

Ee-oh-lay

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Summary

Shane has a surprise for Ilya.

Shane and Ilya hadn't bothered closing the blinds when they'd finished fucking the previous night. They'd been nearly asleep, a sweaty entanglement of limbs and hair and sheets and muffled moans, when Shane had remembered that he had a surprise for Ilya, one that necessitated setting an alarm and getting up early. He'd only told Ilya about the surprise part before they'd fallen asleep, and now that the first light of the day began to filter through the leafy canopy outside, Shane knew he wasn't going to fall back asleep. As quietly as he could, he reached for his phone and turned off the alarm he'd set.

Beside him, Ilya twitched in his sleep, his lashes fluttering delicately against his face. Shane wanted to reach out and stroke his face, and he wanted to watch Ilya sleep forever. He wanted to hold Ilya and be held by Ilya.

Ilya inhaled sharply, suddenly awake beside Shane now.

"Good morning," Ilya said, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. His t-shirt rode up, exposing the taut skin of his belly, and Shane considered abandoning his plan entirely to spend the morning in bed. "Surprise."

"Surprise?" Shane said.

"You said there was surprise," Ilya said. "For me."

"There is," Shane said.

"But you are not naked and there is no breakfast in bed," Ilya said, pursing his lips into a pout. "So how can there be surprise?"

"There are lots of kinds of surprises," Shane said, to which Ilya looked doubtful.

"Canadians are too boring for real surprises," he said finally, wrapping Shane in a hug and rolling over onto him. Ilya's weight pressed the air out of Shane's lungs momentarily, leaving him with the feeling of having been suspended in space.

"This is an exciting Canadian surprise," Shane said, pushing Ilya off of him. "We have to go now, or we'll be too late."

"The surprise can't wait two minutes for me to suck your dick?" Ilya said. He flashed a smile at Shane.

"My dick will be here when we get back," Shane said. "And you can have it for longer than two minutes."

"One minute is maybe actually all I need," Ilya said.

"Fuck you," Shane said, swatting Ilya's elbow as he pushed the blankets off of them.

"I know you want me to fuck you," Ilya said.

“Fuck off.” Shane swung his legs out of bed, reaching for a pair of shorts on the floor with his feet. He stepped into the shorts—Ilya’s, it appeared—and pressed his face against the glass of the window. The sky was turning a golden yellow, last night’s spiderwebs heavy with dew as a new day began. They needed to get moving.

“I know you like it,” Ilya said, which wasn’t wrong, though Shane was unwilling to give him the satisfaction of knowing this.

“I’d like it more if you got dressed and met me outside,” Shane said.

He shuffled into a shirt—his own, this time—he found on the floor and went to the back door, where he’d stashed a small bag with a blanket and an apple for each of them last night. He was lacing up his sneakers when Ilya appeared, wearing a Team Canada shirt from the World Juniors the year before they’d met. It was an old shirt from the back of Shane’s closet, bought back before he had filled out the musculature of his frame, and the fabric was tight against Ilya’s body. The entire scene made the blood in Shane’s ears pound, forcing him to once again consider abandoning his plan so Ilya could fuck him face-first into the sofa all morning. Ilya took an apple from Shane and bit off a chunk.

“Was that surprise?” Ilya said. “After I cook you tuna melt, you finally make me breakfast in return? Raw apple?”

“Not the surprise,” Shane said. “Not even close. And I literally cooked for you last night.”

He motioned for Ilya to follow him out the back door, where they passed the ashen remains of last night’s fire. The blackened coals were still damp from the water they’d used to extinguish the flames. At the end of the patio, they caught the deer path that hugged the shoreline of the lake. Shane reached for Ilya’s hand and held it tightly, even though the trail was really only wide enough for them to walk single file and the brush was summer-dense.

He kept turning around and smiling at Ilya, thrilled that they could act like this outside of the confines of a hotel room or a locked door, even though more than once Shane was convinced he’d gotten lost. With most of his mind focused on Ilya, these woods where he’d spent so much time suddenly seemed unfamiliar—larger and denser than he’d noticed. Shane prided himself on his observation skills.

He made sure to tell his parents as often as he could that he was grateful for his mom for introducing him to hockey and grateful for his dad for introducing him to birdwatching. Hockey had been the first love of his life, but birding afforded him access to a supernatural calm that anchored him through the ups and downs of each season—the hockey season, the year’s seasons.

Everyone who wanted to play on the big stage had to learn how to face the pressures of the league, and Shane had never told any of the guys where his poise came from. His ability to stand up tall in the face of blaring noise and flashing lights, his presence of mind to follow the puck up and down the ice—these were honed just as much by the hours he and his mom spent at the rink as by the hours he and his dad had spent together in the woods around their cottage while he was growing up.

There was never enough time for everything he wanted to do. A lifetime wouldn't be enough, not with everything that was on the cusp of feeling possible with Ilya, but Shane recognized the stretch of woods they were in again and he knew they were close. When they reached the edge of a clearing, not far from the lakeshore but far enough away that the bugs left them alone, he reached for Ilya and squeezed his hand, wishing he could wordlessly communicate everything he wanted to say without breaking the quiet of the moment. They stopped, and beside a thicket of honeysuckle, Shane spread the blanket he'd brought for them. He patted the ground and motioned for Ilya to join him.

