elias took that as his cue to roll over and try to sleep. It only took a few tosses and turns to find a comfortable position.

Tomorrow would be the last day of the year, another one gone. He only had a handful of weeks to get ready for the Olympics. He had a team to lead until then.

But for tonight, his only remaining task was to get some decent sleep. The rest of the world would be there when he woke up.

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One

NOLAN

February 8, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nolan Hart couldn’t believe he was standing in the Olympic Village. It still felt surreal that he had been chosen to represent Canada in only his second year in the league. Nolan knew he was a good player—he’d worked damned hard to make sure of it—but knowing it was one thing, and being on a team with some of the best of Canadian hockey was another thing entirely. His fingers twitched at his side, and he just barely resisted the urge to pinch himself.

He had made it through customs on autopilot, something he’d gotten used to over the years going between Canada and the United States. Making his way to the Olympic Village and through check-in had been done in a haze. It wasn’t until he was standing here, now, that it finally sunk in.

Holy shit. He was at the Olympics. Nolan Hart was an Olympian.

He looked up at the residential buildings in front of him. He saw athletes from various countries walking around, some going in and out of the building. A group of girls were standing close together, rubbing their hands on their arms to warm up.

Nolan smiled to himself. Compared to the Winnipeg winters he was finally getting accustomed to, the weather here in Italy felt like summer. He was looking forward to the next few weeks’ worth of warmth rather than the below-freezing temperatures back at home.

He tightened his grip around his two large suitcases. Getting everything crammed into just two bags had been no easy feat. Thankfully, all his gear and equipment had already been taken to either his room or the practice rink. He really hoped the athlete housing had elevators. He did not want to try to fight these monsters up stairs.

The first thing he noticed when he entered the Canadian resident lobby was that it was already buzzing with activity. Team Canada merch and decor covered the space. It was a little wild that in the same room, there were tiny figure skaters next to snowboarders, next to huge ice hockey defenders. Nolan felt like a kid at the best kind of summer camp.

He scanned the room for any familiar faces. He spotted Marko Vuković across the lobby and immediately changed course. The Seattle Emeralds defenseman had been chirping him nonstop since the roster announcement. It was like he saved up as much material as he could for the few times a year they saw each other.

Nolan grinned as he tugged his suitcases toward Marko. Marko was talking to a few other athletes, but Nolan didn't recognize any of them as hockey players.

"Oh, our darling young Pretty Boy has arrived!" Marko cooed as he got closer.

Nolan fist bumped Marko when he stopped next to him. "Well, someone had to show up and remind you what a real hockey player looks like."

Marko put a clenched hand over his heart as if he was deeply offended. Nolan just rolled his eyes. Being dramatic was part of Marko's genetic makeup. He smiled as he introduced himself to the other athletes standing with them.

Nolan made small talk for a few minutes, but honestly, he was itching to see his room. He was curious to find out who he would be living with for the next few weeks. He had seen that last Olympics had cardboard beds, and Nolan sincerely hoped they were better this year.

One of the girls, Nolan was pretty sure she was a figure skater, excused herself and went up to her room. Nolan used it as his excuse to leave, too. He told Marko that he would catch up with him later and made his way to his room. He grinned to himself when he realized they did in fact have elevators.

When he finally got to his room, thankfully with less confusion than he'd expected, he hesitated before turning the door handle. A wave of nervous energy hit him. This would be his sanctuary for the next few weeks. It made opening the door feel more significant than it probably was.

He mentally laughed at himself. He had already done so many of the important steps: he had made the team, he had trained, he'd flown all the

way to Italy. But for some reason, entering his room felt like its own moment.

Nolan pushed the door open to find Carter Wood lounging on a bed. Relief immediately loosened something in his chest. He'd crossed paths with Carter plenty of times over the last couple years and had always gotten along with him.

Carter sat up, phone still in hand, and grinned when Nolan entered. "Hart!"

"Woody! Good to see you, bro."

"You too, man. Good flight?"

Nolan took a deep breath. "Long, but yeah. Crazy to be here, huh?"

Carter nodded and gestured to the bed by the window, which Nolan assumed was his. A collection of Team Canada merch had been laid out on top, and Nolan immediately went over to inspect it. He was most excited about the red-and-white blanket. He ran a hand over it, pleased to find it was as soft as it looked.

"Have you seen anyone else yet?" Nolan asked.

"I haven't been here too long, but I did run into Mercer downstairs," Carter told him, like seeing the Elias Mercer outside of the rink was a normal occurrence.

He didn't want to seem like a fanboy, though, so he just said, "Oh, cool. Have you played with him before?"

Nolan finally sat on his bed and looked at Carter. Carter nodded before answering, "Yeah, a couple years ago at Worlds." He shrugged. "Nice guy, kinda intense, though."

Nolan wouldn't expect anything different. They chatted for another minute before Nolan pulled out his phone. He sent a quick text to the group chat with his parents and younger sisters to let them know he had made it up to his room. Then he did the same for the group chat with his two best friends from Winnipeg. He did the mental math and knew it was late evening back home.

Which is why when his phone buzzed only a minute after he'd hit send, he wasn't surprised.

JESPER
glad you made it safe

TYLER
did you see him yet

Nolan rolled his eyes. He had a feeling he knew exactly who Tyler meant.

NOLAN
did i see who yet

TYLER
your boyfriend of course

NOLAN
why are you like this always.
but no not yet

JESPER
i did hear he’s single

NOLAN
oh god not you too

JESPER
what do they say? “when in Italy, do as the Italians do?”

TYLER
I think that’s Rome

JESPER
Rome is in Italy you dumbass

Nolan texted with them for a bit longer until his stomach growled and reminded him just how long it had been since he’d had anything to eat. He looked over at Carter. “Hey, Woody, wanna go grab something to eat?”

Carter immediately nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, hell yeah. I’m so hungry.”

Nolan was surprised by how normal the dining hall looked. It was huge, of course, but he had been expecting long dark tables like something out of a fantasy movie. The reality before him felt much closer to a high school cafeteria. There were large windows letting in tons of natural light, sleek metal serving stations, and rows of white tables.

Athletes filled the room. He’d seen some outside earlier, but seeing everyone eating and talking made them seem so much more human. Nolan peeked over at Carter, but he seemed far less starstruck and more food-focused. Nolan decided to follow his lead.

To his surprise, the food was more than just spaghetti and pizza. Nolan knew he would definitely need to eat genuine Italian food while he was in Italy, but he wasn’t too keen on the first time being from the village cafeteria while he was still jet-lagged.

Carter nodded toward one side of the hall, but at first glance, Nolan didn't see anything over there he was particularly interested in. He found a stir fry station and figured he couldn't go wrong there.

Food in hand, Nolan scanned the tables until he spotted Carter sitting with several other players from the league. Only one other guy wore a Team Canada shirt. The rest wore Team USA or various European team gear.

Nolan knew some of the guys, and knew of the others. Everyone in the NHL kind of knew everyone, even if you hadn't really met before. It definitely made situations like this easier.

He half paid attention to the conversation happening around him: he had talked to hockey players about hockey a million times before, and by now, he could follow these conversations in his sleep.

Instead, he people watched.

A group of guys from Finland were talking to a couple girls from Japan. Someone a few tables away from Norway took a bite and made a face. Nolan smiled to himself. Some girls from Austria and Germany were trading Olympic pins. Nolan mentally scolded himself—he'd meant to bring some pins with him to dinner.

Nolan thought he heard his name, so he turned his head back to the guys sitting around him. In doing so, he glanced past the main entrance.

Walking in was Elias Mercer himself. He was walking with Marko, nodding along while Marko said something. Marko grinned and Mercer rolled his eyes.

As if he didn't stand out enough, Mercer was in a dark henley and jeans. Nolan was surprised by how much taller he looked. Nolan had expected him to look smaller off ice, but he still commanded all the attention in the room.

Or maybe Nolan just felt drawn to him. Nolan couldn't remember a time when Elias Mercer hadn't been one of the biggest names in Canadian hockey. He hadn't had a chance to ever talk to him before, and he was more nervous than he wanted to admit about playing on the same team.

It didn't help that Mercer looked like he had just tumbled out of bed and still managed to look hot. His outfit was seriously working for him. Nolan had always found him attractive in his gear, and he'd definitely seen an interview here and there, but being in the same room with him right now was something else entirely.

“Hart, did you hear what I said?” Carter asked, yanking Nolan’s focus back to the table.

Oh God, had anyone noticed him staring at Mercer? He hoped not.

“Sorry, can you say it again? I’m pretty messed up from the time difference,” Nolan replied, sure his response was just a hair too delayed.

The message Marko had sent on the day of the roster announcement came back to him.

MARKO

congrats rookie. don’t make mercer hate you before camp.

NOLAN

thanks bro congrats to you too. but you know i’m not a rookie anymore right?

MARKO

give it a few more years before i stop calling you that ;)

Nolan had made it through camp without Mercer hating him. Now he just needed to stay on Mercer’s nice list through the tournament.

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Two

ELIAS

February 9, 2026 · Olympic Village

Elias was never late, and he certainly wasn't going to start with their first team practice. Waking up on the other side of the world was more disorienting than he had expected. Elias hated every time he learned he couldn't just strong-arm his way through things like jet lag.

He shuffled his legs under the blanket, subconsciously feeling around for Moose. The bed was cold where he expected to find the golden retriever.

Elias was glad to have his own room. Being well known in the hockey world definitely had its perks. He was happy to not have to worry about sharing the thermostat, or his roommate having bad-smelling food, or someone else in his space.

That being said, he briefly wondered how his teammates were feeling waking up with their roommates. He glanced over at the clock. 6:04 AM. On second thought, he wondered if they were even all awake yet, especially some of the younger players.

He mentally went through the roster and realized the kid from Winnipeg, Hart, was the youngest on the team. He was almost definitely still asleep. Marko, despite being closer to Elias's age, was also likely still asleep. Elias smiled to himself and shook his head.

Elias gave himself his normal three minutes for his shower. Luckily, he'd made it through the last few games before the break without taking too many big hits or picking up any concerning aches or bruises. Physically, he couldn't have asked to be in a better place to start the Olympics. He could only hope the other guys could say the same.

After he showered and dressed for the morning, he used the coffee pot in his room to make himself a cup. He made it the way he always did: black

with two sweeteners. Just enough to knock off the full bitterness, but strong enough that the coffee was still the main flavor.

Elias took a drink of his coffee and spread out his notes to look over before practice. It wasn't anything too crazy, just some things he'd noticed in the weeks since the roster announcement.

Marko had been playing well, but taking unnecessary risks in a few games. Wood looked exhausted in his last few games. Timmins had recently been moved up a line. Hart had been struggling in his last few games, specifically in his most recent game before the break. Lowry was coming off a lower body injury.

He made a note to check in on all of it during practice. It wasn't his job to decide who played on what line, but he still had a responsibility to know how his teammates were doing. He'd been wearing the C for Montreal for eight seasons now, and almost as long at Worlds. This was a muscle he was very familiar with stretching.

Before he realized it, it was time for him to head down to breakfast. Technically breakfast didn't start until 7:30, but Elias was hoping to touch base with all the guys. He always liked to check in at international events.

Unsurprisingly, he was the first player to breakfast. He saw the coaches and some of the team staff and made his way over to the tables with little Team Canada signs.

"Hey, Bennett, good to see you." Elias held out his hand to shake. He was thankful Graham Bennett was his coach for the Olympics, especially since they always worked well together at Worlds.

"Mercer, I hope you had a good trip," Bennett told him.

Elias nodded. "I did. Everyone else make it in okay?"

"Good enough. How's the room looking?"

Elias finished their conversation before greeting the familiar faces and introducing himself to the people he hadn't yet met. Only then did he make his way over to get breakfast and another cup of coffee.

Just as he was sitting down to eat, Elias noticed a few guys walking in together. Elias nodded to the other veteran players he had known for years at this point. He would give them a second to get their food before talking to them.

More of the team trickled in as Elias finished eating. When he was done, he stood up with his coffee cup and started making the rounds.

Around 8 o’clock, Elias saw Hart finally walk in. He was smiling, but if his bedhead was anything to go by, he hadn’t been up for long. Hart was with one of the other young players. Elias continued making his way around while he let Hart get settled.

Eventually, he made his way over to Hart’s table. He was looking forward to getting to play with him, honestly. Despite what the media was saying about his performance in his last few games, Hart had raw talent in a way that wasn’t too common.

“Morning, Hart,” Elias greeted as he sat down at the table across from him.

Hart stopped with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Good morning, Mercer.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard good things,” Elias said, lifting his cup to take another sip. When nothing came out, he frowned at the empty cup in betrayal.

Hart’s eyes widened just a hair. “Nice to meet you, too. I’m stoked to get to play with you.” Hart lowered his eyes for a second, his gaze landing on Elias’s cup. “Actually, I needed to go get myself a cup of coffee, if you want to walk over with me since it looks like you’re out?”

Elias briefly debated if he needed a third—or was it fourth?—cup of coffee. More caffeine couldn’t hurt. He shrugged before standing to follow Hart toward the coffee station.

“How was your trip in?” Elias asked.

“Long. But it’s worth it to be here. Honestly, I still feel like I’m dreaming sometimes,” Hart told him, the last sentence softer like he’d been saying it more to himself than to Elias.

“Yeah, it’s crazy. I dreamed about this when I was a kid,” Elias told him.

When they reached the coffee station, Hart grabbed a cup and started pouring while Elias did the same. As Elias was reaching for the sweeteners, he saw Hart grab the creamer and pour an ungodly amount in his cup. Then, as if that weren’t enough, he added just a bit of sugar. It made Elias’s teeth hurt just looking at it.

“I did, too,” Hart told him as he finished making his coffee. He looked oddly earnest. Hart turned like he was going to head back to the table, but stopped when he saw Elias leaning against the counter.

“Well, I just wanted to touch base and say hi. And to let you know that I’m here if you need anything. Our coaches and staff are great, but I

remember what my first time representing Hockey Canada felt like. It can be a lot. So, if you ever need to talk, or want advice, or want to vent, I'm here. I'm in room 412. Seriously, don't hesitate to reach out."

Hart looked a little surprised by Elias's mini speech. He recovered quickly and said, "Thanks, Cap. I really appreciate it."

Elias nodded and mentally checked another item off his list. He let Hart head back to his table while he went to say hi to anyone he had missed earlier.

Breakfast ended shortly after, and Elias was grabbing his stuff to head to their pre-practice team meeting. The walk to the meeting room was short, less than ten minutes. Elias had his to-go cup of coffee in one hand, team schedule printouts in the other, a manila folder tucked under his arm, and his small bag on his shoulder.

The meeting was what Elias had expected. Bennett gave his introductory speech and went over schedules and possible lines. He'd coached enough international tournaments to know how to settle a room full of NHL players. Elias paid attention, but he was itching to get on the ice.

By the time they reached the practice rink, Elias was beyond ready to get going. They started with drills before moving on to a scrimmage. He'd already played with a lot of these guys, so there was some established chemistry on the ice.

Bennett changed up the lines when things weren't working, keeping Elias on the starting line. After a couple changes, he put Hart on Elias's left.

Elias felt the shift immediately. He knew Hart was a good winger, but seeing it firsthand was different. Hart caught every pass Elias sent his way, then took off toward the net. He weaved through the defenders like they weren't even there. Elias couldn't help but watch appreciatively. Hart twisted his wrist and sent the puck straight into the net before the goalie even had a chance to respond. Hart may have been having a rough time before the break, but nothing on the ice right now was reflecting that.

Elias had always loved watching good hockey, and this was no different.

The rest of practice followed in the same fashion. Hart was playing beautifully, keeping control of the puck even as the other team tried to steal it. They played a few more rounds while Bennett tried out different combinations, but he kept Hart starting with Elias.

When Bennett blew the whistle for them to head to the locker room, Elias was breathing hard and sweaty. As he glanced around at his

teammates, he noticed they all looked the same.

When his eyes found Hart, he realized he had already been watching him. Elias grinned at him and nodded in a job-well-done way. He was thankful to be surrounded by this much talent.

It was clear the other guys felt the same. A minute later, one of the guys on the bench next to him, Timmins, said, “Man, wouldn’t it be sick if we actually fucking did it? If we won gold?” He shook his head with a smile on his face and turned to look at Elias. “Cap, they’d remember you for leading us to gold!”

Elias could see it so clearly that it almost felt blinding. Being captain of the gold-winning team felt like a dream on the edge of being too far to reach. He would have loved for that to be one of the defining moments of his legacy.

Next to Timmins, Marko laughed. “Hell, yeah. Better that than missing an empty netter or for some scandal.”

Elias couldn’t help it; he shuddered. No, he had spent his whole career making sure there was enough skill on the ice to give people a lifetime’s worth of stuff to talk about.

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Three

NOLAN

February 10, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nolan woke up on his third day at the Olympics feeling like he was on top of the world. Practice going so well the day before almost definitely had something to do with it. From the other side of the room, Nolan heard Carter snoring, still happily asleep. So, while Carter slept, Nolan let his mind wander.

Even if it was just during practice, playing on a line yesterday with Elias Mercer felt like a dream come true in and of itself. Their on-ice chemistry was amazing. Nolan knew Mercer had felt it too. He was excited to see if it continued into today's practice.

Nolan was also proud of himself for being totally normal and chill when Mercer had told Nolan his room number. Mercer had absentmindedly scratched his beard as he'd been telling Nolan, like he wasn't even aware he was doing it, and Nolan had visions of how that beard would feel in between his thighs. And yet, he'd managed to keep a straight face even through that thought.

Nolan had known he was gay almost as long as he'd understood what it felt like to want someone. His first crush had been a boy in his elementary school class, and while his friends eventually started talking about girls like they were the best thing ever, Nolan only ever felt that way about other guys.

What really sealed the deal for him was when he was eleven years old. Montreal was playing a game against Vancouver and his dad had gotten them tickets. While his grandparents watched his little sisters, he got to have an evening with just his mom and dad. It was his first NHL game.

That was also the first time he got to see Elias Mercer play. During the game, Mercer had gotten into a fight with one of the players from Vancouver. Gloves had dropped quickly, and Mercer had skated off the ice with a bloody nose. It wasn't long before he came back and played the rest of the game with a little dried blood on his upper lip. Nolan never got over how impressive that was.

Going from seeing that to playing on the Olympic team with him was something Nolan never could have predicted. Mercer was the kind of player everyone in hockey knew of, both for his skill and his intensity. That was why Mercer being so kind had caught Nolan off guard. He hadn't expected Mercer to be an asshole, of course, and he knew people said he was a good captain, but giving out words of encouragement and his room number hadn't been in Nolan's bingo card.

Nolan rolled around on his bed, thankful it was long enough that his feet weren't falling off the end. He pulled out his phone, even though it was too late at home for his family and friends to be awake. He sent a couple pictures he'd taken yesterday but he wasn't expecting much of a reply for a while.

He stretched and heard the groan of Carter waking up in his own bed. They had practice again today, then this evening was Team Canada's women's game. Nolan was beyond excited. Even though their first game was the day after tomorrow, it felt a million years away. He was equally nervous and eager to see if the momentum he'd had yesterday continued.

By the time he was sitting at breakfast, Nolan felt much more comfortable with his team than he had the day before. He sat with Carter, Marko, and a couple other guys. Somehow Marko managed to seem like he hated mornings and like he was made for them at the same time. But Nolan would much rather be around Marko and his endless need to mess around than to be around someone grumpy.

Mercer was already there when Nolan had walked in, and he'd smiled at Nolan immediately. Nolan was definitely pretending it didn't make him feel a little bit giddy inside. Nolan was but a man who liked to be noticed, who could blame him?

Nolan rode the high of Mercer's attention all through practice. They had mostly settled on lines yesterday, so there was less of a guessing game today. Much to his delight, practice was even smoother today than it was yesterday. It gave him the confidence to be a bit flirty with Mercer. It wasn't

like he was expecting anything to come of it, but there was no harm in having some fun. He was flirty with everyone, so honestly, he was sure no one would notice if he played it up a little for Mercer.

During one specific play, Mercer sent the puck in Nolan's direction. It was a good setup, if he could make the shot. He didn't give himself time to question it; he just moved on instinct. When the puck hit the back of the net, Nolan felt almost as proud as he would getting a go-ahead goal in the third.

He snapped his head toward Mercer to make sure he'd seen it. Of course he had. He smiled widely and drifted toward Mercer as if on instinct.

"That was great, kid," Mercer told him. "Good job."

Nolan kept beaming. And if hearing he was doing a good job from Mercer made something tingle in him, that was his own business.

Nolan's eyes dropped to Mercer's mouth, just for a split second. He told himself he was imagining the way Mercer flushed deeper than he had been.

He kept up the light flirting. He could not be blamed for the way he kept bumping his body into Mercer's. Hockey was a contact sport, after all.

In the locker room, everyone was chatting about their plans the rest of the day. It seemed like a mix of who was planning to go to the Canada Hockey House that night and who wasn't.

Marko called out, "Merce, are you going?"

Mercer slipped his shirt over his head. "I'm leaning toward no. Seems like a lot."

Nolan piped up, "Cap, come on! Don't you wanna watch women's hockey? We gotta watch Canada kick the U.S.'s ass!"

Mercer raised his eyebrows. "You know our first game is in a couple days?"

Nolan nodded. "Yep, our first *Olympic* game. Because we're at the Olympics. Don't you wanna watch *other* Olympic hockey?"

Mercer shrugged. "I'm here to play hockey."

Nolan wanted to shake him. Marko looked like he felt the same. "Mercer, you are aware this is also hockey? Surely, you are capable of both playing and watching hockey."

Nolan walked over to him. "Mercer, you said you've been dreaming about this your whole life, right?"

"Right, which is why I need to rest and go over strategy."

A few different arguments flitted through Nolan's mind. He settled on, "Then think of this as Team Canada bonding time. It'll make us play better

together.”

Mercer sighed. Nolan tried not to let his hopes rise too high. Mercer thought about it for a second. Then he gave a long-suffering sigh. “Fine, I’ll go. But only because you might have a point about the team bonding.”

Nolan was very proud of himself for not fist pumping. He made eye contact with Marko, whose eyes shined with amusement and triumph.

“Damn, Merce, if I had known all it would take to get you to go somewhere was the kid using his puppy dog eyes, I would’ve used it on you a long time ago,” he teased.

Mercer shoved his shoulder. “Do you have to be like this every day?”

Marko grinned. “Of course, it’s what fuels me. I’ll die if I’m too boring.” He paused as if he was considering something. His eyes lit up, and he snapped his fingers, pointing at Mercer. “Maybe that’s what’s wrong with you.”

Mercer scoffed. “Fuck off, Marko, honestly.”

Nolan couldn’t help but think that was one thing Marko hadn’t gotten right. He didn’t see anything wrong with Mercer from where he stood.



The guys all agreed that it would be best to wear their Team Canada merch. That being said, Nolan wasn’t 100% sure which option he should wear. He decided the best way to decide was to not think about it for a minute. He pulled his phone out and opened his group chat with Tyler and Jesper.

NOLAN
practice has been great. there’s this super cool canada hockey house that we’re all going to so we can watch the women’s game tonight!!

Of course, Tyler was the first to reply.

TYLER
does that include your boyfriend

NOLAN
not my boyfriend. but yes. he wasn’t gonna go but I changed his mind

JESPER
bro you make it too easy for him

TYLER
oh nolan would LOVE to be easy for him

Nolan rolled his eyes.

NOLAN
i hate both of you

JESPER
not a denial

TYLER
not a single denial actually

Nolan didn’t reply. He decided a better use of his time was finding what to wear. He got up and looked through his closet at the various Team Canada clothes. After entirely too much flipping through them, he settled on a matching sweat set. The hoodie was cream and had his number, 21, on the front with a huge maple leaf on the back. It felt perfect to him.

Nolan, Mercer, and Marko all made their way to Canada Hockey House together, to meet up with the rest of the team. Athletes filled the space—and with them, maple leaves and dreams. Not for the first time, Nolan felt like he needed to pinch himself. He’d seen the Olympics and all that came with it on TV his whole childhood, but it felt a little fantastical to be standing here. He looked over at Mercer, who was looking around with childlike wonder in his eyes. For a moment, Mercer looked less like the captain of Team Canada and more like someone who had grown up dreaming about this too. Nolan was thankful he’d pushed for Mercer to get this experience, too.

The game was a good one, with Team Canada taking the win. Not long after that, everyone was heading back to their rooms. Nolan kept the smile on his face the whole way there.

As he walked, Nolan’s stomach growled. Busy days often made him hungry before bed. He made a quick detour for a snack and munched on his way to his room.

Nolan got back to his room right around eleven. He took a quick shower, eager to change and hang out on his phone in bed, so it was very annoying when Carter entered the room. He looked a little surprised to see him, which was odd considering this was his room, too. His expression quickly changed to something closer to guilt.

“Hey, buddy…” Carter started. Nolan sighed.

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Four

ELIAS

February 10, 2026 · Olympic Village

Elias was in that weird spot in between sleep and consciousness when he heard the knock at his door. He blinked his eyes open and looked over at the clock on his nightstand. 11:27 PM. He hadn't even been in bed that long. Maybe it wasn't actually a knock. Maybe he had been dreaming.

His eyes were slipping closed when another knock came. It was louder this time. Definitely a knock.

Elias reached over and grabbed his glasses. He yawned as he stumbled his way over to the door. He understood that 11:27 might not be late to the young guys, but Elias had decided that if he didn't have a game or late-night obligations, this was a perfectly reasonable bedtime.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting when he opened the door, but Nolan Hart wasn't it.

Hart was standing in the hallway, rubbing the back of his neck. He was in a pair of gray sweatpants and an old Winnipeg Currents t-shirt. Elias pointedly did not allow himself to linger any longer than necessary on Hart's body. Hart's eyes snapped up when Elias opened the door, like he wasn't expecting him to actually answer.

"Hart?" Elias asked, raising his eyebrows. His voice came out scratchy with the sleep he had been chasing.

Hart took a deep breath before he answered. "Mercer, hey. Were you asleep?"

"Nah, it's fine. What's up? Everything okay?"

Hart turned around and looked at his own hotel room down the hall. "Carter has some girl coming over and kicked me out for a while. I was

hoping maybe I could chill with you for a bit?”

Elias rubbed his eyes to avoid answering for a minute. He knew he was still the captain, and it wasn’t out of the ordinary for the young guys to seek him out for help. But Hart had also been getting increasingly touchier in the last couple days. Elias wasn’t sure he was ready to have this cozy version of Hart in his hotel room. The problem wasn’t that Hart was a man. Elias had known he liked men for nearly two decades. The problem was that this was Hart, and Elias knew a bad idea when he saw one.

Elias gave a tight smile and stepped aside. He took a deep breath as Hart crossed into his room.

Hart looked nervous. “Thanks, bro, I really appreciate this.” He waited for a second before toeing his shoes off and lining them up next to Elias’s. Elias tried not to let himself like the way the shoes looked next to each other.

Get a fucking grip, dude.

Elias led Hart further into his room. Not sure what else they could really do, he grabbed the remote and gestured to the sofa for Hart to sit on. It wasn’t very big, hardly even larger than a loveseat, but it was either that or the bed. Elias knew himself well enough not to let this man get his scent all over where Elias was supposed to sleep.

He handed the remote to Hart and turned his body toward the wet bar. “Do you want anything to drink? I’ve got water and Gatorade, but I can order up something else if you want it.”

Hart shook his head as he turned on the TV. The room lit up. Elias hadn’t realized how dark it was until the blue light reflected off Hart’s face. “No, water is fine. Thank you,” Hart said. He flipped through the channels faster than Elias could keep up with. “If you wanna go back to bed I can just hang out on my phone.”

Elias grabbed them each a bottle of water and sat down next to Hart. He noticed that Hart was sitting stiffly in the corner of the couch, like he was trying to take up as little space as possible. Elias purposefully took a more relaxed posture, hoping it would encourage Hart to relax a bit more. “No, I’ll hang with you.”

The relief was evident on Hart’s face. “You wanna watch a movie then?”

“Just nothing scary. I will have to sleep at some point.”

Hart laughed. Sometimes it surprised Elias how easily Hart showed his cards.

After a couple minutes of scrolling, they settled on some action movie from a few years ago. Elias vaguely remembered watching it on a plane at some point, but he didn't remember liking it enough to focus fully on it again. Which was good, honestly, because Elias knew his mind would drift to the man sitting next to him whether he wanted it to or not.

Elias leaned back further and crossed one foot over his knee. It was then that he realized he wasn't wearing pants. His boxer briefs weren't old or anything, and it wasn't like Hart hadn't seen him naked in a locker room, but there was something different here. At the same time, Elias realized he still had his glasses on. He hoped the flush he felt creeping up his neck wasn't visible in the dark of the room. Should he go put some pajama pants on? Would that draw too much attention to himself? Did it even matter?

Elias had left the Team Canada blanket on the couch yesterday, so he settled for throwing the blanket over his lap. He angled his body so he was facing the TV better, and if seeing Hart better was a bonus, so be it. His hair was wavy, like it had air dried after he showered. There was always something warm about Hart, but seeing him laugh and smile at the movie was something else entirely. In a completely unsurprising move, Hart chattered through the beginning of the film.

"Wait, have we seen this lady before?" he asked, and it took a second before Elias realized he was expected to respond.

"Honestly, I don't remember. I don't think so," Elias said. It was true, he didn't remember, but his mind was too focused on other things to say for certain either way.

Elias let his mind wander as the movie kept playing. Occasionally Hart would make some comment, and Elias hoped he was responding in a way that seemed natural. They still had a couple days until the first game, but they already seemed to be clicking on the ice.

Elias wasn't sure initially if Hart would play on the same line as him. It felt like a given that Elias would be on the first line himself, but since Nolan was only in his second year as a pro, it wouldn't have been too surprising if he had been on the second line. After the first day of practice, Elias was a bit shocked at how well they had read each other on the ice. Sometimes the new lines could take a second to really click, but it was like Hart knew exactly what Elias was planning to do with the puck.

Before Elias could think more about their on-ice chemistry, he noticed Hart shift out of the corner of his eye. Was that a shiver? Elias snapped his

eyes to the TV, trying to figure out if something on screen had caused the reaction. However, the scene playing seemed to be completely uneventful. Elias tried to go back to his thoughts.

Then it happened again. But this time, he also tried to sink further into the couch. Elias couldn’t help but notice that Hart’s eyes kept looking at the blanket still spread out on Elias’s lap. Was Hart cold? Elias quickly did an inventory of everything in the room, but this was the only blanket other than the large comforter on the bed. Should he offer it to Hart? But then he would have his boxer briefs on full display. Would Hart even notice? Elias couldn’t be sure. Hart seemed invested in the movie, but Elias thought he’d caught Hart looking at him a few times. His polite Canadian upbringing won. He knew he had to offer Hart the blanket. He wasn’t even cold himself, and it felt wrong to keep the blanket when Hart was so obviously chilly.

Elias decided against asking; he just took the blanket off of himself and draped it over Hart. Hart looked up at him, startled. He opened his mouth to protest, but when Elias just shook his head, it snapped shut again.

“Thank you,” Hart said instead, voice uncharacteristically soft. He was looking at Elias in such a way that he almost forgot to reply. He mumbled out a “you’re welcome” on muscle memory alone.

Hart didn't look away. Elias wasn't entirely sure why he didn't, either. For a moment, neither of them moved. Hart's eyes dropped, just briefly, to Elias's mouth before finding his again.

Oh.

Elias knew that look. He'd given it to enough men himself.

If he leaned forward, he could close the distance. It wouldn't take much. Hart was right there, looking at him like—

“You warm enough?” Elias asked, forcing himself away from that train of thought.

Hart blinked. Then he smiled, a little crookedly. “Yeah. Thanks, Mercer.”

Elias nodded and turned back toward the television.

He had to get a fucking grip.

Unfortunately for Elias, as the night went on, he realized the blanket had actually been keeping him warmer than he had initially realized. Elias sighed to himself: these damn hotel rooms always dropped in temperature the later it got.

He looked over at Hart, noticing how he had curled up in a ball under the blanket. Seeing this version of Hart was so different from playing alongside or against him on the ice. Gone was the intense young kid who had something to prove, and in his place was soft smiles at the movie and eyes drooping closed. A flash of possessiveness came over Elias. He was suddenly annoyed that anyone else ever got to see Hart like this.

Eyes still closed, Hart stretched his legs out a bit, laying them next to Elias's on the sofa. They weren't quite touching, but Elias could feel the warmth coming from Hart's skin. Before he could process the contrast between Hart's warmth and the icy air, Hart shifted. He kicked his feet up just barely, spreading the blanket over Elias's thigh. Had he meant to do that? Elias forced his breathing to remain steady. He did not want Hart to know how this was affecting him. Surely, it was just the late hour.

Then, without even really thinking about what he was doing, Elias shifted. It was minute, only an inch or two, but it was enough. Elias felt Hart's sock-covered foot rest against his thigh. He waited a moment to see how Hart would react.

Hart's only reaction was a deep sigh that almost seemed…happy? He cuddled further into the couch, and within a few minutes, his breathing had evened out as he fell asleep.

Elias glanced at the screen, noticing the movie still had more than halfway to go. Looking over at Hart, though, he couldn't stop the smile that spread over his face.

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Five

NOLAN

February 11, 2026 · Olympic Village

When Nolan woke up, the sunlight was hitting him oddly. The room was only faintly glowing, compared to the full sunshine Carter normally preferred.

Nolan blindly reached for his phone on the nightstand, but his hand never caught the edge. He opened his eyes more completely, looking around the room in confusion. A small laugh from the corner of the room caught his attention.

Elias Mercer sat in the chair by the desk, drinking a cup of coffee and scrolling on his phone. The night before came back to Nolan immediately.

As if he could feel Nolan's gaze, Mercer looked up at him. "Oh, shit, sorry, did I wake you?"

Nolan shook his head. He wasn't a morning person by any means, but today he felt especially groggy. Words would have to wait just a moment.

"I got you some coffee," Mercer told him, gesturing with his phone toward a second coffee cup sitting on the counter.

Nolan nodded again. It was only then that he noticed Mercer had put his glasses back on. The look softened him in a way that Mercer probably didn't even realize. Nolan yawned as he tapped his phone on, making sure he hadn't missed any important notifications. His phone was probably close to dying. He hadn't planned on falling asleep here, so he certainly hadn't thought far enough ahead to bring his charger with him.

Nolan went through all the things he needed to do: grab his coffee, thank Mercer profusely, run downstairs to grab cream for said coffee, then go back to his room to charge his phone and brush his teeth.

But to his absolute shock, Nolan noticed his phone had a completely full battery. Mercer must have noticed his eyebrows furrowing, because he spoke up.

“Oh, yeah, I charged your phone. I didn’t want you to miss an alarm or anything,” he said with a shrug, like the simple act hadn’t made Nolan’s heart skip a beat.

Nolan mumbled his thanks, and Mercer hummed in response to whatever sound Nolan had made. He glanced back over at the coffee sitting on the counter and swung his legs over the sofa.

With a groan, Nolan raised his arms over his head and stretched. He felt the cold air hit his stomach as his shirt rode up with the movement. From the chair, Nolan heard Mercer cough. He was leaning forward, reaching for a napkin to dab the spilled coffee on his lap.

Red covered his cheeks, which made sense if he had just been choking. Mercer glanced over at him, clearly seeing if Nolan had noticed him. When their eyes met, Mercer quickly said, “Hot coffee down the wrong pipe.”

Nolan nodded, not wanting to embarrass him further by commenting on it. He then stood up to go grab his cup. He glanced toward the coffee table, looking for his room key.

“Thanks for the coffee, man. And for letting me crash here. I gotta go grab some creamer and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Mercer didn’t even look up. “No, you don’t. I put some creamer and sugar in it already.”

“You what?” Nolan said before he even meant to.

“Yeah,” Mercer continued. “That’s how you take it, right?”

“Right,” Nolan said, cautiously lifting the cup to his lips to take a sip. Holy shit. It was perfect. Elias Mercer had gotten his coffee order exactly correct.

Slowly, Nolan turned and made his way back to the couch. Had he woken up in some different reality? Sure, Mercer was a good captain and nice off the ice, but surely there was no way he remembered Nolan’s coffee order. Mercer was already drinking his coffee black like none of this was strange at all, so Nolan decided not to question it further.

The rest of their short morning together continued in the same way, Mercer being devastatingly attentive without realizing it, and Nolan pretending everything was the same as always. After another half hour or so, Nolan knew he really did need to go back to his own room and get ready

for the day. They had practice today, and the first game would be tomorrow.

Mercer lingered by the door as he got ready to leave. When Nolan stepped into the hallway, he had a weird feeling like he should hug Mercer goodbye. Which *was* weird. Tapping helmets on the ice was one thing. Initiating physical contact off ice was a completely different thing.

Nolan walked to his room in a bit of a daze. He half expected to see a half-naked woman in the room, so he was a little surprised when he saw that Carter was alone.

“Hey, bro. Big thanks for clearing out last night,” Carter said. His voice was heavy with sleep in a way that made it obvious he hadn’t been awake long.

Nolan grinned on instinct. “Yeah, of course. Was she hot?”

Carter grinned back, shit-eating and smug. “Oh, you have no idea. She —” He cut himself off, eyes zeroing in on the coffee cup still in Nolan’s hand. “Sick, you got coffee. Did you get me one?”

Color drained from Nolan’s face as he looked down at his cup. “Oh. No. I didn’t, uh, know if you would have guests or even want one. Sorry,” Nolan told him guiltily.

“Nah, it’s okay, man.” Carter shrugged. Thankfully, he wasn’t looking at Nolan anymore. Nolan tried to use the brief minute to recenter himself.

Carter decided to go get his own cup of coffee, so Nolan used the alone time to shower and get ready for practice. He realized he hadn’t actually eaten anything yet, so he’d need to grab something before heading to the practice rink.

Nolan tried to remind himself that things were normal. They were fine. Practice would be normal and fine. No one else knew he had fallen asleep in Mercer’s hotel room. No one else knew that he had seen Mercer in glasses. No one knew that the image of Mercer’s strong thighs pressing against his boxer briefs had permanently altered Nolan’s brain. Everything was normal and fine.



Everything was not normal and fine. When Nolan entered the locker room, his eyes searched for Mercer without thought. He found him in front of his stall, in his practice shorts and a compression shirt, talking to Marko. Marko

looked like he was giving Mercer a hard time about something, and Mercer was very obviously not looking at Marko.

Like he could feel that Nolan had walked in, Mercer turned his head toward the door. Their eyes met, and Nolan couldn't help the flush that spread up his neck.

God, why was he blushing? He felt like a schoolgirl with a crush. He had probably spent more than half of his life with some kind of crush on Mercer. He couldn't figure out why things suddenly felt so much more intense.

Nolan tried to force himself to focus on hockey. Whether Mercer was changing Nolan's life or not was irrelevant. Their first game was less than twenty-four hours away, and he needed to make sure he showed everyone that he deserved his spot on the roster, just like everyone else.

Practice felt more intense. The team wanted to show they were a serious contender. They all had something to prove. Despite his best efforts, Nolan could feel his brain overthinking every pass and play. A voice that sounded like his dad's was there to echo each thought he had. He was getting in his own head about his worth as a player. Nolan knew he needed to show the other guys that he belonged here, on the first line alongside Mercer, one of the best players in the league.

When yet another pass didn't connect at the end of practice, Nolan felt pissed off. Why was he fucking this up? He knew he was better than this.

Nolan was shaking his head at himself when he entered the locker room. He heard a couple of the other guys talking among themselves on the far side of the room. Nolan kept his head down and tried to tune it out.

But then he heard it.

"The fucking kid is playing just like he did before the break. Just because you're the best on your shitty team doesn't mean you're not a shitty player, too."

Nolan's heart fell to the floor. Did his own teammates really think that? Before he could spiral too much, he heard a low voice cut through the pounding in his ears.

"We're not doing that," Mercer said. He was met with silence. He continued, not raising his voice any. "You don't get to disrespect people in this room because they had a rough week. He earned his spot here the same as everyone else."

One of the guys made a sound like he was going to defend himself, but Mercer cut him off.

“If you’ve got a problem with his game, say it on the ice. Otherwise shut up.”

Nolan risked a glance toward where the others had been standing. The original two guys had their heads together, speaking in quiet tones. Mercer had already left to go shower.

Mercer’s words kept replaying in his head as he got undressed. It would have been so easy for Elias to just leave the guys to shit-talk. He hadn’t known Nolan was there. He could have ignored it, and Nolan never would have known. But he had decided to not only defend Nolan, but completely shut down the conversation. He had made it clear that kind of talk did not have a place here.

All without knowing Nolan could hear every word.

Nolan had originally planned on showering at the practice rink, but after that whole scene, he wanted to wait until he was back in his hotel room so he could take his time to decompress. He got his bag together and went to wait for the team bus.

Carter got on the bus first, taking their usual row in the middle. But when Nolan got close, he just shook his head and nodded toward the back. Carter nodded and gave him a sympathetic smile.

Nolan flopped down into the seat and put his headphones in. He didn’t want to think about anything for the next few minutes. The team was all going to dinner tonight—something about boosting morale before the first game—and Nolan really just wanted time to lick his wounds in peace.

It shouldn’t have surprised him as much as it did when he felt a body sit down next to him. Even before he looked over, he knew it was Elias.

Elias had his head leaning back against the headrest. For just a minute, Nolan saw how exhausted he looked. Just as quickly as it appeared, his expression changed back to the unbothered captain.

Nolan didn’t say anything, but he did move his foot to press against Elias’s. Immediately, Elias shifted closer until their thighs touched. Nolan’s breath hitched slightly. When he looked up, he found Elias smiling softly at him.

Something in his chest tightened. Nolan made a choice right then and there. Fuck it. He wanted this. And judging by the way Elias was smiling at him, maybe the feeling was mutual.

