

Cold Front

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Summary

It is the beginning of Shane's second season with the Ottawa Centaurs. Last season saw them go from strength to strength, and Shane is on a mission to compete for the Stanley Cup. His husband, Ilya, also has the same goal; however, he thinks it may be a tad ambitious this season. Of course, he won't let that affect Shane's drive, as when it comes to hockey, Shane can achieve anything when he is motivated enough. That is until one fateful game, when Shane is knocked out cold and unresponsive. Ilya is forced to relive the trauma from many years ago, as Shane battles the effects of a traumatic brain injury.

Notes

This is set after the conclusion of Long Game. Ilya and Shane are married and are in their second season with the Ottawa Centaurs together. This story also takes inspiration from Crave's television show. This means that team names are consistent with the television show; Montreal Metros, instead of Voyageurs, and Boston Raiders, instead of Bears.

Personal Note: I had a concussion and traumatic brain injury in 2020. Symptoms are based on personal experiences. I am also not an expert on hockey or Russian, apologies in advance!

Chapter 1: Prologue

Prologue:

The cool air of the arena breathed with anticipation. Shane's eyes scanned the sea of red and black. A packed stadium of Ottawa Centaur fans, Shane noted. With every game, Ottawa's crowds were becoming more and more electric. When Shane left Montreal, he believed the booming echoes of enthusiastic fans would end. He had observed Ilya's frustration as the Ottawa Centaurs lost game after game, even against his former Boston teammates. What he did not anticipate was that Ottawa was on the precipice of greatness. A team that had once been a patchwork of traded athletes and idealistic rookies had been transformed into something that resembled a 'good team'.

His eyes briefly caught his husband's. The shock of blue met his own teasing eyes. Ilya raised his eyebrows, a smile playing on his features. "You ready to win?" Shane murmured to Ilya.

"*Da*," Ilya smiled. "You would like that, wouldn't you?"

"Fuck off. So would you."

"Yes, but I have been in this team longer than you have." Ilya had confidence in this team, more than he ever had. But years of self-doubt had clawed its way into his subconscious.

"But I'm changing things." Shane puffed up his chest.

"I think I am the one who has been changing things." Ilya pointed to the 'C' on his chest, smirking.

"Don't get used to it," Shane drawled as he got into position.

The smell of freshly resurfaced ice filled Shane's senses. He enjoyed the way his skates quietly glided across fresh ice. In minutes, the fresh white sheen would be marked with harsh lines. As patterns formed, skates would thrash louder and louder against the ice. It was as if the ice were in tune with the growing adrenaline of the game.

Ilya was facing off against the Toronto Guardian's new star centre. He was visibly younger than Ilya's thirty-three. His brown eyes danced, not quite daring to look Ilya in the eyes. That was all the proof Ilya needed to know that this kid was a *fan*. Maybe he had a poster of Ilya on the walls of his childhood bedroom. The puck dropped. Ilya secretly hoped he had impressed the young Toronto rookie. Anything to make his aching limbs feel ten years younger. With a ragged breath, he passed the puck to Shane.

Shane sped across the ice; the sea of red and black rose to their feet. He handled the puck with ease, confident and determined. Ilya loved playing with Shane. They communicated only with a determined look and mutual understanding. "Holl-an-der!" the crowd chanted, thumping the glass in unison. To Shane, this crowd not only deserved a win, but a triumph. He imagined the end of the season, his name etched on the Stanley Cup, alongside Ilya's.

“Hollander!” Shane glanced at Luca Haas, the team’s rookie forward. He considered sending the puck to Haas, but the thought was fleeting.

Bam. A heavy weight knocked him backwards. *Crack.* There was a wet thud as Shane hit the ice.

The blur of black and red turned to spots of white. The once electric crowd was standing motionless, in eerie silence. The white spots filled Shane’s vision. It was as if the ice below him was swallowing him up. The white spots flickered and were absorbed by darkness.