"Close your eyes and listen," Shane whispered as Ilya obediently curled into his side. At first all he could hear was the sound of Ilya breathing just below his ear, that steady in-and-out rhythm he never wanted to go without ever again. They'd barely been at the cottage for a day and Shane couldn't understand how he'd lived a decade without this. He could never go back.

It was nearly fully light now, the sun up and over the horizon, and the forest had begun to awaken. A chickadee zipped through the brush beside them, and two nuthatches—Shane's favorite since he was a kid—cackled to one another from a branch high above. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the drumming of a woodpecker—probably a downy, but maybe a hairy—hard at work.

There were no guarantees in hockey, and there were no guarantees in birdwatching. You could do everything right and still lose or still not find what you were looking for, and Shane knew better than to take any of this personally. But still—he wanted this. He wanted to be a hockey player and he wanted to love Ilya and he wanted to see what he'd come here looking for. He strained his ears against the chatter of the forest, filtering out the rustle of the leaves and the chatter of a pair of squirrels somewhere high above them.

"There," Shane said, the forest dissolving around him as his ears honed in on what he'd come here seeking.

"What is there?" Ilya said.

"Did you hear it?"

The bird sang again, its high, flute-like call cutting through the humid air and straight into Shane. The hairs on his arms stood up.

"You are trying to kill me," Ilya said.

"I'm not trying to kill you," Shane said.

"Yes, you are," Ilya said. "First with evil Canadian murder bird—"

"That was just a loon," Shane said.

"Loon, you say. A loon, sure. And now this—this—what even am I listening to?"

"It's a wood thrush."

"Wood...thrush?" Ilya said.

“It’s a songbird.”

“It sounds like a disease.”

“You’re impossible.”

“You conspired with this loon last night and this other bird today to surprise me, and now you are all going to kill me,” Ilya said.

Shane laughed. “Conspired,” he said. “That’s a good word. Where’d you learn it?”

“Fuck you, asshole,” Ilya said.

“A lot of people say this is the most beautiful sound in the whole world,” Shane said. “And I agree with them. And so does my dad.”

Movement flashed in the brush ahead of them. A small bird, its wings a warm, cinnamon brown with a speckled belly, perched and regarded them for a moment before bursting into song. Shane put his finger against Ilya’s lips, motioning for him to remain still. He’d never seen a wood thrush this close before.

“It’s here to kill us,” Ilya whispered.

“That bird could fit in your hand,” Shane whispered back. “Look at it.”

His whole life, he’d felt like an observer to the delights of other people, watching his parents and his teammates and seemingly every stranger around him get to live their lives in the ways they wanted while he held himself back, careful with his secrets. He used to be unsure about what he wanted, and once he knew what he wanted, he was less sure he deserved any of it. From its perch above them, the wood thrush continued to sing. The forest hummed with life as sunlight streamed through the canopy, and Shane finally felt like he was part of the world.

He turned to Ilya and smiled, reaching under the waistband of the shorts Ilya was wearing, a pair of Shane’s that he knew he’d jerked off in dozens of times. He couldn’t remember a time before he knew Ilya but he knew that time had to exist because these shorts were proof of it. Ilya was already hard, had probably been hard this entire time they’d been sitting listening to birds, had probably been hard since they’d woken up, but he’d still been willing to humor Shane, to listen when Shane said *look, this is who I really am when no one else is watching*.

Ilya returned the gesture, reaching into Shane’s shorts, and found what he was looking for. As they found their rhythm, Shane gasped loudly enough that the wood thrush, singing a mating call of its own, relocated to a higher branch. Watching the face Ilya made as he came made Shane finish too, the dawn officially becoming morning becoming day as they gulped deeply the warm, sweet smell of the air and their bodies on the forest floor.

“I think you are wrong,” Ilya said after a while.

“Oh?” Shane said. “About what?”

“About most beautiful sound in world.”

“You didn’t like the wood thrush?”

“No, no, I did,” Ilya said. “But most beautiful sound in world—no. That is more like....” he trailed off, his brow furrowed in a way that made Shane wish he could press his forehead against Ilya’s and understand all of his thoughts, the untranslated and the untranslatable, something only the two of them could share between each other.

“What I mean to say is...” Ilya said, wiping his sticky fingers on the side of his shorts. “To me, most beautiful sound is more like....how you sound when I fuck you and you beg for more. Or maybe when you ask to suck my dick and I say no and you beg.”

“I’m sensing a theme here,” Shane said.

“I like to know what you want,” Ilya said.

“You already know I want you,” Shane said. “I always have. I want you and I want...”

“Yes?” Ilya said. “You want what?”

“I don’t know, I—I want more,” Shane said. “Not like I think you aren’t enough, it’s just—I want the whole world with you.”

Ilya sat up and looked around. The wood thrush had disappeared from its perch, though its song was still audible from somewhere deeper in the forest. The call of a loon drifted across from the water, and the sun was bright and warm now. Shane sat up beside him, laying his head on Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya cradled the back of Shane’s head in his palm.

“We can have whatever we want, Shane Hollander,” Ilya said.

Shane, for the first time in his life, believed him.

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