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Six

ELIAS

February 11, 2026 · Olympic Village

Honestly, it was getting a little irritating how Elias seemed to immediately sense the moment Hart entered a room. His head turned in the direction of the door involuntarily. Hart looked up and met his eyes, almost like he had just been waiting for Elias to see him.

The rest of the restaurant seemed to blur at the edges and Elias completely forgot everything Marko had been saying. All he could focus on was Hart, his perfectly pleated pants, and the smile that was becoming more confident with each passing second.

Hart turned his smile toward Elias, and Elias refused to acknowledge the way it affected him. Instead, he gave a tight-lipped nod and turned back to Marko.

“You are so down bad,” Marko informed him, full of glee.

“I am not,” Elias snapped back. “What were you saying?”

Marko wiggled his eyebrows. “You would know if you weren’t too busy being distracted by Pretty Boy.”

Elias felt his jaw tighten. Before he could say anything, Marko’s wife, Sierra, reached over and smacked her husband lightly on the arm. “Babe, stop,” she chastised him.

Elias sent a grateful nod in her direction. Sierra gave Elias a quick wink with a small smile.

Hart’s voice was suddenly behind Elias as he reached the table. Elias had left the seat next to him open—in case anyone on the team didn’t know where to sit—which Hart seemed to have claimed for himself. He greeted Sierra, but Elias couldn’t have told you what he said.

Because Hart, on his way to pulling his chair out, had put his hand on the back of Elias's neck and squeezed gently before trailing his fingers along Elias's shoulder.

"Hey, Mercer," Hart said. Elias hated how casual he sounded, and that annoyed him. Why shouldn't he sound casual? There was no way he had any idea that he was giving a grown man butterflies.

Just before he sat down, Hart took off his coat. Any progress Elias had been making (none) immediately vanished.

Nolan Hart was wearing a sheer black shirt.

And Elias forgot how to breathe.

Someone wolf whistled from the other end of the table, causing Elias to snap back to reality. Hart laughed a little and shimmied his shoulders. Elias couldn't help but notice the blush that was blooming on his neck and the way his eyes cut to Elias for just a second.

It was then that Elias remembered he hadn't yet spoken a word to Hart. He cleared his throat slightly before saying, "Hey, Hart."

Hart smiled at him as he pulled his seat closer to the table. Elias couldn't help but notice that he had pulled his chair closer. By the way that Hart was turning to talk to Sierra, Elias couldn't even be sure he had meant to do it.

Sierra snapped her fingers a couple times as she told him, "Someone definitely knows how to clean up."

Hart blushed. "Thanks," he said, preening. Elias heard how he lowered his voice to ask, "Are you sure it's not too much?"

Sierra lowered her voice to answer him. "Absolutely not. You're perfect."

Elias furrowed his eyebrows and used the moment to distract himself by looking down the table. It looked like almost everyone and their plus-ones were already there. After doing some quick mental math, he nodded to himself, sure that Nolan had been the last to arrive. Talk about making an entrance.

The table naturally quieted down as everyone looked over their menus. Elias kept his eyes on the table; he already knew he was getting grilled chicken and risotto. He instead watched Hart look over the menu. He raised his eyebrows at some options and made faces at the unappetizing ones. Elias found it strangely entertaining to watch every thought cross Hart's face.

When most people had set their menus back down, the server materialized.

He started at the far end of the table, and Elias noticed how his smile seemed to brighten when he reached Hart. Hart sighed dramatically and dropped his menu on the table. “I can’t decide what I want. Should I get the chicken parmigiana or arrabbiata?”

The server smiled. “How are you with heat?”

Nolan made eye contact with Elias as he answered, “I can handle spice.” Then he winked.

Elias furrowed his eyebrows. The server laughed slightly. “I’m sure you can. I would go with the arrabbiata, then.”

Hart smiled back before handing over his menu. He and the server shared eye contact for far too long.

Finally, the server turned toward Elias. “And for you?”

“Grilled chicken with risotto.” Elias kept his voice clipped. The server scribbled in his book and grabbed the menu from Elias’s outstretched hand.

Hart turned and said something to Marko. Marko notably did not comment on the blatant flirting, which was actually out of character for him. Anytime Elias even smiled at someone, Marko had something to say about it. Why wasn’t Hart getting the same treatment?

On the other side of Elias sat Noah Price and his girlfriend, Avery. Price was a good kid, friendly as could be off the ice, but took no shit on it. He was also a smaller guy, which shocked people when they tried to knock him over, but he was too solid. He was a great defenseman. Elias was thankful he was from Canada.

Avery was telling a story about her job as a nurse, when he suddenly felt Hart’s thigh press against his beneath the table. Elias quickly turned to see if Hart needed his attention, but he was still talking to some of the other guys. He didn’t even look in Elias’s direction.

Elias turned back to Price and Avery to continue the conversation. They kept chatting until the server was back and starting to pass out entrees. If Hart wasn’t going to acknowledge it, neither was he.

Hart noticed immediately that the server had returned and quickly began moving stuff out of the way. He leaned back in his chair as he kept talking to Marko.

Then the server finally reached Hart. “Careful, it’s hot,” he warned, briefly touching Nolan’s shoulder as he stepped behind him.

Elias couldn’t stop his eyes from rolling. He honestly was a little surprised by how bold this server was. Anyone with eyes could see how attractive Hart was, or could feel how charming he was, but Elias almost didn’t believe the server was hitting on him so obviously.

With the food all passed out, the team began to eat. Hart, thigh still pressed against Elias’s, let out a low moan when he took his first bite. Elias bit into his tongue.

Did he even realize how sensual he made eating look?

Elias’s own meal was definitely tasty, but he didn’t know if it was moan-worthy. He tried not to focus only on Hart, but with the heat of his thigh, it was a task easier said than done.

It felt like both no time had passed and it had been forever when the server returned to ask about dessert. Elias was not planning on eating that much sugar—he knew it would make him feel gross tomorrow. Hart, however, did not seem to share this sentiment. He was practically bouncing in his seat ordering the tiramisu.

While they waited for the dessert, Elias turned to talk to Marko, Sierra, and Hart.

“So,” Hart said, turning to look at Carter Wood, who was seated across the table from them. “Where’s Mia?”

“Mia?? Who’s Mia?” Marko demanded, also turning to look at Wood. He was never one to miss out on gossip.

Hart dramatically put his hand over his heart. “She’s Carter’s Olympic fling,” he said in a faux dreamy tone.

Wood laughed. “Hooking up with someone once does not make her a fling, nor does it warrant an invite to team dinner.”

“Oh, c’mon, Woody! You could’ve brought her!” Marko said, earning another light smack from Sierra.

Elias leaned forward. “Was that the girl he was with last night?” he quietly asked Hart.

“What? Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.” Hart tilted his head toward Elias.

Elias leaned forward even more, bringing them almost flush against each other. “I said, is that who he was with last night?”

He must have spoken a little louder, because across the table, Marko piped up, “Cap, you keepin’ tabs on Woody?”

Wood flushed. He looked over at Hart like he hadn’t expected him to gossip about him with their captain. Hart squeezed his eyes shut like he was

trying to come up with an explanation.

Elias jumped in before he could say anything. He directed his answer to Marko. “Well, when someone kicks their roommate out and he has to crash on my sofa, I usually like to know why.”

Next to Sierra, Wood flushed deeper. Sierra raised her eyebrows pointedly at Elias. Marko, however, looked delighted.

“Cap, that is so generous of you. To let Pretty Boy hang out in your hotel room while he was temporarily homeless.”

Elias scowled at his friend. Why did he have to word it like that?

He was spared from saying anything else, because at that moment, he heard, “I’m behind you, just gonna lean over and set this down.” His eyes snapped over to see the same server standing behind Hart with his hand fully on Hart’s shoulder.

What was this guy’s *problem*? He set the dessert down, but didn’t move away. He waited until Hart turned around, then he fluttered his eyelashes at him. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

Could he be any more obvious?

Hart just smiled brightly and shook his head in response. The server nodded and finally removed his hand from Hart’s shoulders. Elias narrowed his eyes.

They widened again when Hart took a bite of the tiramisu and let out another moan. Maybe Elias should have ordered dessert after all.

“This is so fucking good.” Hart turned to Elias. He dipped his fork into it again and held it up. “Here, try it.”

Elias paused. It would be rude to refuse, right?

Before he could talk himself out of it, he leaned forward and opened his mouth. Hart immediately put the tiramisu in his mouth and raised his eyebrows like he was waiting for a response.

It was good. And one bite wasn’t going to totally sabotage his game. Elias answered honestly, “It’s pretty good.”

“See,” Hart said, leaning in closer. He reached out and put his hand on Elias’s upper thigh. “I told you.”

Elias slammed his hand down on top of Hart’s. He lowered his voice.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Hart rubbed his thumb back and forth. Did he just move his hand further into his thigh? Was Elias just imagining things?

But then Nolan Hart’s eyes twinkled.

“What? I’m just trying to show you how good things can be.”

He knew what Hart was trying to do. He should have moved Hart’s hand away immediately, but instead, he put his own on top of it. Why was he letting this happen? He was the captain of this team. He should know better.

The most damning part of it all was that he didn’t want it to stop.

Elias was fucked.

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Seven

ELIAS

February 12, 2026 · CAN vs. CZE

Elias took his seat on the bus. He scrolled on his phone while he waited for Marko to join him. It wasn't long before he heard Marko's voice and looked up instinctively.

When Marko reached his row, he didn't sit down. "Hey, man, Woody wanted to talk, so I'm trading seats with Hart. He'll sit with you," Marko told him with a wink.

"What? When did we decide that?" Elias heard Hart say from behind Marko.

Marko ignored him and just went a few rows back to where Wood was waiting. Hart looked at the empty seat next to Elias, then to Wood, then to the seat again. He sighed and moved to sit down, seemingly having accepted defeat.

Hart's eyes were warm when they met Elias's, but they seemed tired. Elias had the sudden strange urge to grab Hart's hand and tell him it would be okay.

He didn't do that, obviously.

Instead, he sat up straighter and spread his legs a bit more. It made his knee brush against Hart's, but given how touchy Hart had been at dinner, he assumed that he wouldn't mind. He must not have noticed, or maybe he really didn't care, because he didn't move.

For the first few minutes, neither of them said anything, both just content to sit with their knees touching. Hart had put his jacket back on, and Elias thought it was a damn shame he was covered up once again.

A few minutes before they pulled up to the hotel, Hart turned his head toward Elias.

“Did you end up finishing the movie last night?”

Elias shook his head. He couldn’t help but notice how soft Hart looked. All the energy Nolan had at dinner seemed to melt away the closer they got to the hotel. It felt like such a privilege to see Hart so relaxed. “I’ve seen it before, but I honestly don’t remember much about it,” he said.

Nolan smiled. “We should finish it then.”

“Tonight?” Elias raised his eyebrows.

“No, probably not tonight. I know you need your beauty sleep. I can’t disrupt your routine two nights in a row.”

Oddly enough, Elias felt a pang of disappointment. “Yeah, sure,” he said, hoping his voice didn’t betray him.

“Soon, though,” Hart amended. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“Let’s see how the game goes first,” Elias told him.

Elias knew he was being deliberately noncommittal. Spending another several hours alone in his room with Hart did not sound like a good idea. It also sounded like what could be the best part of his week.

“Don’t worry, you’ll definitely score all the goals and we’ll kick their ass.” His voice was soft, but still earnest.

Elias half laughed. “God, I hope so.”

And he did hope so. He knew a first game loss would disappoint the team. They could still come back from it, of course, but it certainly wasn’t good for morale. Oh, well. No use worrying about it tonight. Elias would worry about the game tomorrow evening.

Then they were pulling up to the hotel and getting off the bus. Hart walked with Elias to the elevator and down the hall, but they didn’t say much more. Other people were around, and it didn’t feel like the kind of conversation Elias wanted to continue with company.

They reached Hart’s room first. He gave Elias a sleepy smile and barely held back a yawn before he stepped into his room behind Wood. Elias smiled softly at him.

His thoughts didn’t make it much further, because as soon as the door shut, Marko was invading his space.

Elias glared at Marko, hoping he would get the hint to back up a little. He did not.

“So. The kid,” Marko said, not even trying to keep his voice casual.

“What about him?” Elias didn’t lose the scowl on his face. He gave a pointed look at the door they were still *standing in front of*. He pulled

Marko further down the hallway.

“He looked good tonight,” Marko said, this time his tone more conversational.

Elias let out a huff. “Yeah, did you see the waiter tonight? He was practically throwing himself at Hart.”

Marko honest-to-God laughed. “What? Dude, he was just being nice.”

Elias shook his head. “Nah, man. He kept touching him and shit.”

Marko tilted his head. Why did he look amused? “To warn him that he was behind him.”

Elias rolled his eyes. Was Marko intentionally being obtuse? “C’mon, didn’t you see him fluttering his eyelashes when he gave Hart his tiramisu?”

“Elias. He blinked.”

Elias let out another huff. Arguing with Marko wasn’t getting him anywhere, and he knew what he had seen. And besides, they had reached Elias’s room anyway.

“Whatever, I’m going to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Elias said as he slid the key card into the door.

Marko didn’t know when to quit. Even with his back to him, Elias heard the teasing tone when he said, “Hoping to have a certain Pretty Boy join you later?”

Elias groaned. “Man, can you go bother someone else for the night? I’m so fucking tired.”

Marko’s laugh followed him down the hall to his own room.



Practice the next morning was light. Elias felt grounded when his blades hit the ice, making passes and controlling the puck in a way that only came from a lifetime of familiarity. Hockey was something Elias knew he did well, and for that reason, he was able to lock in and keep his mind on the ice.

Elias was both nervous and excited for the game tonight. They had settled on starting Hart on the first line with Elias. With every move, it was obvious why Hart had been drafted first overall. Their practices had shown undeniable chemistry. Despite never playing together before, they seemed to instinctively know where the other was.

All the calm he had felt being on the ice vanished the second he stepped off it and saw Hart vibrating with anticipation. Elias bumped their shoulders on his way to the shower, hoping the movement would startle Hart enough to distract him for a minute. He sincerely hoped Hart was taking a nap before the game.

Elias's allotted three minutes went by quickly, and he was wrapping the towel around his waist when Hart entered the showers.

Elias had long since trained himself not to notice his teammates' bodies. That being said, he was still a man who was attracted to other men. And damn, sometimes it was hard not to notice how attractive Hart really was.

Hart's hair was only lightly damp with sweat. His toned arms and legs carried him with an easy confidence despite the nerves he was obviously feeling. He put his towel down and reached to turn the water on.

Nolan Hart was a man with an ass. A good ass. Great, even, some might say. Not Elias. But some.

The universe hated him, so Hart turned around. His eyes immediately landed on Elias, who was still standing there staring, not even pretending to be drying off. Elias half expected him to say something, but he just raised his eyebrows before turning back around.

Elias had to get out of here immediately. He had a pre-game nap to take.



Elias lined up across from Czechia's center for the opening faceoff. The Czechs were a good team, but Canada was better. Elias had faith in both his own abilities and his team.

The linesman dropped the puck, and Elias won the faceoff. He sent the puck to his left, where Hart was waiting. Canada kept control of the puck. Three minutes and fourteen seconds into the first period, Elias was skating toward the net with the puck. Two Czech defenders were closing in on him, so he flicked the puck to the left, knowing who would be there.

Hart caught the pass beautifully and aimed for the goal. The puck hit the back of the net, soaring over the goalie's shoulder before he even had time to react.

Hart had scored the opening Olympic goal for Team Canada. He immediately turned, eyes wide and looking toward Elias. Elias was already skating his direction with his arms open. They crashed into each other.

“Hell yeah!” Elias said in his ear. “That’s my fuckin’ rookie!”

Hart was grinning ear to ear. Elias kept one arm around his shoulders, holding Hart close to him. Their other teammates on the ice swarmed toward them.

Marko was the first to say, “Way to go, Rookie!”

Hart didn’t say anything but his smile did. He was so pleased with himself. *Good*, Elias thought. *He deserves this.*

The rest of the first period went on in the same fashion. Czechia got a goal to tie the score, but just before the horn for the first intermission, Canada scored again. They headed toward the locker room with 2-1 on the board.

In the second period, Czechia was playing harder. Their hits were stronger, their chirps cut a little deeper, and the offense was cleaner. Canada’s goalie was still better, though. Clarke was catching every attempt. He blocked every single shot. The second period ended with one more Canada goal, setting the score at 3-1 for the second intermission.

Elias did not allow himself to relax at all. Czechia could easily get two goals in the third, sending the first game into overtime. Elias listened carefully as the coaches talked strategy, special teams, and gave a bit of a pep talk.

As soon as the third period started, Czechia got a penalty for tripping, so Canada was on the power play. It was the push they needed. Elias got his first goal of the game. For one exhilarating second, all he could hear was the roar of the crowd. He’d just scored a fucking goal at the Olympics.

Hart crashed into him immediately. It shouldn’t have surprised him when he pressed his helmet to Elias’s. Elias had been playing hockey his whole life. Guys did things like this all the time. But the way Hart was looking at him, eyes sparkling with pride, made something swoop in his stomach. He barely even felt it when their other linemate jumped in, as well. It felt like the world had narrowed to only him and Hart.

“You’ve still got it, old man,” Hart murmured, voice low.

Elias just laughed. Then it was time for play to continue. Halfway through the period, Hart was racing for the puck, bent over a little to gain speed. Elias couldn’t stop his eyes from tracking the movement. He was a captivating player to watch.

One of the Czechs took the puck, shooting it down the ice. Hart turned around and skated closer to Elias.

“You keep looking at me like that, Cap, and people are gonna notice,” he said, voice barely loud enough to be heard as he skated past.

“In your dreams, kid,” Elias called to him. What was he even talking about? How was Elias looking at him?

Hart turned around and winked. “Only in the best ones.”

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Eight

NOLAN

February 12, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nolan decided to take advantage of the post-win high. Mercer was walking a little ahead of him in the hotel, talking to a couple of the older players. Nolan jogged a bit to catch up to him.

He bumped his shoulder into Mercer. “Hey, Cap. Told you we would kick their asses.”

Nolan was a little smug when Mercer didn’t create distance between them. Their bodies weren’t quite touching, but they weren’t exactly giving each other space, either. “Yeah, you did say that, huh? Had to make sure of that and score the first goal?”

For all Nolan’s confidence on the ice, something about Mercer mentioning it again off ice caused him to blush. “Well, it got us on the board, didn’t it?”

“I’m proud of you, rookie. You played a good game.” Mercer smiled softly at him.

Nolan felt his blush deepen. He was saved from playing it cool by Noah Price walking up. “Hey, Cap, can I get your opinion on something?”

Nolan watched as Mercer slipped back into his captain's face. Nolan secretly loved that he was privy to a softer side of Mercer than his other teammates got to see.



Back in his room, Nolan found himself wishing he had more time with Mercer. By now, he was sure that Mercer felt something for him, too. He wanted to keep playing with it. But how could he do that?

Then, an idea came to him, and it was honestly kind of genius. He pulled out his phone.

NOLAN
should we maybe finish that movie

He sent the text message before he could talk himself out of it. He was not going to watch his phone and wait for a reply. Mercer might not even reply. He could be so tired that he was already asleep. Sure, they had only been in their rooms for approximately twelve minutes, but maybe he went to sleep really easily. Maybe he—

His phone buzzed.

ELIAS
Sounds good. Give me ten then come over?

Nolan genuinely had the urge to squeal. He looked down at what he was wearing: his postgame sweats, and a Team Canada shirt. He debated changing everything, then decided to just put on some shorts instead. If nothing else, Mercer seemed to like his ass, and you have to work with what you got, right?

Nine minutes later, Nolan had tousled his hair just enough to look like he hadn't touched it at all. He grabbed his key card and headed out, thankful Carter had gone to find Mia and wasn't there to give him shit.

He made himself walk at a normal pace the short distance to Mercer's room. He couldn't stop himself from looking down the hall, like he was a kid out after bedtime. He raised his hand to knock. It took a second, and just before he lifted his fist again, the door opened.

Mercer was in a plain black T-shirt, which hugged his biceps perfectly, and light gray sweatpants. Nolan had already decided to just go for it, so he allowed his gaze to rake over Elias the way he wanted to. Elias flushed, just a little, and moved aside to let Nolan into the room.

"You look cozy," Nolan commented.

Elias hesitated a second before answering. "Well, we can't all make sheer shirts look effortless. Some of us actually want to be comfortable."

Oh, so Elias had *definitely* noticed the shirt. Good. That had been the goal. Nolan smirked. "I thought I looked nice, actually."

Elias hummed. "Oh, you definitely did."

Nolan looked toward the sofa. He started to step toward it, but Elias spoke. "Actually, the sofa is not gonna do my back any favors. I was hoping we could just hang out on the bed instead."

Nolan nodded. “Oh, yeah, that makes sense.” He made sure his shoes were lined up next to Elias’s by the door. He looked over at Elias. “By the way, do you have any water?”

Elias looked like he had just remembered something. “The hotel actually sent up a bottle of wine to congratulate us on winning the first game. Would you like a glass?”

Normally, Nolan was not a big fan of wine. Tonight, though, it might come in handy. “That sounds great, Mercer, thanks.”

Nolan waited by the bed while Elias got the wine. Some people were picky about which side of the bed they slept on, so even though Nolan himself didn’t care, he didn’t want to risk it.

Nolan felt a hand on his waist, there and then gone. He turned to see Elias holding out a plastic cup of what was surely nice red wine. He smiled as he took it, trying to ignore the heat where Elias’s hand had been.

Elias went to the bed first and sat down on the right side. Nolan had always liked the left side, anyway.

“Thanks for letting me come over,” Nolan told him as he sat down.

“Yeah, I’m still trying to decide whether this is a good idea or not.”

Nolan tilted his head. “Watching a movie?”

Elias gave him a look.

Nolan’s shoulders fell a little. “Oh. I—” he started, but didn’t know what to say. He could offer to leave, but he really didn’t want to.

Elias sighed. “You’re my teammate, Hart.”

“I know that.”

Elias continued, “And I’m your captain. You make it really difficult to be responsible.” Despite his words, Elias was smiling. Nolan even thought he saw Elias’s eyes flicker down to his lips. Nolan gulped.

“Shit, I just realized,” Nolan said, trying to change the subject. “The movie we watched was just playing on some random channel. We probably can’t even find it again.”

Elias settled against the headboard, holding his cup of wine across his legs. God, he looked fucking good. Stable. Sure of himself. Nolan was suddenly very thankful for the wine.

“That’s fine, honestly. We can just find something else on TV,” Elias told him. He took another sip of his wine. Nolan caught himself watching the

bob of his throat. He brought his own wine to his lips and got a bigger drink than he meant to.

It was dry, definitely, but he supposed it wasn't too bad. He must have made a face, though, because Elias gave a half snort, half laugh. Nolan narrowed his eyes.

"What?"

Elias just grinned at Nolan. He really was so pretty. Rugged—but pretty nonetheless.

Could wine hit you that quick? Nolan wasn't sure.

"Just drink your wine, rookie," Elias said, then bumped his knee against Nolan's leg on the bed. He didn't move it.

"Okay, so wait, what do you wanna watch then?" Nolan asked, remembering what was supposed to be the task at hand.

Elias flipped through the channels before landing on a rom-com from the 2000s. Honestly, it had probably come out right around when Nolan was born.

"What year did this come out?" Nolan asked, taking another drink of wine. It wasn't so bad the second time around.

Elias shrugged. "I don't know, I think like 2003 or 4."

"Oh, shit, that's older than me."

Elias choked on his wine. "God, I forget you're a *baby.*"

Nolan furrowed his eyebrows again. "I turn twenty-one this year."

Elias snorted. "Stop talking, Hart, you're making it worse."

Okay, maybe the wine really was starting to hit Nolan, because he said, "Don't you worry, Cap, I have experience where it matters." He threw in a wink for good measure. The wine was definitely lightly hitting him.

Elias flushed and stared at Nolan for just a moment too long.

When Nolan finished his glass, the movie wasn't even halfway through. He went to take another drink and realized his cup was empty. He frowned before turning to Elias.

"I'm out of wine."

Elias raised his eyebrows at Nolan. "Would you like some more?"

Nolan nodded, but thought it might be worthwhile to stop after this glass. After all, his goal was a pleasant buzz to take the edge off his nerves, not to get drunk.

Nolan watched as Elias got up to get them more wine. The gray sweatpants hugged his thighs in the most delicious way. When Elias came

back, Nolan had been staring out into space, but focused when he realized he was doing it. The problem was that he didn't change where his gaze was, he just focused his eyes. So, his eyes landed exactly where he'd been looking: at Elias's crotch. Nolan blushed and snapped his eyes up to Elias's face, hoping he hadn't noticed. By the way his eyes darkened, he had definitely caught Nolan.

When Elias reached out to hand his cup back to Nolan, Nolan scooted a little closer to grab it. Elias sat back down, also a little closer. There were only a few inches in between them now. Still feeling bold, Nolan decided to stretch his legs out and press them more fully against Elias's.

For a minute, Elias didn't move. Then, he shuffled a bit, and intertwined their legs. Nolan forgot to breathe for a second. Was he *cuddling with Elias Mercer?*

Nolan hid his smile by getting a drink. He glanced over at Elias and saw that he was watching the movie with his own little smile.

Nolan got a final drink and reached over to set his glass on the nightstand. When he lay back down, Elias held his arm out. He nodded toward himself, then quietly said, "Come here."

Nolan couldn't believe his luck, but he didn't question it. He shuffled until he rested his head on Elias's chest. For how solid Elias felt beneath him, he was surprisingly comfortable. Elias smelled like the Canadian woods, something warm, and best of all, like a man. Nolan inhaled a little deeper.

Strong arms wrapped around Nolan. As he tangled their legs back together, he couldn't help but wish Elias was also wearing shorts, so they could have some skin-to-skin contact. Elias tightened his hold and shifted them further down the bed.

If you would have told Nolan a week ago that he would be full-on cuddling with Elias in his hotel room, he would've asked you which fantasy you were talking about.

As the movie neared its end, Nolan's eyes grew heavier and heavier. All the excitement from the day was finally catching up with him. Sinking into Elias was only pushing him closer to drifting off. He must have dozed for a couple minutes, or maybe longer, because suddenly Elias was nudging him awake.

"Nolan, I gotta get up and turn off the lamp."

“Don’t wanna move,” Nolan mumbled, enjoying this position way too much.

Elias pressed his face into Nolan’s hair to hide his laugh. “I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Nolan reluctantly rolled over so Elias could get up. It felt like he had just rolled over when he felt Elias lift him up enough to pull the blanket over him. Before Nolan could say anything, Elias was slipping under the covers with him. Even half asleep, he was impressed by the casual show of strength.

Nolan felt like a baby monkey with the way he immediately snuggled back against Elias. It was only then that he realized his bare legs were touching skin.

Nolan’s eyes snapped open. Elias pulled Nolan closer to him so that they were lying chest to chest. Nolan pulled back just slightly and looked up at Elias.

Elias gave him the soft smile that Nolan was beginning to think of as his. The curtains were open just enough to let a sliver of moonlight hit Elias in exactly the perfect spot. The wind was blowing outside, and Nolan took the moment to really look at Elias.

His gray-blue eyes were looking right back at him. The expression on his face could only be described as completely content. Neither said anything, both just looking at the other. Nolan suddenly realized he wouldn’t mind going to sleep like this, with Elias, every night. He licked his lips as he imagined it.

Elias's gaze dropped to Nolan's mouth, but he didn't move any closer. For a moment, Nolan wondered if he was waiting for Nolan to make the first move.

Well. Nolan had never been particularly good at waiting. He leaned up and caught Elias’s lips in the kiss he’d been dreaming about forever.

Nolan was on top of the world when Elias kissed him back.

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Nine

ELIAS

February 13, 2026 · CAN vs. SUI

The Swiss were annoyingly skilled at defense. Most of the time, Elias enjoyed games like this. Tonight, though, every play felt just a second too slow. He felt off, despite waking up in the best way, with his arms wrapped around Nolan.

With a couple minutes left in the second period, the scoreboard read 1-0, in favor of Switzerland. Try as he might, Elias couldn't pinpoint a specific reason the team wasn't clicking today. The horn was a welcome sound—he needed the break to reset his thoughts. Maybe the team could actually get a goal.

Nolan entered the locker room next to Elias. Elias knew as captain he should say something encouraging. He'd said some variation of it a million times: a one-goal advantage was nothing; there was still an entire period to turn it around. He was almost too frustrated to say anything, but an encouraging smile from Nolan changed his mind.

He said the first thing that came to his mind, reminding his team that the game wasn't over yet. It must have worked, because the team looked like they had a bit more pep in their step.

But two minutes into the period, Roman Furrer happened. Furrer was known for being a dirty player. While his checks were always just barely on the side of illegal, they rarely got called.

Nolan had taken his shift just as Elias was finishing his own. Elias had only been sitting on the bench for a second, eyes tracking the puck. One of Canada's defenders stole the puck from Switzerland, and passed it to Nolan. Of course, Nolan caught it, racing toward the net. Elias could already see the goal before Nolan hit it.

Seconds before he raised his stick, Roman Furrer slammed into Nolan's shoulder. In the blink of an eye, Nolan was crumbling to the ice. Elias saw the whole thing in slow motion.

Elias watched as Nolan instinctively reached across to cradle his shoulder. The same shoulder Elias had tucked into his body last night, the same shoulder he had kissed this morning. Even from across the ice, Elias could see his face scrunched up in pain.

Furrer took the opportunity to snatch the puck and raced down the ice with it. Elias jumped up, waiting for the sound of the whistle. It didn't come.

Elias snapped his gaze toward the ref, but he had already moved on. "What the fuck!" Elias called. He refocused on Nolan as he got up, clearly hurt. After what felt like an eternity, a whistle blew.

They still didn't call a penalty, but it gave Nolan a minute to get back to the bench. Elias was already shuffling down to meet him. He was captain, after all, and his linemate had just taken a dirty hit. He was well within his rights to worry.

"Mercer, I'm fine," Nolan insisted before he even reached the bench. He gave Elias a pointed look. "I mean it. I'm fine."

Elias had to fight the urge to grab him and look over him himself. Instead, he turned to their coach and demanded, "Why didn't they fucking call that? That's bullshit! That was a dirty hit!"

"Mercer, focus on the game. Get ready for your next shift," Coach told him sharply.

Elias opened his mouth to challenge him, but he felt a glove on his back. It was so unexpected—he was so focused on the scene in front of him—that he almost jumped. He whipped around to see that it was Marko.

"Merce, it's okay, man."

Elias shook his head. Nolan was hurt! Furrer was playing dirty, again, and no one was saying anything! What happened to protecting your teammates?

It was only then that Elias realized that the trainers were doing their jobs and checking Nolan. When they pressed on a specific spot and Nolan winced, they made him go down the tunnel to be checked out further. Elias watched him until he was out of sight.

Play had already resumed, and Elias forced himself to sit on the bench as if nothing was wrong. Furrer was finally finishing his shift, and Elias hoped

he would get to meet him on the ice for the next one. The good thing about people knowing you were a clean player was that they didn't expect you to start shit. Even if you weren't the one starting it, not really. And they certainly didn't expect you to premeditate a retaliation hit on behalf of your rookie.

During his next shift, he did just that. He skated to the faceoff dot, bent down, and held a perfect stance. After he won the faceoff, he sent the puck toward Canada's defensemen.

He heard his coach's voice telling him to focus on the game. He forced himself to watch the play and try to plan for his next move. Then he made the mistake of glancing toward the bench. His eyes automatically searched for Nolan. The image of Nolan going down the tunnel flashed to the forefront of his mind. Remembering his plan, Elias zeroed in on Furrer.

He knew before he even moved that it was going to land him a penalty. At least Canada had a good penalty kill team.

Furrer didn't even have time to look up before Elias swept his stick into his skates and sent him sprawling. A hush fell over the arena for a moment. The whistle was immediate—two minutes for tripping—snapping Elias back to reality as the sounds of the game returned at full blast.

Elias didn't wait for the official call. He was already skating to the penalty box. He didn't care. Furrer had to face some kind of consequence at some point. Elias was more than happy to be the one to deliver it.

Marko caught his eye just as he took his position for the penalty kill. Elias couldn't read the look on his face, but to be honest, he wasn't trying that hard. He knew that Marko probably would have something to say, but he would worry about that later.

As soon as it began, his penalty ended. Canada had successfully kept Switzerland from scoring. Elias skated out to join his team. The game continued the way it had been: hard, dragging, and low-scoring.

With four minutes left of regulation, Canada broke through and got a goal. Elias jumped up from the bench with his teammates and cheered. Relief crashed through him. *Finally.*

Try as they did, Canada didn't manage to get another goal. The horn signaled the end of regulation with a tie. Elias headed to the locker room with the rest of Team Canada to get ready for overtime.

When he stepped into the locker room, his eyes scanned the space until he found Nolan. He was sitting at his stall, an ice pack resting on his

shoulder, jersey only half on.

"Just a bruise," one of the trainers was saying as he walked away.

Nolan met Elias's gaze.

Thank God, Elias thought. Nolan sitting here was proof that he was at least relatively okay. But as soon as that thought crossed Elias's mind, he tried to shake it away.

He couldn't let his personal feelings for Nolan get in the way. He had overtime to focus on. Still, he could check on him. He cleared his throat and said, "Hart." Nolan raised his eyebrows. Elias continued, "Shoulder okay?"

"Yeah, my shoulder will be fine."

Elias just nodded and turned toward his own stall. He really tried his best to focus on what the coaches were saying: overtime strategy, what they had been doing well, and what they needed to work on to get the final goal. It was easier said than done.

It felt like he was on autopilot when he went back out on the ice. He barely won the faceoff on muscle memory alone. Elias kept finding himself glancing around the ice for Nolan before he suddenly remembered he wasn't out there.

Elias's entire opening shift for overtime was spent in the defensive zone. The Swiss had gotten the puck pretty immediately, and they were not letting Canada take it from them. Luckily, Canada's goalie was blocking the shots, but by the time Elias got back to the bench, he knew it would be game over if they couldn't get the puck out of their own end.

Canada finally recovered the puck, and one of the defensemen sent it shooting down the ice. Elias sat forward. This was the chance they had been waiting for. The defenseman passed to a forward, who then made the shot on goal. Switzerland's goalie trapped the puck on the ice under his glove. The ref blew his whistle.

A couple minutes later, Elias was back on the ice. He had just managed to snatch the puck from Switzerland. He knew he didn't have a clear opening, and the Swiss defensemen were getting closer, so he shot the puck to Marko. After a second, Marko sent it back. Elias saw the opening a second before it happened. He raised his stick to send the puck toward the goal, but before he could hit it, Switzerland stole it back.

The Swiss had good defense, but they also had good offense. The forward who had the puck crossed the ice in a matter of seconds. He made

the shot before their goalie could even track the puck. It flew over his shoulder and secured the win for Switzerland.

As the horn blew and Switzerland crowded each other, Elias felt something like shame sink into him.

Elias went through the motions of postgame in a haze. He answered a couple of media questions in the same non-answer way he typically did after a loss. He showered, got dressed, and ignored the quiet murmur of the locker room. Everyone was always quieter after a loss, but especially after an Olympic overtime loss, Elias saw just how beaten the team felt. He nodded to a couple players, grimaced at Marko, and headed to the hallway. He had found a little alcove a couple days before and knew it would provide just the reprieve he was looking for.

He didn't hear the footsteps approaching, too caught up in replaying the last minutes of the game. Elias felt the shift in the air the second Nolan leaned against the wall beside him. When had his body started recognizing the second Nolan was within his orbit? Elias kept his eyes closed. He wasn't ready to see the look of disappointment on Nolan's face.

Nolan took a deep breath, and Elias opened his eyes and looked over at him. He was out of his uniform by now, in a team jacket and sweats. He was leaning against the wall with his good shoulder, ice still perched on his bad one. He half-smiled, half-grimaced. "Hey." His voice was soft.

Elias looked away. He didn't feel like he could handle Nolan's comfort right now. He gave a tight nod and didn't say anything.

"You know, I can defend myself. You don't have to take penalties in my honor."

Elias almost rolled his eyes. "I was just being a captain."

"Hm," Nolan hummed. He hesitated before he stepped a bit closer. From the corner of his eye, Elias saw his arm raise and then fall like he was itching to touch him but decided against it. "It's okay, you know."

Elias turned and looked at him. Nolan had his eyebrows furrowed, his lips in a thin line. Elias didn't say anything.

"One loss won't kill us. We can still come back from this."

Again, Elias didn't say anything. He just nodded again. He couldn't trust himself to say the right thing. He tried to take a deep breath.

"Elias," Nolan said, voice lower now. This time he did reach out and lightly place his hand on Elias's arm. "You don't have to shut me out. I'm still here when you lose."

Elias couldn’t help it. He snapped. “God, Hart, not everything is about you.”

Nolan snatched his hand back as if he had been burned. “I know that, I wasn’t—”

Elias started at the same time. “I didn’t—” He took another deep breath. “If this is going to affect how I play, I don’t think we should do this.”

Nolan went still. Elias didn’t dare look at him. “You don’t mean that,” Nolan said, like he was trying to convince both of them.

Elias pushed off the wall. He finally looked at Nolan. He saw the shock and hurt on his face. Every instinct in Elias told him to comfort Nolan, to pull him into his chest and keep that awful look off his face.

And that was exactly the problem.

“I’m sorry, Hart,” Elias said just before he turned and walked away.

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Ten

NOLAN

February 14, 2026 · Olympic Village

Waking up alone this morning was a stark contrast to the way Nolan had woken up yesterday. The cold sheets, the cold air in his room, and the cold sting of Elias shutting him out the night before sat heavy around him.

Nolan figured the best way to combat all that cold was with hot coffee. Which was how he found himself standing outside Elias's door with an extra cup in hand. When the barista had asked if Nolan wanted a drink carrier, Nolan had said no. After all, he had two hands for two coffees. Standing here, trying to figure out how he was going to knock without a hand to do so, he could see how, in retrospect, that had maybe been a worthwhile idea.

Nolan briefly thought about using his head to knock, but the idea of one of his teammates catching him was mortifying enough that he quickly abandoned that idea. After some careful reconfiguration, Nolan had both coffees balanced in one hand, leaving his free hand to knock. Elias didn't answer. Nolan glanced at his watch again: it was 9:32 AM. He knew Elias was awake, even on an off day.

"Mercer, I know you're awake in there!" Nolan raised his voice enough to be heard through the door. The coffees together were starting to get really hot in his hand. He raised his hand to knock again.

In the middle of the second knock, the door opened to reveal Elias.

Elias was a handsome man. He always looked good. Nolan had been attracted to him since he understood what attraction was.

Right now, though, Elias did not look good. He looked *exhausted*.

Dark circles surrounded Elias's eyes. His hair looked like he had been dragging his hands through it for hours. He looked tired in a way that suggested more than a lack of sleep. Nolan wanted to hug him.

"Nolan." Elias sighed.

"Good morning. I got you something."

Elias glanced down at the coffees in Nolan's hand. "Nolan, I thought I told you that this wasn't a good idea."

Nolan grabbed the coffee he knew was Elias's. He held it out as he answered. "Well, I brought coffee, and I was hoping we could talk about that."

Nolan stepped forward before he had a chance to argue. Elias reached for the coffee cup. Nolan couldn't hold back his grin. He barely resisted the urge to kiss Elias on the way past him into the room.

The door clicked shut behind them. "I already put Sweet'N Low in it," Nolan said. He glanced from the bed to the sofa, debating over where he should sit. The sofa was probably the safer bet.

Elias kept leaning against the counter. He held his coffee, but didn't take a drink of it. "Okay. What is there to talk about?"

Nolan sat up straighter. He didn't want to seem too blasé about this. He wanted Elias to know he was serious. He took a deep breath before he began. "I know yesterday was a hard game." Elias opened his mouth—whether it was to argue or agree, Nolan wasn't sure. Nolan held up his hand to stop him. "Elias, I know it was. I also know you put the weight of the world on your shoulders."

Elias set his coffee down and crossed his arms. "Don't say that like I'm being unreasonable. I'm the captain, it's my job to lead the team."

Nolan nodded. "Yeah, but you aren't the whole team."

Elias rubbed his hands down his face. "Nolan, you don't get it."

Nolan took a sip of his coffee. "Elias, what don't I get? That you feel a lot of pressure? That you take your job as Captain Canada very seriously? That it feels like the whole world has their eyes on you?"

Elias crossed his arms again. "Nolan, you got hurt. And then I got distracted. Then we lost. You can't see how those things correlate?"

Nolan was very proud of himself for not snorting. He once again resisted the urge to kiss Elias between the little crease in his eyebrows. "Yes, I got hurt. But sometimes that happens. And you're allowed to care, you know?

You’re allowed to be upset that I got a dirty hit that didn’t get called. That’s okay.”

Elias shook his head. “But what about when I care too much?”

Nolan patted the sofa next to him. “Come sit down with me,” he said.

Elias started to shake his head, but Nolan just patted the seat again. Elias sighed before giving in and sitting next to him. His leg started bouncing, but stopped almost as soon as it began. He settled his hands on his thighs.

Nolan reached out and put his hand on top of Elias’s. “So, you think caring caused us to lose? In a game that we were already struggling with?”

For all his arguments, Elias still flipped his hand and threaded their fingers together. “No, Nolan. I think caring caused me to get distracted.”

“Can I ask you another question?” Elias nodded. “Do you plan to never play a game while caring about something other than hockey?”

Elias’s brow furrowed deeper. Nolan could see Elias going through his possible answers. “It’s different.”

“How?”

“You’re on the ice with me.”

Nolan nodded. “Okay, so if I walk out this door right now, if I never get to kiss you again, if we pretend there’s nothing between us, will that make you stop caring about me?”