Ilya watched in horror as Shane crumpled onto the ice. He rushed over, blinking through tears. He could see red seeping out of Shane’s helmet, a blooming halo of crimson on the white ice. Ilya crouched over Shane and placed a hand on his arm. “Shane!” Ilya murmured.

Shane was so cold. Ilya’s fingers moved to Shane’s wrist. A slow beat pressed against Ilya’s thumb. *You’re alive. Stay with me.* “Wake up, *moya lyubov*,” Ilya whispered the words, hoping his voice would will Shane’s eyes open.

Ilya’s mind went back to a similar incident years earlier. He remembered the agony of not being able to hold Shane in his arms. He would’ve traced Shane’s freckles peppered across his cheeks and waited for Shane to wake up. Instead, he remembered that his demands to know if Shane was better were met by the strong orders from officials.

This time, he held Shane’s neck in place as first aid officers hurried to the ice. His fingers smoothed Shane’s thick, black hair as a spinal stretcher was placed next to them. A woman wearing a grim expression ushered Ilya to move out of the way. He nodded his head and let the paramedics lift Shane onto the stretcher. His fingers gripped Shane’s hand with a promise. He would not leave. Not this time.

Shane’s eyes were closed, as if at peace. It was in stark contrast to the chaos surrounding him. “Hollander, can you hear me?” the woman steadily repeated to Shane. Nothing. Ilya’s heart thumped against his chest, threatening to rise up his oesophagus.

The woman—or Andréa, as printed on her name badge—reached for her radio. “Unconscious and non-responsive. Pulse is thready and there is visible head trauma.”

Suddenly they were moving out of the arena. Ilya’s hands shook as he gripped the side of the stretcher. Andréa looked back at Ilya. “An ambulance is on its way, keep trying to talk to him.”

Trying to form words in English in this moment felt like speaking with a mouthful of cotton wool. “*Prosnut’sya.*” Wake up.

As Ilya followed Shane into the ambulance, panic gripped his senses. The paramedics hooked Shane up to a monitor. Ilya waited, waited for the other shoe to drop. For the heart monitor to produce silence, to confirm his worst fears.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A slow and rhythmic sound echoed from the monitor. A tear fell from Ilya's cheek in relief, and he gripped Shane's hand tighter. Shane's hand was warmer, no longer wrapped in the chill of the arena. Ilya closed his eyes and opened them, as if willing himself to wake up from this bad dream.

The ambulance was overwhelming. A range of noises bounced off the walls; gritty voices on the radio, paramedics shouting orders, the sound of the ambulance accelerating. However, all Ilya could listen to was the machine monitoring Shane's pulse. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* Ilya ran his fingers in circles in Shane's palm, as if willing Shane's heart to keep going.

"Please stay with me, *moya lyubov*."

Chapter 2: The Hospital

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your kudos and lovely comments! You have motivated me to keep going.
Get your tissues ready!

The Hospital

There was only darkness. Soft murmurings and loud machines gripped Shane's senses.

"We expect he will wake up."

"When?", a strained voice whispered. *Ilya.*

"His vitals are good, and there wasn't an intracranial haemorrhage as we had feared. All positive signs."

"That's a relief". *Mom?*

"Will he be himself?" Shane couldn't help but notice the shake in Ilya's voice. "We won't know the level of brain trauma until he is awake. We will have to be prepared for all possibilities." There was a softness in her voice.

Her words were followed by silence. A silence so deafening, Shane needed to claw back to consciousness just to fill the void of anxiety that hung in the room.

"*I'm okay. I'm okay.*" Yet no words came out, only silence. Still, Shane hoped that the words would materialise and wrap Ilya in his arms. A tangible comfort that said; *I am okay, moya lyubov.* Shane's eyes resisted against the heaviness of his lashes, determined to shield his eyes from the light. Shane willed his eyelids open. Silhouettes filled his vision. His eyes found Ilya, dark circles and harsh lines etched into his features. Shane's eyes darted to the machines surrounding him. He could surmise that he was hooked up to an array of monitors and an IV. It was so cold, as if his veins were filled with ice. He let out an involuntary shiver, and watched as five pairs of eyes met his own wide eyes.