Nolan saw the moment Elias couldn’t argue with him. His shoulders fell and he pulled his hand away to rub his face with it. When he looked up, he somehow looked more tired than he had when the conversation started. “You know it won’t.”

Nolan went for it. He reached up and cupped Elias’s cheek. “I know it won’t.” Elias leaned into his touch. “I can’t even imagine how I would act if you were the one who took the hit.” He brushed his thumb against Elias’s cheek. “You aren’t alone. Let me carry it with you.”

Nolan wasn’t expecting the smile that broke out on Elias’s face. “How can you help me carry it? You hurt your shoulder.”

A laugh bubbled out of Nolan before he could stop it. “Well, Cap, luckily I have two shoulders.”

Elias kept smiling, but it turned into something softer. Nolan was tired of waiting. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Elias’s.

Even though he had intended for it to just be a quick press of their lips together, Elias grabbed Nolan’s waist and pulled him closer. The kiss deepened as their tongues met. Nolan needed to be closer. Nolan didn’t

break the kiss as he climbed into Elias's lap. Elias bucked up against him as soon as Nolan settled. Nolan moaned at the sensation. Elias started kissing and nipping at his neck, and Nolan tilted his head up so he had better access. He could feel Elias getting hard beneath him, and Nolan was right there with him.

"Don't leave a mark," Nolan told him, internally cringing at how breathless he sounded.

Elias pressed his teeth in harder. "You don't want people to know you're mine?" Elias asked, teasing in his voice.

Nolan ground down against him. "Mercer, I will go shout it from the rooftops right now if you want me to."

Elias laughed. He gripped Nolan's hips to stop any more movement. He leaned forward and rested his head on Nolan's shoulder—the uninjured one—before pressing a soft kiss there.

Elias let go of Nolan's hips and wrapped his arms around him. Nolan did the same. He felt all the stress he'd been carrying float away. He had spent the night worrying that he would never get to be close to Elias like this again. Here, arms around each other, Nolan could only feel bone-deep relief.

Nolan wanted to kiss Elias again, so he did. Then he looked at Elias. He leaned forward and pressed a feather-light kiss on the scar above his left eyebrow. He reached out and brushed his thumb beneath Elias's eyes. "I don't know about you, but I slept like shit. Can we nap?"

Elias raised his eyebrows. "It's only ten AM."

Nolan put on his best puppy dog eyes. "Please? Then we can get breakfast after?"

Elias agreed. Nolan was honestly a little surprised it had worked so easily. He made a mental note to keep that in his back pocket.

Nolan stood up and stretched. He looked over and caught Elias admiring the way his shirt had exposed a strip of skin. Elias glanced up, and Nolan winked at him.

Nolan held his hand out. Elias groaned as Nolan pulled him off the sofa. "Come on, old man, take me to bed."

Elias pinched his hip. Nolan kept their fingers laced together until they were in bed and under the sheets. With Elias's arms around him, their bodies pressed together, they both found sleep almost instantly.

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Eleven

NOLAN

February 14, 2026 · Olympic Village

The first thing Nolan saw when he entered the dining hall was the heart-shaped pancakes. The white tables were already filled with various athletes. Nolan still wasn't used to seeing such huge names casually drinking coffee. He tore his eyes away from the stars—*wait, wasn't that guy, like, the best snowboarder in the world right now?*—and scanned the food options instead. Perfect. They were finishing up breakfast and had already started putting lunch items out. Best of both worlds.

Nolan looked over to see what Elias was thinking for food, but he was already heading to the salad bar. The deep crease that had settled between Elias's eyebrows after the Switzerland game was finally gone. Nolan hadn't realized how much he'd been watching for it until now. Satisfied, he filled his plate with everything his heart desired, including a pink heart-shaped cookie.

By the time he headed toward the table, Elias was already sitting with a couple of their teammates. Nolan took a seat across from Elias, next to Cam Kelly. Cam was their linemate and right winger. He was serious about hockey and seemed to be actively trying to be less serious about life. So far, the results were mixed.

"Mercer, guess fucking what," Nolan said, not bothering to hide the glee in his voice.

Elias sighed good-naturedly and set his fork down. "What's up?"

Nolan held up the heart cookie. "Today is officially all about me."

Elias furrowed his brow. "How did you come to that conclusion? It's just a cookie?"

Nolan wiggled it. "Yeah, a *heart* cookie. For Nolan Hart. It's Hart Day."

Elias picked up his fork again. “I don’t think that’s a thing.”

Nolan set the cookie back down on his plate. “Heart cookie. Heart pancakes. Heart everything.”

Cam added from next to him, “He’s got a point.”

Elias narrowed his eyes. “Kelly, you are not helping.”

Cam just shrugged. “Sorry, Cap, but the evidence is compelling.”

Nolan beamed and raised his eyebrows as if to say, *see*? Elias huffed. “They aren’t even spelt the same.”

Nolan shrugged this time. “Tomato, tomahto.”

“Those are the same word, though.”

Nolan pointed his fork at Elias. “Exactly.”

Cam laughed. “He’s got another point.”

“Kelly, still not helping,” Elias said, but Nolan could see the hint of a smile forming.

Nolan cut a piece of his heart-shaped pancake and held it up. “Anyway, happy Hart Day, boys.”

Cam nodded. “Happy Hart Day.”

Elias groaned. “Oh, God, is this gonna be a thing now?”

Nolan grinned and pressed his foot against Elias’s. “It already was. I don’t make the rules.”

The three of them chatted as they ate. Cam had gotten there before them, so he finished first but still hung around. As Nolan polished off the last of his food, he looked between them. “Should we go watch an event?”

Owen Roy, Canada’s backup goaltender, was walking up just as Nolan asked. He perked up. “Me and some of the other guys thought about going to watch curling. You guys in?”

Elias looked to Nolan before he answered. Nolan nodded. “Oh, happy Hart Day, Owen.”

Owen put his hand over his heart. “Aw, happy Heart Day to you, too, Nolan.”

Nolan loved his life. Honestly. Elias, on the other hand, seemed to hate his. “That’s not a real thing.”

Owen tilted his head. “Dude, what? Do you hate love or something? Valentine’s Day is literally all about hearts.”

Nolan cackled as he got up to throw away his and Elias’s trash. When he came back, they had somehow multiplied. Marko, Noah, and Jordan Hunt

—one of their forwards—were all there. When everyone was ready, they all headed toward the curling match.

Nolan wasn't sure he even understood what curling was, really. He assumed maybe they curled something somehow. He heard people talk about it and knew it was generally loved in Canada, but that was the extent of his knowledge.

Imagine Nolan's surprise when the players came onto the ice with brooms. He tried to figure out some rules on his own, but when they started pushing a rock with a handle around, he decided he might need to ask someone else.

He leaned over to Owen. If doing so made him press a little closer to Elias, then so be it. "Owen, why are they sweeping the ice?"

"It's so they can skate easier," Owen told him, deadpan.

Before Nolan could say anything, Jordan Hunt said, "But they aren't skating."

Owen just looked at him for a second. Jordan must have taken his silence for confusion, so he leaned forward and said, "See." He pointed. "They're just wearing shoes."

Nolan watched as Owen gave Jordan a grateful nod, patted his back once and said, "Thanks, buddy."

Jordan smiled and turned back to the match. Nolan was just about to ask someone else when Noah Price spoke up from the row in front of him.

"Actually, it's because the sweeping affects the ice temperature and friction."

Jordan turned his head, suddenly interested. "Why?"

Noah flicked his eyes briefly in Jordan's direction. "So the stone moves differently."

Jordan wanted more. "Isn't that cheating?"

Noah shook his head.

"Why not?"

Noah pinched the bridge of his nose before he turned to fully face Jordan. "It's just part of the sport."

Jordan furrowed his eyebrows. He opened his mouth to keep going, but Marko put his hand on Jordan's thigh. "Hunt, bud, let's let Price watch the game for a minute."

Noah sighed from his seat and corrected, "Match."

After a second, Jordan sat up straight like he had just thought of something. He looked toward Noah. “Wait, then why is it called curling?”

Marko stood up. “Hunt, let’s go get drinks really quick.”

Jordan stood up, but still said, “But I wanna know.”

Marko laughed and guided him away. “We’ll Google it in line.”

Now Nolan sort of wanted to know the answer, too. Luckily, one of his skills was knowing when not to poke the bear. Instead, he turned to Elias.

“Do you like curling?” he asked.

Elias shrugged. “Yeah, it’s Canadian.” A smile tugged at his mouth. “Not as much as Price, though, apparently.”

Fuck, Nolan wanted to kiss him.

Elias leaned in closer. He lowered his voice even more and spoke directly into Nolan’s ear. “If you keep looking at me like that, we’re gonna have to get out of here.”

Nolan gulped. Elias pulled back and turned his attention to the match, looking like a man who hadn’t said anything.

Nolan had no idea what happened the rest of the match.



Most of the other guys went off to do their own thing, but Nolan, Marko, and Elias decided to go explore the Olympic Village. Nolan had done a bit of wandering in the first couple days, but there was still so much more to see.

Nolan still couldn’t believe this was his life. He had worked so hard to be a good, respected hockey player. Looking around the Village, at gold medalists, he felt like this was the payoff. Getting to be here, walking next to Elias Mercer, as an Olympian. He smiled to himself.

Elias caught it, because of course he did. He bumped his shoulder into Nolan’s good one. When Nolan looked over, Elias was looking straight ahead, but still smiling.

A couple girls in Team Australia jackets walked up to them. “Do you guys want to trade pins?”

Nolan was already reaching for his lanyard. He loved this part. Meeting the other Olympians was such a unique experience. Every athlete had a story, and for a few minutes, pin trading was enough of an excuse to hear it.

They'd all worked hard to make it this far, loved their sport, and seemed honored just to be there.

All three of the guys pulled out their own pin options and let the girls pick which they wanted. When the trading was done, the girls smiled at them.

"What sport do you guys play?" one of them asked.

"We're all on the Canadian men's ice hockey team," Elias told them. "What about you?"

The other woman smiled. "We're on the Freestyle Skiing team."

Nolan grinned. "That's so cool."

Marko also looked impressed. "Can either of you do the thing where you flip four times?"

Nolan hadn't seen that, but now he definitely wanted to. The first one nodded enthusiastically. Then she turned her attention to Elias. "You guys could come watch us sometime."

Her smile was perfectly sweet. Nolan suddenly felt the need to claw her eyes out.

Marko snorted next to him. Nolan did not acknowledge it. Elias was still trying his best to be polite. "I'm sure that would be quite the sight. We'll have to see what our schedule is like though."

The woman seemed to deflate a little, and Nolan just barely resisted the urge to shimmy smugly. They chatted for another minute before the women walked away.

Nolan spotted an official merch shop that he knew he needed to go to. On the way, a sponsor booth called out to the three of them to offer some free stuff. Nolan, sights set on the merch shop, smiled and declined.

They got Elias. His Canadian instincts were too strong to simply dismiss the sponsor. Marko stepped closer to Nolan as they stood back and let Elias nod along to what the sponsor was saying.

"You know, if Elias wanted to leave you for an Australian skier, there's nothing you could do," Marko said.

Nolan scowled at him. "Is that supposed to be helpful?"

Marko laughed. "Nope, just saying Mercer didn't exactly jump at the chance."

"I don't know what you think you know," Nolan said, instead of acknowledging that statement.

Marko raised his eyebrows. "Does he know you're obsessed with him?"

Nolan thought about it for a second. Then he shrugged. “Yeah, probably. It’s not like I’m good at hiding it.”

Before Marko could say anything else, Elias walked back up to them. Nolan directed the trio to the merch shop.

As soon as they walked in, a ball cap caught Nolan’s eye. It spoke to him. He quickly turned to Elias. “We should get matching hats.” Then, as an afterthought, he said to Marko, “The three of us.”

Marko shook his head. “Nah, that’s not in my color palette.”

Elias shook his own head in disbelief. “Marko, what the hell are you talking about?”

Marko shrugged, completely unbothered. “I don’t know, man, ask Sierra.”

Nolan made a mental note to return to that later. Maybe at Marko’s birthday dinner in a couple days. For now, he turned his focus back to Elias, who looked like he really wanted to argue the matching hats.

By the time they were heading to the Canada vs. France game the next day, Elias and Nolan were proud owners of matching Olympic hats.

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Twelve

ELIAS

February 16, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nothing gave Elias confidence like winning a good game. They'd beaten France 5-1. Their line clicked in a way that it hadn't in the game against Switzerland. Elias hadn't realized how much he'd been carrying the frustration of that loss until it was gone.

Even though he had only woken up next to Nolan a couple times, he still reached out to the empty side of the bed. The gesture was embarrassingly instinctive. Ridiculous. He was only here for another week or so. He would have to go back to his normal life, without Nolan.

The thought made something ache deep in his chest. He was distracted by the sound of his phone buzzing in the Team Canada group chat.

MARKO
Birthday dinner at 7PM. Be there if you aren't a coward.

Elias nodded to himself as he read the message. Then another one came through.

MARKO
Sierra wants us all to look nice so please dress accordingly. I want my wife to still like me at the end of this.

A flurry of messages came through all at once.

JORDAN
Happy Birthday

MARKO
Thanks, man

NOLAN
HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARKO

MARKO
Hart.

NOLAN
oops sorry for yelling
happy birthday

The corner of Elias's mouth twitched at Nolan's message. He realized, with some alarm, that he wanted to text Nolan separately. For no real reason—just to talk. When had that happened?

Instead, he replied to the group chat.

ELIAS
Are you sure you can stay awake that long? I thought senior citizens are usually asleep by then.

Another flurry came through.

JORDAN
Cap, aren't you older than him?

OWEN
OOOOH Mercer can chirp

NOLAN
i always knew you were funny

MARKO
I'll be good, but if it's past your bedtime, I'll forgive you for not making it

JORDAN
He'll be there. He's no coward!

ELIAS
Thank you for defending my honor, Hunt.

Elias was trying to talk himself into getting out of bed when his phone buzzed.

NOLAN
coffee before practice?

Elias smiled to himself. He had a feeling today would be a good day.



Elias had no idea what to wear. The day had passed in a blur of coffee, practice, and team meetings. Now he was standing in front of his small closet, trying to decide what was dinner appropriate.

He toyed with the idea of asking his sister, Claire, for outfit advice, but quickly dismissed it. He wasn't a teenage girl getting ready to go to the prom. He was Elias Mercer, captain of Team Canada. A well respected-hockey player.

And yet, standing in front of his closet, he felt less like a captain and more like a guy who wanted to look nice for dinner.

He looked through the few options he had before he finally settled on a dark gray henley, dark jeans, and some boots. He threw on the same coat he'd been wearing, knowing he'd take it off as soon as he got there.

Sierra had reserved a private dining room at an upscale restaurant, giving the team and Marko's friends space to celebrate without drawing too much attention. Elias was actually really looking forward to it. Without a game the next day, he could finally enjoy himself without curfews or an early morning practice hanging over his head.



By the time Elias got to the restaurant, half the team was already there. A few of the guys greeted him. He looked around—telling himself he was just checking on the guys—until his eyes landed on him.

Nolan was standing with some teammates. Hunt was telling a story, if the way he was waving his hands around was any indication, and Nolan was smiling around his cup. True laughter lit up his eyes. Even from across the room, Elias could see the small freckle under his left eye. Elias wanted to walk over and kiss it.

Like magnets drawn to each other, Nolan looked up and scanned the room until their eyes met. His smile transformed into something just for Elias, something softer.

It was a bit unfair how Nolan could be dressed so casually and still look so fucking good. He was in a pair of light jeans, white sneakers, and a Team Canada pullover. He looked the right amount of cozy and confident.

Elias thought about trying to walk around and mingle before going to Nolan, but he knew he was just delaying the inevitable. The moment Elias started toward him, Nolan's smile widened.

Normally, Elias wasn't someone who liked public displays of affection. Looking at Nolan now, he suddenly wanted to walk up, wrap an arm around his waist, and kiss him. Show everyone that Nolan was his.

He shook the thought away. This was not the time or place. And besides, Nolan wasn't really his. He didn't want to think about that right now, either. He just wanted to focus on the guy in front of him and maybe hope that they would wake up together again the next morning.

"Hey, Mercer," Nolan greeted him when he was finally next to him.

"Hey, Hart," he replied. Then he looked over at the rest of the group. "Kelly, Hunt, Price."

They chorused greetings back. He stepped into the open space next to Nolan. It was maybe a little too close, but Elias would figure out a way to explain it if someone asked.

Hunt started filling Elias in on the story he'd been telling when he stopped mid-sentence. His eyes darted around the room before focusing on Nolan.

"Wait, where did you get that drink? Why don't I have a drink?"

Elias bit back his smile. Nolan did not. "I got it from the bar. Do you want me to go get you one?"

Hunt nodded. Nolan looked over at Elias and raised his eyebrows, the silent question obvious to him. "I'll go with you. I could probably use a drink, too."

Kelly's expression looked somewhere between shocked and triumphant. "Mercer's going to drink with us? We're in for a fun night, boys!"

A couple guys a few feet away must have heard, because as he turned to follow Nolan to the bar, he heard a few hoots.

When they reached the bar, the bartender was making a drink and held up a hand to indicate he would be there soon. Nolan leaned against the bar and turned to look over at Elias.

"You sure do clean up nice," he said, raking his eyes up and down Elias.

"I could say the same thing."

Nolan grinned. "I'm glad you noticed."

Elias gave him a look. "Hard not to."

Before Nolan could reply, the bartender walked up to take their orders. While they waited for their drinks, a few players from other countries came by to say hi to both Elias and Nolan. Elias was happy to see everyone, especially since some of these he only got to see once or twice a year off the ice.

He finished nearly half of the drink before he set his glass down. He was looking forward to the more relaxed feeling he knew would come with the

hum of the alcohol. It would make him feel less like Elias Mercer and more like Elias. He knew he still had to mingle, but it would be nice to not focus on being the guy everyone looked up to.

If Elias thought he'd had a million people stopping by to say hi, Nolan had just as many. Before long, he was heading to a table with some of the other veteran players with his second drink in hand.

Maybe it was all in his head, but it felt like despite Marko being the birthday boy, the party revolved around Nolan. He bounced from group to group, always a drink in his hand, laughing freely.

He looked so in his element. Elias was paying attention to the guys at his table, laughing when he was supposed to, giving his opinions at the correct time. But he couldn't help the way he tracked Nolan around the room.

"Dude, you're staring," he heard from next to him. Marko had flopped down on the empty seat to his left. Marko's eyes were already a little hazy. Good for him. He deserved to have a good time on his birthday.

"What?" Elias asked.

Marko snickered. "Merce, you can't even take your eyes off him to look at me when you're supposed to be answering me."

He snapped his gaze away from Nolan as if he'd been looking at the sun for too long.

"Oh, so now it's a crime to pay attention to your teammates?"

Marko laughed outright. "You are looking at him like you want to eat him. God help us if you ever look at any other teammate like that."

Elias tried to match Marko's snicker from before. "I think you're imagining things."

Marko clapped him on his shoulder. "Bud, I think you're the one imagining things. Things you shouldn't imagine in public."

Several scenes flashed through Elias's mind at once: Nolan lying on his bed, looking up at him. Nolan on his knees. Nolan moaning as Elias sucked on his neck.

Okay. Maybe the liquor was kicking in.

As if he could read his mind, Marko said, "Just keep it in your pants in front of everyone else. Wait till you take him to the bathroom at least."

Elias tried to tell himself that was a bad idea. He wasn't sure he really believed it.

Sierra walked up to Nolan then. Marko made a happy noise next to him. "Aw, look at our better halves."

Elias huffed. “What are you even talking about?”

Marko didn’t answer him. Sierra laughed and reached out to squeeze Nolan’s bicep. Elias felt a pang of jealousy. He wished he could be open about affection so publicly.

Marko bumped their shoulders together. “Stop looking like you wanna kill my wife.”

Elias shook his head and was about to argue when Sierra pointed toward them. Nolan stood up straighter and started nodding vigorously. Then he speed-walked away.

Elias tried to keep his eyes on him, but he was weaving in and out of people so quickly that it was impossible. Before he had a chance to worry about it, Nolan was suddenly in front of him, holding a new drink.

Nolan’s eyes were slightly glazed over, but he still looked determined. “Sierra said you looked thirsty,” he informed Elias as he slid the cocktail closer to him.

Elias glanced down at his still-full drink in front of him. Nolan looked so earnest, though, so Elias smiled and grabbed it. He made a point to take a sip. “Oh, that’s good.”

Nolan perked up, happy to have done a good job. The drink honestly was good. Elias would probably be fine if he drank both.

By the time both drinks were finished, Elias was not fine. He could definitely feel the liquor now. When Nolan finished his rounds, he found his spot next to Elias at the table.

Somehow, Nolan steered the conversation to pets. He made everyone look at pictures of his own kitten—Wayne, apparently—before he turned to Elias.

“Wait, don’t you have a dog? Let’s see!”

Elias pulled out his phone and started going through his pictures of Moose. When he got to a particularly cute one of Moose playing in the snow, Nolan snatched the phone from Elias’s hands and eagerly showed it to the person next to him, which happened to be Timmins.

“Carson, look at Cap’s dog. He is such a good boy,” Nolan told him.

Timmins shrugged. “Yeah, he’s a dog.”

Nolan pulled Elias’s phone back against his chest and narrowed his eyes as if suddenly suspicious of him. “Yeah, a *good* dog.”

Timmins shrugged again. “I’m just not the biggest fan of dogs, I guess.”

Nolan looked scandalized. Before he could start defending the honor of every dog to ever exist, Sierra started shuffling everyone toward the long dinner table. She had assigned seats for everyone, and to his delight, Nolan was right next to him. Marko and Sierra sat across from them, with Cam Kelly next to Sierra and Hunt next to Nolan.

It felt like only a second had passed when they had their meals in front of them. Nolan took a bite of his chicken dish, then closed his eyes and moaned. Elias felt his jeans tighten.

Nolan opened his eyes, and must have seen something in his expression, because he winked.

Elias wasn't sure how he was going to survive the rest of the night.

Nolan kept eating, face neutral as if nothing had happened. Someone asked Kelly a question, and Nolan's eyes lit up. "Oh my god. Cam Kelly," he said, almost to himself.

"Yeah?" Kelly said, turning to look at Nolan.

Nolan set his fork down. "Have you ever said your name out loud?"

Kelly's mouth twitched like he wanted to smile. "Yeah, I may have once or twice."

Nolan nodded seriously. "Cam Kelly," he repeated.

"Right."

"It is so fun to say!"

Elias was so incredibly fond of this man.

Kelly, to his credit, didn't argue. Next to Nolan, Hunt looked like he had just discovered the eighth wonder. "Oh my God, you're right."

Nolan was thrilled. "I know!"

Nolan and Hunt took turns through the rest of the evening saying and singsonging Cam Kelly. After the first few times, Kelly just ignored them.

Elias was turned toward Roy when he heard someone's girlfriend ask Nolan a question. "Nolan"—Elias's ears perked up as if he had been the one addressed— "How is it playing in your first Olympics?"

Elias turned to listen to his answer. He was expecting Nolan to say something media-approved like Elias himself had when he was asked the same thing. What Nolan said was not what he was expecting.

"Mostly, I'm just really thankful to have Elias as my captain."

Elias's breath caught in his throat. Nobody had ever looked at him and seen the man behind the captain quite the way Nolan did. The room

suddenly felt a little too warm. He didn’t get a chance to say anything before Marko responded.

“Yeah, *Elias* is a good captain, huh,” he said, keeping his eyes on Elias as he said it.

Nolan just smiled, like he was glad someone else understood it.

Elias suddenly felt a little claustrophobic. He stood up, maybe too quickly, because his chair scraped loudly on the floor. Nolan looked up at him, his brow furrowed.

“You good?” he asked.

Elias nodded and headed to the bathroom. He could probably use it anyway, and he could take the chance to splash some water on his face.

When he was finished washing his hands, he stepped back into the hallway to head back to dinner. Nolan was there in the hallway, waiting for him.

“Have I told you how good you look tonight?” Nolan said, casually.

Elias tilted his head. “You have.”

Nolan stepped closer to him, their chests almost touching. He reached out and ran his hands down Elias’s chest. His eyes darkened. “This looks so fucking good on you.”

Elias gulped. Nolan tracked the movement with his eyes. He licked his lips. “You know what would look even better?” He paused just for a moment. Not really even long enough for Elias to say anything. “You out of it.”

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Thirteen

NOLAN

February 16, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nolan really wanted to press his whole body against Elias's back. He looked down the hallway, and no one else was out of their rooms, but Nolan knew Elias wouldn't want to risk it. So, he settled for putting his hands on Elias's waist while he fumbled with the key card.

After what felt like ages, but was almost certainly less than a minute, the door opened. As soon as they were inside, Nolan shut and locked the door. Then he launched himself at Elias.

If he were sober, he might try to draw this out. But Nolan was a few drinks in, and he was tired of waiting. He'd been dreaming about this for days now.

Nolan had spent all night watching Elias. Elias, with his henley that hugged his torso and arms perfectly. Elias, with his gorgeous smiles that came easier as the night went on. Elias, in jeans that Nolan wasn't sure how they survived his thighs. Those *thighs*. Nolan loved those thighs. He wanted them to crush him.

And don't even get him started on Elias's ass.

Luckily, Nolan knew Elias was just as ready for this as he was. The door had barely clicked shut when Nolan pushed Elias against it. He used the leverage to grind against him as he kissed him. Even through their jeans, the feeling of Elias's hard dick rubbing against his own was intoxicating.

Nolan moaned, loud and unashamed. Elias ground back against him, but pulled back enough to say, "We should move this to the bed."

Nolan whined, not wanting the separation that the relocation would cause. The whine turned into an excited squeak when Elias picked Nolan up. Nolan wrapped his legs around him instinctively.

Fuck, Nolan was a grown man. And not a small one, either. And Elias had just lifted him like it was nothing.

Elias connected their mouths again. Nolan moaned. They had shared sweet kisses, morning kisses, and apology kisses. This kiss was none of those things. This kiss had heat. Nolan loved it.

Nolan could tell when they reached the bed. Elias tried to lower him down, but even a man built like a statue could be affected by liquor. Nolan thumped a little harder on the bed than he suspected Elias had wanted him to, but he didn't give Elias a chance to dwell on it.

He leaned up just enough to grab the back of Elias's neck and pull him down on top of him. Nolan suddenly felt small in the best way. Having Elias put all his weight on Nolan was phenomenal.

Nolan was desperate to feel some skin-on-skin contact. He started tugging at Elias's shirt, eager to get it off. Elias sat back and yanked his shirt off with one hand.

Nolan's mouth went dry. He loved that he had the privilege of seeing Elias like this: full of want, flushed with need, and all of it was aimed at Nolan.

As Elias stepped out of his jeans, Nolan made quick work of ridding himself of his own clothes. Elias moved back until he was leaning over Nolan once again. Nolan felt a brief pang of regret at not being able to admire Elias's naked body longer, but hopefully, this wouldn't be his last opportunity.

Elias reached down in between them and put his hand on Nolan. His dick was hard, already leaking precum from the tip. Elias's hands were bigger than his own, rough in slightly different places. He pressed his thumb against the slit before dragging his hand down once. Nolan bucked up.

Elias smiled into their kiss and pumped down again. As much as Nolan was thrilled to finally have Elias Mercer touching him, he knew, "I am not gonna last if you keep going."

Elias pulled back. His eyes were dark in a way Nolan wasn't used to seeing. "Good thing we have all night."

Nolan was going to die a happy man.

Elias leaned in and nipped at Nolan's ear. Nolan rewarded him with another moan. "And if we take the edge off, we'll definitely be able to go longer. You're young, I know you have more than one in you."

Nolan was always up for a challenge.

He didn’t trust himself to form a coherent sentence, so he just nodded. It was all the permission Elias needed. He let go of Nolan, then reached between them again. This time, it wasn’t only his hand. It was also Elias’s cock pressed against him.

The feeling was too good. It was a little rough, but Nolan wasn’t about to complain. Elias only pumped a couple times before Nolan felt the familiar tightness in his gut.

His breathing was picking up. Elias kissed him, then said against his lips, “That’s it, Nolan. You’re doing so good. Come for me.”

That was all it took to send him over the edge. Elias kept stroking, letting Nolan ride out his orgasm.

Holy shit. Elias had just rubbed his dick against Nolan’s enough that he came. What was his life?

It only took a minute or so for Nolan to float back down and realize that while he had come, Elias had not. And Nolan was dying to be the cause.

He propped himself up on his elbows. Nolan planned to ask in a more eloquent way, but his post-orgasm mind could only come up with, “Can I blow you?”

Elias licked his lips. “I would love to see your pretty mouth wrapped around me.”

Who would have thought liquor turned Elias into such a poetic man?

Nolan flipped them so Elias was on his back with Nolan over him. He took his time kissing, sucking, and biting his way down his body.

He licked the inside of Elias’s thighs, wrapping his hands around as much as he could. He took a second to admire the cock in front of him.

Between locker rooms and hookups, Nolan was no stranger to seeing dicks. Most of them weren’t anything to write home about. Elias, though, had a beautiful cock. It was flushed red, straining up toward his stomach. The head was swollen and leaking with precum. He wasn’t the longest Nolan had seen, but he was thick in a way that Nolan couldn’t wait to feel inside him.

He leaned in and dragged his tongue from the base to the tip. He glanced up at Elias through his eyelashes and met his eyes. Elias reached out and rubbed his thumb against Nolan’s temple.

“You look so stunning like this,” Elias told him, voice filled with awe.

Nolan smiled, satisfied he was doing well. He decided to show off his other skills.

He kissed the tip once, before he took it in his mouth and sucked hard. Elias groaned. It was the best sound Nolan had ever heard. Nolan kissed it one more time before he swallowed, opened his jaw, and took Elias into his mouth completely.

Elias let out a strangled moan. “Fuuuck,” he said, drawing out the word.

Nolan relished in the weight of a good cock on his tongue. He hollowed his cheeks and started bobbing his head. Elias reached down and tangled his hands through Nolan’s hair. Elias gave an experimental tug, and Nolan moaned around him. Nolan’s own dick had been steadily getting harder, but that made it to full strength.

Elias bucked his hips up. Nolan was glad, he wanted Elias to take what he needed from him. He wanted to be the reason Elias let go. Nolan gripped Elias’s thighs harder, hoping he got the message.

He seemed to, because soon he was fully fucking into Nolan’s mouth. Nolan felt like every moment in his life had been leading up to this. Sure, he had a lot of accomplishments, and he was definitely proud of them, but feeling Elias lose himself because of Nolan took the cake.

Nolan was drooling now. With each bump against the back of his throat, his eyes watered more. Nolan started rutting against the bed, desperate for friction.

It hadn’t been that long when Elias was tugging on Nolan’s hair, telling him, “I’m gonna come.” He tried to give Nolan another chance to pull away, but Nolan had no intention of stopping.

A second later, and his mouth was filling with the bitter taste of Elias’s release. Nolan swallowed every drop that he milked out. When Elias was finally finished, Nolan pulled off with a pop.

He wanted to say something, but his own body was begging for a release. He took himself in his hand, and it only took a couple strokes before he was coming again.

He flopped down onto the bed next to Elias. His breathing was hard, and he knew his voice would sound wrecked if he tried to talk.

Elias spoke first. “Wow, you really don’t do anything half-assed, do you?”

“Momma didn’t raise a quitter,” Nolan replied, hoping he didn’t sound too tired for it to land.

Elias reached down to Nolan’s stomach, where his cum was pooling, and dragged his thumb through it. Then, in what was maybe one of the hottest

things Nolan had ever seen, Elias brought his thumb to his mouth to taste Nolan. He closed his eyes and hummed as if he were savoring the flavor.

“You cannot do things like that right now. My dick needs a second,” Nolan said, voice strained.

Elias laughed and leaned over to kiss him. The kiss was soft and unhurried in a way their earlier kisses hadn’t been. Nolan smiled, completely content.

All too soon, Elias pulled away and got up. He went to the sink and waited for the water to warm up. He brought the wet rag back and gently cleaned Nolan off. He pressed a kiss to the shoulder that was almost fully better by now and said, “We can shower later. Let’s just rest now.”

Nolan nodded. “You always know just what to do,” Nolan told him as he went to drop the rag in the bathroom. Elias laughed as he came back to the bed.

He pulled back the top sheet and placed it over them. Nolan leaned up just enough to let Elias lay down next to him and put his arm behind him. As they settled into each other, Elias pressed another sweet kiss to Nolan’s hair. Nolan struggled to keep his eyes open as the exhaustion of the day settled over him.

He knew Elias had said they had all night, but hopefully he was okay with a quick nap before they got back to it. Besides, they were still days away from the end of the games.

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Fourteen

NOLAN

February 17, 2026 · Olympic Village

Nolan still wasn't used to the sunshine streaming into Elias's room. However, he was quickly getting used to waking up pressed against Elias and the weight of an arm wrapped around his middle. Nolan reached down and put his hand on top of Elias's. He kissed their fingers softly before he scooted back to press further into Elias.

Elias moaned a little and untangled their fingers to reach down and grip Nolan's hip. He thrust up gently, just enough to cause some friction, and Nolan pushed back to meet him.

Before things could escalate further, Nolan's stomach growled. He frowned slightly; he normally didn't get hungry this early. He reached out to feel around for his phone.

"Oh my god," he said when he saw the time. "It's nine fifteen already!"

That got Elias's attention. "Fuck, okay, we gotta head down to breakfast then."

Elias immediately tried to pull his arm back, but Nolan tightened his grip. "No, I don't wanna move."

"Hart," Elias said, warning in his tone. Nolan liked the sound a little too much. He wondered what other ways he could make Elias use that tone on him.

He sighed. He wanted to spend more time cuddling in bed, but Elias was right. They were already running a little late.

Even though he would have loved to shower together and wear Elias's clothes to breakfast, he knew that would be a bit much this early in their relationship. Drunk flirting was one thing, freshly showered in the captain's

clothes was another. He told Elias he needed to go get dressed in his room before kissing him and turning toward the door.

Elias caught his wrist before he reached the door. “Hey, last night was good. Really good.”

Nolan didn’t even try to fight the smile. “I appreciate your glowing review.”

Elias smiled and shook his head fondly. He leaned forward and caught Nolan’s lips once more before he let go.

Nolan kept his smile all the way back to his own room, through his shower, and through Carter’s chirps about getting lucky. If only Carter knew who Nolan had been with.

At the team breakfast, Nolan took his unofficial assigned seat across from Marko and Elias. Elias was sipping his black coffee, eyes tired but happy. Nolan loved that he was the cause of that.

Marko, on his second day of being twenty-eight, looked a bit worse for wear. He flinched slightly whenever something too loud happened. Nolan wanted to drop his fork on his plate or something equally high pitched, but decided that probably wouldn’t be nice.

The three of them made small talk, mainly with the intent of distracting everyone from their hangovers. Nolan was surprised his own wasn't worse, but that's what adrenaline would do, he guessed.

Suddenly, Marko looked between Elias and Nolan, like he was trying to figure something out. Then, he raised his eyebrows and gasped, “Hart, is that a hickey?!”

Elias’s eyes snapped up and scanned Nolan quickly. “What? No, that’s impossible. I made sure—” He cut himself off, realizing he had been speaking out loud. Nolan smirked at him.

Marko also caught it. Even though Elias had been mumbling, it was clear that Marko had been hoping to get a reaction out of Elias.

“Merce, why would you know about Hart’s possible hickeys?” The teasing was evident in his voice.

Elias flushed and narrowed his eyes at Marko. “Vuković, sometimes I swear you only exist to stress me out.”

Marko wrapped his arms around Elias. “Aw, buddy, I love you, too!”

Nolan laughed. Despite Elias looking annoyed, Nolan saw how hard he was fighting a smile. Nolan reached for his neck, as if he could feel a hickey.

“There’s not actually a hickey,” Elias told him, still held captive in Marko’s embrace.

Nolan just barely resisted pouting. Marko noticed that too, if the delight dancing in his eyes was anything to go by. Luckily, he didn’t comment on it.

Marko finally released his hold on Elias, who then made a show of fixing his shirt as if he had truly been put out.

Soon enough, everyone was shuffling to the team meeting. The game tomorrow would be against Czechia again, and the team as a whole wanted to make sure they took home another win. Nolan was hoping for a bit of a replay of the first time they played the Czechs. Elias had looked at Nolan with pride, and Nolan wouldn't mind seeing that look again.

Practice went smoothly. The hangover was mostly worn off by now, but despite the lack of a game the previous day, Nolan was still tired. His on-ice chemistry with Elias was better than it had been before. Nolan definitely felt a bit smug about that, because he could only attribute it to the chemistry they’d had in bed the night before.

Thankfully, Nolan wasn’t selected for media availability after practice. Instead, he sat off to the side and watched Elias slip into Captain Mercer.

The first reporter asked a couple questions about how the games were going, line chemistry, and then pivoted to ask about his time off the ice.

“Elias, seeing as this is your first Olympics, what are you doing to fill your time off the ice?”

Nolan smirked to himself. If only they knew just what Elias was doing off the ice. If he tried hard enough, he could still taste Elias from the night before.

In front of him, Elias answered, “Yeah, I’ve been hanging out with the guys and doing a little pin trading. There’s actually a really cool pizza one; have you heard about it?” Elias asked.

The reporter shook her head. Elias continued, “It’s super cool. I’ve been on a hunt to find it.”

The reporters latched onto that, asking more about the pin trading. It wasn’t long before they moved on to the next player, and Elias was walking back to the locker room next to Nolan.

When they reached the locker room, Nolan let out a yawn. He wasn’t sure what Elias was hoping to do for the rest of the afternoon, but he was hoping he could talk him into taking a nap. Honestly, Nolan owed a lot to

whatever guy had decided that naps were an essential part of being a hockey player.

“Hey, are you actually trying to find that pizza pin?” Nolan asked as they walked toward their rooms.

“I did hear about it and thought it would be cool to have,” Elias answered.

Nolan raised an eyebrow at him. “But are you actually trying?”

Elias shrugged. “I thought about it.”

Nolan laughed. He made a mental note to keep an eye out. He yawned again, the exhaustion from the night before really catching up to him.

The odds continued to be in his favor, because Elias suggested a nap before Nolan even could. Nolan sincerely hoped he could keep this man.

“I need to stop by my room and change,” he told Elias as they walked down the hall.

Elias shrugged. “Just get a few changes so you don’t have to go back and forth so much.”

The way Elias said it was practical, but Nolan could read between the lines. A thrill sparked through him. Elias was making room for him.

Maybe it was only for the rest of the Olympics. Maybe things would get more complicated once the medal rounds started. But for now, Nolan wasn’t about to question additional domesticity with Elias.



It felt like no time had passed when Nolan woke up. Waking up wrapped up with Elias was quickly becoming one of his favorite things. Nolan took the minute before Elias woke up to really admire him.

Asleep, the creases on Elias’s forehead smoothed out. It was one of the only times he ever fully relaxed. Nolan loved this view of him, when he wasn’t Elias Mercer, Captain Canada. He was just Elias, a man Nolan was growing more and more attached to.

Nolan wanted to reach out and feel the dark blond waves that were falling out of place. Elias never had perfectly styled hair, but it was usually pushed back from him running his hands through it. Nolan wished he could see Elias’s eyes. The gray-blue always softened when they met his.

As if he could feel Nolan’s gaze, his eyes opened, and Nolan was rewarded with seeing the eyes he had just been missing. He gave Nolan a

sleepy smile.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Nolan's. Nolan wasn't sure he would ever really get used to Elias giving him sweet kisses.

"Did you get to sleep any?" Elias asked.

Nolan nodded. "I only woke up a couple minutes ago."

A text tone went off from the nightstand. Elias rolled over and lifted his phone just enough to see the screen before he set it back down. "Just my sister. I'll text her back later," he told Nolan.

Nolan tilted his head. "I don't think I knew you had a sister."

Elias stretched before wrapping his arms back around Nolan. "Yep, one sister and one brother. Claire is twenty-eight, and Ben is twenty-two."

Nolan raised his eyebrows. "Oh, Ben is close to my age."

Elias groaned and hid his face in Nolan's shoulder. "Ugh, don't make me think of you as the same as my baby brother."

Nolan laughed and finally gave into the urge to run his fingers through Elias's hair. "It's not my fault I'm younger than him. Why is he so young anyway? Your sister is close to your age," Nolan asked.

"Yeah, Ben was a surprise baby. My parents thought they were done after Claire, and then when I was nine, they had another baby. Sometimes I can't believe he's a real grown up now." Elias shook his head, as if he was still imagining a baby.

"Are you close with them?"

Elias paused before he answered. "I wish I was closer with them than I am. Claire and I are closer in age, so we were little together. She always liked skating, but never wanted to be hit so she didn't really like playing. She's a veterinarian now. She's hoping to have a baby soon, which my parents are thrilled about. Especially since I'm not giving them grandkids anytime soon." He half smiled. "But by the time Ben was old enough to want to be around me, I was already into hockey. I was already living with my first billet family when he started school. So I'm happy to see him whenever I can, but I wasn't around for as much of his childhood as I wish I was."

Nolan knew that feeling all too well. "Yeah, I get that. My sisters are eleven and thirteen. I try to text and call and FaceTime as much as I can, but it's not the same as being there. The older one, Sophia, is getting to the age where she's too cool for me. Ava, the youngest, luckily still thinks I'm great, but the clock is ticking on that, too."

“I should’ve known you were a big brother,” Elias told him.

“I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not,” Nolan said, narrowing his eyes.

Elias shook his head. “I’m not. You always look like you expect yourself to do well. You smile and laugh but I can see the pressure under it.”

That stopped Nolan up short. He’d had a joke ready, but suddenly it felt like it would fall flat. He decided to unpack that later and change the subject for now. “Are you out to them?”

Elias sighed. “Yeah, I figured out I was gay when I was a teenager. I was scared, because even by then I knew the locker room wasn’t the place for guys like me. I heard the names some guys got called. I saw how certain rumors made it harder for certain players. I just wanted to play hockey. So, I told my family, but not until the Royals had already drafted me. I wanted them to see I could still do the things I wanted even if I didn’t wanna marry a woman.”

“Are they okay with it?”

Elias nodded so fast that it must have hurt his neck. “Yeah, of course, they’re not bigoted or anything. My mom has a gay cousin too, and he has a husband, so it’s not like they didn’t know other gay men. I think it was just a shock to them that it was me, their son.”

Nolan nodded. “Same for me. I never even had a crush on a girl. I’ve told my parents, and I had a lowkey boyfriend in high school, but my dad doesn’t understand why I would wanna make things harder for myself.”

Elias frowned. “But it’s not like it’s something you chose.”

Nolan sighed. He didn’t really want to get into this right now. “He knows that, it’s just complicated. Can we not talk about it?” He immediately felt bad for snapping, but he wasn’t ready to unpack his dad right now.

Shock crossed Elias’s face briefly before he nodded and changed the subject. “Who was your first celebrity crush?” he asked.

There was no way Nolan was going to tell him the truth: that it was Elias himself. Instead, he gave his more standard answer. “Peeta Mellark.”

Elias laughed for a second. “From *The Hunger Games?”*

Nolan raised one eyebrow. He reached out and held up a lock of Elias’s blond hair. “Apparently, I have a type.”

Elias laughed. “Mine was Kurt Russell. But specifically, from his role in *Miracle*.”

Nolan was not shocked. “Of *course* your first celebrity crush was the coach from a hockey movie.”

“Okay, so you had a boyfriend in high school. Was he your first real crush?” Elias asked, not even arguing against the hockey-lover allegations.

Nolan thought for a second before he answered. “Probably. There were boys when I was younger who I thought were cute or cool, but Julien was the first guy I really wanted to kiss and hold his hand. I was pumped when I found out the feelings were mutual.”

Elias half snorted. “At least yours wasn’t a straight guy! Mine was on my junior team’s athletic trainer. He was young, probably early twenties, and I thought he was so hot and competent.”

Nolan grinned. “Oh my god, you have a type, too. I am also in my early twenties, hot, and competent.”

Elias rolled his eyes and shoved him lightly. “You are insufferable.”

Nolan’s eyes sparkled. “Yeah, but I think you kinda like it.”

All exasperation fell from his face. He reached out and put his hand on Nolan’s jawline. “Yeah, I kinda do.”

Nolan leaned forward and kissed him, slow and deep. They kept talking through the evening and into the night. Mostly just dumb questions, getting to know each other as people better.

But when Nolan fell asleep, the same way he woke up that morning, wrapped up in Elias, he kept hearing the earnest way Elias had said, “*Yeah, I kinda do.*”

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Fifteen

ELIAS

February 18, 2026 · CAN vs. CZE

Elias sat in the locker room, gear on, listening to Coach Bennett give his pre-game talk and reminding everyone of the strategies they'd gone over in practice that morning. He was excited to get out on the ice for warmups. Elias loved the rush of adrenaline that came before a game—something about the roar of the crowd lit him up.

Bennett looked across the room and nodded at Roy. "Don't forget, Roy is in the net tonight." Then he clapped and he was done. The guys all lined up to head out to the ice.

On the way past him, Nolan tapped his stick against Elias's calves. When Elias looked up at him, Nolan just winked.

Because no moment was allowed to be sacred, Marko called out, "I saw that!"

Somewhere next to him, Hunt asked, "Saw what?" And Elias just smiled as he stepped onto the ice.

Elias skated his usual circles and did his usual stretches on the ice. He kept his eyes half on his teammates. He had faith in his team and their ability to win. The first game against the Czechs had gone well, so Elias knew it wouldn't be impossible for them to win this one, too.

Nolan skated by next to him, shooting a puck toward Roy. Elias couldn't help but think about how much had changed in the six days since the first time they played against Czechia.

Then, Elias had been steadily ignoring his attraction to Nolan, insisting it was just admiration for his hockey skills. He'd tried not to let anything come of it. But here they were, only six days later, and Nolan had spent several nights in his bed. Elias knew about his family, his first boyfriend,

and far more intimate details than he should be thinking about five minutes before an Olympic hockey game.

And now, he was going to get hard on the ice before a game.

He quickly shoved those thoughts away and returned his focus to the task at hand: the game against Czechia.

He glanced at the clock. Warmups were coming to a close, and players were starting to head back down the tunnel. Elias followed suit.

They waited the final few minutes before they went out to start the game. Elias knew this was his moment to remind everyone what kind of team they were.

Some captains were aggressive. Others gave long, encouraging speeches. Elias always had the same approach as a captain: remind his team that they could do it as long as they trusted each other. After all, they had all been good enough to make it all the way to the pro league, and in this case, had been chosen to represent their country in the Olympics. They just had to believe in themselves.

“Alright, boys,” he started, and everyone turned to look at him. “We know how the Czechs play. We already beat them once. Don’t get cocky about it. Trust your own skill and the guy next to you. Let’s make Roy’s job easy tonight.”

The guys all lined up to head to the ice. Elias waited at his spot by the door, giving everyone their own glove taps on the way out.

When Roy passed him, he made sure to really lock eyes with him. “You’ve got this,” he said, and Roy nodded intently.

Finally, Nolan was in front of him. He was the last one before Elias himself went out. He had a look of concentration on his face. Nolan knew how to laugh and have a good time during the game, but he never slacked off and he always took the game seriously. It was one of the things Elias admired most about him.

“Let’s show them how it’s done, Hart,” Elias told him, tapping their helmets together. He could see his favorite freckle under Nolan’s eye when they were this close.

Nolan’s eyes twinkled, and for a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them. He dropped his fierce hockey player mask and just looked at Elias with pure affection.

It was almost too much.

He pulled back and his game day expression returned immediately. “Let’s do it, Cap.”

Elias won the first faceoff. He sent the puck to Kelly and watched as he passed it over to Nolan. Nolan started down the ice, but one of the Czechs snatched it away.

The rest of the first period continued in the same fashion. The Czechs made a couple shots on goal, but Roy was guarding the net like his life depended on it.

During one of their breaks on the bench, Nolan leaned over. “Owen is kicking ass. They’ve had like six shots on goal and he’s stopped every single one.”

“Yeah, he’s doing great. If we could just get a couple shots in the net, we’d be in a great spot,” Elias told him.

Nolan just laughed. “Have faith in your team, old man,” Nolan said, lightly bumping his shoulder.

Elias kept his eye on the puck. Coach Bennett called out about an upcoming shift change. “I do; I just want to see us win.”

As it turned out, Nolan had a solution for that. Just a couple seconds after they got on the ice, he scored. He wasted no time in turning to Elias, shit-eating grin on his face. Elias skated toward him and flung his arms around him.

Nolan leaned closer to Elias’s ear. “When we win, I should get a reward for that,” he said, voice low but sure.

What a little shit. Two could play at that game. “We’ll see if you’ve earned it,” he said, giving Nolan a playful tap under the chin with his glove.

Nolan froze. It only lasted a second, but it was enough for Elias to know it had landed.

Elias glanced up at the clock as he skated toward the faceoff dot. They had just over seven minutes left in the first period. A lot could happen in seven minutes.

He looked over at Nolan as he bent down. He was in position, standing right next to the Czech winger. He was watching the faceoff with a determined look. Elias smirked to himself. Maybe Nolan would earn that reward after all.

Whatever got them to the gold medal round.

By the start of the third period, Canada was leading 3-0. Roy had been standing on his head all night, and Elias was proud of him. The Czechs had

come in with something to prove, and even so, Roy had answered every single challenge.

Just before they went back out, Elias stopped Roy. “Keep doing what you’re doing,” he told him before he gave him a quick shoulder squeeze.

“That’s the plan, Merce,” Roy said.

Not long into the period, Nolan scored another goal. The Czechs were getting annoyed, as was made clear by their play getting increasingly sloppy. Canada, on the other hand, got more confident with every turnover.

No one wanted to say it, but Elias could tell the arena was humming at the possibility with every save Roy made. Elias was right there with them.

With three minutes left, Elias watched as Nolan stole the puck from one of the Czech defensemen. He raced toward the net, but his path was blocked. Without looking back, he shot the puck toward Elias. Elias was once again amazed by the fact that Nolan instinctively knew where he was.

Elias saw an opening and took the shot. The first person he heard when the puck hit the net was Nolan. He was immediately cheering, a proud grin stretched across his face.

With only ten seconds left, one of the Czech forwards made a shot. The puck bounced around, with the Czechs trying hard for a rebound shot. In the end, Roy caught the puck right as the final buzzer went off, sprawled on his belly across the ice.

The Canadians cheered. Roy had gotten a shutout in his first Olympic starting game. The rest of the team met them on the ice, delight obvious on everyone’s face. Hunt immediately went and threw his arms around Roy, who looked a little shocked in his own right.

The rest of the guys followed Hunt’s lead and crowded around Roy. A 5-0 shutout was no small feat. Roy had worked his ass off, and in the end, it had paid off.

The handshake line showed the stark contrast between the two teams. The Czechs all wore somber expressions, disappointment obvious with every handshake.

The team was still buzzing as they got into the locker room. Nolan waited for the first private moment he could get before he approached Elias. He kept his stance casual, so if anyone looked over, nothing would seem out of the ordinary. Elias appreciated the gesture.

“So, we won,” Nolan started, not looking at Elias.

“I was there,” Elias responded.

Nolan finally turned to look straight at him. “Think I was good enough for a reward?”

The innocence of the question went straight to his dick. By the way that Nolan’s eyes had darkened, Elias knew he felt the same.

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Sixteen

NOLAN

February 20, 2026 · CAN vs. FIN

Even through all the excitement for the semifinal game, Nolan had woken up missing his family. He'd been able to talk to his sisters a couple times, and his parents, too, but he really just wanted to talk about the upcoming game with someone who saw firsthand how hard he'd worked for it.

So, he waited until it was a respectable 7:30 AM back in Vancouver, and called home. He really wanted to be able to video chat, but he knew his family would be getting ready for the day and a phone call would be immensely easier for them.

He called his mom's phone, but Sophia was the one that answered. She didn't even say hello, just put the phone on speaker. The sounds of the household moving around greeted him. His heart suddenly ached something fierce. His mom was in the middle of a sentence, but Nolan couldn't make out what she was saying over the sounds of the cabinet doors closing.

"Hello?" Nolan asked.

"Yeah, hi," Sophia said, as if she was put out by pressing a button on their mom's phone. Nolan laughed and shook his head. Thirteen-year-olds were ridiculous.

"How are things going?" Nolan asked.

"The same as they were two days ago," Sophia replied, adding a sigh this time.

Nolan scoffed. "Soph, you could at least pretend to like me. How many of your friends have super awesome big brothers in the Olympics?"

"I don't know, but they probably have to hear about it less than I do," she grumbled.

“Soph!” he said, voice filled with amusement.

“I don’t have any friends with brothers in the Olympics,” Ava said, sounding further away, as if she had leaned over to make sure Nolan could hear her.

“Thank you, Ava, I’m glad you appreciate my talents,” he told her as he lay back on Elias’s bed. Elias was sitting on the couch, scrolling on his phone. He looked up and gave Nolan a soft smile.

“How’s school going? Any big updates? Ave, how did your math test go?”

He heard shuffling and then Ava’s voice was much closer, like she had picked up the phone. “It was okay. I hate math. But I don’t think I bombed it.”

Nolan sighed. “That’s good at least. I hate math too. But you gotta do it.”

“I know,” Ava whined, drawing out the word.

Before he could say anything else, his dad’s voice came through. “Morning, son,” he said.

“Hey, Dad.”

Nolan heard the sounds of a chair scraping. If he had to guess, he would bet the girls were sitting at the kitchen island eating breakfast. “Nol, talk to Dad while we go get dressed,” Sophia said.

Nolan heard a click, then his father’s voice came through clearer. “How’s Italy?” his dad asked.

“Oh, man, it’s so cool. We have the semifinal game in just a little bit. I still can’t believe we made it this far,” Nolan gushed.

His dad hummed. “Why not? Canada’s a great team.”

Nolan nodded even though his dad couldn’t see him. “I know, it just still feels surreal to be here.”

“You worked your whole life for this, kid.”

“I know, and now we’re one game away from the gold round. Even if we lose today, we could still get bronze. Which is so cool. Even bronze would be so cool.”

His dad huffed this time. “You didn’t work this hard to settle for third place.”

Elias looked up at that from where he was sitting. He raised his eyebrows in question, but Nolan just waved it off.

“I know, Dad.”

His father continued. “You need to tighten up your shots today. During the last game, you hesitated a bit with the puck.”

Nolan bit back a sigh. He hoped his voice didn’t come out as small as the criticism made him feel. “I scored two goals, Dad.” He hated that he even felt the need to defend himself.

Across the room, Elias sat up straighter, putting his phone down as he watched Nolan.

“I’m just telling you what I noticed.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Nolan said.

Nolan heard shuffling and his sisters’ voices got louder as they came closer. Then he heard his mom’s voice, finally.

“Robert, let me talk to my boy,” she said. Nolan could imagine her holding her hand out for her phone. He smiled at the image.

“I’ll talk to you after the game, son,” his dad said. Nolan made a sound of confirmation.

“Hi, baby,” his mom said, voice full of love. Nolan felt his body relax.

“Hi, Mom,” he said. “How are you?”

She sighed. “Oh, you know. Sophia’s giving me a run for my money,” she told him.

He laughed. “I bet she is.”

“How are you doing? Are you having fun?” she asked, the same as she always did when he called home.

He looked over at Elias before he realized he was doing it. They shared a quick smile. Elias finally sat back and picked his phone back up.

Nolan briefly wondered if his dad was still there to hear him, but shook his head at himself. He was allowed to talk about having fun at the Olympics. “Yeah, Mom, it’s been a lot of fun. The team is great.”

“Oh, good,” she said, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “Is that Mercer still being nice to you?”

Nolan felt his cheeks heat up immediately. He almost didn’t want to look at Elias, but he was too curious for his own good and had to know if he’d heard it.

Elias was smirking. He had definitely heard it.

“Yes, he’s still being nice to me,” Nolan said, hoping she would drop it.

“Good. I know you’ve always admired him, but sometimes you meet your heroes and they let you down.”

Nolan groaned. “Mom, he’s not my hero.”

She laughed. “Honey, you can’t lie to your mother. I know how excited you were to play with him,” she said. Nolan hated how it made him sound like a little kid looking forward to a play date. He didn’t get a chance to respond, because his mom continued. “Anyway, I gotta get the girls to school. I love you,” she said.

“Okay, I love you too,” he told her.

But before she hung up, his dad’s voice came through one last time. “Don’t forget what I said,” he called out.

Nolan felt his shoulders tense. “Got it. Bye, Dad.”

“Bye, baby,” his mom said just before the call ended.

He tossed the phone down on the bed and sat up to look at Elias.

“Not a word,” Nolan warned.

Elias grinned. “I didn't say anything.”

“You're thinking it.”

“I'm thinking a lot of things.”

Elias stood up and came to sit next to him on the bed. “Feel better?” he asked.

Nolan nodded. He wasn’t sure he actually did, but he didn’t think Elias wanted the full breakdown. “Yeah, it’s nice to talk to everyone. Don’t worry about what my mom said,” he told him.

Elias laughed. “I’ll leave it for now. Your dad seems invested in your hockey career.” His voice was light, but made Nolan’s walls go up anyway.

“Yeah, he just wants me to do well,” Nolan said, trying not to sound too defensive.

Elias furrowed his brows like he wanted to say something, but he wrapped his arms around Nolan and pushed him back onto the bed. “Come on,” he said, “we have just enough time for our nap.”

Nolan scooted closer, happy to get a little time in Elias’s arms before the game. The comfort was just what he needed.



Finland was a strong team. Their defense was solid, and their offense was just as good. Enough of the league’s top players were Finnish that Nolan knew this would be a tough game. Nolan reminded himself that he'd played against almost all of these guys before.

The first period went the way Nolan had been expecting. Neither team kept the puck in their zone for very long. By the first intermission, the scoreboard read 0-0.

The second period started off strong. Marko intercepted a pass and scored. Some of the tension left Nolan's body as a point finally appeared on the scoreboard. It was Marko's first Olympic goal, and he beamed with excitement. Nolan grinned back from the bench.

The Finns answered with their own goal shortly after. Nolan didn't panic, not yet. They still had plenty of time to score.

Canada kept pushing, but nothing seemed to get past the Finnish defense. As the clock ticked down, worry started seeping in. Right before the second period ended, the Finns got another goal.

Starting the third period down a goal never felt good. Nolan spent the whole intermission wondering which opportunities he'd passed, if he'd hesitated at all.

Halfway through the third, Carson Timmins—their second-line left wing—got a goal. Nolan watched the whole thing from the bench next to Elias. The Finnish goalie hit the puck with his stick, then on a rebound, Timmins snuck it right between the goalie's legs. It wasn't until they showed the replay that Nolan saw Timmins wink at the goalie.

Nolan shook his head in amusement and looked over to see his expression mirrored on Elias. Some players liked to be a little playful on the ice, and Timmins was apparently one of them.

Nolan glanced up at the clock: six minutes left. It was definitely enough time for either team to break the tie. When it was time for his next shift, Nolan told himself he would take every chance he had to score.

The Finns weren't a team to give many opportunities away, so when Canada went on the power play, Nolan felt like it was his chance. This was just what they needed.

Nolan got the puck right in front of the net. A lane opened. This was it. He didn't hesitate. He took the shot. The Finnish defensive pairing closed the lane almost immediately, and the puck never reached the net. After a couple more seconds, the power play ended with no goal scored. Nolan set his mouth in a flat line the whole way back to the bench.

Three minutes later, in the final minute of the semifinal game, Canada got the winning goal. Across the ice, Cam Kelly fell to his knees in celebration. Nolan jumped up with the rest of his team to skate toward him.

They had made it to the gold medal round. One more game to win it all. Nolan should've felt ecstatic. Instead, he could only picture the lane closing before the puck ever reached the net.

Later, in the hotel room, Nolan collapsed on the bed next to Elias. Elias frowned.

"We won," he said.

Nolan put on his best smile. "I know." He tried to make his voice cheery.

"Don't do that. Don't pretend with me. You're allowed to be happy about it." He reached out and put his hand on Nolan's arm.

Nolan nodded, but Elias didn't seem convinced. "Is this about your dad?" he asked.

Nolan sighed. "No," he said automatically. After a second, he continued. "He quit."

Elias tilted his head in confusion. "Hockey. He played in college. He had teams watching him. Then my mom got pregnant and he gave it all up." Nolan sighed and looked up to the ceiling. "He always says he doesn't regret it. It's just…" he hesitated. "I couldn't even make the fucking shot."

Elias's eyes softened and he moved his hand from Nolan's arm to his cheek. "Nolan, his decision is not a debt you have to repay every game."

Nolan knew logically Elias was right. It didn't take away the shame growing in his gut, though. He didn't say anything.

Elias must have been able to tell Nolan didn't have anything left to say. So instead, he leaned forward and kissed Nolan until he stopped thinking about his missed shot, and the only thing on his mind was the feeling of Elias against him.

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Seventeen

ELIAS

February 21, 2026 · Olympic Village

For the first time in days, Elias sat alone in his room. Nolan was in his own room packing. They only had two nights left in Italy. Elias had expected the ending to feel bittersweet, but he hadn't expected to feel nauseous at the idea of going home.

Practice that morning had been fine, if a little more intense than usual. But considering tomorrow would end with a gold or silver medal, that was to be expected.

As the day wore on, Elias could practically hear the clock ticking down on his time with Nolan. He felt ridiculous, to be honest. He had only known Nolan Hart for fourteen days. It wasn't enough time for him to feel this heartbroken at the thought of being away from Nolan. It wasn't enough time for him to feel so attached to him.

It wasn't enough time in general. Elias wanted more time.

He sighed to himself once again. He looked around his room, making note of the things Nolan had already taken back to his own room. He couldn't believe how empty it made the room feel.

Before he could stop himself, he imagined Nolan's things not only back in their spot in his room, but in his home in Montreal. Which was crazy, right? Fourteen days wasn't long enough to daydream about someone's belongings in your home.

And yet, the more he tried to fight it, the clearer the picture became. It made him miss something that hadn't even happened yet.

He went to his closet and started packing things on autopilot. It wasn't long before he heard a keycard unlocking the door to the room. Knowing it could only be Nolan, Elias let out a breath of relief.

“Honey, I’m home,” Nolan called out as he crossed the room toward him. He wrapped his arms around Elias’s waist from behind and rested his head in between Elias’s shoulder blades.

Elias leaned his head back against Nolan’s and placed his hands over his. For a second, neither of them said anything, content to stand in each other’s space.

“Did you get all packed up?” Elias asked, keeping his eyes closed so he could savor the feeling for a moment longer.

He felt Nolan nod against him. “As much as I could. You?”

“Getting there. Except the gold medal, of course. Still waiting on that one.”

Nolan pulled back, and Elias turned to face him. Nolan reached into his back pocket and pulled something out. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he held it up between two fingers. “Actually, you forgot this. I didn’t want you to leave the Olympics as a liar,” Nolan told him, spinning the object so Elias could see what it was.

Elias grinned. “You actually found the pizza pin?”

Nolan ducked his head, but Elias still saw the faint blush.

Elias took the pin and pulled Nolan against him again. He kissed the top of his head. With a grin still on his face, he told Nolan, “Thank you for keeping me honest.”

Nolan sighed dramatically. “Someone has to.” Then, he sighed again, less performative this time. His voice was softer when he said, “I can’t believe it’s almost time to go home.”

Elias didn’t say anything—he couldn’t. He wasn’t sure what he even really hoped for, or really expected, let alone how to tell Nolan. So instead of saying anything, he just hummed.

Nolan didn’t let the silence linger. “We should probably talk about that, huh?” he asked quietly.

Elias sighed. He knew they needed to, but for once in his life, he wanted to delay the planning for just a little longer. He thought about pulling Nolan down into bed with him, but he knew that would just give him an excuse to cuddle and delay the inevitable conversation. He went to the mini fridge, grabbed a bottle of water for each of them, and sat on the couch. Elias sat on one side and Nolan took the other. Nolan wasted no time in making himself comfortable by stretching his legs across Elias’s lap.

Maybe Nolan could see that Elias didn’t want to be the one to start. Or maybe he himself was just eager to get it going. Either way, he said, “Okay, so I’ve been thinking about this all day. I don’t really know how to start, so I just want to say I’ve really enjoyed getting closer to you the last couple weeks.”

Elias squeezed Nolan’s calf where his hand was resting. “Me too. I’m glad we got to have this little bubble together.”

Nolan raised his eyebrows. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t want it to pop.”

Something immediately loosened in Elias’s chest. “Me either. I know we haven’t discussed labels yet, and I’m not sure how you feel about them—” Elias started, but Nolan cut him off.

“I personally am a big fan of labels.”

Somehow that didn’t surprise Elias in the least. “Great,” he said. “It’s been years since I’ve had a boyfriend, so I’m probably a little rusty, but I’d like to give it a go.”

Nolan smiled. Elias wanted to kiss him. “You’ve been doing great so far.”

Elias brushed his thumb against Nolan’s leg. “I’m glad you think so. I’m happy to tell friends and family about us, teammates if you want. Most of my team knows about me already. Hell, I’m sure half the league does at this point. I don’t exactly keep it a secret—I just don’t advertise it.”

Nolan squinted a little. “You did have those rumors with what’s her name for years.”

Elias rolled his eyes playfully. “She was a childhood neighbor that my family stayed in contact with. I’ve been gay my whole life. I promise I didn’t take a decade-long detour.”

Nolan grinned back. “I, too, have been gay my whole life.”

“Shocker,” Elias said, the amusement in his voice obvious. He sighed then, knowing what he was about to say and dreading it already. “I don’t want to publicly come out.”

“Yet or ever?”

“Definitely not yet, but maybe not ever.” He looked down, not wanting to see Nolan’s expression. He knew it was cowardly of him to not meet Nolan’s eyes, but he was scared of the potential disappointment he might find. He knew not everyone was okay with keeping a relationship private.

“Okay…” Nolan said, trailing off.

Elias finally looked up and tried to explain. “It’s just—I’ve worked my ass off my whole life to get to where I am. I don’t want to just be known as the gay hockey player.”

Nolan cocked his head. “Okay. I get that. But you wouldn’t be. You wouldn’t even be the first gay player. There’s that guy in San Jose that had a public boyfriend. And the Nashville goalie is pretty much an open secret. He goes out with his boyfriend all the time. And then there’s Nathan Smith. He already did the whole big announcement thing after he was drafted.”

“But they aren't at the same level as I am. As *we* are. Not to sound conceited, but it’s true. The guy in San Jose has a girlfriend now, so that story faded. They ignore the goalie too. And Smith hasn’t even played his first NHL game yet.”

Nolan sighed. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. I get where you’re coming from. I guess…” He looked off for a second. “And I know this isn’t what you’re saying, but I guess I just don’t want to feel like a secret. I’m not asking you to propose during the Stanley Cup Final. But I’m not ashamed of who I am, and I’m not ashamed to be with you.”

Elias shook his head. “No, I’m not asking you to be a secret. I’m not ashamed of you. I want you to be part of my life. I want the people I love to know and adore you too. But I’ve seen how the media can reduce a player to a headline. Look at Trafford. He was a great player. He won three Cups. And now, when people talk about him, all they talk about is how he died in some freak accident.”

Nolan sat up and reached forward to grab Elias’s hand. “Okay. I get it. As long as I don’t have to hide you, that’s okay with me. We can figure the rest out as we go.”

Elias felt any lingering tightness in his chest dissipate. “That’s all I want.”

Nolan scooted across the couch and put his hand on Elias’s cheek. “Well, maybe the gold medal too.” He smiled as he leaned in and pressed his lips to Elias’s. Then he pulled back and was already grinning. “Oh, and just so we’re clear. I don’t share well.”

Elias laughed. “Great. Me either.”

Then, he finally kissed Nolan the way he’d been wanting to all day: without the threat of the Olympics ending hanging over their heads.

Later, when they were in bed cuddled together, Nolan looked at Elias. “So… does this mean I can meet Moose?”

Elias kissed Nolan’s hair as he ran his fingers through it. “Moose would absolutely love you. You match his energy.”

Nolan smiled brightly. “I bet that’s why you like me.”

Elias couldn’t even deny it. “There may be more truth in that than I’m willing to admit.”

Nolan looked triumphant in the same way he did every time Elias admitted to liking him. After a second, Elias continued, “But only if I can meet Wayne. Is he named after Gretzky?”

Nolan nodded. “Of course he is.”

Elias laughed. “Of course he is. I’m sorry I even questioned it. I can’t wait to meet him, or for you to meet Moose.”

“Well, then I guess it’s a good thing we play each other in April.”

“Babe,” Elias said, not even realizing the pet name had slipped out until after it did, “I am not waiting until April to see you.”

Nolan had definitely taken note of the pet name. He reached up and kissed Elias’s neck. “Great. I would die if I couldn’t kiss you for that long.”

Elias squeezed his hip. “You’ve only been kissing me for a week,” he told him.

“Exactly. I had no idea what I was missing. Now that I know, I never wanna stop.”

For the first time since arriving in Italy, going home didn’t necessarily mean leaving Nolan behind. Maybe that was enough.

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Eighteen

NOLAN

February 22, 2026 · CAN vs. USA

Nolan had no idea how Elias managed to seem so calm. Nolan felt like he was vibrating in his bus seat. His leg was bouncing, and he was pulling on a piece of skin on his pointer finger.

Nolan felt a hand rest on his knee, holding it in place. He looked up to see Elias patiently smiling at him. He was wearing the same steady expression he'd had on all tournament. "Hart," he said, "it's okay."

Nolan forced himself to take a deep breath before letting it out slowly. "I know. How are you so calm?"

Elias shrugged and squeezed Nolan's knee. "I have to be. It doesn't do any good for the captain to be a nervous wreck."

Nolan frowned. He had never thought about what that must feel like for Elias. He knew that he always looked to the captain for reassurance. Oftentimes, the captain set the mood for the whole team. But Nolan had never realized that meant Elias rarely had the luxury of showing his own nervousness.

"You can be nervous with me," Nolan told him in a quieter tone.

"I know." Elias gave his knee another squeeze. Nolan half expected him to pull his hand away, but it stayed put. The weight did wonders to Nolan's nerves.

The bus finally pulled up to the arena and Nolan took another deep breath before he stood up. Either way, he was going home as an Olympic medalist. But, God, the gold would taste so sweet.

They had been sitting close to the front, so Elias got up and off first. Nolan saw that he was standing outside the door, nodding at everyone as

they got off. It was one of Nolan's favorite things about Elias—how he grounded a space so effortlessly.

Everything else leading up to the game was a blur. All too soon, Nolan was putting on his gear and waiting for the game to start. The buzz of energy in the locker room was palpable. They only had a couple minutes before they went out on the ice.

Nolan watched as Elias moved toward the door. He tucked his helmet under his arm and stood. Everyone seemed to notice at the same time. The room quieted before Elias even opened his mouth.

"Okay, guys. I want all of you to take a deep breath. If you're nervous, good. That means this matters." The room collectively breathed in and out. Nolan hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath until he let it out. "We've been playing together for two weeks. We don't have to turn into a different team just because there's a gold medal on the line."

Several of the guys around the room nodded. Elias continued. "No matter what happens out there, I'm proud to wear this jersey with you."

Elias took a moment to make eye contact with every single player. Nolan was sure his eyes softened when it was his turn. Nolan was suddenly hit with a pang of disappointment that this was his last Olympic game with Elias as his captain, the last time Elias would lead him onto the ice.

He didn't get to linger on that thought, though. Elias finished, "Let's get out there and earn this."

It felt like Nolan blinked and he was out at center ice lining up for the first puck drop.

Team USA was objectively a good team. Nolan knew over half the guys on the roster. He had played with or against them more times than he could count. It meant he knew what to expect from them, but they also knew what to expect from Canada.

The USA center won the faceoff. Nolan didn't let himself stress over that. He followed his team as they tried to get the puck back. Both teams were playing like everything was on the line, because it was.

Halfway through the period, USA took a tripping penalty. Nolan hoped this would be their chance to finally get on the board.

Two minutes later, and it was still 0-0. USA had successfully killed the penalty. The arena's roar faded into a collective groan. Nolan let out one of his own. They had missed their chance.

Nolan took his spot on the bench and watched the game with bated breath. Elias sat next to him, eyes focused on the puck. Nolan pressed his thigh against Elias and noticed how his body relaxed just a hair.

The first period ended without a goal from either team. Nolan had expected this to be a low-scoring game, but expecting it was different than experiencing it.

The air was still tense when the second period began. Each whistle echoed louder than the last. It somehow felt like the clock was moving too fast and too slow at the same time.

Just two minutes into the period, Nolan watched as Carter found a lane between the USA defenders. The puck slipped under the goalie's glove and went to the back of the net.

Nolan jumped up with the rest of the team. It was exactly the boost they needed. The game immediately felt more charged. USA pushed for the equalizer, but Canada's defense didn't let a shot through. The period ended with a score of 1-0 in favor of Canada.

Intermission went as expected. Nolan watched as players got injuries checked out, the team went over strategies, and everyone took a second to breathe.

Before they went out, Elias stood at the front of the room again. "Alright, guys. Let's finish this."

Team USA had changed their first line. Nolan found himself shoulder to shoulder with Mason Harris. Nolan hadn't played on the same team as him since juniors, but he'd played against him plenty of times since then. Mason grinned at him. "Silver will really complement your complexion," he told Nolan.

Nolan nudged him with his shoulder. "Aw, too bad I'm more of a gold guy."

The puck dropped, then they were off. USA came out with something to prove. Barely a minute into the third, they got the tying goal they had been searching for. Nolan watched the team crowd around the winger who got the goal. He tore his eyes away as he skated toward the bench.

The second line took their places at center ice and play resumed. Nolan tracked each play with his elbows on his knees. Elias's stance mirrored his next to him on the bench.

Halfway through the period, Marko got a high-sticking penalty. Nolan bit back a groan. USA did not need the upper hand.

With thirty seconds left in the penalty kill, the USA center shot the puck. It looked like it was headed for the top corner, but it just barely rang off the crossbar. Nolan tried not to let out a sigh of relief.

Canada successfully killed the penalty shortly after. Nolan was thankful for the break after that shift. His body was starting to feel tired from all the pent-up energy. Hockey was never easy, but this particular game was really taking it out of him.

With only two minutes left in regulation, neither team had scored. Nolan did not want to go to overtime. Canada managed to get the puck into their offensive zone, and they bounced the puck around. Nolan glanced up at the clock: only 1:13 left.

Myers, a right winger, saw an opening and made a shot. USA's goaltender hit the puck with his stick and it slid on the ice.

Right into Jordan Hunt's stick. Nolan stopped breathing as Jordan snapped the puck back toward the net. Time slowed down as the puck flew past the goalie and hit the back of the net.

Both teams met at center ice for what was hopefully the final faceoff. Nolan glanced at the clock. With under a minute left, USA was desperate to tie the game and force overtime. Nolan watched the goalie skate to the bench and a sixth player came out onto the ice.

Nolan spent the remaining time glancing frantically between the clock and the game. Every play had Nolan on the edge of his seat.

Sixteen seconds left. Canada failed to clear. Eleven seconds left. The puck couldn't get out of the defensive zone. Nolan glanced up: three seconds left.

Nolan focused on the clock as it counted down to zero. All the sounds of the arena faded until the blare of the horn.

The game was over. Holy shit. The game was over, and Canada had won.

Nolan turned to his left. Elias was already standing up next to him. They shared a smile before they both hopped over the boards to tackle their goalie, Clarke.

Sticks and gloves littered the ice. Nolan and Elias were some of the first guys from the bench to meet the dogpile that was already starting at the crease. The sounds of his teammates shouting and cheering were loud in his ear.

Even through all the physical contact, one touch on his lower back stood out. Nolan smiled as he felt his boyfriend's hand slip under his jersey for barely a second. It was enough to give him a little moment that belonged to just the two of them, even in the middle of the team celebrating.

After a minute or two, the team lined up for the handshake line. Nolan couldn't imagine how they must have felt. His mom had always taught him not to be a sore winner, so he kept his excitement in check. Her voice echoed in his mind with every handshake.

When Mason stood in front of him, despite his disappointed expression, his friend told him, "Enjoy the gold. You earned it."

Nolan pulled him into a fast one-armed hug. He thanked him before moving on to the next person.

The next thing he knew, he was finished with the handshake line and was waiting off to the side while they cleaned up the ice and brought out the medal setups.

Nolan took more time hugging and celebrating with his fellow teammates. They all wore matching expressions of delighted disbelief. It still didn't feel real that he'd won a gold medal at the Olympics. He had a feeling it wouldn't really sink in until the medal itself was around his neck.

Nolan watched as Team USA stood in a line to be presented with their silver medals. A couple of the guys had red eyes, like they were holding back tears. It was the complete opposite to how Nolan felt—he was holding back tears of joy.

When it was Canada's turn, Nolan watched as each of his teammates had their gold medal placed around their necks. He felt the same pride he did whenever his sisters accomplished something difficult. It almost felt silly, since he was the youngest on the team, but he still felt like a proud parent.

Then it was his turn. He leaned forward and waited as the medal settled against his chest. It was lighter than he expected. It still had weight to it, definitely, but he'd half expected it to be as heavy as all the pressure he'd been carrying without realizing it. He reached up to touch the cool metal. It still didn't quite feel real.

Nolan found himself drifting back beside Elias. He didn't remember making the choice to stand next to him; his body had just acted on its own. Either way, he had the best view to watch Elias get his own gold medal.

If Nolan had felt proud of his teammates before, it was nothing compared to the pride he felt watching Elias Mercer right now. Nolan knew

he had worked hard to get where he was. They all had, of course. Nolan just knew how much of it Elias carried.

Elias looked over at Nolan when it was over. He smiled and Nolan noticed his hand twitched like he wanted to reach out. He knew the feeling all too well.

Nolan’s eyes moved from Elias’s face, shifting farther down until they finally landed on the gold medal. It looked like it had always belonged there.

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Nineteen

ELIAS

February 22, 2026

Celebrating with the team had been fun, but Elias was eager to get back to his room and celebrate with his boyfriend. It was their last night together, and Elias intended to make the most of it.

Nolan's cheeks were slightly flushed from the champagne, and his eyes were lit up with happiness. All night long, he'd looked so elated, and all it had done for Elias was make him desperate to get his mouth on him.

Nolan's pink tongue darted out to lick a drop of champagne off his lips, and the action was enough for Elias to decide maybe it was time they head back to their room.

He walked over to where Nolan was standing with his usual three guys. Elias placed his hand on his lower back to let Nolan know he was there.

"Hey, I'm probably gonna head back to the room. I need to finish packing," he said.

Nolan looked confused for a second, probably because he knew Elias had already packed. Then his expression changed and Elias could tell he had read between the lines.

Nolan gave a yawn that was so obviously fake that Elias snorted. "Oh yeah. I'm tired, too. I'll walk with you."

Elias smiled. Nolan was trying his best to be discreet, but apparently, the champagne hindered his ability a little. As they turned away, Marko chirped, "You guys are not subtle."

Elias just shrugged. "Wasn't really trying to be," he said, even though he kind of had been. Nolan's eyes lit up and Elias decided it was fine if some of the teammates knew.

In the rideshare back to the village, Nolan was in a playful mood. He kept his hand on Elias's thigh, getting closer and closer without actually touching his dick. Nolan wasn't even looking at him, which was the worst part. He was driving Elias crazy and staring straight ahead like nothing was happening.

By the time they made it into the room, Elias had reached his patience limit. As soon as they were through the door, Elias pulled Nolan into him. Their lips found each other and Elias let out a slight moan of relief.

The feeling of their bodies pressed fully against each other was the feeling Elias had been waiting for all night. The sound of their gold medals clinking against each other was almost…magical. He still couldn't believe his team had won the gold medal, and that he'd had Nolan by his side for the win.

Honestly, if you had told Elias a month ago that he'd leave the Olympics with not only a boyfriend, but that it would be the kid from Winnipeg, he would not have believed you. And yet, here he was, taking the medals off each of their necks and placing them carefully on the table side by side.

"They look good together," Nolan told him, putting his hands on Elias's waist as he walked up behind him. Elias returned the gesture as he turned around.

"So do we," he told Nolan. Nolan's smile was pleased. Elias continued. "And I can't wait to admire them later. But right now, I need you out of your clothes."

Nolan's eyes darkened and he reached down, but instead of going for his own pants, he started with Elias. Elias moaned and brought their mouths together. He would never get tired of feeling Nolan's lips moving against his.

Only when Nolan was finished unbuttoning his pants did he take off his own. Elias used the time to pull off his own shirt before grabbing Nolan's. With both of them fully naked, Elias pushed Nolan back onto the bed.

"Nolan," Elias said as he kissed down his chest. "Can I leave a mark?"

Nolan moaned and pushed his body up against Elias. It caused his dick to rub right against Elias's. Any softness either of them could have had was definitely gone by now. "Fuck yes," he said.

The thing about hockey was that it did not leave unbruised bodies. Players usually had bruises at various stages of healing all over their body.

Nolan was no different. Elias made sure to find a spot that could be a bruise left from a hard hit.

When he was satisfied with his mark, he moved further down with the intent of taking Nolan into his mouth. With Nolan's legs spread apart, Elias noticed a fine line tattoo on the inside of his upper thigh. He wasn't sure how he had missed it before, though he'd never exactly had the best light to study Nolan's inner thighs.

Nolan looked down to see Elias looking at the tattoo. It was a small wave that led into two lines, like a river almost. "It's supposed to represent Vancouver, for the wave, then turning into Winnipeg, for the Currents. It's dumb," he explained.

Elias bent down and placed a soft kiss on it. "It's not. It's about you," Elias told him.

Nolan blushed, but because he was Nolan, he had to make a joke. "I should've known you were into tatted guys. I'll have to warn Marko."

Elias gave him a look. "Please don't bring up Marko when I'm about to put your dick in my mouth."

Nolan didn't say anything, just thrust his hips up so his dick hit Elias's face. Elias gave a half-incredulous laugh. When he made eye contact with Nolan, his expression was somewhere between playful and shocked at himself.

Elias was done wasting time. He put his hands around the base, and wrapped his mouth around the tip. Nolan let out a breathy moan above him. Elias pulled off to lick the underside from base to tip before he took him all the way in.

Elias prided himself in being good at the things he put his mind to, and sucking dick was one of those things.

Nolan's was a good one—it wasn't too thick, but it was longer than average. Besides, Elias cared much more about the man it was attached to than the dick itself.

And right now, the man it was attached to was thrusting up into his mouth. Elias loved feeling Nolan let go because of him. Even though he tried to keep the energy around him light, Elias had noticed how much pressure Nolan put on himself. To be the reason he shed some of that was a privilege.

Only a few seconds later, Nolan was pulling on Elias's hair to pull him off. Elias did not take his mouth off him, but he did look up and raise his

eyebrows.

“Stop, stop, I’m gonna come,” Nolan told him, still trying to pull him back. Elias, satisfied that was the only reason he was telling him to stop, kept going. He had an idea, anyway.

Elias reached back and ran a finger through Nolan’s crack and lightly over his rim. Nolan jumped a little at the contact, but Elias felt how he tried to relax his body. Elias didn’t push in yet, seeing as he didn’t have any lube, but he hoped that would be a moot point soon.

Nolan made the whimper he always did before he came, and Elias sucked harder, relishing in the salty warmth flooding his mouth. Elias kept sucking but made sure not to swallow anything. When he was sure Nolan was finished, he sat up.