Shane found familiar eyes, washed with a mix of relief and fear. *Ilya. Mom. Dad.*

"Shane!". Ilya hurried to Shane's side, gripping his hand. He smoothed the worn callouses of Shane's fingers, pressing light kisses to the skin.

He found the unfamiliar voices, their faces were calm and clinical.

“Shane, you’re awake. Can you hear me?”, the voice had moved closer, wielding a torch with a harsh light.

Shane blinked rapidly, willing the brightness away. He could feel Ilya, gripping his fingers tighter, a small comfort. However, this did nothing to quell the anxiety threatening to burst from his chest.

Shane breathed in and out, in and out. The light had gripped his senses, an overwhelming and unyielding feeling of sensory overload that he needed to escape. He heard a high-pitched hum. It was all-consuming, pulsing through his body. The rhythm of his breathing picked up; he had lost control.

“Shane!” Blurry figures moved around him.

“Shane, stay with us.”

“What’s wrong?” Shane could hear the panic in Ilya’s voice, a raspy shell of the confident Russian he knew.

His vision blurred, and the void of darkness followed.

Ilya felt a hand on his shoulder, light and familiar. Shane stood next to him, freckles painted across his cheeks.

“Hey, hey”. Shane crouched on his knees and looked up at Ilya with a warm smile. He rubbed his thumb under Ilya’s eyes, catching the salty tears as they fell.

“We all get our bell rung eventually”, he teased. Ilya looked at Shane hard.

“Not if I have anything to do with it”, Ilya’s voice was scratchy and hoarse.

“Because hockey is a famously injury-free sport, right?”, Shane smiled. His fingers found the back of Ilya’s head. He ran his fingers through the thick, blonde curls. Ilya let out a sigh.

“Ilya, honey.”

A gentle voice threatened to break through the haze. Shane dissipated, and Ilya opened his eyes to see Yuna staring down at him. His eyes shifted to the bed beside him; Shane still lay motionless.

It had been six hours since Shane first woken up. The moment was so fleeting that it broke the very solid walls Ilya had been constructing since the accident. Hope had turned to fear.

Yuna’s eyes were marred with exhaustion, mirroring his own. Ilya felt guilty that he could not be strong. Strong enough to help Yuna and David shoulder the burden. Yet, his heart was

broken. Its pieces had been left at the arena, lost under the crimson-stained ice.

“I can take over; there is a couch two rooms down, where you can sleep.”

Ilya shook his head, unmoved. “No. No. He may wake up again.”

“And I will find you, right away.”

“I can’t.” He stifled a sob, bringing a hand to his mouth as if he could block the sobs with sheer force.

“Oh, Ilya,” Yuna pulled Ilya into a firm hug. The dam broke. Wet tears cascaded down his cheeks, pooling in Yuna’s woollen cardigan.

“Wait a minute,” Yuna reached for her handbag and got out a packet of tissues from her first aid kit. Her ability to be so prepared reminded Ilya of Shane. It only made him cry more.

“I can’t do this again,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” Yuna gently replied, wiping Ilya’s salty tears with a wad of tissues.

“Last time. It almost killed me. I- I- was so worried, I could not sleep. And no one would tell me anything.”

Ilya remembered that day, years ago. He had demanded that the referee and medics tell him something, anything. Ilya had slumped at the end of his hotel bed, hating himself. Hating that he could not follow Shane into the ambulance. Hating the inconvenience that was their secret relationship. Their relationship had always been a secret, but in this moment, he would’ve had all forms of secrecy dissolve, if it would let him hold Shane’s warm hand in his.

“But this is different, Ilya.” Yuna’s words snapped him back into reality. Ilya’s fingers grasped at the gold band around his mother’s necklace. When they had gone into ICU, an orderly had shoved a snap-lock bag at him with Shane’s ring inside.

Now, Ilya gripped the ring tightly, turning to Yuna. “We are husbands now, but some things remain the same. They won’t tell us anything and I cannot sleep until—”

“Until you know he is okay.” Yuna looked at him with understanding.