Elias cupped his hand under his mouth, and spit out Nolan’s cum into it. There was a drop left on his lip, and Nolan’s eyes widened as he watched Elias dart out his tongue to lick it.

Elias was thankful they had discussed their testing status earlier, so he didn’t need to look for a condom. Nolan was still breathing heavily, and Elias allowed him a minute to rest. With Nolan’s cum still in his hand, he started stroking his own cock.

“Fuck, that’s so hot,” Nolan said, voice breathy and strained.

Elias grinned and switched hands, so his dominant hand was free to reach for Nolan. He spread his fingers a little and saw how Nolan’s cum webbed between them.

Then, he reached out and began fingering Nolan. He started slow, but Nolan still shuddered with the first press of his finger inside.

“God, fuck, your hands are so big,” he said, words slurring together a bit.

Elias grinned. “Think you can go again?” he asked as he slipped a second finger in.

“Eli, I swear to god, if you don’t fuck me soon, I’m gonna lose it.”

Elias leaned forward and kissed the curve of Nolan’s shoulder. “That’s the plan, baby,” he said. Nolan moaned and pushed back against his fingers.

He needed Nolan to lift his hips though, so he took his extra hand off his dick and patted Nolan’s side. Nolan immediately did as he was asked, allowing Elias to slip one of the pillows under his hips.

Satisfied with their positions, Elias added a third finger. He curled them in a way that he knew would make him crazy. Elias knew he had hit it when Nolan jerked up and gave a little shout.

“Now,” he said frantically. “I need you inside of me *now*. I’m ready.”

Elias stretched his fingers once more before pulling them out. He sat up and spit in his hand to mix it with the cum. It might still be a little rough, but Elias had a feeling Nolan wouldn’t mind.

He lined himself up against Nolan’s hole. He rubbed the head back and forth a couple times just to see Nolan squirm. And then finally, *finally*, he pushed the tip inside.

Nolan was better than anything he could have dreamed up. Even just barely inside, Elias moaned at the feeling of the tight heat around him.

Nolan was enjoying this, too, but clearly didn’t want to take as long as Elias did. Elias let out a half laugh of disbelief as Nolan pushed down, forcing Elias all the way in to the hilt.

“*Fuck me,”* Nolan told him, stern and sure.

Elias did not need to be told twice. He leaned down and kissed Nolan quickly before he sat back up. He started thrusting, loving the way Nolan met him each time. They read each other as well, if not better, than they did on the ice.

He only lasted a few more pumps before he felt tingling at the base of his spine. He started to pull out, but Nolan’s hands snapped down and held his hips in place.

“No,” Nolan said. “Inside. Come in me. I wanna feel you.”

“How are you so perfect?” Elias asked, picking up the pace until he felt everything come to a head. He kept thrusting as his orgasm washed over him, the added cum mixing with Nolan’s from before. It felt phenomenal. Elias wanted to feel this for the rest of his life.

Fuck. Where had *that* come from?

He chalked it up to orgasm haze, and he kept thrusting even after he was finished, with a hand on Nolan to bring him over the edge once more. It didn’t take long before Nolan had his own ropes of cum shooting across both of their chests.

When they were both breathing heavily, tired and satiated, Elias finally pulled out slowly and collapsed on the bed next to Nolan. He would get up to clean them both in a second. For now, he just wanted to catch his breath.

Nolan leaned over and pressed a kiss against Elias’s shoulder. Elias met his gaze and noticed how heavy Nolan’s eyes looked. He guessed the adrenaline from the game and getting the gold combined with the post-win sex was finally wearing off.

Elias flung his legs over the bed to go to the bathroom. He came back with a warm face cloth and cleaned them both. After tossing it toward the bathroom, he climbed back into bed beside Nolan.

Nolan wasted no time in snuggling up to Elias. Elias automatically reached up and started running his fingers through Nolan's hair. He hummed happily, almost like a cat purring.

“Would you believe me if I said I’ve been dreaming about doing that with you for years?” Nolan asked, quiet, as if he was nervous to say it out loud.

“Yes,” Elias told him, placing a kiss on his hair. He thought about keeping his next thought to himself, but he figured since it was their last night in Italy, he could afford to be a little honest.

“Would *you* believe *me* if I said kinda me too? Not years obviously, but definitely since you got drafted. The first game we played against each other, you had a beautiful shot. Do you remember?” He didn’t pause long enough for Nolan to answer. “You lit up. You looked so damn pleased with yourself. I knew then and there you had the kind of talent that could go far in this league. And then. Then you fucking blew a kiss to the Montreal bench.” Elias shook his head at the memory. “I should’ve been annoyed at your obvious arrogance. But for some reason, all I could imagine was kissing that fucking smirk off your face.”

Nolan pulled back so he could make eye contact with Elias. He studied him for a long moment before saying, “Way back then? I was just a rookie.”

Elias squeezed his hip. “Yeah, a fucking talented rookie. Come on, you can’t be shocked I’m attracted to good hockey.”

Nolan shook his head. “No, of course I’m not. But to *my* hockey?”

Elias put a hand against his jaw. “Your hockey *is* good hockey. I’ve been keeping up with your games, with you.”

Nolan grinned at that. “It’s okay to just admit you liked watching me because I’m hot.”

Elias rolled his eyes, but Nolan wasn’t entirely wrong. “Well, that certainly helped.”

Nolan laughed and leaned in to kiss him, sweet and deep. Elias savored it. When they finally pulled apart, Elias held Nolan close against him. He felt his body inching closer to sleep and loathed the fact that this was the last time for a while that he would get to fall asleep next to Nolan.

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Twenty

NOLAN

February 23, 2026 · Milan

Nolan felt so ridiculous. He was getting annoyed with himself for how ridiculous he felt. Then, he got annoyed for getting annoyed.

The airport around him was loud enough that no one seemed to notice. The strap of his duffel bag started slipping off his shoulder, so he adjusted it as he walked toward his gate. All of Team Canada, as well as a bunch of other guys from the NHL, were taking the same flight to Montreal, then most were going their separate ways from there.

Nolan was glad to have this final stretch of time with Elias, but at the same time, he almost wished it was over so he could be sad in peace. It felt like delaying the inevitable. He was trying his best not to rush their goodbye, but that was easier said than done. As if he could tell Nolan was getting lost in his own mind, Elias bumped his shoulder against Nolan.

“You good?” he asked.

Nolan wanted to tell him that no, he wasn’t good; he wasn’t looking forward to going back home. He wanted to stay in his little Olympic bubble with Elias forever. He knew how crazy that sounded. Part of him desperately wanted to stay here, but another part still missed Winnipeg. They still had the rest of the season left. Even after everything that had happened with Elias, Nolan still missed his own team. It was only a couple weeks ago that he had been in his living room with Jesper and Tyler.

Speaking of, he pulled out his phone to shoot them a quick text that he was at the airport and would be boarding soon.

A few of the guys were on the lookout for somewhere to get coffee. A few more were settling into some seats now that they had finally arrived at their gate. Everyone was talking with the same kind of happy exhaustion.

Nolan was finding it hard to fake it. He'd known this was coming to an end, that they had to go home sometime, but it felt strange that his entire world was changing while everyone around him carried on as normal.

He spotted a couple empty chairs together and sat down in one of them. It felt like everywhere he looked, he saw athletes and staff from his team and others. He hadn't expected Elias to immediately sit down next to him, not when they were about to have the entire flight together, but it still stung when Elias went around saying goodbye to their teammates individually.

Nolan tried to distract himself with the sounds of his teammates around him. After all, he and Elias were still in the same room, breathing the same air, for now. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

Marko was arguing with someone about a coffee order. Jordan was talking to Owen in the background. Nolan was pretty sure Owen was trying to convince Jordan that pigeons were government spies—he'd almost definitely heard Owen say, "But have you ever seen a baby pigeon?" followed by Jordan's gasp of horror—but that felt like a rabbit hole Nolan did not have the energy to go down.

Then he heard Elias's laugh. It wasn't anything over the top, but it was enough that Nolan's heart tightened in his chest. Suddenly, the cacophony of the airport felt suffocating. Before he even realized what he was doing, he was standing up and almost running to the washroom.

He went into the first empty stall he saw. He was thankful that Europe didn't have the huge gaps in their bathroom stalls that North America loved. He leaned against the door and tried to take a few breaths to calm himself.

Hearing Elias's laugh reminded him that by this time tomorrow, he wouldn't get the honor of hearing it in person anymore. He wouldn't get to be the one making him laugh. He wouldn't get to look across the room and find Elias already watching him.

Tears stung in his eyes, and because he was in the safety of the stall, he let them fall.

He could afford this one moment of weakness.

He knew logically that he and Elias were together, and exclusive, and had made tentative plans to see each other soon. It still didn't stop the intrusive thoughts from flooding his mind, though.

Made-up scenarios flashed through his mind like the worst kind of horror movie montage. Elias laughing with some random guy at a bar. Elias realizing that Nolan wasn't the only one that could make him feel like that.

Elias leaning in to kiss the random guy. Elias seeing a text from Nolan and ignoring it. Elias going home with the guy. Elias deciding that making this work with Nolan was more trouble than it was worth.

Of course, he knew how unlikely any of that was. He trusted Elias. But some part of him worried that Elias would change his mind when Nolan was no longer in his line of sight.

Before he could spiral further, he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled his phone out and saw that it was just a text from Tyler wishing him a safe flight. It was just enough to remind Nolan that he still had several hours of uninterrupted time with Elias before they had to go their separate ways.

He took a deep breath and opened the stall door. At the sink, he splashed some water on his face. He could only hope the redness in his eyes would fade before he reached the gate.

When their gate was in view, he noticed Elias sitting in the empty chair next to his bags. Nolan let out a sigh of relief. He didn't trust himself to say anything until he sat down next to him.

"I got you a coffee," Elias told him, holding out a cup for him to take.

Nolan felt more ridiculous than he had before. He'd been in a bathroom stall, freaking himself out, while his boyfriend ordered him a coffee.

Elias looked at Nolan for a second longer. "Are you okay?" he asked, eyes flicking back and forth between Nolan's own.

Nolan wished they weren't in an airport surrounded by their colleagues. He wanted to lean into his boyfriend and get the comfort and reassurance he craved. He knew that wasn't an option right now, though, so he settled for being as honest as he could. "Just wish we didn't have to say goodbye."

Elias's eyes softened, his expression matching Nolan's sadness. "Me too. But it's not goodbye forever. I'll still talk to you all the time and I'll see you soon. You can't get rid of me that easily, babe."

Elias had lowered his voice, but Nolan was sure no one was paying them any attention anyway. "Good," he said as he raised his cup to take a drink of his coffee.

Nolan looked around, then decided that he could do what he wanted, even if it was in a smaller way. Hockey players were physically affectionate with each other on and off the ice. He and Elias had already been spending time together throughout the tournament, and Elias was not only sitting next to him here, but would be sitting next to him for the flight to Montreal. So,

Nolan allowed himself to indulge just a little and leaned his head onto Elias's shoulder.



Nolan's neck was starting to get sore. He'd fallen asleep against Elias on the plane for the last couple hours. He was immediately irritated with himself for sleeping when he could have been talking to Elias.

Next to him, Elias had his headphones in and a book opened in front of him. He used his finger to hold his spot on the page and looked over at Nolan.

"Hey, sleepyhead," he said.

Nolan stretched. "Sorry I fell asleep," he told Elias.

Elias cocked his head. "Why? You were tired."

Nolan started to tell him that he was sorry he wasted their time together, but the words suddenly felt silly almost. Elias didn't seem like he was upset at all. He decided to change the subject. "What are you reading?"

Elias put his bookmark in the book before closing it to show Nolan the title. It was a hockey player biography. Nolan shouldn't have been surprised. He then noticed a label on the front of the book.

Nolan blinked. "Is that a library book?"

Elias raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"I had no idea people still went to libraries."

Elias did not lower his eyebrows. "Millions of people do."

Nolan squinted for a moment before he smiled and put his hand on Elias's thigh. "And who knew Elias Mercer was one of them?"

Elias opened his mouth to say something, but a flight attendant stopped on their row to ask about snacks and drinks.

After they finished telling the attendant what they wanted, Nolan looked back to Elias. He reached out and grabbed Elias's hand. Elias hesitated only a second before threading their fingers together. Nolan didn't say anything. He was content to sit with Elias and feel the warmth of Elias's hand wrapped around his.

The rest of the flight passed by uneventfully. They chatted, Nolan fell back asleep for another half hour, and he learned that Elias had a hard time sleeping on planes. It was all too soon that they were landing and shuffling off the plane and through customs.

It felt grounding to breathe in Canadian air, even if it was stuffy airport air. After the long process of entering the country, the team finally started going their separate ways.

A bunch of the other guys had connecting flights, but none of them were going to Winnipeg. Nolan didn't have long to find his new gate, but he wasn't ready to say goodbye when he saw the exit sign for Montreal.

Not for the first time, Nolan wished they didn't have to worry about who saw them. He didn't want to be a recognizable hockey player, saying goodbye to Canada's most famous athlete. He just wanted to be a guy, able to kiss his boyfriend, sad to be leaving him.

He didn't want to let his heart wish that someday things could be different.

Elias looked around and then gestured for Nolan to follow him. Nolan did without a second thought. Elias led them to a small alcove behind the edge of an airport restaurant. It wasn't totally isolated, but it was significantly more private than the main walkway had been.

Elias reached out and squeezed Nolan's bicep. "I wish I could kiss you," he said quietly.

For one reckless second, Nolan wanted to tell him to just do it then, fuck whoever was around, but he knew that wasn't the smart choice. So instead, he just felt his shoulders slump as he said, "Me too."

Elias did decide it was acceptable to wrap his arms around Nolan and pull him into a fierce hug. Nolan so badly wanted to bury his face in Elias's neck, kiss him there, and whisper all the things he wasn't ready to say.

"I'll see you soon, okay?" Elias said, voice low in Nolan's ear.

"Yes. Soon," Nolan agreed.

"Thank you for the last two weeks," Elias said, still holding onto him.

It took everything in Nolan to not let out a sob. He wanted to stay here forever with Elias. "No, thank *you*," Nolan said, pointedly ignoring the way his voice broke.

Elias pulled back and looked him in the eyes. It was so intense that Nolan had the urge to look away. "I will see you soon, baby, don't forget that."

How did Elias always know exactly what to say? Nolan nodded shakily and once again wished he could kiss Elias.

Elias gave his bicep one last squeeze before taking a step back. They slowly made their way to the fork where Elias would continue out into his

life in Montreal, and Nolan would go back to his life in Winnipeg.

As Elias rode the escalator down to baggage claim, they kept their eyes on each other the whole time. Nolan did not let the tears fall from his eyes. Not while Elias could still see him.

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Twenty-One

ELIAS

February 2026 · Montreal

The sun was just starting to set when Elias put the key in his front door. It felt both the same and different to be home. He'd been gone for longer than this before, and yet, it still felt like he was almost a different person when he stepped inside.

Before he was able to close the door, Moose was there to greet him. Moose didn't jump—Elias had made sure of that when he was a puppy. Elias was once again thankful for that fact: he wasn't sure he could have handled a sixty-five-pound dog jumping on him after a day full of international travel and saying goodbye to his boyfriend.

Moose wiggled his butt excitedly and his tail was wagging at top speed. Elias took off his coat and hung it up in the closet, tucking his boots under it. Only then did he sit down on the ground and hold his arms out for Moose to barrel into.

He was glad to have another heartbeat in the house when he got home. It always felt good to have someone so happy to see him. Moose stayed with Claire anytime he had a road trip, so it wasn't like he was alone when Elias was gone. Still, he always greeted Elias with the same enthusiasm as if it had been years—not days—since they had seen each other last.

"I missed you, too, bud," he told Moose as he buried his face into his neck. "Did Claire bring you home on her lunch break? I'm so glad she did. I didn't know if you would be here when I got home."

After several minutes, when Moose finally deemed his greeting satisfactory, he trotted off toward the living room. Elias groaned as he stood up, feeling a tad stiff from the long flight.

He took his time getting settled, taking a shower and unpacking. When Elias was younger, he'd learned that if he didn't unpack as soon as he got home, he'd leave it until it was time to pack for the next trip, creating even more work for himself. He'd been unpacking as soon as he got home for so long that it was second nature. He took out the pizza pin and smiled at it before he set it on his nightstand.

After about an hour, Elias was on his couch in his comfy clothes, scrolling through streaming services while dinner was on the way. He was so tired. His body knew it was home and the last two weeks were rapidly catching up with him. He needed to stay awake in order to beat the jet lag as much as he could.

Elias checked his phone, just in case Nolan had texted him and needed something. Elias wanted to be available in case something crazy happened, like Nolan's connecting flight got canceled and he was stranded in Montreal.

He decided on his favorite home renovation show. Just as his food was getting dropped off, he got a text from Nolan.

NOLAN
boarding :)
is it lame to say i miss u already?

For maybe the first time, it really sank in that they were apart. He'd known they were saying goodbye all afternoon, but seeing the text from Nolan made the distance feel real. He looked around his home—the one he'd carefully built into a place of peace—and, for the first time, understood why people wanted someone to share it with.

ELIAS
If it is, then I'm lame, too. I miss you.

NOLAN
well we did already know that about you…..

ELIAS
Hey!

Elias could picture the shit-eating grin that would spread across Nolan's face. He smiled to himself.

Moose decided that was the perfect moment to jump on the couch and drape his entire body on top of Elias. He scratched behind his ears, thankful for the distraction.



The Montreal Royals had a light skate and recovery day scheduled. Elias was excited to see his team again. Two of his teammates had played in the Olympics, representing Finland and the United States, but the rest of the roster had taken a rare mid-season vacation.

Elias pulled into the players' lot of the practice facility at the same time as Luc Greer. He was glad to have a few minutes with just the two of them before everyone else arrived.

Greer was one of the alternate captains and Elias's closest friend on the team. He started playing for the Royals a season before Elias, making him one of the few teammates who remembered what Elias was like before he wore the C.

"Welcome back, Olympian. Did you decide to grace the mere mortals with your presence?" Greer asked, voice even despite the glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

Elias chuckled. One thing about Greer was that he always managed to compliment and humble Elias at the same time.

"Man, I'm so tired. I just got in last night, and I didn't sleep well," Elias said.

Greer frowned. "No? I would've thought you'd sleep like a baby finally being back in your own bed?"

Elias shook his head. He didn't know how to explain that he'd had too much room, that the other side of his bed was too cold.

Instead, he shrugged. "I think my body is still running on the high of the games. The jet lag is also kicking my ass."

Greer nodded, like that made perfect sense. They reached the door and Elias grabbed it first, holding it open while Greer walked through. They kept chatting as they made their way toward the locker room.

"The boys watched all of your games," Greer said. He had two sons, ages five and eight. They loved Elias, and he loved them. They liked to give him a hard time, much like their dad, but Greer told him that they thought he was the coolest guy they knew. "We had to fight Aiden—he wanted to wear your jersey to school every game day."

Elias laughed, picturing a stubborn five-year-old insisting on wearing a Team Canada jersey every few days. Josh was a jokester, but Aiden had

inherited both his dad’s dry humor and his mom’s stubbornness. It made for some interesting arguments.

“I can get him more jerseys so Steph doesn’t have to wash it every day,” Elias offered.

Greer gave a long-suffering sigh. “We really do not need any more Mercer paraphernalia at my house.”

Elias huffed. “Don’t say it like that! You make it sound nefarious.”

Greer gave him a look. “It feels like that sometimes.”

They finally reached the locker room. Powell was already in there, unsurprisingly. It was easy to assume that the young players slacked off, but Pow was always one of the first guys there. Elias had a theory that it was mostly so he could get whatever gossip he wanted before too many people were around.

He looked up as the locker room door opened. “Captain Canada, you have returned!” he called out from his stall.

“Good to see you, bud,” Elias told him with a smile.

Greer spoke up as he went to his own stall. “No dramatic greeting for me?”

Pow gave an exaggerated frown. “Okay, one, I’m not dramatic. Don’t be rude.” Greer snorted. “And two, I literally saw you at Metro two days ago.”

Greer shrugged like that was an unimportant fact.

Pow started walking over with his arms already open for a hug. Elias rolled his eyes but stepped into the hug. Pow slapped him on the back a couple times. “Congrats on the gold, Cap,” Pow said, earnest as ever.

“Thanks, Pow. The team clicked well.”

Pow squeezed his shoulder. “And here I thought fame would change you. But nope, you’re still our favorite little Cap.”

Elias raised his eyebrows. “Who are you calling little? I’m both older and taller than you.”

Pow shrugged and walked backwards to his stall. “It’s vibes.”

The rest of the team slowly filtered in. Elias accepted everyone’s congratulations with a smile. When Blake Dowd and Antti Lind came in, Elias offered his own congratulations on their silver and bronze medals, respectively.

Dowd was Montreal’s starting goalie and Team USA’s backup goalie. He was observant and prone to saying things no one else saw coming, but he was a genuinely good guy. Elias knew he must’ve felt awful about losing

the gold, but it was still a major accomplishment to win silver. He trusted that Dowd knew Elias wasn't gloating.

The Olympians all had to see the trainers while the rest of the team went out to the ice for a light skate. Elias checked his phone before he put it up. He smiled when he saw he had a text from Nolan. His smile widened when he saw it was a selfie featuring Nolan curled up in bed with a small black kitten on the pillow next to him.

NOLAN

my face after realizing i let my phone die last night and had to plug it in this morning. at least wayne is here to keep me company

ELIAS

Who knew my biggest competition would be a cat?

Nolan replied immediately.

NOLAN

he's got nothin on you. he acts like i don't exist most of the time

ELIAS

…he's currently on your pillow though?

NOLAN

yes but only because i'm not acknowledging him

Elias grinned as he put his phone in his stall and started getting changed. He looked up to see Greer watching him with narrow eyes.

"Something to share with the class?"

Elias hummed. "Not just yet. I'll let you know," he told Greer, knowing he wouldn't push. As expected, he just nodded and let it go.

"Olympians, media availability," Elias heard. He took a deep breath and sat up straighter.

Since he was captain of the gold medal-winning team, it was no surprise that he was up first.

"Mercer, first, how's it feel to be back in Canada?"

Elias grinned. "Great. I missed our coffee. Italy has fine coffee, but I missed mine more than I expected."

The reporters chuckled. "Are you looking forward to your first game as a gold medalist?"

Elias nodded. "For sure, yeah. It'll be nice to be back on the ice with my team. You miss these guys when you're gone," he told them.

Another reporter asked, "You said you missed the coffee. Anything else specific you missed while you were gone that you're looking forward to?"

He knew the honest answer was that anything he'd missed while he was gone paled in comparison to what he missed now that he was home. But there was no way to explain that, so Elias gave a different answer. “My bed, obviously.” The reporters laughed again. Elias smiled. “I’m mostly looking forward to winning more games and hopefully bringing the Cup home to Montreal. It’d be nice to keep that momentum going.”

The reporters asked a couple more questions before they moved onto Dowd.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. By the time they were leaving, Elias realized he should probably at least get some groceries. Their next two games were at home, then they had a quick road trip to the West Coast. Right now, he had nothing to make at home, and honestly, the idea of cooking his own food for a change was definitely appealing.

He walked through the grocery store and picked out his standard items. He thought about inviting Claire and her husband over for dinner as a thank you for watching Moose while Elias had been gone. He sent a text to Claire and mentally added the ingredients he would need for the recipe.

Claire replied pretty immediately.

CLAIRE

Oh thank god. I do not wanna cook.

Elias gave the message a “ha-ha” reaction before making his way to the dairy section. He thought he might have heavy whipping cream, but he couldn’t be sure it wasn’t expired.

He passed by the creamer section. Without realizing it, his eyes found the hazelnut creamer Nolan loved. He caught himself with his hand halfway stretched out before realizing there wasn’t a reason to buy it. Not yet, anyway. Nolan probably wouldn’t be in Montreal until April. The thought made him unexpectedly sad as he pulled his hand back and went to grab the heavy whipping cream.

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Twenty-Two

NOLAN

February 2026 · Winnipeg

Nolan opened his fridge to reach for his creamer, then flipped open the lid and started pouring it into his coffee. Before the coffee was light enough, the carton sputtered empty. He looked inside the container as if sight alone could refill it. He groaned. This was not shaping up to be a great day.

He had fallen asleep texting Elias last night and forgotten to plug in his phone. Luckily, he woke up only about twenty minutes after his alarm would've gone off, so he wasn't running too late. His phone was charging on the kitchen counter now, mocking him and his lack of creamer.

He had also forgotten to move his clothes to the dryer last night. That was fine, honestly. They would still dry while he was at morning skate; he just would have to wait to pack for Vancouver when he got back.

Everything was just inconvenient enough to be annoying without causing any major issues.

And then, Tyler walked through the door holding a cup of to-go coffee like the angel he was. Nolan could have wept tears of joy.

Wayne was a traitor. He was not a fan of people on most days, but for some reason, he had decided he liked Tyler this morning. He walked up to Tyler and immediately began rubbing his little body against Tyler's leg.

Tyler handed him the coffee. "Thought you might want your favorite coffee as a treat for winning gold." He then bent down to run his fingers through Wayne's short, black hair.

"That's perfect because I'm actually out of fucking creamer," Nolan told him. He lifted the cup to his mouth and felt the instant joy that only a perfect cup of coffee could bring.

“Color me shocked,” Tyler said as he plopped down on the couch. Wayne followed him. Tyler knew this was a rare opportunity and he looked triumphant. “Jesper is still waking up, but we can all carpool to the rink if you want.”

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good, but I need to come right home after. I still have to pack.”

Tyler dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “We don’t leave until tonight. You have time. We’re not skipping lunch.”

Nolan knew better than to argue. Between Tyler’s general Tyler-ness and Jesper’s particular brand of Swedish stubbornness, Nolan knew it would be a lost cause. And he had missed his friends. Lunch wouldn’t be a bad idea.

A half hour later, they were all piling into Jesper’s SUV. Tyler didn’t have a car (“Why would I need one? Both of you have cars.”), and Jesper enjoyed driving much more than Nolan did. So, their usual routine was for Tyler and Nolan to take turns in the front seat.

Today was Nolan’s turn. He checked his phone again, hoping to find a text from Elias. He knew it was futile, though, since Elias was probably just wrapping up practice.

Jesper looked over as Nolan tapped his screen for a third time in as many minutes. “Waiting for a text from your boyfriend?” he asked, half joking and half not.

Nolan didn’t immediately deny it. Tyler, gremlin that he was, immediately sniffed out a secret. He popped up and leaned his head between their seats. “Nolan, why didn’t you deny it?”

Nolan felt himself blush. Oh, well. He decided it had to come out sometime, might as well be now. “You know…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “As a general rule, I try not to lie.”

“Nolan Patrick Hart!” Tyler shrieked.

Nolan turned around to make eye contact. “Why are you using my full government name?”

Tyler did not back down. “Why did *you* leave for the Olympics and come back with a boyfriend?!”

Nolan decided to just really lean into it. “You were the one who called him my boyfriend first. I didn’t want to make a liar out of you.”

Jesper changed lanes as he said, “You know he’s going to be insufferable about this, right?”

“Probably,” Nolan said at the same time Tyler said, “With good reason! I send him away for two weeks and he falls in love?!”

Jesper nodded like he agreed. Nolan couldn’t even argue. “I wasn’t planning on it! It just happened!”

Tyler blinked. “Wait. Who is it?! Is he an international player?”

Nolan braced himself, knowing he was unleashing something when he confirmed who it was. “I thought it was obvious! I literally said you called him my boyfriend. It’s Elias.”

Tyler shrieked again. Maybe Nolan should wear hearing protection in the future when he told him big things. “I thought you were being facetious!”

“Wow, that’s a big word for Tyler,” Jesper told him.

Tyler smacked Jesper on the arm but didn’t lean back. He kept looking at Nolan. “Wait, you're actually serious. You’re dating Elias Mercer? Your gay awakening Elias Mercer? Captain Canada Elias Mercer?!”

“Okay, maybe we shouldn’t say he’s my gay awakening.”

Tyler huffed. “Maybe we shouldn’t lie to ourselves.”

Jesper hummed from the driver's seat. “He’s got you there, Nol.”

“Fine, yes, that Elias Mercer. Listen, he’s older, hot, great at hockey, and kept looking at me like he wanted to eat me. What else was I supposed to do?” Nolan said, voice bordering on whiny.

“Don’t feel bad, that’s all it takes for Tyler, too,” Jesper chirped.

Tyler frowned from where he was still sticking his head over the center console. “Hey, we’re interrogating Nolan, not being mean to me.”

Jesper reached over and patted Tyler’s cheek without taking his eyes off the road. “Just being honest.”

Tyler ignored him and kept his focus on Nolan. “Okay, so you saw a hot old guy and decided to seduce him. Got it.”

Nolan held up his hand. “I said he’s old*er*, not old. And I didn’t exactly seduce him. I just wore a sheer shirt to dinner.”

Tyler snorted. “Dude, that’s seductive.”

Nolan crossed his arms. “I just wanted him to notice me.”

Tyler clapped and finally leaned back into his seat. “It worked, if he’s your boyfriend now.” Then he sat up again. “Wait, are you gonna tell your family? You’re seeing them tomorrow for the game, right?”

Nolan sighed. He was planning to get lunch with his mom, then both parents and his sisters would be at the game tomorrow night. Nolan always loved playing in Vancouver and getting to be home to see his family. There

was something special about playing in the city that raised you. And this time, he was returning home as part of the team that brought his country a gold medal. He was both excited and overwhelmed.

“I’m not sure yet, honestly. I might tell my mom. Probably not my dad though. I don’t need another lecture about focusing on hockey,” Nolan said truthfully.

Just then, Jesper turned into the Winnipeg practice facility. “We are not done talking about this. We will continue at lunch,” he told Nolan, leaving no room for arguments.

True to his word, Jesper started the line of questioning back up the second they sat down at their favorite bistro for lunch. Nolan answered the appropriate questions. It was fine to let Tyler wonder about a few things.

By the end of lunch, both Jesper and Tyler seemed to have gotten all the answers they needed. To Nolan’s slight disappointment, they changed the subject on the way home. He wanted to brag about his boyfriend, who could blame him?



Waking up in a hotel in his hometown always felt strange. He wondered if it would ever stop making him feel like someone pretending to be a tourist. Of course, Nolan knew that wasn’t the truth. He hadn’t lived full-time in Vancouver since he was sixteen, when he started playing junior hockey and staying with billet families. But it never stopped feeling like home.

He imagined how nice it would be to show Elias his hometown; not the tourist version, but the one he knew growing up. The one where he had his first kiss. He wanted to show him the arena he had seen Elias play for the first time, back when he was just a starstruck kid dreaming of making it to the big leagues. He never imagined he would know how soft his lips were or how it felt to wake up wrapped in his arms.

Throughout morning skate and film review, Nolan daydreamed about everything he wanted to show Elias. His mom had insisted on picking him up from the rink, leaving Nolan feeling like a little kid as he waited outside for her to pull up.

That didn’t stop the instant feeling of safety and comfort he felt seeing his mom’s minivan. A couple of his teammates chirped him about getting

picked up, but Nolan just flipped them off before he climbed into the passenger seat.

“Hey, Mom. Thanks for picking me up,” Nolan said as he buckled his seatbelt. He breathed in the warm scent that could only be Julia Hart: somewhere between vanilla, paper, and childhood memories.

His mom reached over and squeezed his knee. “Of course, baby. Anything for a few extra minutes with my favorite son.”

“I’m your only son,” he reminded her.

She winked. “And even if you weren’t, you would still be my favorite.”

Despite them having not discussed where they would go for lunch, his mom drove them to their favorite lunch spot downtown. It was one of the things they didn’t need to decide: if Nolan was playing in Vancouver, and he was getting lunch with his mom, they were going to Lacey’s.

They took a table near the back of the restaurant and ordered. It wasn’t until they were waiting for their food that his mom brought up the Olympics.

“I’m so proud of you, honey. You did such a great job and you represented Canada well,” she said warmly.

“Thanks, Mom. It helped to have such a good team to play with.”

She gave him a stern look. “Don’t forget that you are good enough to be part of that team.”

Nolan laughed. Where his dad always had a way for Nolan to improve, his mom always made sure to tell him he was already doing a good job. “I know that, Mom.”

“Now, did you have a good time? How was the food? Did you meet any cool athletes?” she asked, clearly having been waiting for this moment.

“Yeah, I had a great time. It was kinda crazy to see so many athletes I’ve only heard of just sitting around talking and eating. Celebrities really are just like us,” he said, as if he wasn’t a gold medalist himself.

She smiled at that. “Good, I’m glad to hear that. I know how hard you can be on yourself. You still deserve to have a good time.”

“Yeah, but working hard is what got me there, too,” he reminded her.

She hummed at that but didn’t argue. They chatted about the games, his teammates, and how his sisters were doing. She reminded him that they would all be at the game tonight. Just before she made the executive decision that they were sharing dessert, even though it was a game day, she

looked at Nolan with the thoughtful look that only moms ever seemed to perfect.

“You seem happy. Lighter, maybe,” she told him.

He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. “I am, actually. I met someone at the Olympics. He’s not out publicly, and it’s still really new, obviously, so I think I’m going to keep who he is to myself for now. But it’s really good.”

Julia smiled widely. “Is he nice to you? Is he handsome?”

Nolan laughed at his mom’s priorities. Of course handsomeness and kindness were of the same caliber to her. “Yes, to both. He’s so great, Mom, I can’t wait for you to meet him. And of course he’s handsome. Can you imagine me with someone ugly?”

Julia laughed. “No, not really. But sometimes people get cuter the more you know them!”

Nolan shook his head. “Trust me, he is good looking enough to start with.” He cleared his throat a little then. “Would you mind keeping this to yourself for now? I wanna tell Dad and the girls soon, but it’s still so new, and I don’t want to take any focus from the rest of the season,” Nolan told her.

“Of course, honey. I don’t have to tell them everything,” she said with another wink. Nolan grinned.

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.”

She reached over the table and grabbed his hands. “I love you too, sweet boy. I am so proud to be your mother. I just want you to be happy.” Nolan nodded and did not allow tears to form. “Now, what do you think of the strawberry shortcake?”

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Twenty-Three

NOLAN

February 2026 · Winnipeg Currents @ Vancouver Ports

Winning was never a bad feeling, but there was something extra sweet about winning the first game back after getting the gold medal. Having his family in the stands watching made it all the better.

Nolan rushed through his postgame media obligations and shower. His parents were letting his sisters stay up late to see him, and he wanted to make the most of every extra minute.

By the time he finally reached his family, it was pushing 10:30. His body insisted it was already well past midnight, but the second he spotted them waiting for him, he forgot how tired he was.

Ava and Sophia both stood in their Hart #21 jerseys. The sight made Nolan grin like a madman. Sophia always acted like she was too cool to publicly acknowledge that she liked him, but here she was in his jersey. Ava had all the same pride and none of the qualms just yet. His parents stood behind them, smiling at Nolan. He loved how proud they were of him.

It made him feel like a kid showing off a new trick, but in the best way possible.

Ava did not wait for Nolan to reach them. She ran toward him with a giant smile on her face. “Nolan!” she cried, jumping up before she even checked whether Nolan’s arms were open and ready for her.

He spun her around before putting her back on the ground. “Ava, did you grow up while I wasn’t looking? Are you already a grown-up? When did you get so tall?!” he asked, pretending to inspect her while raising an eyebrow at his mom.

Julia shrugged. “She had a bit of a growth spurt last month.”

He finally reached Sophia and pulled her into a bear hug. She, too, was getting taller. She stayed stiff for only a second before wrapping her arms around him. Then she squeezed him tightly, catching him by surprise.

“I’m so proud of you, Noles,” she whispered, voice on the edge of cracking.

Nolan felt tears sting in his eyes. He wanted to tell her he was so proud of her too—of the kid she was and the teenager she was becoming—but he knew that would be pushing it.

He had limited time with his family—maybe only thirty minutes—before the team flew out to Anaheim. They had a game there in a couple days, then they were heading to San Jose. Nolan couldn’t wait for the upcoming homestand. Between this and the Olympics, he’d been sleeping in his own bed far less often than he’d wanted to.

His dad stepped forward. He smiled, one of his genuinely pleased smiles, and pulled Nolan into a quick hug. He gave him a couple firm pats on the back, then stepped back. His voice was pleased when he said, “Hell of a tournament, son. Wish we could’ve been there to see it.”

Nolan smiled at his dad. “I know, Dad. But the girls couldn’t just miss school for two weeks.”

He led his family to the sofas reserved for visiting family. They all settled and, to no surprise, Ava sat next to him and curled up to his side.

Something in his chest loosened. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath waiting to see his family. But here they were, talking, laughing at stories the girls shared about school.

“Nolan, was Elias Mercer nice to you?” Ava asked, tone eager.

Nolan laughed. “Of course he was. He was so nice, and really cool. Maybe one day you can meet him,” he told her, reaching out to ruffle her hair.

“Really?!” she asked, awe and excitement in her voice. Her eyes were bright with the possibility.

Nolan realized then that that was something he wanted badly. For Elias to meet his family. Not just as Elias Mercer, but as his boyfriend. He hoped it would be soon.



It was only slightly warmer in San Jose, but that hardly mattered when the sting of losing was still fresh on Nolan's mind. Like so many games this season, this one had gone into overtime. They had been *right there*. Nolan had sent the puck to one of his teammates, but an Anaheim defender intercepted the pass and sent it back the other way. It had all happened too fast for Winnipeg to recover.

Nolan tried not to dwell on it as he leaned his head back against his seat on the plane. He was beyond ready to just be in his hotel in San Jose and get a night of mediocre sleep on pillows that always looked better than they felt.

When they finally got to the hotel, Nolan was pleased to find that he had his own room. It wasn't uncommon to still have a roommate for road trips, but Nolan wasn't going to complain.

He briefly wondered if Elias ever had to share a room these days. Probably not. Even at the Olympics he got his own room.

He flopped down on his bed and pulled out his phone to text Elias.

NOLAN

i really hate hotel beds without you in them

It was late, late enough that he certainly wasn't expecting a response. Especially given the three-hour time difference between the two of them.

Long after showering, lying in bed rereading old conversations with his boyfriend, he finally fell asleep. He was tired enough that he didn't dream.

The next morning, Nolan woke up to his phone ringing on the nightstand. He blindly reached over, hit the answer button, and held it up to his ear.

"Morning," he grumbled, but he was sure it came out significantly more slurred than he had meant it to.

"Good morning, sunshine!" Tyler cooed from the other side of the phone. "Let's go get breakfast before morning skate. Jesper's in, too," Tyler informed him, as if doing anything without Jesper was even a possibility.

Nolan rolled onto his back and groaned. He rubbed his hand down his face as he said, "I just have some time with the trainers this morning. But okay. Let's go get food. When?"

Tyler told him they would be there within half an hour. Nolan stretched and got up to get ready.

The rest of the day was fine. Breakfast was pretty good, they had fantastic sushi for lunch, and he got to talk to Elias for a few minutes. His dad had called to remind him to pay attention to San Jose’s power play, but that wasn’t out of the norm.

Elias had a home game today, and being captain, he had extra responsibilities to the team. It made for limited time for the two to talk.

Nolan always felt a little bummed after leaving his family. Especially with his sisters, seeing them in person always made it so obvious how much time was passing. He tried to tell himself that even if he hadn’t become a professional hockey player, he probably still would've been away from home. But that didn't always comfort him in the way he wanted it to.

He sent a text to his sisters to tell them how much he loved them before sending a good luck text to Elias before his game. Luckily, with the time difference, he would get to watch it without his teammates hounding him for missing team dinner.

Montreal was playing Washington. They were pretty evenly matched, but Nolan knew Montreal could win. He watched every period with the same intensity he would’ve watched a playoff game. Which was silly, really. He just missed Elias and wished he could see him.

They’d only been doing the long-distance thing for six days, and he was already over it.

It felt like Nolan was counting down the days until they played each other in April. The fact that the game was at the end of the season felt a little miraculous in itself. Nolan had pored over their schedules the other day, but it didn’t look like any time would work before then. They were always missing each other by a day or finding themselves on opposite sides of the continent.

Nolan was drawn out of his thoughts by the Royals scoring a goal. It was enough for them to be leading by two with less than five minutes in regulation. Nolan didn’t want to get his hopes up—he’d seen crazier things—but he was feeling good.

Elias got a goal with just over a minute left on the clock, and Nolan jumped up and cheered as if he had been on the bench rather than in his hotel room. He immediately pulled out his phone.

NOLAN

beautiful shot babe. wish i was there to kiss you

It wasn’t until almost an hour later that Nolan got a response. He flipped his phone over at dinner to check it.

ELIAS

Me too, baby.

Nolan smiled despite himself as he typed out a reply.

They kept up with the conversation through the rest of the evening until Elias got ready for bed. His team was flying out for a quick California road trip in the afternoon, and he still needed to pack, so Nolan let him get some rest.

The next day, Nolan dragged himself back to his hotel room after a light skate. Sunday games always seemed to start later, even though Nolan knew that wasn’t actually true. Somehow Sundays always felt like he had lived three days before puck drop.

He tapped his phone screen for the sixth time in ten minutes, but there still wasn’t a reply from Elias. It bummed Nolan out a little, because he knew it would be hard to text as the day went on. He sighed heavily as he lay down on the bed.

His eyes were just slipping closed about ten minutes later when he heard a knock at the door. He ignored it, but then it came again. He sighed. “No housekeeping,” he called out. But they knocked again.

Nolan flung the blanket off of him and hoped it wasn’t Tyler at the door. He should know better.

He didn’t check the peephole before opening the door. He had to blink a few times when he saw who was there.

“Told you I wasn’t waiting for April,” Elias said with a smirk.

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Twenty-Four

ELIAS

March 1, 2026 · San Jose

Over the last month, Elias had gotten familiar with this particular 6’2” man being in his arms. Usually, though, he wasn’t launching himself at Elias, barely choking back a sob.

He caught his boyfriend in his arms and walked them into the hotel room. He kept his arms wrapped around Nolan as he rested his cheek on Nolan’s head and quietly asked, “Miss me?”

“Are you really here? Or am I dreaming?” Nolan asked, face still tucked in Elias’s chest.

Elias pressed a kiss to his hair. “Not dreaming. But would I tell you even if you are?”

Nolan pulled back and cocked his head slightly. “Maybe? Weird things happen in dreams.”

Elias laughed. He had known he missed Nolan, of course—that’s why he was here, after all—but hearing Nolan make one of his little comments made something tighten in his chest.

Nolan’s eyes softened when Elias laughed. Elias decided it had been long enough and leaned forward to capture his lips in a kiss. The kiss was more urgent than he'd intended. It was as if the moment their lips met, all the emotions of being apart flooded into the kiss.

God, it hadn’t even been a full week yet. Elias was not looking forward to what the rest of the season would be like.

Nolan moaned into the kiss. Elias had missed hearing that sound. He had missed *feeling* Nolan make that sound. They stood there for a couple minutes, content to kiss and hold each other.

Finally, Nolan pulled back. “What are you doing here? *How* are you here?”

Elias wiggled his eyebrows. “The rest of the team is flying in tonight, because our next game is in San Jose. I just got permission to fly in earlier so I could spend time with you.”

Any lingering surprise Nolan had disappeared. “For someone who claims to be out of practice being a boyfriend, you’re doing pretty damn good so far.”

Elias smiled, pleased with himself. “I’m trying my best.”

Nolan turned and looked at the bed. “I was about to nap, but we can do something else if you want. Are you hungry? We can go eat.”

Elias shook his head. “No, babe, I ate already. Let’s nap. I just wanted time with you. I don’t care how we spend it.”

Nolan moved to the bed first, already in a t-shirt and boxer briefs. Elias made quick work of matching him. Soon, they were in bed together with their bodies pressed against each other. Both men fell asleep quickly, and Elias couldn’t help but notice that it was the best sleep he’d had in a week.

Elias woke up sometime around two in the afternoon. He panicked for just a second, feeling like it was early evening, before he remembered he was on the West Coast. In the couple seconds it took for him to get his bearings, he settled further into Nolan.

He couldn’t believe that he forgot he was in bed with Nolan even for a second.

As if he could sense the shift in Elias, Nolan woke up only a few seconds later. He stretched and then rolled over so they were lying face to face.

“Hi, baby,” Nolan said.

Elias tried to recall if Nolan had ever called him baby before. He didn’t think he had. And despite himself, Elias liked the way it sounded—especially when paired with Nolan’s sleepy voice.

Elias leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to Nolan’s lips. “When do you need to be at the rink?”

Nolan took a deep breath. “Around four. I probably need to eat something beforehand.”

“Wanna go somewhere?” Elias asked, reaching his hand up to stroke Nolan’s cheek.

Nolan leaned into it. Elias suddenly had the thought that if Nolan were a cat, he would be purring. “Okay, but what if we don’t?” Nolan asked. “I just

wanna be greedy and keep you to myself for a little longer."

"Whatever you want. I'm yours until the game," Elias told him.

Nolan narrowed his eyes in a teasing way. "But hopefully after too?" he asked.

Elias smiled. "You know what I mean." Nolan grinned at that. "The restaurant in this hotel is great. We can just order room service if you want."

It didn't take them long to figure out what they each wanted to order. They turned on a matinee game while they waited for their food.

They finished their food quickly and Nolan got up to shower before his game. Elias stayed on the bed while he waited and scrolled on his phone.

Elias looked up when the bathroom door opened. Nolan was standing in his towel, the bathroom light behind him creating a halo effect around him. His hair was still wet and there were a couple of spare drops of water on his chest.

Elias felt his mouth water at the sight.

"So," Nolan said, as he walked closer to the bed. "I was thinking. We have some extra time…" he trailed off, pointedly looking Elias up and down. His tongue darted out to lick his lips, and Elias tracked the movement.

Nolan noticed and grinned. "I have a game in a couple hours, so I probably shouldn't let you fuck me. But I've got other ideas."

Elias propped himself up on his elbows and watched with greedy eyes as Nolan let the towel fall. Nolan was hard already, and Elias desperately wanted to get his mouth on him.

Nolan was clearly not in the mood to wait because he crossed the room at high speed to climb on top of Elias. He straddled Elias and ground against him. Nolan leaned down and kissed him hungrily.

Elias's cock was already hard at the sight of Nolan, but the movement had him moaning. Even through the boxer briefs he still had on, the friction was divine.

"You think you can just show up at my hotel," Nolan started, kissing the stubble along Elias's jaw. He bit at the skin there. "Looking like that"— another nip— "and expect me not to jump you? To feel all of you against me?"

Usually, it was Elias leading and Nolan was happy to let him. Nolan taking charge like this was new for them, but he found he didn't mind it at all. It was hot to see Nolan being a little bossy.

Elias took the moment to push up against Nolan. The action caused Nolan to pull back and moan. Elias leaned forward and bit Nolan's collarbone. "And you think that wasn't part of the reason I came here anyway?"

Nolan reached down and finally touched Elias's dick. Both of them moaned. "Fuck," Nolan breathed. "I missed this."

"Me too." Elias kissed him. He had missed this specifically, but he had also just missed being close to Nolan.

Nolan pulled back and scooted down the bed. He grabbed the edge of Elias's shirt and pulled it off, then did the same with his boxer briefs. His dick stood up, already leaking at the tip. Elias watched as Nolan's pupils grew.

Nolan licked his lips and bent down to do the same to Elias's cock. Nolan tongued the slit and wrapped his hands around the base.

The roughness of Nolan's fingers sent a shiver through Elias. He flattened his tongue and dragged it from base to tip. Elias reached down and tangled his fingers through Nolan's hair as he finally wrapped his lips around it.

Elias gave a slight tug and Nolan moaned. "That's so good, baby," he told him. Nolan sucked harder and moved his hand so he could swallow the whole length.

Elias bucked up without meaning to. Nolan looked up and wiggled his eyebrows at him. Elias did it again as an experiment and Nolan gripped his thigh. Okay, so he liked that. Noted.

"Fuck, you are so good at this," he told Nolan.

It only took a couple minutes before Elias felt the pressure low in his stomach. He gave a tug on Nolan's hair. "I'm close," he warned him.

Nolan did not let up. In fact, he redoubled his efforts. With a final thrust, Elias came into the heat of Nolan's mouth. Nolan sucked a little softer and swallowed every drop.

When he was finally done, Nolan pulled back and his hand flew to his own cock. Nolan barely needed another touch before he came, too, spilling across Elias's stomach.

Elias loved the way Nolan's face tightened with pleasure.

He reached down and dragged his finger through the cum still warm on his stomach. He kept eye contact with Nolan as he brought it to his mouth and sucked on his finger.

“Fuck.” Nolan’s voice was wrecked. “That was so fucking hot.”

Elias grinned. Nolan lay back on the bed. “Give me a second and I’ll get up to get a towel,” he said.

Elias leaned over and pressed a kiss to his lips. Nolan smiled, his expression a bit sex-drunk. Elias really was so fond of him. He got up and walked to the bathroom that was still steamy from Nolan’s shower. He waited for the water to warm before dampening the cloth.

Nolan smiled as Elias cleaned them both. Elias tossed the cloth toward the bathroom and lay down beside him. Nolan immediately scooted closer and cuddled into his chest.

After a few minutes, Nolan seemed to have caught his breath. “I need to start getting ready soon,” he told Elias.

Elias pulled him tighter. “I know. But just give me a few more minutes to hold you.”

Nolan kissed his shoulder and made a noise of agreement.

In a few hours, Nolan would play the game against San Jose, Elias’s team would fly in, and then Elias would spend a few days playing the teams of California.

For now, though, they lay in bed, both naked, and just existed as boyfriends instead of hockey players.

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Twenty-Five

NOLAN

March 2026 · Winnipeg

Nolan was greeted by a very vocal, very opinionated kitten when he opened his door. Wayne had only spent approximately five months as a pet, but he had settled into the role quite nicely. Right now, he appeared to be complaining about his lack of wet food—never mind the full bowl of dry food on the counter.

Nolan reached down to pet him on his way to the kitchen, but Wayne slinked out of the way.

Nolan huffed. “You know, if I hadn’t brought you into this warm apartment, you would still be following me in the garage and hiding under cars to stay warm.”

Wayne blinked. He did not seem impressed.

Nolan opened a can of food and put it on the counter next to Wayne’s water fountain. Wayne meowed in what Nolan decided was a thank you, but was probably more like “finally.”

Nolan took out his phone and snapped a picture of Wayne. He typed out a message to send to Elias.

NOLAN

how can I care for another being and it still looks at me like this

Elias replied quickly.

ELIAS

I’m not sure I can give you advice on this one. If I tell Moose off, he gets upset then comes to me for comfort.

NOLAN

i too would want you to comfort me after you tell me off

ELIAS

…sometimes it’s a little alarming how similar you are to my dog.

Nolan scrolled through his phone until he found a picture of himself at around ten years old with the old dog Snapchat filter. He sent it to Elias.

ELIAS

I could legally drink in the United States when this filter came out. Why do you look like a newborn baby?

NOLAN

WELL…I WAS TEN YEARS OLD SO

ELIAS

Jesus you have to stop saying things like that.

Nolan grinned as he flopped down on his bed. Wayne had followed him into his room, but continued looking annoyed by Nolan’s existence.

He had been home for a few days now, but Wayne was equally offended whether he had been on a two-week road trip or an hour-long trip to the grocery store. This had just been a morning skate, barely long enough for him to have been bothered.

Last night, they played the Tampa Bay Herons. The Herons had been a great team this year, but the Currents had fought tooth and nail for the overtime win. Winnipeg didn’t have a game tonight, but Montreal was playing in Anaheim, so Jesper and Tyler were coming over to help Nolan cheer on his boyfriend.

They had also conned Nolan into cooking dinner. There weren’t many things Nolan cooked well, but he made a mean spaghetti with low-carb noodles. It was one of Tyler’s favorites and he loved whining until Nolan gave in and made it.

Jesper, as always, was content to go along with whatever nonsense Tyler had planned.

Jesper had also decided to bring beer for everyone, so that was a bonus.

Just as the noodles started to boil, right before puck drop, Tyler and Jesper let themselves into Nolan’s apartment. Tyler immediately commented on how good it smelled, which just meant he could smell the garlic.

When Nolan first got his apartment, he had hoped it would be filled with people as often as possible. Between growing up with his little sisters and living with billet families that always seemed to have kids, he had been a little nervous about a too-quiet apartment.

Having Tyler and Jesper in the same complex certainly helped. He'd also bought an extra-comfortable, oversized sectional to make the place more inviting. The extra space didn’t stop Tyler from taking up as much of it as he could.

From the kitchen, Nolan heard Jesper grumble at Tyler to move over, followed by Tyler’s squeal when Jesper pinched him for refusing. But when Nolan made his way to the living room, Tyler was curled up in one corner pouting while Jesper watched the pre-game broadcast completely unbothered.

“You know,” Tyler said when Nolan took his normal spot on the couch, “you’re really lucky your boyfriend plays for a different conference than us.”

Nolan looked over, amused. “Oh, yeah?”

Tyler nodded seriously. “It’s the only reason I feel comfortable cheering for him right now.”

Jesper turned to look at Tyler. “That’s the only reason? Not because he’s Elias Mercer?”

Tyler held up his hands. “We’re not talking about Elias Mercer right now. We’re talking about Elias, Nolan’s boyfriend.”

Jesper huffed. “Nolan’s boyfriend Elias *is* Elias Mercer.”

“It is not the same,” Tyler insisted.

Jesper looked to Nolan for backup. Nolan, however, just shrugged. “I kinda agree with him.”

Tyler’s grin was magnificent. “Ha! I’m right!”

Nolan groaned. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Tyler shook his head. “Nope, too late, you can’t take it back now.”

The opening faceoff put an end to the conversation for now. Elias bent down in front of the Anaheim center and, to no one's surprise, won.

Montreal had been on fire this season and it had only gotten better after the Olympic break. They were almost definitely making it to the playoffs this year. Nolan grinned at the thought. He was proud of how hard his boyfriend worked.

It was also pretty hot watching him play, of course.

The Royals opened up the scoring and kept the lead for the whole first period. By the third period, they still had the lead, sitting at 5—1. Anaheim managed to get one back early in the period, but Elias scored the final goal with twenty-three seconds left on the clock, ending the game at 6—2.

Nolan immediately took out his phone.

NOLAN

have i told you that you look so fucking hot winning games

“Can you wait to sext your boyfriend when we’re not in the room?” Jesper asked from his side of the couch.

Nolan winked at him. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Tyler stood up and stretched dramatically. “Well, being this good looking doesn’t come cheap. I should go get my beauty rest.”

Jesper stood up too and narrowed his eyes at Tyler. “I don’t think there’s enough sleep in the world to help you.” Tyler opened his mouth to protest, but Jesper spoke before he could. “Nolan cooked. That means it’s our job to clean. It won’t take too long with both of us.”

Tyler groaned but didn’t argue. Jesper was right—the kitchen was clean in less than ten minutes.

It was nearing midnight—a perk of West Coast games. Tyler and Jesper headed home, leaving Nolan alone with Wayne and the quiet apartment. He was exhausted, but he knew it’d probably be a little while before Elias was available to talk. Waiting up for him felt worth it. His nap tomorrow would just have to put in the overtime.

He scrolled through social media in an attempt to keep himself awake. The official Montreal Royals account had posted a clip of the goal Elias scored. Nolan grinned. He really was so proud of his boyfriend. He commented on the post **lfg!!!** with a goat emoji.

Nolan’s eyes were heavy when he finally felt his phone vibrating from an incoming FaceTime call. He answered immediately.

“Hi,” he said, not bothering to sit up from where he was lying in bed.

Elias gave him a fond smile. “While I’m glad to see your face, you should be asleep, Nol. It’s late for you.”

Nolan smiled back. “Sleep can wait,” he said.

“*I* can wait,” Elias argued.

Nolan furrowed his eyebrows. “Well, I couldn’t.”

“Fair enough.” Then he took a deep breath and leaned back. It was only then that Nolan realized Elias was in a hallway in the arena. His hair was still wet from his shower. He looked tired. “I’m about to have to get on a plane, but I wanted to run an idea by you.”

Nolan nodded and waited for Elias to continue.

“Okay, next week, I have a couple days between games. One of our days without games overlaps. I was thinking I could fly out to you for a night. It wouldn’t be long—probably less than twenty-four hours. But…I still want it. What do you think?”

Nolan sat up and pulled up the team schedule on his phone. “Wait. Do you mean the 13th?”

Elias nodded. Nolan continued, “Okay, I have a game on the 12th. And it’s a lot of flying for you in a short amount of time.” Nolan switched to the schedule he had downloaded for the Royals. “You’ll be in Ottawa right before that, then back to Montreal. Are you sure you wanna give up time at home to come over here?”

“Home will be there next week. I can be in Winnipeg by 3:30 on Thursday afternoon,” Elias said, as the sounds of his background got louder. He looked off-camera and nodded at someone.

Nolan wanted to ask Elias if he was sure again, but honestly, he was so excited at the idea of seeing his boyfriend that he didn’t want to jinx it. “Okay, babe. Go catch up with your team. Text me when you land in Montreal, even if I’m asleep. I’ll buy your flight for next week.”

Elias smirked. “It’s already purchased.”

Nolan laughed. “Oh, you just assumed I would say yes?”

Elias’s smirk softened into a smile. “I assumed you missed me like I miss you.”

Fuck, why did he suddenly feel like crying?

Someone called out to Elias offscreen. He looked back at Nolan with regret in his eyes. Nolan knew the feeling.

“Go, babe.” Nolan jerked his chin as if he could see the people waiting for Elias on the other side of the screen.

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell you when I land,” Elias told him. “Bye, baby.”

“Bye, Eli,” Nolan said.

Right as the call ended, Wayne meowed next to him on the bed. Nolan looked over at him and huffed a not-at-all-watery laugh.

“Yeah, I know,” Nolan said to both his kitten and the black screen.

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Twenty-Six

ELIAS

March 12, 2026 · Winnipeg

Elias wasn’t sure why he felt so nervous about knocking on Nolan’s front door.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He had a pretty good feeling he knew why he was nervous. He hadn’t been to a boyfriend's house in over half a decade. Sure, he’d gone home with guys to their places for hookups, but that was not what this was.

Nolan had tried to insist on picking Elias up from the airport, but Elias had told him to eat lunch and rest before his game tonight. Elias knew they would only get an hour at most before Nolan had to head to the rink, so he wanted to make the most of it.

He raised his hand to knock on Nolan’s apartment door. He’d only knocked once when the door opened to reveal a very pleased-looking Nolan.

His expression froze when he looked at Elias. “Holy shit.” Nolan looked him up and down. “How have I never seen you in a ball cap and hoodie before?”

Elias gave him an amused smile. “Hi to you, too.”

Nolan reached out and pulled him into the apartment. “Seriously, you look like sex right now.”

Elias laughed as he toed off his shoes, pleased to see the shoe rack by Nolan’s door. “I’ve literally been on a plane for around two hours and I had a skate this morning. I’m not sure if that’s entirely true.”

Nolan shoved Elias against the door and pressed their bodies together. “No, babe. I don’t think you understand how lickable you look right now.”

Elias loved when Nolan manhandled him. He loved that Nolan was strong enough to do so, and without straining himself. He noticed that Nolan's eyes flicked down to his lips.

Elias pushed his crotch up against Nolan's. "So, what's stopping you then?" he challenged in a low voice.

That was all the permission Nolan needed. He pressed back against him, and Elias could already feel him getting hard. Nolan pressed their mouths together.

They barely pulled away to move to the sofa where Nolan pushed Elias down and straddled his lap.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes later when they were both lying against the back of the couch, breathing hard in their post-orgasm haze.

"I'm so glad you're here," Nolan said breathlessly, reaching over to squeeze Elias's hand.

Elias brought their hands up to his mouth and pressed a light kiss to Nolan's knuckles. "Me too, baby."

Nolan smiled again. They lay there for a couple more minutes before Nolan pulled Elias up to give him an apartment tour.

Elias hadn't expected Nolan to be messy, necessarily, but he'd seen enough of his younger teammates' apartments over the years that he wouldn't have been surprised by a little clutter. He hadn't expected much in the way of decorations, either.

He was wrong on both accounts.

Nolan's apartment was not only very well kept, but it was also styled in a way that looked effortlessly cozy. Every corner reflected his personality. There were family pictures covering the walls, a few trophies from Nolan's life, and various little knickknacks and plants all over. There was also a large cat tree next to the window, which Nolan had explained was because "Wayne likes to watch the birds on the balcony."

Elias had thought he knew what to expect in his boyfriend's home. The reality was so much better. It felt so undeniably like Nolan.

All too quickly, it was time for Nolan to head to his game. He came out of his room in a perfectly tailored game day suit. It was a warm brown that perfectly matched Winnipeg's color scheme. Elias would have thought the brown suit would bring out the brown in Nolan's hazel eyes, but instead the green and gold seemed brighter than ever.

Nolan held his arms out and did a little twirl. He looked at Elias like he was expecting him to laugh at his antics.

Elias couldn't laugh, though. He was mesmerized.

He'd seen pictures of Nolan in suits before, had probably even crossed paths with him at various NHL events, but this was the first time he was seeing him in a suit while being in a relationship with him.

"You look beautiful," he told him, because really, there was no other word for it. "How did I get so lucky?"

Nolan gasped quietly. "You can't say things like that before I have to leave," he whispered.

Elias stood up to cross the room and kiss him.

Just as their lips touched, a knock on the door interrupted them.

Nolan rested his head on Elias's shoulder and groaned. "Ugh, I told them I would meet them downstairs."

"Who?" Elias asked.

He didn't have to wait for an answer because he heard a key in the lock. Then the door opened and in walked Tyler Cates and Jesper Markstrom.

"You owe me twenty bucks," Jesper said in lieu of a greeting.

Tyler let out a whine. "Ugh, why couldn't you guys be naked?!"

Elias laughed. "That's what you were hoping to walk in on?"

Tyler looked at Elias like he was crazy. "Of course. Do you know how hot both of you are?"

Nolan groaned. "Can't you ever be normal? Why is this the way you choose to meet my boyfriend?"

Tyler shrugged. Jesper gave Nolan a flat look. "You cannot tell me you expected Tyler to behave normally."

Tyler shoved Jesper. "This is my normal."

Jesper gave a long-suffering sigh. "Unfortunately."

Elias laughed again. He had known the three men were close, but it was different to see them being so natural with each other. It was like they all knew exactly where they belonged in each other's lives.

Nolan sighed and finally detached himself from Elias. He gestured toward Elias. "Tyler, Jesper, I would like you to meet my boyfriend, Elias."

There was a sudden tightness in Elias's chest. He was mildly surprised at how easy it was for Nolan to casually introduce him as his boyfriend.

"Hi," Elias said, stepping forward to hold out his hand to shake Tyler and Jesper's.

Tyler looked very amused. “Hi, unfortunately I am a hugger.” That was all the warning Elias got before he was wrapped in Tyler’s embrace.

Tyler leaned into his ear and said, “I grew up hunting with my dad. I’ll skin you like a deer if you hurt him.”

Elias was so shocked that he just nodded. When Tyler released him and pulled back, he was smiling like he hadn’t just threatened Elias’s life.

Jesper held his hand out to shake Elias’s then. “You’re a generational player,” he told him. Before Elias could say thank you, Jesper continued, “Ignore Tyler. But also, I will help him. So.”

“Noted,” Elias said, grateful that his boyfriend had people in his life who were so fiercely protective of him.

Nolan clapped his hands together loudly, successfully drawing the attention back to him. “Okay, we need to go. I’ll be back later. My car key is in the wooden bowl by the door, so if you need to go get food or anything, feel free. Also, Wayne will start crying around 6:30. If you want to feed him, you absolutely can, or you can just wait for me to get home.” He stopped to smile. “Wow, I get to come home to you after a game,” he laughed softly, “I love that.”

Elias smiled back and kissed him goodbye. He had plans of watching the game on his boyfriend’s ridiculously comfortable couch, ordering food delivery, and waiting for Nolan to get home. He would also be feeding Wayne, of course—it would be incredibly rude to eat in front of a hungry cat when he was perfectly capable of feeding him.

“Bye, baby. I’ll be here when you get back. Go win the game,” Elias told him.

Tyler piped up from the doorway, “We will be playing, too, you know!”

Elias grinned and held Nolan’s eye contact. “My statement stands.”

Tyler gave an offended huff and Nolan laughed. Elias really loved making Nolan laugh.

Within a few minutes, the apartment went from chaotic energy to just Elias and Wayne. Wayne was sitting on his cat tree, watching Elias with suspicious eyes.

Elias smiled. “Has your dad ever told you about the guy you’re named after?” Wayne meowed. Elias took that as encouragement to continue. “Great. His name is Wayne Gretzky, and he’s the greatest hockey player of all time.”

Luckily, Elias was very familiar with all things involving Gretzky, so he took his time explaining everything to Wayne.

Unfortunately, Wayne was not impressed with his namesake's life story, so he did hop down sometime around Gretzky's rookie year. Elias shrugged. There would be more time to educate him later.

Even though Wayne was not the best hockey historian, he was great at time management. True to Nolan's words, he started crying at 6:30 on the dot.

The rest of his evening went according to plan. Winnipeg got the win in regulation, and Nolan had already texted that he was headed home. Elias was excited to see him after a win.

He was even more excited to fall asleep and wake up with him.

Nolan was grinning ear to ear when he walked through the door. Elias stood up and pulled Nolan into him, squeezing his waist. "Great game, babe."

Nolan smiled at Elias before leaning in to kiss him, soft and sweet. Elias responded immediately of course, not at all embarrassed by good hockey turning him on. He rolled his hips against Nolan, but before they could escalate things further, Nolan's phone rang.

Groaning, Nolan pulled back and held up his phone. Elias saw that it was his dad calling. He shut his eyes tightly for half a second before he hit answer.

"Hey, Dad," Nolan said, voice cheerful in a way that Elias immediately noticed as forced.

He could hear Robert's response, but not clearly enough to make out what he was saying. After a few seconds, Nolan said, "We won, though."

Elias bit his tongue and breathed out perhaps too sharply from his nose. Robert kept talking. Then, Nolan said, "Okay, I'll work on it at practice."

Elias rubbed his thumb against Nolan's hip as Nolan stood quietly listening to his dad's criticism. "I still got a goal, Dad," Nolan said, sounding quiet and unsure of himself.

Damn. Nolan had played a great game. Winnipeg had won. Nolan had scored a goal and gotten two separate assists. Couldn't his dad let him have one good evening?

After a couple more minutes of Nolan agreeing with whatever his dad was saying, the call finally ended. As soon as he hung up, Nolan tossed his phone onto the couch and sighed deeply. He then turned to Elias.

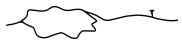
“Sorry,” he said, sounding much less excited than he had been a few minutes before.

“No, baby. Don’t apologize. You had a fantastic fucking game. Three points! You’re in the top ten for the whole league. I’m so proud of you,” Elias told him, continuing to rub his thumb against Nolan’s hip.

Nolan smiled softly. “Thank you.”

Elias decided to take Nolan’s mind off his father’s words. He bent down and placed a kiss to the hollow of Nolan’s throat. “Let me show you how proud of you I am,” he said, mouth still against Nolan’s skin.

If the moan Nolan let out was anything to go by, Nolan was very willing to go along with whatever Elias had planned.



Elias woke up to the soft sunlight hitting Nolan’s eyelashes on the pillow next to him, well rested and completely relaxed.

Nolan was less cuddly in his own bed, apparently. He lay on his back, limbs spread out on the king-sized bed. His left foot was crossed over and pressed against Elias. He guessed this was his version of cuddling from the comfort of his own home.

Elias glanced over at the clock then nudged Nolan when he saw the time. “Do you need to go to the rink?”

Nolan did not open his eyes. “Optional.”

Elias could count on both hands the number of times he had opted out of optional skate in his professional career. The captain in him wanted to encourage Nolan to go, but the boyfriend in him was happy for the extra time.

They spent the morning lazing around. They brushed their teeth side by side, drank coffee together, and cuddled on the couch.

It reminded Elias of being back at the Olympics, but in a more permanent way. Where the Olympics felt like a bubble, this felt like the first look at something bigger. Something better.

He'd never thought his life was missing anything until Nolan showed him how much more there could be.

Elias had a flight home scheduled for late evening, and it felt like every minute was ticking closer to another goodbye. He was trying not to think

about it, but he knew they wouldn’t get to see each other for almost a month. It cast a shadow over all the good moments.

Nolan drove Elias to the airport when it was time to catch his flight. It was the reverse of their Montreal airport goodbye. This time, Nolan stood in his sunglasses and cap, watching Elias go through security.

Each goodbye was getting harder than the last.

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Twenty-Seven

NOLAN

March 2026 · Winnipeg Currents vs. Colorado Peaks

Nolan shouldn’t have been surprised by how much he missed Elias, even though it had only been a day. He hadn’t even had Elias in his home for a full twenty-four hours, and he was already desperate for more. In the last twelve hours, he’d spent an abundance of time daydreaming about what it would feel like to come home to Elias every day, after every practice, after every game.

Which was crazy, right? They’d only been together for a month. Imagining things like a future together was probably way too fast.

Perhaps unhelpfully, his brain reminded him that his captain, Caleb Morgan, had met and married his wife within a ten-month period—and that was four years ago. Maybe some people just moved quickly.

He was brought back to the present when Matt Barrow tapped his stick against Nolan’s skate.

“You good, kid?” he asked.

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, sorry, just thinking.”

Matt tilted his head slightly and gave Nolan an assessing look. “You were as happy as a clam the other day, and now you look like someone kicked your puppy. What happened?”

Nolan knew he could be honest with Matt. Having lived with him and his family during his rookie year, he knew Matt was open-minded and accepting. “My boyfriend was in town, but he had to go home. So, I guess I’m just a little bummed.”

Matt furrowed his eyebrows. “Your boyfriend was here and you didn’t bring him over for supper?”

Nolan blushed. “He was only here for the night. And it’s new, so…” he trailed off.

Matt hummed. “Hm. Well, bring him over whenever you’re both ready. And you come over soon, anyway. Tess and the kids miss ya.”

Nolan’s heart squeezed. He missed them, too. Matt’s two kids were only a handful of years younger than Nolan. The Barrows had welcomed him in with open arms and immediately made him feel like a permanent fixture in their home.

Sometimes, when he was missing his own family in Vancouver, he forgot he had another one here in Winnipeg. He definitely needed to go see them soon.

Through the rest of the day, Nolan tried his best to focus on the game. Colorado was playing them at home, and Jordan Hunt had texted him asking if he wanted to get coffee before the game. Unfortunately, their schedules hadn't lined up well enough for them to meet.

It was a shame, really. Nolan had known Jordan prior to the Olympics, but they had really hit it off during the games. Jordan was easy to be around, and Nolan thought his constant good mood might help pull him out of his funk.

During the game, Jordan pinned Nolan against the boards after he tried to move the puck. He smiled and told him, “That’s for standing me up.”

Nolan laughed as he shot the puck toward Tyler. “Jordan, neither of us had time!”

Jordan just shrugged and turned around to chase the puck.

Colorado won, 3-2. It was fine. You couldn’t win them all. Nolan was pissed at himself for not playing better, but a voice that sounded suspiciously like Elias’s tried to remind him this was a team sport.

Luck was not on Nolan’s side, because it was his turn for media availability that night. After a couple of questions about the game, one reporter asked, “Nolan, the Royals won their game tonight. The other day you commented on a post about Elias Mercer’s game-winning goal, calling him the GOAT. Have you stayed in touch after the Olympics?”

Despite his sour mood, he smiled at that. “Yeah, we still talk. That was a beautiful goal. It was great playing with him at the Olympics, too.”

The reporter moved on, and soon enough, Nolan was back in his apartment, mentally going over game strategies for tomorrow as he got ready for bed.

Montreal’s game had ended right around the start of Winnipeg’s third period, and they had won. It wasn’t shocking—Montreal was having a steady season and the San Jose Orcas were still rebuilding. Nolan tried not to be bitter that his team had lost while his boyfriend’s had won.

They both had games the next night, so Nolan knew he wouldn’t get to talk to Elias much before bed. They both needed their rest. Even so, he pulled out his phone to text him as he was crawling into bed.

NOLAN

lowkey why can’t the world cut me some slack. i already have to go to sleep without you. why did my team lose too

ELIAS

I know. I’m sorry. Do you want reassurance or just support? I can do either.

Nolan smiled despite the ache in his chest.

NOLAN

honestly i just want you

ELIAS

Me too. I wish I was there.

They texted a bit more before they said their goodnights. Just as he was falling asleep, Nolan absentmindedly reached across the bed.

It was cold. He closed his eyes anyway and fell asleep with a frown on his face.



Winnipeg had lost three games in a row. Nolan did not envy his captain. Keeping up team morale while on a losing streak was not an easy job. Caleb was good at it, though. He wasn’t a loud or in-your-face captain. He mostly encouraged the team by reminding them of the confidence he had in them.

No need to worry, though, because what Caleb didn’t critique him on, his dad made sure to. Robert was always a phone call away, ready with notes on what Nolan could do to improve his game or what he could have done better.

Nolan flopped down on his hotel bed in Pittsburgh. They had just finished morning skate, and now he had the rest of the afternoon free. Elias was at home in Montreal doing the same thing, so Nolan had suggested a FaceTime date.

Their plan was to order the same dinner to-go, and watch a movie through one of those online sharing links together. Nolan wished Elias could be next to him, but this wasn't the worst second-best.

When dinner finally rolled around, Nolan was beyond ready for it. Nolan had been craving Thai food and Elias was just happy to go along with it. They timed it so their food was delivered within minutes of each other.

Nolan spread everything out on his bed, propped his laptop up for the movie, and then pulled out his phone to call Elias.

The line only rang for a second before he answered. Elias was sitting at his kitchen table, wearing his glasses and an old Royals shirt, smiling at Nolan.

"Hi, baby," he answered.

Nolan grinned at him. "Hey, hot stuff."

"How was practice this morning?" Elias asked as he took a drink of his water.

Nolan sighed. "It was fine. Everyone is starting to get irritated. We play Pittsburgh tomorrow, and they've been doing weirdly well this season, so I'm not the most enthusiastic, to be honest."

Elias frowned. "Yeah, I get that. But you're a good team. And I noticed their first-line center has been favoring his left leg recently. I'm not sure what happened. But I thought I would tell you about it."

Nolan raised his eyebrows at his boyfriend. "Elias Mercer, were you studying an opposing team to help a different opposing team win?"

Elias huffed. "*No.* I was studying a team in my conference and thought I could tell my boyfriend what I found."

Nolan pulled up Montreal's calendar. "But you don't play them again in the regular season."

"What if we play them in the playoffs?"

Nolan laughed. No part of him was surprised by Elias's hockey-centered brain. He had a reputation for being intense about hockey for a reason. Nolan was just thankful to be inside the hockey bubble with him. "Shit, at this rate, it looks like you'll definitely be in the playoffs."

Elias looked scandalized. "Don't you dare jinx it!"

Nolan held up his hands in surrender. "Okay sorry, sorry. Anyway, show me what you ordered!"

Elias picked up his phone to show Nolan his food. “I got my go-to: pad krapow with brown rice, level three.”

Nolan gasped. “Level three?! My tongue would be on fire and my stomach would hate me. How can you survive that?”

“My mom has red hair,” Elias said, as if that meant something. He must have noticed the confusion on Nolan’s face because he continued. “According to my mom, sometimes redheads don’t react to spice the same way. So that was her excuse for putting extra pepper on everything, which means I grew up eating spicy food.”

Nolan made a sound of understanding. “I’ve never been thankful for having boring brunette parents.”

Elias laughed at him. “Your turn. Show me what you got.”

He flipped his camera and panned it across the bed. “I got tom kha, it’s my favorite, and curry fried rice, and Thai tea.”

“Nol, that could feed like four people.”

Nolan flipped the camera back to show his face. “I’m a growing boy. Also, tom kha is a liquid. It doesn’t count.”

Elias narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

“It is,” Nolan told him with an air of finality.

“Let’s eat then,” Elias told him. “Then we can watch the movie after?”

Nolan smiled and nodded. “Oh, Matt Barrow invited you to dinner next time you’re here,” he told him.

Elias raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you told him about us?”

Nolan tried to listen for any hint of annoyance. Elias had been very clear about wanting to keep his private life private, but he’d said it was okay to tell friends and family.

When Elias didn’t seem bothered, Nolan continued, “Not you specifically, just my boyfriend.”

“You can tell him that it’s me if you want. You said you stayed with him last year, right? So, you’re close with him?” Elias asked as he took a bite.

Nolan finished chewing his own bite before he answered. “Right. He’s super chill, and so is his wife. They’re like my family here.”

“That’s good, babe. I’m glad you have people there.”

Nolan decided to ask the question that had been on his mind. He tried to sound as casual as possible when he said, “Have you told anyone about us?”

Elias smiled. “A couple guys have noticed that I’m happier and smiling at my phone more now. But I haven’t explicitly told them anything. I wanted to keep you to myself for a while.”

Nolan returned his smile. “You can tell them, if you want. Obviously, Tyler and Jesper know, so if you want someone to talk to, I’m fine with people knowing it’s me.”

Elias looked directly into the camera. “Would you like for me to tell them?”

Nolan hadn’t been expecting such a direct question. But the truth was… yes, he did want that. “I think so. I want to tell other people about you. I wanna brag that I managed to lock down the best hockey player out there.”

Elias laughed. “That’s good with me. We’re both already out to our teams, right?” When Nolan nodded, he continued. “And we said we were both good with our teams knowing. I think it’s been enough time that we can be more sure about this, about us.” Nolan’s heart squeezed. He was so sure about Elias, but it was nice to hear that Elias felt the same. “So, I think yeah, let’s tell them.”

Nolan beamed. He hadn’t realized he was waiting for—not permission per se, but something akin to it. He wanted Elias to feel comfortable with their relationship and whatever level of openness they decided on, as long as it was made together.

A weight he hadn’t known he was carrying lifted. As it disappeared, he felt lighter in its absence.

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Twenty-Eight

ELIAS

March 2026 · Montreal

Elias was sweating as he sat down in his stall to check his phone after practice. Nolan had sent him a selfie of him and Wayne, Wayne blissfully unaware of Nolan behind him while he slept. Nolan was grinning, thrilled to be taking a picture with his cat.

Elias smiled and held out his own phone to take a quick selfie to send back to Nolan.

NOLAN
can I lick the sweat off your neck

ELIAS
Can you ever respond to a selfie normally?

NOLAN
nah babe not when you look like that

Elias felt someone flop down next to him. He looked up and saw Pow looking suspiciously at Elias's phone.

"Who are you sending selfies to? Why are you smiling like an idiot?" he asked through narrowed eyes.

Elias sighed and raised his voice a little. "Alright. Since you all love to gossip like schoolgirls, I've been seeing someone since the Olympics." The room suddenly quieted and heads snapped toward him with eager eyes. "It's Nolan Hart. You may have heard of him—he plays for Winnipeg."

One of the younger guys whistled. "Get it, Cap!"

Elias laughed. Greer nodded at him and gave an approving smile.

Next to him, Pow furrowed his eyebrows. "Wait, Hart? Like Team Canada Hart?"

Elias nodded. "That's the one."

Pow crossed his arms. “So, none of my offers were good enough for you? You had to find someone younger and hotter than me? You had to go all the way to Italy to find a boyfriend when I’ve been in your locker room the whole time?!”

Elias pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew Pow was (mostly) kidding. Then something Pow said clicked. “Oh fuck, *is* he younger than you?”

Pow nodded. “Yeah, I’m twenty-two.”

Elias groaned. Across the room, Greer laughed. Someone threw tape at them. Greer finally stopped laughing for a second to say, “Holy shit, Merce, your boyfriend is younger than Pow!”

Elias hid his face in his hands. “Ugh, don’t say that.”

Antti Lind squeezed Elias’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Cap. Everyone deserves to find love. Even if it’s with a baby.”

The room got louder with laughter, which Elias hadn’t even realized was possible. His team was never going to let him live this down.

After several minutes, the guys went back to their own conversations, but quite a few gave Elias nods or winks of encouragement. One of the rookies asked, “Wait—is that why Hart was talking about you the other day?”

Elias cocked his head a little. When had Nolan been talking about him? And saying what? “What do you mean?”

“They asked him about the Olympics because he commented on a post about you or something,” the rookie shrugged like it was no big deal. Elias started going through the recent posts in his mind that Nolan could’ve commented on.

He didn’t get to think about it for too long. Pow apparently wasn’t done. “Mercer, I thought you didn’t date. I tried to set you up so many times!”

Elias shrugged. “It’s not that I don’t date, I just wasn’t looking. And you tried to set me up with any gay guy you knew. They weren’t exactly love matches.”

Pow pointed at him as if he was offended. “Hey, one of those guys was a lawyer! Lawyers make bank, bro.”

Elias turned to look at him. “Pow, *I* make bank. I don’t need to date rich.”

Pow’s eyes widened like he had never considered that angle before. He nodded, eyes a little hazy as if he was having to digest Elias’s salary. Elias bit his cheek to avoid laughing.

During his standard three-minute shower, Elias thought through the next few days. His and Nolan's schedules mirrored each other's. Both teams had one last home game tomorrow before heading out on road trips. Montreal's was over a week long, which Elias wasn't looking forward to. By this point in the season, he was running on fumes and the hope of winning the Cup.

The only upside was that neither team had a game on Friday night, so they had another FaceTime date planned.

Elias had enjoyed the last one more than he had expected to. It still surprised him how much he enjoyed the boring everyday things with Nolan.

As he was getting dressed to head home, Greer fell into step beside him. "Get Moose and come over tonight. The boys are asking for a dog again and I need to placate them."

Elias grinned. "Are you sure that won't make them want a dog even more?"

Greer shrugged. "I don't know. But it's worth a shot."



Moose was thrilled to head over to the Greers' house. Aiden and Josh loved to play with him, and Moose was still young enough to have an abundance of energy. It was the best way to tire out all three of them.

The boys had on their jackets and tuques. With all the curiosity of a five-year-old, Aiden asked, "Uncle Eli, why doesn't Moose have a jacket?"

Elias smiled at him. "He does."

Aiden tilted his head and looked at Moose and his clearly unclothed body. "I don't see one."

Elias reached down to pat his fluffy side. "It's right here."

Moose's tail wagged as Aiden considered this. Apparently satisfied with the answer, Aiden ran toward the tennis ball that was just for Moose.

The Greers had a nice backyard. It had enough trees to feel private, but the neighborhood still had plenty of people close by. Montreal looked the way it always did in late March. The sun played peek-a-boo with the clouds, offering brief bursts of warmth before disappearing again. The backyard wasn't dry yet, but it wasn't the muddiest it got.

Watching the boys play with Moose stirred something deep inside him. It took Elias a moment to recognize it. He'd never spent much time thinking

about what came after hockey, but suddenly he found himself wanting what Greer had. A home. Children. A life that continued long after the final game.

Images flashed through his mind unbidden. All he could see was Nolan playing with their dog and a couple kids. He imagined Nolan through the years, how his face might change with age, the way his body might broaden.

For the first time, he could clearly see the life he wanted. Of course, Elias always hoped his future included a husband and children, but it had only ever been a vague and distant idea. A natural continuation of how his life was expected to go.

When Elias pictured that future now, Nolan was there.