“I am impatient, you see.” Ilya smiled, attempting to conceal his agony with humour.

Hours slipped into days. Ilya only waited, waited for those beautiful brown eyes to open. Ilya had been coaxed to swap shifts with Yuna and David, allowing himself a few hours to catch up on sleep.

However, every sleep was restless, and every dream was filled with images of Shane hitting the ice. The crack as plastic met hard white ice. Shane's body crumpled, motionless. Blood, so much blood. Shane's eyes were awake in a hospital bed, then blinking and falling back into the void. Ilya could not shake any of it.

"Ilya!". David ran up to Ilya, and Ilya stood up rapidly. He did not need words to know what this meant.

Ilya walked into the room, eyes meeting Shane's. Shane's eyes were wide open, fear written across his face.

"Wha—?"

"Sh-sh-sh", Ilya sat at the edge of Shane's bed. He ran a hand across Shane's chin, giving him a comforting smile.

The room filled with medical staff, one of whom shooed Ilya, forcing him to step back with a resigned sigh.

"You'll have him in no time", the nurse said, apologetically.

"Shane, do you know where you are?", an authoritative voice probed. Shane's eyes met Ilya's, as if searching for comfort.

"Th—". Shane struggled with the consonants on his tongue. "H—". He tried again, with no luck.

"Cognitive speech issues. Possible aphasia", the doctor muttered to another stranger in scrubs. It was as if Shane wasn't there, as if he was a creature to be studied and examined under a microscope.

"Are you having trouble forming words, Shane?", the voice followed, kind and encouraging. "Nod for yes, shake your head for no."

Shane shook his head rapidly. The sensation of shaking his head allowed a high-pitched noise to permeate his senses. He covered his ears. The light felt like it was burning him, so he closed his eyes for good measure. A kind nurse turned off the fluorescent overhead light and the heart rate monitor.

"Sensory overload." The doctor muttered the words, scrawling illegible handwriting on Shane's chart.

Ilya closed his eyes, as if what was happening was not real. He took two deep breaths, before his eyes found Shane's. Shane would be okay. Shane would be okay.

Shane's image was blurred, but his eyes met Ilya's. Ilya's expression was still and calm. However, Shane could tell that Ilya's eyes were at war. His attempts to give off a sense of calm flickered with fear.

“T-T-”. A tear slipped from Shane’s tear duct, in frustration. The word was dancing at the tip of his tongue, but refused to come out. Everyone looked back at him in confusion. He balled his hands into fists, feeling deflated.

“Tired?”, his Ilya interpreted. Shane nodded, relieved.

“Can he sleep?”, his Mom asked. The doctor studied him, then turned to his mother. “Yes, we won’t ask any more questions, just yet”.

Shane’s eyes closed in relief. He felt a warm hand stroke his forehead. He knew it was Ilya. His calluses had been hollowed out from decades of playing hockey.

Ilya waited for the crowd of medical staff to exit the room. Yuna shot Ilya a look, indicating that she and David were going to rest.

“It is under control”, Ilya said simply. “I know”, Yuna smiled in thanks.

Ilya’s hand found Shane’s thick, black hair. If Shane were his normal self, he would have complained that he needed to shower days ago. Ilya mentally promised that he would help Shane shower when he was better.

Shane’s wide eyes met Ilya’s. Ilya had not realised that Shane was still awake. They stared at each other, communicating with only their eyes.

“Sleep, *moya lyubov*.” Shane closed his eyes, and his breathing turned heavy.

Only then, did Ilya allow more tears to fall. Soft, salty droplets fell in quick succession. He reached for Shane’s hand and kissed it. *I love you*, the lips said.

Ilya reached for a tissue and wiped his face. He scrunched the tissue in his hand and threw it with force. It was as if he were releasing all the tension from the past twenty-four hours. He was compelled to grab another tissue then another, throwing a cascade of balled up tissues at the bin. To his surprise, he got one in. He observed the pile of tissues that scattered onto the floor like snow. Ilya looked back at Shane and smiled. “I’m sure you would’ve loved that.”

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