Josh stole the ball from Aiden and Aiden's cry of betrayal brought Elias back to the present. Greer and his wife, Steph, joined him on the back porch. Greer passed him a drink. Elias nodded his thanks.

Out of the corner of his eye, Elias saw Greer hold his arm out and Steph snuggle into it. The action looked almost instinctual. They both watched their sons play with fond smiles.

Watching them made Elias suddenly aware of the empty space beside him, the place where Nolan fit perfectly. He frowned a little and pulled out his phone. He took a picture of Moose and the boys and sent it off to Nolan.

Greer looked over at him. "So, the winger from Winnipeg. Word on the street is that he's the next you."

Elias huffed. "Word on the street? Since when are you such an old man?"

Steph spoke up. "He started saying phrases like that to be funny and ironic, but now he can't stop."

Greer narrowed his eyes. "Stop trying to change the subject."

Elias let out a quiet laugh. "Yeah, the winger from Winnipeg," he said softly.

Greer gave a thumbs up to Josh for doing something Elias had missed. "Tell me about him."

"Well, he's a damn good hockey player. Playing with him was great. He's incredible, really. He—"

Greer interrupted. "I didn't ask about his hockey. I can look up stats if I want that. Tell me about *him.*"

Elias looked out at the yard. "He's nice. He's funny and sincere and hardworking. He surprises me constantly."

“Does he make you happy?” Steph asked, turning her head to look at him.

Elias nodded and smiled. “He really does. In ways I didn’t expect.”

Moose ran by, smiling in his own dog way, thrilled to be playing. His feet were definitely going to be muddy. The sound of laughter rang across the yard and the boys took turns throwing Moose’s ball. All in all, it was shaping up to be a good afternoon.

When the sun decided it wanted to hide behind the clouds, Moose was sufficiently muddy, and the boys were much colder than they wanted to admit. Elias and the Greers decided to go inside. He stopped to clean the mud off his dog while the boys took off their winter clothes.

Steph went to the kitchen to make everyone hot chocolate. Elias sat on one of the couches and Aiden came to sit next to him, with Moose lying at their feet.

Elias’s phone buzzed. Nolan had responded to his picture of Moose and the boys with a picture of Wayne. Of course Aiden noticed the picture of the black kitten. Five-year-olds weren’t exactly known for minding their own business.

“Who is that?” he asked.

Elias clicked on the picture and turned his phone to give Aiden a better view. “This is Wayne,” he told him.

Josh sat up from his spot next to Moose on the floor. He turned his head, wanting to see the picture as well. “Like Wayne Gretzky?” Josh asked.

Elias grinned. “Exactly like that.”

“Who does Wayne belong to?” Josh questioned. He was probably trying to figure out how to meet him. Both boys were equal opportunist animal lovers.

Before Elias could answer, Greer spoke from his recliner. “He belongs to Uncle Eli’s boyfriend.”

He didn’t even look away from the hockey game he had found on the TV.

“What’s his name? Does he have other pets too?” Aiden asked. Elias had to laugh at the kid’s priorities.

“His name is Nolan. And nope, Wayne is the only pet he has.”

Josh looked down at Moose. “Does he get along with Moose? Sometimes cats are mean to dogs.”

Elias tilted his head. “I don’t know, actually. They live far away so Wayne hasn’t met Moose yet.”

Steph came back into the room and passed out the hot chocolates. “Boys, don’t pester Uncle Eli.”

They ignored their mother.

“If he lives far away, how do you get to hug him?” Aiden asked.

It made Elias’s heart ache. “Well, I just make sure to give him extra hugs when I get to see him.”

Aiden seemed to be considering this. “Can I meet him one day?”

Elias pulled Aiden to his side and reached out to ruffle Josh’s hair. “Of course, you can meet him one day. You have to give me your stamp of approval.”

Aiden nodded as he took a careful sip of his hot chocolate. He looked like he was going to take that job very seriously.

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Twenty-Nine

NOLAN

April 2026 · Winnipeg Currents @ Dallas Steers

Nolan was hot as soon as he stepped out of the hotel. This wasn't his first time playing in Dallas—not by a long shot. But he was still shocked every time that Texas could manage to be so hot in April. It had snowed last week back home in Winnipeg. Here it was swimming weather. At least last night had been a little cooler.

He heard similar groans and complaints from his teammates as they stepped outside.

"It's so bright. And hot. Why is it so bright and hot?" Tyler whined from next to him.

"It's to give you a preview of hell," one of their defensemen chirped.

"Oh, you mean being there with you?" Tyler fired back.

A few guys laughed as they all got on the bus. Nolan took his normal seat next to Tyler. Tyler had a way of pulling everyone's attention away from whatever they were worried about, even if only for a minute. It helped keep Nolan out of his own head sometimes.

Now was one of those times. Nolan was trying not to stress too much about playing Dallas, but the Steers were having a hell of a season. They'd been the first team to clinch a playoff berth, while Winnipeg was still fighting for a Wild Card spot.

Next to him, Tyler grinned at his phone. Nolan figured it was only fair to give Tyler shit about it. Between him and Jesper, Nolan hadn't been able to catch a break in weeks.

"Is that Emily?" he asked, pretty sure that was the name of Tyler's most recent girlfriend.

“From Ottawa? Nah, we broke up. This is Gabrielle. Hold on, she’s so hot,” he explained as he pulled up an Instagram profile. She was pretty, Nolan had to admit. Tall and blonde, though Tyler hadn’t ever really had a type.

“When did you meet her?” Nolan asked as they pulled up to the rink for practice.

Tyler gave a dreamy smile, as if recalling a fairytale meeting. “Two weeks ago. She’s great. She slid into my DMs, and I knew I couldn’t pass her up.”

Nolan patted his friend’s shoulder. “Well, I hope it works out.”

Tyler nodded earnestly. “I really think it will, bro. She might be the one.”

From across the aisle, Jesper scoffed and made eye contact with Nolan. Nolan gave a tiny shrug. Tyler always had a new girlfriend. It was never in a sleazy way, though. The guy was in love with the idea of love. Unfortunately, most of the women he dated were only in love with the idea of a hockey player.

Not long after, Nolan welcomed the chill of the rink. The first touch of his blades to the ice always felt a little like coming home. As they ran drills, he found himself thinking about how cool it was that he got to play his favorite sport for a living. Even in places like Dallas, where hockey wasn’t the main sport, people still came out to watch them play.

It was easy to forget how lucky he was when the team wasn’t doing well. But sometimes the puck went tape to tape and found the back of the net, and Nolan had a brief flash of, *Oh*, *yeah.*

Nolan tried to keep that feeling at the front of his mind through the game, even as they lost in regulation.

The only thing keeping Nolan going—well, other than hockey itself—was his FaceTime date with Elias the following afternoon. Neither team had a game, so they were planning to do another dinner and movie. They would even be in the same time zone, with Elias in New Jersey and Nolan in Columbus.

On the bus to the airport, Nolan sent Elias a text.

NOLAN

can’t wait for our date tomorrow <3

Elias texted back almost immediately.

ELIAS

Me too, babe. Counting down the days until you’re in MTL.

Nolan smiled to himself. He was, too, if he was honest. Next week, Winnipeg played in Montreal. Nolan was way past missing his boyfriend and was excited for a night with him. He was also unreasonably excited to meet Moose.



Morning skate in Columbus was not Nolan's favorite morning skate of the season. Nothing against Columbus, the rink, or the people, but he'd definitely woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

The same bed that was very lumpy and had paper-thin pillows. Nolan had not slept well. Then somehow his charger had unplugged overnight due to a loose outlet, so now his phone was almost dead.

The rest of the morning hadn't improved. He'd tried to take a nap before his FaceTime date with Elias, but never managed to fall fully asleep.

By the time his phone rang an hour before their scheduled FaceTime, Nolan was in a thoroughly miserable mood.

He reached for his phone, hoping seeing Elias's face would help improve his mood. But when he went to answer the call, he noticed it was just a regular phone call rather than a FaceTime call.

"Hello?" he asked.

Elias sighed. "Hi, baby."

Nolan groaned. "Noooo. Why do you sound like that? What's wrong?"

Elias gave a half laugh. "I have to cancel our FaceTime date. Our GM called me and asked me to go to some last-minute dinner and it's expected to last all night. I'm so sorry."

Nolan was suddenly very thankful for the lack of video. He didn't want Elias to see that this was making him want to cry.

He pulled the phone away to take a deep breath before he answered. When he felt the slightest bit more steady, he put the phone back to his ear. "Okay, that's fine, I get it."

"I know how much you were looking forward to this. I'm really sorry, baby."

Nolan could picture the crease between Elias's eyebrows. He knew that Elias didn't *want* to cancel, but being the captain came with extra responsibilities. "Yeah, me too. But it's fine. We'll just do it sometime soon," he said.

Elias was quiet for just a breath too long. “Can we wait to set a specific day? The end of the season is always crazy, especially since we already clinched, and…” he trailed off.

Nolan bit his tongue. He knew Elias didn’t mean anything by it, but Nolan couldn’t help but feel like it was a dig that Winnipeg hadn’t clinched a playoff berth yet. He tried to brighten his voice. This was clearly not Elias’s choice, so getting mad at Elias wouldn’t be helpful.

“Yeah, I know, babe. Call me before you go to sleep? I was really looking forward to talking to you. I just want to hear your voice before I go to sleep,” Nolan told him.

“I’m not sure when I’ll be back at the hotel, but I’ll do my best to call,” Elias promised.

They said their goodbyes and Nolan flopped back onto his bed. He lay there for a moment, wallowing in self-pity before he pulled out his phone to text Tyler and Jesper to ask them to dinner.

Hours later, Nolan was in his hotel bed, with his thin pillows, scrolling on his phone to stay awake. Just before midnight, he got a text from Elias.

It was a voice memo.

He hit play and his boyfriend’s voice filled the dark room. “Hi, baby.” Nolan could hear the sounds of people in the background. “I know this isn’t a phone call, but you said you just wanted to hear my voice, so I thought this was the next best thing. I just wanted to say goodnight and I’m sorry again. I’ll call you in the morning. Send me a selfie or something. Bye, babe.”

Nolan listened twice before he felt stinging in his eyes. He texted back a simple heart and fell asleep trying not to feel too sorry for himself.



Winnipeg had a quick couple of nights at home to play against Seattle. Nolan was excited to see Marko, but a little less excited about the game itself. The Emeralds were Winnipeg’s most direct competition for the Wild Card spot, and every game mattered at this point.

Nolan had invited Marko out for dinner, but as soon as Tyler heard about it, he took the liberty of inviting himself and Jesper. Tyler and Marko together were always chaotic. They fed off each other’s energy.

Marko had chosen a burger place for dinner, so the four of them ordered at the counter then found a table near the back.

“Marko, my man, congrats on the gold!” Tyler told him as soon as they sat down.

Nolan huffed. “You didn’t congratulate *me* like that.”

Tyler laughed and rolled his eyes. “I brought you coffee, bro. Same thing.”

Marko grinned. “Thanks, dude. How are things? How’s Sarah?”

Tyler tilted his head. “Sarah?”

Marko raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, that was her name, right? You were seeing her last time I saw you.”

“Oh! Sarah! Yeah, we broke up.”

Jesper rolled his eyes. “That was like ten girlfriends ago, Vuković, keep up.”

Tyler reached over and pinched him. “It was not! Only like…” He looked up for a second and Nolan could see him counting. “Three girls ago!”

“The counting is not helping your case,” Nolan pointed out.

Marko laughed. “That was, like, five months ago? You’ve had three girlfriends since then?”

Tyler shrugged unapologetically. “What can I say? I have a lot of love to give.”

Marko shook his head. “Any other love life updates?” He pointedly looked at Nolan.

“Shut up, Marko. Like you don’t know,” Nolan grumbled.

Across from him, Tyler lit up like a kid on Christmas. “Wait, he knows?!”

Marko leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms with a smug grin. “Of course I know. I called it months ago.”

Tyler honest-to-God squealed. He sat forward and said, “Me too! I mean, with the way Nolan’s always been obsessed with Mercer.”

Nolan couldn’t believe this level of betrayal. “I have not always been obsessed with him.”

Marko’s eyes twinkled next to him. Nolan knew this had been a bad idea. Tyler just kept going, “Oh yeah? Why is your number twenty-one?”

“Tyler, shut *up*!” Nolan hissed. Jesper had the tiniest smile on his face. Was no one loyal?

Marko placed a hand on Nolan’s shoulder. Nolan shrugged it off. “Dear Nolan, I don’t think I know why your number is twenty-one.”

Nolan wasn’t going down without a fight. “I’ve had it since I was a kid.”

Jesper, the traitor, said from across the table, “Hart, tell us why you chose it as a kid.”

Nolan couldn’t believe his life. “The number I wanted wasn’t available.”

None of the other three were impressed. As if they all had an unspoken agreement, no one said anything as they just stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

After a second, he decided this was a losing battle. “Fine! You all suck! I wanted twelve, after my favorite player, but someone else already had it. So, I went with it reversed.”

The look on Marko’s face could only be described as gleeful. “Twelve like Elias Mercer?” When Nolan nodded, Marko put his hand over his heart. “That is the most romantic thing I have ever heard.”

Jesper looked over at him, all traces of teasing gone from his expression. “It honestly kind of is. You’ve been making him part of your world for your whole life.”

Nolan had never thought of it like that. But maybe Jesper was onto something.

That idea stayed with Nolan through the next few days, even after Seattle won. And when he stepped off the plane in Montreal, knowing there were just hours between him and Elias, it was still there.

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Thirty

ELIAS

April 7, 2026 · Montreal

Elias was tired. Florida had played like they had something to prove, and they did. With their win tonight, the Glades had clinched their playoff berth. Florida was known for being a physical team. It seemed like they had spent the whole game trying to goad Elias into taking a penalty. He hadn't, but he was tired from fighting back everything he wanted to say and do.

When he pulled up to his house, it was drizzling slightly. His neighborhood was quiet this time of night. He was eager to get inside and take a proper shower.

The first thing he noticed when he opened the door was that Moose was not there to greet him. On its own, that was weird enough. But then he saw an unfamiliar pair of shoes lined up against the wall. He frowned as he slowly walked toward his living room.

Immediately, he saw Moose lying on the floor, tail thumping loudly. On the couch above him, scrolling on his phone, was Nolan.

"Nolan?" he asked in disbelief. Then he noticed Nolan had his headphones in and probably hadn't heard him.

He walked closer and reached out to touch Nolan's leg.

Before he could say anything, Nolan jumped and screamed. "Fuck!" he yelled as he yanked out his headphones. His eyes softened when he realized it was Elias.

Nolan wasted no time in throwing his phone down and jumping into Elias's arms. "Baby," Nolan said in his ear. "Surprise!"

Elias would never admit to the way his voice came out shaky. "You're here already?"

Nolan kissed him. Elias melted into it. After a couple seconds, Nolan pulled back. “Well, since you already told me the door code, I figured it was my turn to show up early and surprise you.”

Elias pulled Nolan back against him and pressed their lips together. Nolan met every movement with equal intensity, pushing his tongue into Elias’s mouth and threading his fingers through Elias’s hair.

He pulled back with a smile when his fingers brushed the dampness in Elias’s hair. “The rain got you, huh?”

Only then did Elias remember he was still wearing his damp coat. He grimaced. “Can I go shower really fast? I didn’t take a full shower after the game. And as much as I would like to shower together, the things I wanna do would be much more comfortable if done in a bed.”

Ten minutes later, Elias was freshly clean and stepping out of his en suite into his bedroom. Nolan was lying on his bed, in nothing but a smile and his boxers, and Elias felt his mouth water.

What a fucking sight, this beautiful boy on his bed.

Elias stalked forward and put a knee up on his bed. Nolan twitched, like he was deciding whether to sit up to meet Elias or stay lying down. Elias heard his breathing pick up ever so slightly.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed you?” Elias asked, bending down to place a quick kiss against Nolan.

“Probably as much as I’ve missed you,” Nolan replied, bucking his hips up the moment Elias was lined up over him.

The movement caused their cocks to brush against each other’s through the fabric of Nolan’s underwear. It felt too good. Elias let out a moan and ground down again, feeling how hard Nolan already was.

As much as Elias wanted to spend hours making out with Nolan, he was more interested in putting his mouth elsewhere. He kissed down Nolan’s chest as he pulled his boxer briefs off. Elias was rewarded with the heat of Nolan’s dick popping up against him.

Elias was impatient. Sue him. He bent down and started mouthing at Nolan’s cock. He was always amazed by how gorgeous of a cock it was. He sucked the head into his mouth, but stopped when Nolan pulled on his hair in a much rougher way than normal.

“Stop, stop,” Nolan told him. “I wanted to be ready to go as soon as you got here, so I’m, uh.” He blushed, which was so sweet and out of place here that Elias couldn’t stop himself from grinning. “I have a plug in.”

Elias reached down, and sure enough, there it was. “You are so fucking perfect,” he told Nolan.

Nolan let out a breathy laugh. “I’m glad you think so. Can you fuck me now please?”

Elias didn’t need to be asked twice. Nolan hissed as Elias pulled the plug out. He flipped Nolan around so he was on all fours. Without being asked, Nolan put his head down on the bed and lifted his ass up. Elias slapped his cheek lightly, loving the moan Nolan let out.

Elias grabbed a handful and squeezed. You didn't become a professional hockey player without developing a decent ass, but Nolan's was next level. He spread his boyfriend’s cheeks apart and his mouth watered at the sight of his hole. He reached around to stroke Nolan’s cock. Elias couldn’t resist bending down and placing a kiss against Nolan's rim. Nolan pushed back against his mouth as if on reflex. Fuck, Elias needed to be inside him *now.*

Elias ran his thumb over Nolan’s slit and gathered the precum that had pooled there. “Fuck, babe, you are so wet for me.”

Nolan moaned. “Just for you,” he panted.

Elias smeared the precum onto his dick. He reached over to grab some lube from his nightstand drawer. Before he could grab it, Nolan grabbed his wrist.

“No, I wanna feel everything. Even if it’s a little rough,” Nolan told him.

At this rate, with Nolan saying things like that, Elias wasn’t going to last. “I know, baby, but I don’t want to hurt you.” He grabbed the lube quickly.

He leaned down and kissed Nolan deeply, if only to hold himself together a little longer. Then, without breaking the kiss, he slowly pushed in.

Nolan felt heavenly. How had Elias managed the months since he’d felt this?

Elias finally bottomed out, and the sight of Nolan pressed against him, skin to skin, never ceased being amazing. If Nolan’s moans were anything to go by, the feeling was mutual. He pulled out, almost all the way, before he pushed back in.

Elias reached his arm around Nolan’s chest and pulled him up, so his back was flush against Elias’s chest. He nipped Nolan’s shoulder, then sucked in the same spot, all while thrusting in and out.

Nolan met every single one with enthusiasm. They were both breathing harder, and by the way Nolan was clenching up, Elias knew they were both

close. He was surprised they had even lasted this long.

“Come, baby. I wanna feel you,” Elias whispered in his ear.

As if he had just been waiting for permission, Nolan let go. His warm release shot out of him, coating Elias’s hands.

Elias was only a second behind him, releasing inside of Nolan. He kept thrusting until they were both finished. For a moment, he just held him close, overwhelmed by how much he'd missed having Nolan here.

Slowly, Elias pulled out. Immediately, his release started sliding out of Nolan. Before he could even fully appreciate the view, Nolan was reaching behind and shoving it back in him.

When Elias looked up, Nolan was wearing a smug grin, fully aware of the effect he had on his boyfriend. Elias laughed. He was so gone for this man.



The weight of Nolan in his arms was Elias’s favorite way to wake up. Neither team had a game, Winnipeg wasn’t getting in until the afternoon, and Elias only had an optional skate that morning. Elias rarely missed a skate, even optional ones, but the feeling of Nolan kept him glued to his bed. The Royals would survive one morning without him.

To no one's surprise, Nolan slept in longer than Elias did. It was just after ten when he finally stirred. He stretched with a groan before looking at Elias.

“That was the best sleep I’ve had in almost a month,” Nolan told him, voice scratchy with sleep.

Elias grinned and leaned in to kiss him. “Three orgasms before bed will help with that.”

Nolan rolled his eyes. “Of course that didn’t hurt, but it was mainly because I finally got to sleep next to you.”

Elias threaded his fingers through Nolan’s hair. He tugged slightly, pulling Nolan closer to him. He pressed their lips together again. “Same. I would sleep next to you every night if I could.”

Nolan grinned. “We should talk about the off-season over coffee.”

Elias laughed. “Is that your way of saying you want coffee?”

“I’m not *not* saying that.”

Elias swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. He stretched, then held his hand out for Nolan.

They got up to go brush their teeth. Elias made eye contact with Nolan in the mirror above the double sinks. Nolan looked like he belonged there, next to Elias, in his home, getting ready for the day.

Afterwards, Elias led them to the kitchen. He went through the motions of setting up the coffee pot on autopilot. Nolan walked over to the fridge and opened it.

He stood frozen in front of it, just staring inside.

“Nol, you okay? Are you trying to cool the house down?” Elias asked as he came up next to him.

“Did you buy me hazelnut creamer?” Nolan questioned, leaning his body against Elias automatically.

“Mmm,” Elias started, nuzzling into Nolan’s neck. “I got it after San Jose. I wanted to be prepared.”

Nolan twisted in his arms, wrapping his own around Elias’s neck. “I am so lucky to have you,” he said, voice cracking.

“Because I got you creamer?” Elias asked.

“Because you do things like getting me creamer, yes. You are so good. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

Elias kissed him and reached back to close the refrigerator door that was still open. “I’m the lucky one, because I get the privilege of being yours.”

Nolan pulled back for a second, desire darkening his eyes. “Elias Mercer, I’m gonna need you to take me to that couch over there and fuck me right now.”

Elias laughed. “What about the coffee?”

“It’ll still be here,” Nolan said as he tugged Elias toward the couch. And really, who was Elias to resist him?



The rest of their day was spent relaxing and soaking up time together. Nolan had to leave for a couple of hours for a team dinner after the rest of his team landed, but he came right back as soon as he could. They had made tentative plans for the offseason, splitting their time between Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Halifax. Elias was looking forward to extended time with his boyfriend.

It was nearing midnight, and Elias and Nolan sat on the couch together, both scrolling on their phones. Every few minutes, Moose would drop his stuffed toy at their feet for them to throw. While it was Nolan's turn, Elias opened Instagram.

He saw that Nolan had posted a new story. He clicked on it and saw that it was only a couple seconds old. It was a picture of Moose, smiling while he waited for his toy to be thrown. Elias glanced up from his screen and turned to Nolan. "Hey, babe, I think you meant to post this on your private story."

Nolan didn't look up. "Oh, no I didn't. Moose looked cute."

Elias waited a second, willing the panic to stay at bay. He quickly did the math in his head: 1. People knew Winnipeg was playing in Montreal. 2. People knew what Elias's dog looked like, and even if they weren't sure, Nolan had put a moose emoji on the picture. 3. It was clear that the picture had been posted this late, with the windows showing the dark nighttime.

Anyone who looked at it for more than a second could put the pieces together. He knew people would immediately start speculating. He didn't want them to get the chance to.

"Can you delete it?" he asked.

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Thirty-One

NOLAN

April 8, 2026 · Montreal

Nolan set his phone down and looked over at Elias. “Why?”

Elias shrugged, but Nolan could tell he was tense. “It’s obvious that you’re at my house at almost midnight. People will start talking.”

Nolan narrowed his eyes. “Okay? So, they’ll see I’m hanging out with a teammate from the Olympics?”

Elias sighed. “Babe, please. If we were just friends, you wouldn’t be here by yourself this late.”

“No one knows I’m by myself here? It’s literally just a picture of a dog?”

Elias’s jaw clenched. “It’s not just a dog. It’s my dog. People know it’s my dog. They’ll know you’re here.”

Nolan gave an incredulous half laugh. “I guess I don’t understand what the problem is.”

Elias looked out the living room window before he answered. The overhead lights were off, leaving only a lamp behind Elias. Some home renovation show was on in the background with the volume turned low. Nolan watched a couple debate tile choices while he waited for Elias to answer.

“I don’t know why you posted it in the first place. Why do people need to know what you’re doing? You’re already talking about me in the media. Why give them more?” Elias finally said.

Nolan almost didn’t even know what to say. “Talking about you in the media? What? Wait—do you mean when they *asked me a question* and I answered? Why does that matter? And I post on Instagram all the time. It’s just a story of a dog. It’s not like I posted a selfie of us post-sex to my profile. You post Moose all the time.”

Elias started shaking his head. “Not all the time. I mostly use Instagram for work, and you know that. And besides, Moose is *my* dog.”

Nolan was surprised by how much the emphasis on “my” hurt. Objectively, it was true. Moose was Elias’s dog. But hearing the distinction stuck in his head.

He took a deep breath before he answered. “Okay. I don’t want to argue with you. I don’t want to spend what little time we have together arguing.”

“I agree.” Elias nodded. “Just delete the picture and it’s all good.”

Nolan opened the app and clicked on his story. But his finger hovered over the delete button. The thing was, he didn’t really want to delete it. He didn’t understand why he needed to.

He looked up at Elias. Elias was watching him, eyes stuck to his frozen finger. “Why does it bother you if people know we’re spending time together?” he asked, voice quiet and even.

Elias’s eyes snapped up to him. “No, baby, it’s not that. It’s the implications of you being here at midnight. You know how fast people start talking.”

Nolan shrugged. “So let them talk. We don’t have to confirm anything.”

Elias let out a sharp breath through his nose. “I don’t want them to talk.”

Nolan closed his eyes for a second. He breathed in and out a couple times before he opened them. Then he deleted the story, heart squeezing with something unpleasant when he saw that the picture was gone. “There. Done.”

Elias nodded. “Thank you.”

That should have been the end of it. Crisis averted. But Nolan couldn’t let it go.

“I just… I really don’t think I understand what the problem is.”

Elias put his phone down too. Nolan watched his shoulders tense, and he sighed deeply before he answered. “I don’t understand what you don’t understand. People would start speculating. The fans are crazy. You know that. But it’s deleted now, it’s done.”

Nolan watched the couple on the show be told their water pipe had busted. It felt oddly reflective of how he was feeling. Usually, Nolan was good at dropping things. For some reason, though, he couldn’t stop this. He wanted to understand where Elias was coming from, and the fact that he didn’t was frustrating him.

“The fans talk anyway,” is what he settled on.

“Exactly. We don’t need to give them more of a reason,” Elias responded in a tense voice.

“I—Elias, I’m not asking you to come out or anything,” Nolan said.

Elias’s eyes snapped over to him. “Of course. I already told you I didn’t want to come out?”

Suddenly, a future flashed before Nolan: never being allowed to spend time together publicly, never being allowed to post pictures of Moose, having to hide the most important relationship in his life forever.

“So what? We just keep our relationship secret forever?” The words tumbled out of him before he could think better of it, but he found that he didn’t want to take them back. He wanted Elias to answer.

Elias huffed. “Of course not. We already talked about telling teammates and friends and family. That’s not a secret.”

“Okay, so what if someone that we’ve told gets traded? What if people start talking in the league? Maybe it’s best if we don’t tell anyone else.”

Elias scoffed. “Nolan, stop. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Nolan desperately hoped he’d misheard, but he knew he hadn’t. “Oh-kay,” he said, not even trying to hide the disbelief in his voice.

“Fuck, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just—” Elias took a deep breath before he continued. “We don’t owe the public anything. They don’t need to know anything.”

“Elias, please. It was a picture of a fucking dog.”

“*No*,” Elias insisted. “It was a reason for people to talk. I know you’re still young, and new to this career, but I’ve seen—”

Nolan cut him off. “This isn’t about me being *young*, Elias, fuck.”

Elias covered his face with one hand. “That’s not what I’m saying—”

“It is quite literally what you just said,” Nolan pointed out.

“You just haven’t seen the way the media can reduce people to a headline,” Elias tried to explain.

That annoyed Nolan further. “You think I don’t have any experience with media scrutiny? You think they haven’t been watching me since I was a kid? Did you miss all the shit people were saying about me before the Olympics? Or any time I’ve ever missed a fucking shot?”

“That’s not the same thing, Nolan.”

“Like hell it isn’t!”

“It isn’t!” Elias snapped, clearly having reached his limit. “Of *course* the media is going to speculate about your skill. It’s what we signed up for!

They don’t need extra ammunition to speculate about our personal lives.”

Nolan was so fucking tired. “We’re in the public eye! They’re going to speculate about anything they can! Who cares?!”

“I care, Nolan! I fucking care.” Elias sighed. “I’ve worked my ass off to be a good hockey player. Why does it matter who I sleep with?”

Nolan threw his hands up in the air. “Yeah, you’re a good hockey player. *I’m* a good hockey player. Why does it fucking matter who you sleep with?”

Elias gave Nolan a look like he was being intentionally obtuse. “We don’t owe them anything. Anything at all. Why should we? Why do we have to tell them anything?! Why does it need to be shared at all?”

Nolan threw himself back against the couch. “It’s a fucking picture of a dog, Elias. It’s not like it’s a picture of me sucking your dick.”

Elias groaned. “Why does it have to be a picture of anything?! It shouldn’t fucking matter!”

“But I still do.”

Elias sighed and rubbed his face again. “You still do what, Nolan?” He sounded so tired.

Nolan stood up. “Matter.” He crossed the room. “I should probably get back to my hotel. Show face, you know.”

Elias sat up. “Nolan, wait.”

Nolan just held up his hand and walked to the bedroom. Elias didn’t follow him up the stairs. He packed in silence, the sound of the TV downstairs too faint to hear. He ordered an Uber, so he wouldn’t have to wait longer than necessary. When everything was in his suitcase, he looked around the room. He felt tears prick in the corners of his eyes, but he wiped them away. He wouldn’t cry, not here.

When he carried his suitcase down the stairs, Elias was waiting there, Moose at his side looking distressed.

“You should get some sleep. Home ice is on the line,” he sighed. “I’ll see you tomorrow. We fly home right after the game, so.”

“You can stay,” Elias whispered.

Nolan shook his head. “Nah, I should be with my team. There’s still a Wild Card spot for grabs.” He tried to smile. “Good night, Elias.”

Elias reached for his keys. “I can drive you,” he offered.

“I already ordered an Uber.” He glanced down at his phone. “Oh, it’s here. Gotta go.” He stepped forward and placed a quick kiss on Elias's cheek. Elias tried to grab his waist, but Nolan carefully pulled away.

Nolan glanced back once. Elias stood there watching Nolan walk out of the door, all traces of anger gone.

As Nolan loaded his suitcase into the car, he had a brief thought that he wished he hadn’t deleted the picture. At least then there would be some evidence he had been here at all.

But then again, that was the whole fucking problem.

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Thirty-Two

ELIAS

April 2026 · Montreal

Throughout his life, Elias had woken up by himself more often than not. He was not a stranger to being in bed alone. This morning, however, the empty space next to him felt suffocating.

He could still smell Nolan on his sheets.

He wondered if he could call Nolan, ask him to come over before the game to talk things out. He hated that they had cut the night short over something like that. He hated that they missed out on a night they should've had together.

Elias made his coffee, two sweeteners like always, and let his gaze linger on the almost full hazelnut creamer still in his fridge. Another thing wasted on their fight.

He tried to go back through it, remember everything they'd said and how it had gone sideways so quickly.

His phone buzzed on the kitchen counter and he finally closed the fridge to go check it. It was a text from Nolan. For one second, he hoped that it would be an apology, an agreement to move on, that they were okay.

NOLAN
morning

That was the least affectionate text Nolan had sent him in…maybe ever. Even before they'd gotten together, Nolan's texts had been flirty and friendly at the least. He wasn't sure which was worse: if he hadn't heard from Nolan at all, or being forced to pretend like a single word was enough.

Elias thought about replying how he normally would, using pet names or talking about Moose, but he wondered if that would just make things worse.

Finally, he settled on matching Nolan’s energy.

ELIAS
Good morning

Nolan didn’t reply.

In a moment of feeling unlike himself, Elias suddenly wished he could hit something. Instead, he tossed his phone face down on the couch and went to get ready for practice.

Even when he felt like this, he still had a team to captain.



Elias skated to center ice to meet Winnipeg’s center for the faceoff. He swiped his stick too fast and the referee blew his whistle. Elias sighed as he skated back, and his winger took his spot. Which left him to go to the winger’s position. Next to Nolan.

Nolan met his eyes as he skated over. He gave a forced smile that was really closer to a grimace. His eyes were sad in the way he’d only seen when Nolan was being too hard on himself.

Elias hated that it felt like he was causing it this time.

He tried to smile back, but he figured it looked about the same as Nolan’s. Every ounce of him wanted to press his arm against Nolan’s, but he didn’t want to risk Nolan pulling away. He kept an inch between them.

The game continued, but Elias felt half a step out of touch the whole time. Both teams played hard, but it was clear that Elias and Nolan both weren’t playing their best. More than once, Greer and Pow met his eyes with questioning looks. Elias didn’t even say anything—how could he explain this?

Montreal won, but no one felt satisfied as they left the ice. After the game, Elias did his best to turn off his emotions and remind his team that they were one step closer to securing home ice advantage for round one.

He was surprised to see a text from Nolan when he got to the locker room.

NOLAN
hey. some of the guys wanted to meet you, if you’re still around.

ELIAS
Yeah, definitely. I’m sure some of my guys want the same thing.

All day, the team had been chirping Elias about playing against his boyfriend. He had smiled and taken it, knowing he would've secretly loved it if this had been a normal day. He sighed before he looked at Greer.

"Hey, some of the Winnipeg guys are coming over. Nolan says they wanna meet me," he told him.

Pow nodded. "Perfect. I need to threaten him in person."

Greer turned to look at him. "Pow, the specification of 'in person' makes me nervous."

Pow shrugged, completely unbothered. "I may or may not have already messaged him on Instagram."

Elias looked at him. "I didn't know you follow him on Instagram."

"I don't. Cute picture of Moose, by the way," he said. Elias winced.

He heard extra voices before he had a chance to reply to Pow. He looked up and saw Nolan and three others walking in. He'd expected Cates and Markstrom, but he hadn't expected Matt Barrow.

Nolan smiled tentatively at Elias when their eyes met as he walked to stand by his side. Elias reached out and put his arm around Nolan's waist before he could second guess himself. Nolan tensed for just a second before he relaxed.

"Hi," Nolan said, voice less confident than it normally was. Barrow caught the difference and furrowed his brow slightly.

"Hey, guys," Elias greeted. Most of the Montreal locker room had stopped and were openly watching the interaction.

The other three Currents all greeted them. Barrow reached out to shake Elias's hand. His grip was firm as he gave one pump. He leveled Elias with a look, and Elias heard every word he didn't say.

With a flick of his eyes, he noticed that it looked similar to what Greer was doing with Nolan, just less intense. "Keep making him happy, and I'll be happy," Greer was saying.

Elias had let go of Nolan, but he noticed Nolan hesitate before mumbling, "Yeah."

Pow, it seemed, had had enough of the indirect threats. "Okay, enough dancing around. What do you have that I don't?" he demanded, looking straight at Nolan.

Nolan's eyes widened a fraction and he huffed out a laugh and then snapped his mouth shut, like it had been involuntary. "Um…" he said, looking to Elias for help.

Cates decided he needed to jump in for assistance. “A gold medal, for starters,” he said, pointing directly at Pow.

“Tyler!” Nolan hissed.

Cates just shrugged and pointed to himself. “I’m not wrong.”

Markstrom shook his head as he told the Royals, “Sorry, we try not to let him out too much, but he insisted on tagging along.” He waved his hand in Cates’s direction.

Cates nodded earnestly. “Like an annoying little brother.”

“That’s not the best light to paint yourself in,” Greer pointed out.

Nolan stepped closer to Elias, but he didn’t look at him. Elias would take what he could get. He turned to the Winnipeg players and said, “This is Pow, and Luc Greer.”

Nolan did the same for his group. “Tyler Cates, Jesper Markstrom, and Matt Barrow.”

Markstrom made eye contact with Pow. “Nice to meet you, Wallace Powell The Third,” he said.

Pow looked scandalized. Greer, on the other hand, immediately started laughing.

“How do you know my full government name?!” Pow demanded.

Markstrom narrowed his eyes. “It is public information?”

Pow’s shoulders dropped. “Oh, yeah.”

The group chatted for a couple more minutes before Barrow looked down at his watch. “We should go. The bus leaves soon.”

The other men said their goodbyes, but Nolan hung back for a minute. He looked the same as Elias felt: unsure what the proper goodbye would be right now.

Elias decided to speak first. “Thanks again for coming early,” he said, and immediately regretted his choice of words. God, why did he feel so awkward? He had thanked him as if it was a business meeting, not his boyfriend visiting him.

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, of course. It was nice to finally meet Moose in person,” he said, then squeezed his eyes shut like he hadn’t meant to say that.

“I told you he would love you,” Elias responded.

He watched as something like hope twinged with sadness flashed through Nolan’s eyes. “Yeah,” Nolan finally agreed, voice quiet again. That seemed to be his favorite word tonight.

Elias took a deep breath before he continued. “Well, let me know when you land in Winnipeg.”

“Yeah—” there was that word again “—I will.”

Nolan looked around the locker room at all the guys who were trying to appear to give the couple their privacy. Then, he quickly leaned in and pressed a kiss to Elias’s lips.

Elias wished Nolan had more time before he had to leave. He wanted to sit down and talk with him, figure this out, give him a proper goodbye kiss. Instead, he only reached down and squeezed his hand quickly before he let him go. He watched Nolan walk out of the locker room, and tried to remind himself that Nolan wasn’t walking out of his life.

True to his word, Nolan texted him when he was back in Winnipeg. It only said “**landed**,” but that’s all Elias had asked of him, really.

The next few days were more of the same. Neither completely ignored the other, but their contact was limited to short texts. Good morning, goodnight, and maybe a couple more throughout the day. They didn’t FaceTime or talk on the phone at all. Elias told himself that they were both busy with the end of the regular season, but it was the longest Elias had gone without hearing Nolan’s voice since February.

He hadn’t realized how much of his day-to-day life involved Nolan, even at a distance, until there was a stark lack of him.

The same day that Montreal clinched home ice advantage, the Currents were officially eliminated for a playoff berth. Seattle had managed to just barely secure the spot. He texted Nolan.

ELIAS

I’m sorry. There’s always next season.

NOLAN

congrats on home ice.

Montreal’s last two games of the regular season were on the east coast, and the coaching staff had decided to rest Elias for the second-to-last. They cited some upper-body injury that he didn’t have, and he stayed home to watch the game on TV.

By now, he’d studied Winnipeg’s schedule enough to know they didn’t have a game tonight. Elias’s first instinct was to ask Nolan for a FaceTime dinner and movie date, but he ultimately decided that sitting on the phone while forcing things to be normal would hurt more. So instead, he watched

his team win without him, didn’t meet Moose’s questioning looks, and sent his simple goodnight text at ten PM.

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Thirty-Three

NOLAN

April 2026 · Winnipeg Currents @ San Jose Orcas

The thing was, Nolan didn't want to say he felt heartbroken. They hadn't broken up. They hadn't even stopped talking. But it had been four days of pretending that their relationship wasn't a shell of what it should've been.

Nolan pulled his phone from his pocket and frowned at the empty lock screen. Still nothing from Elias. He put his phone back in his pocket as he stepped into the arena in Vegas. Over the last couple years, he'd mostly gotten used to Winnipeg's dryness, but Las Vegas was always worse. It was as if the air sucked out every drop of moisture from his body.

He was ready for the season to be over, if he was honest. He'd gotten hit in a weird way during the previous game, and it was making his shoulder injury from the Olympics sore. It usually was fine, even with hits, but something about that hit made it ache.

He also hadn't been eating well and his game hadn't been much better.

Jesper met him as he walked toward the visiting locker room. "Nolan," he said with a smile.

"Hey," Nolan sighed. He had been doing his best to seem like everything was the same, but he'd noticed Jesper, Tyler, and Matt, all giving him questioning gazes. He'd shrugged them off so far, but he was tired of keeping this mask on all the time.

"Doing okay?" Jesper asked.

Nolan decided it wouldn't kill him to be truthful with one of his friends. "No, not really."

Jesper stopped walking. His eyebrows lifted just slightly, like he hadn't really been expecting Nolan to be honest.

“Elias and I got into an argument.”

Jesper nodded. “I see. And what was it about?”

Nolan huffed a laugh, but there was no warmth in it. He rubbed a hand down his face before he answered. “The short answer is that I posted a picture of his dog. The long answer is that I don’t know if we can make this work.”

“Well, there’s a big jump between a dog photo and breaking up.”

Nolan groaned and turned to walk off to the side. He didn’t want to have this conversation in the middle of the hallway. “Maybe I’m just being dramatic and catastrophizing. But what if I’m not?”

Jesper shook his head. “I can’t tell you that because I still don’t know how we got from dog photo to possible breakup.”

Nolan wanted to say he didn’t know how they had gotten there either, but he knew that wouldn’t be helpful. “Basically, he thought it was too obvious that we were together late at night. He was worried people would see it and start speculating. I argued that it didn’t really matter, because people speculate anyway.”

Jesper hummed. “Okay, I see. He seems like he’s pretty private. No one knows anything deep about him. You are not that way. You would tell a stranger your life story if they asked in the right tone of voice.”

Nolan wasn’t sure if he should be offended or not. “But I wasn’t telling strangers my life story.”

Jesper waited for a second, clearly trying to think of a way to respond. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I’m not gay. I don’t have a boyfriend. So, I don’t know if I can really give you advice on this.”

Nolan frowned. He wasn’t *expecting* Jesper to tell him something life-changing that would solve all his problems, but he had kind of hoped that’s what would happen.

“So, what, I should just find another gay player to talk to? Someone like Elias? Oh, wait! I can’t talk to him about this. That’s the whole problem,” Nolan said, fully aware that he was somewhere between whiny and bitchy but unable to stop it.

Jesper gave him a flat look. “You two aren’t the only gay players in the whole league, you know.”

“Oh, right, let me call up the goalie in Nashville,” Nolan snapped.

Jesper sighed. “Let’s try to remember that I am not your enemy. And also, what about Halliday? We play San Jose in a couple days.”

Nolan paused. He had honestly kind of forgotten that Tristan Halliday existed. But he was an openly bisexual player. Maybe he could give Nolan some advice on how to talk to Elias about this.

It was only then that he registered the first part of what Jesper had said. He winced. “Sorry. I know you’re not my enemy. I’m just so…done. And I miss my fucking boyfriend.”

Jesper gave him a sympathetic look and patted his back. “I’m sorry. I wish I could help more.”

Nolan nodded at him. “You did. I’m gonna reach out to Halliday. Thanks, man.”

Caleb Morgan walked up to them then. “Oooh, are we gossiping? What’s the tea today, fellas?”

“Hart thinks the government is full of lizard people,” Jesper told him with full sincerity.

Nolan didn’t know where that came from, but— “Okay, that’s not what I —wait. *Are* they lizard people?”

Morgan sighed. “Let’s debate the species of the government officials after the season. We’re so close. Let’s finish it with pride and get on the ice.”

Nolan and Jesper nodded. “Got it, Cap,” Nolan told him.



A few days later, Nolan found himself sitting at a high-top table inside a San Jose coffee shop. His leg was bouncing nervously regardless of how still he tried to keep it. He’d never seen Halliday off the ice, so he was mostly looking out for someone who resembled his Instagram profile.

“Hart,” he heard from behind him.

He hadn't even realized there was a second door back there. He turned around and came face to face with Tristan Halliday. His hair was curly and dark, and his skin a tan that Nolan wished he had. Nolan had thought that maybe his pictures were unusually flattering, but he really did look like that in real life. If he had blond hair, he would look like he should be on a surfboard rather than an ice rink.

“Hey, bro.” Nolan stood up to give him a fist bump.

Halliday had a cup of coffee already in his hand, which made Nolan turn around and wonder how much he had missed happening behind him.

Halliday took the seat across from him and took a drink of his iced coffee.

“So, what did you wanna talk about?” Halliday asked.

Nolan took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing. I’m gay, my boyfriend is another player, and I was hoping to get your opinion on something as another queer player.”

Halliday raised his eyebrows. “Wow, okay. Yeah, I’ll try to help in whatever way I can.” He laughed, almost to himself. “I don’t know if anyone has ever called me a queer player before. Most people just pretend I’m straight because of Chelsea.”

“Chelsea?” Nolan questioned.

“My girlfriend,” Halliday clarified. “People see us together and just figure I grew out of liking guys.”

Nolan frowned. “That’s annoying. Does that ever bother you?”

Halliday shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Something about Halliday’s shrug made Nolan think he’d already had this conversation too many times. He forced his eyebrows to pull up from their crease and took a deep breath. “Well, I’m sorry you have to deal with that.”

Halliday just nodded, waiting.

“Okay, so. We got into an argument. He doesn’t want me to post anything ever about us. And I don’t think it’s as big of a deal as he thinks it is,” Nolan said.

Halliday gave him a weird look. “All right, if we’re doing this—if you want any advice from me, I think I probably need a little more information.”

Nolan sighed, then in one breath he said, “Okay, I stayed the night at his house in Montreal the night before we played them. I posted a picture of his dog on my Instagram story, but it was kinda late. He asked me to delete it —” Halliday winced “—which confused me. He said he doesn’t want people to speculate about our relationship, because he’s worked hard to be known as a good hockey player. He doesn’t just want to be the gay hockey player.”

“Okay, I’m following so far,” Halliday said when Nolan stopped to take a break.

“I argued that people will speculate anyway. And even if they did, who cares? So, I’m at my friend's house when I’m playing against his team. Who cares?”

Halliday didn’t say anything, so Nolan continued.

“I just feel like—I don’t know. He’s a good hockey player, so no one will care who he dates,” Nolan said.

“Wait, who is your boyfriend?” Halliday asked.

Nolan debated lying, but figured he wasn’t likely to be outed by another queer player. “Elias Mercer. But don’t spread that around, if you don’t mind.”

Halliday waved his hand like he wouldn’t even think about doing that. “Okay. So. I feel like maybe he has a point?”

Nolan started to argue, but Halliday held his hand up to stop him. “I’m not saying you don’t, but I can definitely see why he’s worried about that. Chelsea was part of hockey fandom before we were together and people really do talk about fucking anything. You check someone too hard and there’s fanfiction about it.”

Nolan wasn’t sure he liked where this was going.

“I’m not asking him to come out or anything,” Nolan said, hating how his voice sounded both small and defensive.

Halliday shook his head. “I hope you’ve told him that. But also. I can see how in his mind, you kind of are.”

Nolan dropped his shoulders. “Would coming out really be so bad, though? You’re out. You seem fine.”

Halliday huffed a laugh. “Nah, dude, not the same at all. Mercer is like a fucking hockey god. They say you’re in line to be the next Mercer. You both play in Canada. Lots of eyes are already on you. Like I said, the media mostly acts like I’ve never seen another dude’s dick outside of a locker room, and I live in California. People don’t give as many fucks about hockey here. My being out is not the same at all as the two of you being out would be.”

Nolan felt a little like a kicked puppy. He understood what Halliday was saying, but it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“So, what do I do?” Nolan asked.

Halliday gave a sad smile. “I don’t know, bro. Maybe start by thinking about how much you’re willing to keep private, then talk to him about how much he’s willing to share. There’s gotta be a middle ground somewhere.”

Nolan nodded. He hoped Halliday was right. “Thanks, man, I really appreciate you coming out to talk to me.”

Halliday gave a genuine smile as they both stood up. He handed his phone to Nolan and said, “Put your number in. Now I’m invested and gotta know how this ends up.”

Nolan gave a shocked laugh. “Okay, I’ll keep you updated, then.”

Halliday gave him another fist bump before leaving the coffee shop. Nolan waited for his Uber to take him back to the hotel before tonight’s game.

He spent the rest of the day thinking about what Halliday had said.

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Thirty-Four

ELIAS

April 2026 · Montreal

Claire walked into Elias's house without knocking. He'd told her he wasn't really in the mood for hosting anyone, but apparently, she hadn't cared one bit.

Claire pointedly did not say anything to him as she put her purse on the kitchen island. Moose was thrilled to see Claire, like he always was, so she bent down to scratch his ears.

"How's my favorite boy doing?" she cooed. Moose wiggled his whole body in a way that made Elias think he longed to jump into Claire's arms. "Are you taking care of your dad? He looks a little pitiful if you ask me."

"I can hear you," Elias said from his spot on the couch.

Claire grinned at him. "I know."

After Moose had received the proper amount of attention, she stood up and walked around the couch. She knocked his feet out of the way and sat down in her favorite spot. "I already ordered pizza. It should be here in twenty or so."

Without meaning to, the pizza pin on his nightstand flashed in his mind.

"Claire, you know I don't like eating pizza during the season," Elias said.

Claire waved him off. "Shut up, I don't care. It's not even the season technically. The regular season is over and the playoffs haven't started yet. You're basically in purgatory."

Elias knew better than to argue with her. "Fine, but I don't wanna hear any shit when I dab the grease off."

"You will be hearing shit when you dab the grease off," she told him. "It's the best part. How else are you supposed to know if it's high-quality

pizza?”

Elias shook his head. “How are you a doctor?”

She shrugged. “I’m a vet. I don’t think dogs should eat the grease. But life is too short to deny simple pleasures.”

Elias gave her a look. “You regularly give Moose your crust.”

She looked offended. “Okay, you know I hate the crust and he loves it. He’s a good boy. This is a win-win.”

From his spot on the ground, Moose let out a small bark, as if agreeing with Claire. Claire gave Elias a shit-eating grin. Try as he might, Elias never figured out how the two of them were always able to gang up on him despite being different species.

After a second, Claire’s playful expression turned more serious. “You look like shit, big brother.”

“You really know how to make a man feel good about himself, you know,” Elias said.

“Elias. Are you ready to talk about it?” she asked finally.

He wasn’t sure he was ready, but he knew telling her that probably wouldn’t go over too well. She would get the answer out of him one way or another.

“I guess I have to be. I had a fight with Nolan,” he said, and it felt like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. “He posted a picture of Moose and it was so obvious he was here late. I asked him to delete it, because I don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

Claire gave him a look. “The wrong idea like he’s your boyfriend?”

Elias groaned. “Don’t say it like that.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “How should I say it then? Or is he not your boyfriend anymore?”

“Of course he’s still my boyfriend,” Elias rushed to say, but he realized there wasn’t really an “of course” about it. This easily could be a relationship-ending event.

“Good to know. Back to the issue,” Claire said. She had never been known for her subtlety.

“I don’t want people talking. I don’t want my whole career to just be about me being gay, Claire. My sexuality shouldn’t matter,” he told her.

She nodded. “What did he say when you told him that? Wait, you *did* tell him that, right?”

“Yes, I told him that. He said he thinks people will care more about the fact that I’m a good player than the fact that I’m gay. But he’s young, Claire, he hasn’t been in the league that long. The media fucking loves a headline. They’ll latch onto it and make me the poster boy for league inclusion. I don’t want that. I just wanna play hockey.”

Claire took a deep breath. “I’m gonna ask you something. And I want you to think about it. Don’t immediately answer. I really want you to think about it first.” Elias braced himself. Claire continued, “You said you just want to play hockey. Are you okay with just playing hockey if the price of that is losing Nolan?”

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of his chest. For a second, Elias tried to imagine his life without Nolan. He tried to picture more Cups, retiring with the Royals, becoming a hall-of-famer. He imagined doing it without Nolan.

It fucking sucked.

He didn’t want any of it if it meant not having Nolan.

“There it is,” Claire whispered.

Elias suddenly felt more panicky than he had a few minutes ago. “But I still don’t want to come out,” he told her desperately.

Claire shrugged. “Then don’t. Is that what he’s asking of you?”

Elias shook his head. “No, but…it’s pretty much the same thing, right? He wants to post about being together.”

Claire reached forward and squeezed his leg. “It’s not, though. You can have a relationship without making it a thing. Think about how many celebrities have relationships where they just exist without explicitly confirming it. And if an A-list celebrity can do it, so can you. No offense, but you are not at the same level as Taylor Swift.”

Elias knew that, logically. But emotionally, it felt like if he gave an inch, they would take a mile.

Claire must have recognized his internal debate was still going on. So, she said, “Elias, I’m not asking you to decide whether you’re right. I’m asking you to decide what’s worth losing.”

And didn’t that hit Elias like a bus?

“I don’t want to lose him,” Elias whispered.

“Then don’t. But think about what that means,” she told him.

The doorbell rang, and it was like Elias suddenly remembered a whole world existed outside of the sofa.

Claire got out to get the pizza, while Elias forced himself to stand up. He met her in the kitchen and pulled a couple plates out. More than ever, he suddenly wanted to call Nolan and hear his voice.

"I love him," Elias said out loud, realizing it for the first time.

Claire looked up at him. "Yeah? Are you just figuring that out?"

Elias tilted his head. "Why are you saying that like you already knew?"

Something in Claire's expression softened. "Eli, I've known you loved him since the first time you talked about him. I'm glad you finally caught up."



The next morning, Elias woke up and decided he needed a plan. But before he could make a plan, he needed to decide what he was comfortable with.

He'd heard and understood what Claire had said, but it wasn't easy to completely abandon beliefs he'd held his whole life. He was still terrified of being reduced to his sexuality, but he was starting to realize he was more terrified of losing the man he loved.

Putting a name to the emotion he'd been feeling was still strange.

It had been years since Elias had been in love. His last real relationship had been during his twenties, and that one had been so different from this one. His ex was just discovering his sexuality and was nowhere near ready to tell people. Elias's family had known he was seeing someone, but they'd never met him as his boyfriend.

Elias tried to imagine that kind of relationship with Nolan. Introducing him as just a friend to everyone important in his life, as if Nolan wasn't at the top of the list. He didn't want that. He wanted to be able to hold Nolan's hand, kiss his shoulder at family dinner, build his life with him.

He also thought about how public he was willing to be. Something else his sister had told him was standing out in his mind. Claire had pointed out that A-list celebrities had relationships that were private without being secret. He spent way too long reading several articles about celebrities that kept their private lives private.

Elias also tried to remember that this was still a new relationship. They were only a few months in. They had time to figure out together what their future looked like.

He could do that, he thought. It took a little time, but he was starting to think that people questioning his relationship wasn't the worst thing, especially if he never confirmed it. But that didn't mean he would deny it, either.

He had a brief vision of eating dinner in Montreal together in public and liked the way it felt.

Elias had never expected anything public for himself. He never thought he could have his partner wearing his jersey at his game—not like his teammates' wives did. He never expected the family he built to meet him on the ice after he won the Stanley Cup. He knew the minute the media got wind of a gay relationship, they would never care about anything else.

But maybe it wasn't that black and white. Maybe the media would see him hanging out with Nolan and just assume they were good friends. Maybe people online would speculate. But maybe he didn't have to let it be his defining characteristic.

Today was Winnipeg's final game of the season. Given that it was in San Jose, Elias knew Nolan was more than likely still asleep.

He just wanted to talk to Nolan. He missed him. Texting wasn't enough. He wanted to hear his boyfriend's voice. He wanted to feel their bodies together.

He started going through the logistics in his head. Montreal's first playoff game was against the Tampa Bay Herons in three days. The Currents would no doubt be flying back to Winnipeg after their game in San Jose tonight.

Elias sat on his couch and pulled up flights to Winnipeg. If he booked it now, he could be in Winnipeg by the time Nolan got home tonight. He bought the ticket without a second thought.

Next on his to-do list was to call Claire.

To his surprise, she answered just before the call went to voicemail. "Hey, I have a patient in five minutes. What's up?"

"Can you keep Moose for a few days?" he asked.

"Next week? Yeah, I already said I would when you go to Florida," she told him.

He shook his head even though he knew his sister couldn't see him. "No, tonight. I got a flight to Winnipeg."

"Oh. Of course. If you have to leave before five, just leave him at your place and I'll come get him as soon as I get off," she said, and Elias could

hear the smile in her voice.

“Thank you,” he said. “For Moose and for helping me get out of my own head.”

He could just imagine the way her smile would soften. “Anytime. That’s what little sisters are for. Now, go get your man back.”

Elias laughed. “That’s the plan.”

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Thirty-Five

NOLAN

April 2026 · Winnipeg

Somehow, Nolan was always shocked at how biting the Winnipeg air was after being in California. He had just barely woken up when the flight landed, so he hadn't noticed the air as much. But now that the team had been dropped off at the practice facility so they could all go home, Nolan noticed the chill of the air.

They'd won in San Jose, which was nice. He'd scored a goal, so that lifted his spirits some. But there hadn't been a text from Elias when the game ended, so that brought him back down again.

Now that the season was over, Nolan was planning to get some ice cream and finally allow himself to cry when he got home. He'd been trying his best to keep a brave face on, but he was tired of that. There was no reason for him not to have twenty-four hours of wallowing in self-pity, starting in Jesper's backseat on the way home.

Jesper and Tyler were already moving toward Jesper's car when they both stopped abruptly. Nolan had been so busy feeling sorry for himself that he didn't even notice until he was running into Tyler.

"Yo, what the fuck," Nolan complained.

When he didn't receive an answer, he looked up.

Elias was there, leaning against a rental car in the players' parking lot.

"Hi," he said when their eyes finally met, but Nolan didn't actually hear him so much as see his mouth form the word.

Jesper and Tyler shared a look that Nolan didn't have the energy to decode. "We'll give you two some privacy," Jesper said as he grabbed Tyler's arm to pull him away.

“I kinda wanted to hear, though,” Nolan heard Tyler mumble, followed by what sounded like a smack on his arm.

Nolan stepped forward to Elias. “Are you really here?” He hated the way his voice cracked.

“Yes, baby, I’m really here,” Elias said with a tentative smile.

At the pet name, Nolan lost all control he’d been hanging onto. He felt the tears that had been gathering in his eyes start flowing down his cheeks. He opened his mouth to say something—anything—but all that came out was a wet sob.

“If you’re going to cry every time I surprise you, maybe I shouldn’t surprise you anymore,” Elias said, voice caught between hesitant and teasing.

Nolan took another step forward, then stopped himself. “Can I hug you?” he quietly asked.

“Please,” Elias said, already holding his arms open as he closed the distance between them.

The second he was in his boyfriend’s arms, the sobs started coming out in earnest. He was definitely being too loud, getting tears and snot all over Elias’s shirt. Elias just held him, chests pressed together, peppering kisses against his hair. As he finally let himself feel everything he’d been pushing down, he realized it had only been a few days since he’d been close to Elias in this way.

“I missed you,” Nolan confessed.

Nolan heard Elias take a sharp breath. “Me, too. Let’s go home, baby.”

Nolan nodded and took one last steadying breath, willing the tears to go away for now. He wanted nothing more than to go home and fall asleep next to Elias.

But he knew things weren’t fixed yet. “We should probably talk,” Nolan told him as he buckled his seatbelt.

Elias reached over and grabbed Nolan’s hand as he pulled forward to the road. “Tomorrow. You need rest tonight.”

Nolan bit his lip. It wasn’t until they were pulling up to his apartment that he spoke again. “I hate to be like this, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep tonight if I don’t know where we stand.”

Elias nodded and let Nolan lead the way. He didn’t say anything as they walked up the stairs and into the apartment. With every step they took, Nolan’s anxiety increased.

The second they were inside, Nolan fed Wayne to get that out of the way. Elias waited patiently for him to finish. Then, with their bags put down and shoes by the door, Elias took Nolan's hand and led him to the living room. Elias sat on the couch first, waiting for Nolan to join him. After a second, Nolan did. He put more space in between them than he normally would. Elias immediately scooted closer so their knees were touching.

"I still want to talk tomorrow. But, to ease your worries tonight, I love you. I love you so fucking much and I want to make this work," Elias told him, his eyes unwavering.

"Thank fucking God," Nolan said before he could stop crying again. "I love you, too. I love you so much, Elias. I've been fucking miserable without you."

Elias put his hand on Nolan's knee and squeezed. "Glad it wasn't just me," he said with a smile.

Nolan stood up, pulling Elias with him. "Can we go to bed now?"

Elias laughed and stopped Nolan from moving any further. "First. Come here," he said, voice gentle but leaving no room for argument.

Nolan didn't have any fight left in him, anyway.

Elias pulled Nolan against him and pressed their lips together. It was the first kiss since the locker room after the game, but the first real kiss since before the fight. Nolan let every emotion he'd felt over the last week pour into the kiss.

After a minute or two, Elias pulled back. He was smiling. "Great goal tonight, by the way."

Nolan laughed. "You're so annoying," he told his boyfriend, the fondness in his tone evident.

Finally, Elias let Nolan drag him to his bedroom. Nolan fell asleep, for the first time in a week, not worried about the next day.

Morning met them with sunlight through the windows. Something even brighter settled in his heart. Elias Mercer loved him. Elias was *in love* with him. Nolan wished he could go back and tell his eleven-year-old self this is where he would end up. He wouldn't have believed him.

Next to him, Elias had his eyes closed, but Nolan could tell by his breathing that he wasn't all the way asleep. Nolan twisted to face him, and took the moment to just admire his boyfriend. They still had to talk today but Nolan had a strong feeling it would turn out all right.

“I can feel you looking at me,” Elias said, voice thick with a good night's rest.

“Just admiring the view,” Nolan told him before leaning forward to press a kiss against his nose.

“I love you,” Elias said, and Nolan smiled. He wasn’t sure he would ever get tired of hearing it.

“I love you, too,” he said. He definitely wouldn’t ever get tired of saying it.

Elias took a second to stretch, making dramatic groans that made Nolan grin. Then his expression turned serious and he met Nolan’s eyes.

Even though he genuinely believed things would work out, it still made his heart drop. His body tensed, preparing for bad news.

“My love,” Elias said softly, reaching out to rub his hand down Nolan’s arm. “We’re okay. It’s okay.”

Nolan felt silly, but nodded anyway. “I know, I know.”

“Let’s get coffee, then we can talk. I want us to be on the same page as soon as possible,” he told Nolan.

Nolan almost laughed. “You be my guest. Respectfully, though, caffeine will not help me at all right now.”

So together, they made their way to Nolan’s kitchen. For someone who had only been there once, Elias sure did move around like it was his own home. While Elias made his coffee, Nolan sat on his bar stool. His body was practically vibrating with nervous energy.

When he was finished, Elias set his coffee down on the island where Nolan was sitting and pulled Nolan against his chest. For a few minutes, they just stood there, arms wrapped around each other. More than once over the last week, Nolan had worried he wouldn’t ever get this again. He had never been happier to be wrong about something.

Elias’s breathing was steady and Nolan used the rhythm to ground himself. When he felt settled, he looked up at Elias. His boyfriend was getting good at reading him by now, so Elias leaned down to kiss him.

He really had missed Elias so much. Which almost felt silly of him, because he’d gone longer periods without seeing Elias than this before. But the lack of Elias in his most recent days had made them stretch on in the worst way.

“Okay, I first want to apologize. I shouldn’t have gotten as upset as I did,” Elias started when they sat on the couch. “But more importantly, I

want to apologize for making you think you didn’t matter in my life.”

For a brief moment, Nolan had the most absurd thought: this was the benefit of dating an older man. A twenty-year-old guy would never have the emotional intelligence to say that.

“Okay…” Nolan said, because even though he was twenty years old himself, he knew this was not the time to voice that thought.

“I still don’t want to come out, but I’ve come to realize that there’s a difference between keeping a relationship private and keeping it secret,” Elias told him, then took a deep breath like that was that.

Nolan was a little shocked. He honestly had been expecting to come into this conversation and be the one to almost fully give in. He would have been a little sad about it for the rest of his life, but if it meant keeping Elias, he would have made himself smaller.

“Okay, okay,” he huffed a laugh. “Sorry, I know I’m saying that a lot. I’m just trying to process this. Babe, I would never force you to come out. And I should've asked before I posted the picture. I get that now. I just want to be allowed to be proud of you without feeling like I’m doing something that you would rather be kept hidden.”

Elias’s expression softened. “I never wanted—” he paused for a second, then continued, “Okay, maybe I did want it hidden. But not because of you, never because of you. Because of *me*. I spent so much of my life with hockey being the most important thing. It took me by surprise to realize that wasn’t the case anymore.”

Nolan couldn’t help himself—he let out a small gasp. Of all the things he thought Elias would tell him, saying he was more important than hockey was nowhere on that list.

“I love you,” Nolan blurted.

Elias laughed softly. “I love you, too.” He took a deep breath. “So, that being said, I still don’t think I’m comfortable with anything that would explicitly confirm our relationship. I don’t want to make Valentine’s posts on Instagram or anything. But…I do think it’s okay if people think I love you, because I do. We can live without confirming our relationship, but I don’t want to deny it either.”

Nolan wanted to climb on top of this man. Fuck, he loved him so much. But before he let that side of himself take over, he wanted to make sure they were clear on what was okay.

“No Valentine's posts. Got it. But what about the picture of Moose? Is something like that okay?”

Elias nodded. “Yeah, I thought about it like something called soft launching, but never taking it past that.”

Nolan laughed at how old that made Elias sound. “Okay, perfect. That’s great. Can we skip to the happy ending now?” he asked.

Elias’s eyes were soft and fond. “Only if I can be your leading man.”

Nolan leaned over and said, “Elias, you’ve been my leading man since I was eleven years old.”

Then he kissed him.

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Thirty-Six

ELIAS

April 2026 · Winnipeg

The rest of their day was wonderfully mundane. They spent the better part of the morning in bed, making up for lost time. Elias had Nolan back. He hadn't realized how much he'd needed that.

Sometime around lunch, Nolan trailed his finger down Elias's chest. "How would you feel about going to Matt Barrow's for dinner tonight?"

Which was how Elias found himself parking his rental car in front of a gorgeous two-story house. Nolan immediately got out and walked to the front door with the familiarity of someone coming home. He didn't bother knocking, just took Elias's hand and pulled him inside.

Nolan led them to a kitchen tucked away in the back of the house. A petite brunette woman stood at the sink, washing her hands. She looked up when she heard them, her face brightening when she saw Nolan.

"Hi, honey," she greeted him as she dried off her hands. Nolan dropped his hand and walked around the island to meet the woman. "I almost forgot what you looked like," she told Nolan.

Nolan laughed and melted into her hug. "It hasn't been that long," he told her.

She patted his back before pulling away. "Any amount of time is too long for me." Only then did she turn to look at Elias. "Hi, you must be the boyfriend. I'm Louise Barrow, nice to meet you."

Elias stuck out his hand, but Louise ignored it, pulling him in for a hug instead.

"Elias Mercer," he told her when she let him go. "You have a beautiful home."

She laughed. "Only when the kids decide to pick up after themselves."

As if on cue, Elias heard a voice from behind him. “Nol, can you beat this level for me?” The voice cracked, and immediately Elias knew it was a teenage boy. Nolan grinned and gestured for Elias to follow him.

Nolan plopped down on the couch next to a lanky boy that couldn’t have been older than fourteen. “Elias, this is Brady, Matt’s youngest. Brady, this is my boyfriend, Elias.”

Brady flushed. “Nice to meet you, Elias. I’m a big fan,” he said, then leaned over to Nolan. He did not lower his voice when he said, “He looks kinda old.”

Nolan threw his head back and cackled. Despite the insult, Elias smiled.

“It’s kinda hot,” Nolan told Brady with a wink at Elias.

“Go be gross somewhere else,” a teenage girl said as she walked into the room.

The girl was the spitting image of her mother. “Hi, I’m Emma,” she told Elias with a flip of her hair. “You sure he’s the one you wanna end up with? There’s probably better options out there.”

Elias met Nolan's gaze. “I’m sure. He’s just perfect for me.”

Nolan’s eyes melted. Elias winked.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Elias heard as Matt Barrow finally walked into the room.

Elias turned around and immediately stuck his hand out for Barrow. “Good to see you again. Thank you for inviting me into your home. You have a beautiful family.”

“I know,” Barrow said. “And your boy is part of it. He’s got more than just you who love him. Don’t forget that.”

Elias nodded. “Of course. I’m glad he has you all.”

From the kitchen, Elias heard Louise call out, “Nolan, sweetheart, can you come set the table?” Nolan jumped up and gave Elias a quick kiss as he passed him.

“Bleh,” Emma called out, but Elias saw the way she was smiling.

Elias was stunned by how easily Nolan kissed him in front of the Barrows—and how none of them even blinked. He'd never been comfortable with PDA before. What surprised him most was how little it bothered him now.

Soon enough, Elias was joining the rest of the family around the dining table. The kids kept teasing Nolan all through dinner, and it was clear to see how much Nolan relished in the older brother role. He seemed like he was

good with kids of all ages, and it made Elias look forward to bringing Nolan home to the Greers in Montreal.

After dinner, everyone decided to take their spots on the couch and watch a movie together. Nolan and Elias took the loveseat. Louise handed them a large blanket without a word. Elias didn't have time to feel awkward about cuddling with Nolan in front of the Barrows because Nolan immediately looked at him like this was all he had ever wanted.

"I love you," Nolan whispered only for Elias to hear.

"I love you, too," Elias said back and squeezed his hip.

When the movie was over and Elias drove them back to Nolan's apartment, it finally set in that things were going to be okay. He was getting one more night to fall asleep with the man he loved, then his team was going to the playoffs.

Halfway there, Nolan's phone vibrated with a new text. He groaned, then said, "My dad just texted me."

Elias hummed. "Oh, yeah, what did he say?"

Nolan was already typing on his phone. "He wants me to call him tomorrow to talk about off-season training."

Elias turned to glance at him. "My love, you just finished a 110-point season. You won the gold medal at the Olympics. You are allowed to rest during the time of year specifically designated for rest. Tell him you'll call him in a few days."

Nolan sighed and thought about it for a second. "You know what? You're right. I earned a fucking break." He typed out a response on his phone and then locked it.

As they were crawling into bed together that night, Elias looked at Nolan.

"Got any plans for the next few weeks?" he asked as casually as he could manage.

Nolan nodded seriously. "Yes, I'm going to start a proposal on how to solve world hunger."

Elias laughed. "Finally. It's about time someone did something."

Nolan elbowed him playfully. "I was really just planning to watch hockey since I'm not playing it until next season."

Elias nodded and scooted down, pulling Nolan against him with the movement. "Any team you're rooting for?"

Deadpan, Nolan replied, "I think Tampa Bay, probably."

“You’re such a little shit,” Elias told him.

Nolan grinned. “Yes,” he agreed immediately.

“Well,” Elias started, “if you’re so hell-bent on supporting Tampa Bay, I can get you tickets to see their first game against us in Montreal.”

Nolan rolled his eyes affectionately. “Baby, I will absolutely be at the game in Montreal, cheering for the Royals.”

Elias gave him a quick kiss. “Good. I’d hate for my boyfriend to be rooting against me.”

Nolan kissed him again, slower and deeper. Finally, he pulled back and looked at Elias. “My love,” he said softly, “I am always rooting for you. Unless we’re playing against each other.”

Honestly, Elias wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

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Epilogue

NOLAN

May 2026 · Montreal Royals vs. Carolina Flight

The minute they were through the door of Elias's house, Nolan pushed Elias against the door and dropped to his knees.

"Babe, no sex during playoffs," Elias said, but he bucked up toward Nolan.

Nolan looked at Elias through his lashes, and he heard Elias suck in a breath. "Get the fuck out of here with that. It's been weeks since you've let me anywhere near your dick."

With clumsy hands, Nolan undid Elias's pants and leaned forward to mouth at his boyfriend's rapidly hardening dick. Before he could get much further, Elias pulled him up.

"Baby, please," he said and pressed a quick kiss to Nolan. "I don't want to risk it. Tomorrow is game seven of the Eastern Conference Finals. I know you understand, but the liquor is making you hornier than normal."

Nolan shook his head, even though he knew Elias was probably right. "It's you, not the liquor. You look like *that*, and I miss your cock. My body misses your cock." He was well aware that he was whining, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Elias pulled Nolan against him and placed a kiss where his neck met his shoulder. "I'll make you a deal. If we win tomorrow, I'll fuck you before the final round. Okay?"

He pushed his hips forward and ground them against Elias's. "Fine. Deal. You better fucking win," he grumbled.

Elias grabbed his waist and pushed him back. "I need you to give me space. I only have so much willpower. Especially when you're giving me those eyes and begging."

And because Nolan was who he was, he looked up at Elias and gave him his best bedroom eyes.

Elias groaned and threw his head back against the wall he had been leaning on. Nolan winced—it actually sounded like maybe it hurt. “You’re a fucking menace,” Elias told him.

Nolan reached down and gave Elias’s dick one last squeeze for good measure. “I love you, too,” he said before he turned and headed toward the bedroom.

Moose stopped him along the way. Nolan flopped himself down on the ground without much finesse. “I promise I’m more coordinated,” he told Moose. “I’m a professional athlete. My whole career is basically dancing on a razor blade on ice.”

Moose did not respond, but he did throw his body against Nolan and wag his tail.

Nolan heard the sounds of Elias making Moose’s food. Moose noticed too, because he trotted off, leaving Nolan sitting on the floor. He was still sitting there when Elias walked over to him.

“Come on, my love. Let’s get you to bed.” Elias held out a hand to pull Nolan up.

Nolan followed Elias, once again thankful to sleep in the same bed as the man he was in love with.



The next evening, Nolan followed Elias’s parents and siblings into the family section. He sat in between Claire and Ben, with Stephen and Marie on the other side of Claire.

Elias’s family had welcomed Nolan with open arms. The Mercers were so different from his own family. They didn’t make him feel like he had to earn a place beside them. They simply made room.

Nolan winked at Elias during warmups, which earned him an elbow from Claire to his side. Nolan shoved her back, secretly thrilled to be comfortable enough with Claire that they could be playful. He’d been so nervous they would all think he was way too young. After all, the baby of their family was four years older than Nolan. But from day one, they had treated him like he was just an extension of Elias.

The first period began with Elias winning the faceoff, and Nolan nodded, pleased as if he was on the ice too.

“Great start,” Ben told him.

Within the first minute, Elias made a shot on goal, but Carolina’s goalie was good. Nolan found himself leaning forward every time Elias was on the ice. By halfway through the third period, neither team had a goal.

With ten minutes left on the clock, Montreal finally got a goal. Nolan jumped up with the Mercers, the loud cheers of the crowd all blending in together. Nolan watched in amusement as Powell skated down the ice doing finger guns, yelling, “Pow, pow.”

Carolina pulled their goalie with three minutes left, but try as they might, it didn’t make a difference. The final horn sounded with Montreal winning.

The players all swarmed the ice. Elias was grinning ear to ear. The Montreal Royals had won the Eastern Conference title and were moving on to the Stanley Cup Final.

Nolan was so fucking proud of his boyfriend.

Hours later, after the team had celebrated, Nolan found himself back in Elias’s house. He was thankful for their foresight to feed Moose before the game. Elias had made him a promise, and he fully intended to cash in on his prize.

They wasted no time stripping down to their boxer briefs as soon as they got into the bedroom. Nolan fell back on the bed. Elias was watching him with hungry eyes. It made Nolan feel like he was being stalked by a predator. He fucking loved it.

Elias crawled on top of him. He was both broader and taller than Nolan and it made Nolan feel small in the absolute best way. Nolan loved being an athlete—loved being strong—but he especially loved having a boyfriend that was big and strong enough to manhandle him.

Nolan reached out and ran his hands over Elias’s chest. He was just hairy enough that Nolan never forgot he was a man. He lightly scraped his fingernails along the skin and relished in the moan Elias let out.

In response, Elias ground down, pushing their cocks against each other. Even through the fabric of both pairs of underwear, it felt divine. Nolan moaned loudly before he could stop himself.

He reached down to tug on Elias’s waistband. “Baby, get these things out of the fucking way,” he whined.

Elias was already sitting up, pulling off his own underwear before reaching for Nolan's. As soon as Nolan’s dick was free, it bounced up, red and begging for attention.

Elias bent down and took the tip into his mouth. He sucked on it for a second, as if he was helpless to resist. He pulled back quickly and lowered his head until he could take Nolan’s balls in his mouth.

“I am not going to last. I need you inside me *now*,” Nolan told him.

Elias pulled away and met Nolan’s eyes. Despite it only being a few seconds, his lips already looked puffy. “Well, I did promise you,” Elias said before he started kissing his way up Nolan’s body.

He reached down and started rubbing his fingers against Nolan’s rim. It had been far too long since Elias had touched him there, and Nolan pushed back against his hand on reflex. Elias took his time putting the first finger in.

Nolan grabbed his face with both hands and forced Elias to make eye contact. “Eli, I’m serious. Do not fucking tease me right now. We can take our time later. I will not last much longer and I would much rather cum with you inside of me.”

Elias bent down and gave Nolan a filthy kiss. He pushed a second finger in, scissoring them in a way that felt way too slow. Nolan was going to have to take matters into his own hands.

He reached in between their bodies and grabbed Elias’s cock. It was warm and thick in his hand as he led it toward his hole. Elias chuckled low but let Nolan do it. Nolan let out a deep breath when he felt the head push against his rim, which was luckily now free of Elias’s fingers.

Elias took mercy on him and pushed himself in quickly. Nolan had to squeeze the base of his dick to keep from coming at the feeling of being completely fucking full.

“Fuck, I missed this,” he told Elias as Elias bottomed out.

Elias kissed him again, sweeter this time. He gave a slow thrust before pulling almost all the way out and slamming back in.

From there, he kept up a hard and fast pace. It was exactly what Nolan needed. It only took a few thrusts before Nolan felt the familiar tingle.

“Babe, I’m gonna—” he started, but didn’t get the chance to finish his thought before his release shot out of him, painting their chests in his cum.

Elias was right behind him, movements becoming less controlled as his own orgasm washed over him. When he was finished, he collapsed on top

of Nolan, almost crushing him with the dead weight of his body.

“I love you,” Elias said, panting.

Nolan could feel his cock softening inside him, so he clenched around it. Elias hissed. “Babe, don’t, I’m too sensitive.”

Nolan kissed his hair. “And here I thought I was the only one this eager.”

Elias shook his head against Nolan’s chest. With some effort, Nolan wrapped his arms around Elias, even though they felt like they weighed a million pounds.

“No, love. You think I wasn’t missing you just as much?” Elias asked.

Nolan thought about arguing, but he was too tired. “I love you, too, by the way,” he said.

They lay there in silence, both just waiting for their breathing to return to normal. After a few minutes, Elias said, “I hope we sweep Colorado. I don’t want to wait that long to fuck you again.”

Nolan groaned. He hadn’t even considered that yet. “Well,” he said, “I guess that’ll be good motivation for you to win.”

Elias placed a kiss on his chest. “You’re the best motivation I could think of. I wanna win it for you.”

Nolan ran his fingers through Elias’s hair. “No, win it for you. But don’t forget, I’ll be here either way.”

Elias smiled. “Thank fucking God.”

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Coming next in Beyond the Ice

Book Two

The thing was, Alex shouldn't have been disappointed. Landon had told him he would be there that evening. Maybe evening meant different things to different people. Sure, Alex defined evening as sometime between five and nine P.M., but maybe Landon had a more flexible definition. It was only 10:17. That could still be considered evening.

Alex checked his phone again. Nothing. The last message he'd sent to Landon was still sitting on Read.

Next to him, Peaches let out a long sigh. Alex rolled his eyes at her. What did a five-pound Yorkie have to sigh about?

Honestly, even if Landon didn't show up, that was fine. So what if Alex had had a shitty day and was looking forward to some release? He could do that on his own if he really needed to. It wasn't like Landon was his boyfriend. It wasn't his job to comfort Alex on his bad days.

From the coffee table, his phone pinged. He hated how quickly he sat up and grabbed it. He looked at the screen, already preparing for an apology text from Landon.

Instead, it was his daily affirmations app.

Everything is unfolding for my greater good.

He groaned. What did that even mean? It sounded vaguely religious. He didn't know why he hadn't deleted the damn app yet. It always went off at random times, usually when he was focused on something else.

Huh. Maybe that was part of the point.

His phone pinged again, and he looked at it again, ready to swipe away the repeat notification.

This time, it really was a text from Landon.

LANDON
fuck dude otw sorry today was crazy

Alex couldn’t have stopped his small smile even if he tried. So what if he was happy to see that Landon was still coming over? That wasn’t a crime. Before he could type out a reply, another text came through.

LANDON
i’ll get food. did u eat yet

Alex shook his head. It was after ten at night—of course he’d eaten. But Landon was trying to be sweet.

ALEX
I could eat :)

Twenty minutes later, Landon was walking through his apartment door. Alex had left it unlocked for him. Lately, he’d been considering giving Landon a key.

Landon smiled, his blond hair tucked into a backwards cap. He was in a band t-shirt and ripped jeans, and Alex could see the tattoos inked across his arms and legs. Alex couldn’t wait to see them without the clothes covering them.

Landon kicked his shoes off at the front door. Once again, Alex was thankful Landon had never argued about leaving them there. This was a Korean household, after all.

Alex stood up to greet him. Landon held a to-go bag in his hand, shifting it out of the way so he could give Alex a quick kiss. He pulled away too quickly, and Alex frowned before pulling him back in for another kiss.

“Whoa there, tiger,” Landon told him. “There will be plenty of time for that after. I got your favorite.” He raised the bag.

Alex opened it to see containers from his favorite Thai restaurant. Grinning, Alex kissed Landon again before leading them to his kitchen and unpacking the food.

“You got me pad see ew?” Alex asked.

Landon grinned. “I know it’s your favorite.”

Alex was desperate to get this man in bed.

He started spooning the food into a bowl and spotted the broccoli. He bit back a sigh. It wasn’t like he was allergic to broccoli, he just always ordered everything without it. But it was fine. He could just take it out. Landon had tried his best, and he looked so pleased with himself.

A couple of hours later, Alex lay in bed feeling warm and fuzzy, his arm around Landon as he cuddled into Alex's chest. He could feel Landon's breath on his skin. Alex let himself hope that Landon would fall asleep.

He didn't, of course. It was only a few minutes later that Landon pressed a kiss to Alex's chest before pulling away. He stretched as he sat up.

"You could stay," Alex said, hating how pathetic he sounded.

Landon was already shaking his head. "Nah, I have an early morning. And isn't there an away game soon? Don't you have to get ready for that?"

"Yeah, of course. I get that. No worries," Alex told him. He hated that he felt both let down about Landon leaving and secretly thrilled that Landon had remembered the team's schedule.

"This was fun, though. You're always fun." Landon winked as he pulled his pants on.

Damn him for making Alex's heart flutter.

Before he left, Landon cupped Alex's face as he gave him a sweet kiss. He smiled and told Alex that he would see him soon. At least he had that to look forward to. Alex flopped back onto his bed, the smell of sex and Landon still on the sheets.

And that was the last time he heard from Landon for four months.

Book two in the Beyond the Ice series is coming in 2027.

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Acknowledgements

I cannot believe I’m writing this. I always wanted to be an author when I grew up, and it feels surreal to finally be sitting here with a finished novel. I started writing this book on May 15, 2026. Seventy-five days later, on July 29, I finished the first draft. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without the people who supported me along the way.

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About the Author

Rachael Nicolas writes queer romances about messy feelings, big personalities, and hockey players who fall even harder than they hit. She lives in Texas with her husband, two daughters, a pit bull, and a Bengal cat—and has never liked anything casually in her life. When she isn't writing fictional men kissing, she can usually be found watching hockey, drawing, or reading romance.

Frozen Currents is her debut novel and the first book in the Beyond the Ice series.

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