

Hard Loss

by h_vic

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Thanks to Potterphile12 for beta-ing and thanks to butter_beer_drinker (both over on MNFF) for suggesting the title.

Katie Bell's footsteps rang out on the tiled floor, echoing harshly as she stepped into the silent changing room complex.

"Olly?" she called out and then, hearing a muffled response, headed through the side-door into the main changing room to find the man she assumed would be unlikely to come out and find her.

Oliver Wood was, not at all to Katie's surprise, slumped motionless on a wood-slatted bench in the corner with his head tipped back against the wall and a look of utter dejection on his face. This depressed torpor was entirely foreign on muscles primed for constant action, and something in his apathy scared Katie. There was a sense of hopelessness, an air of defeat, about him that she couldn't bear to see.

He was still wearing his soaked red and white Quidditch robes; the rain had plastered his hair to his skull, and a stray Bludger had left him with a black eye and a split lip. He looked broken and dishevelled and Katie's heart bled for him. She knew she couldn't even begin to understand how he felt at that moment, but she also knew he needed her, even if he wouldn't admit it.

"Olly, everyone else is ready to head back to the hotel. They're waiting out by the Portkey," she said gently, sitting down beside him.

"I just needed a bit of time alone," he said, and the unspoken demand to leave him that way was heavy in his voice, but Katie had no intention of paying any mind to that. In their three years together, she'd yet to let his moods get to her, and she wasn't about to start now.

"Tough!" she said bluntly. "Because I'm not going anywhere."

"I just want to clear my head."

"No," she corrected him. "You want to wallow and sulk, and I'm not going to let you."

Oliver lifted his head away from the wall to turn and glare at her. "Katie, I've just lost the World Cup. I think I'm within my rights to be a little upset."

"No, you didn't," she corrected him.

He stared at her as if she'd grown an extra head. "Yes, we did! In case you didn't notice, Peru beat us!" Anger simmered to the surface and bitterness bubbled through his voice. He looked like he wanted to storm out, but the inertia that so worried her still gripped him too strongly for that.

Katie sighed; this was going to be a long evening if she couldn't get through to him. "Exactly," she said. "Seven of you played out there tonight, not just you. You can't take all the blame, even though you want to."

"But if I'd just managed to save two more goals, we could have won..."

"If Matthew, Paula or Mark had scored twice more; if Martin and Lauren had stopped Barrera, Hernández and Sánchez from ever reaching your end; if Jonny had caught the Snitch... And, anyway, which goals were you planning to save? The one where you were hanging on upside down after that Bludger from Montemayor? The one where Hernández put in that completely unpredictable feint or the one where he barged you out of the way when the ref wasn't looking so that Barrera could score, perhaps?" She raised an eyebrow.

"All right, fine. I just feel like there must have been something else I could have done. It was the bloody World Cup Final! It's a once in a lifetime "

"No, it's not," she interrupted his diatribe, leaving him spluttering angrily about how he couldn't believe that she'd been with him the whole way and yet couldn't see the significance. "I never said that it's not significant," she corrected him. "Just that it's not 'once in a lifetime.' There's another World Cup in four years' time, and the squad will be so much better by then. No one outside of this changing room ever expected you guys would even get out of the group stages this time around, let alone to the Final! So just think what you can do in four years time with a bit more luck in the build up and the young talent that's coming through the clubs at the moment."

Oliver almost seemed to smile at the thought, but then slumped back against the wall again, as dejected as before. "I probably won't be on the team in four years though," he muttered morosely.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Katie chided him, resisting the urge to seize him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. She understood that he was hurting, but she was going to have to get him to be rational. "Why on earth wouldn't you be?"

"I'm twenty-seven," he said. "They'll be getting young blood in to replace me by then. And, even if they didn't, I'd probably get injured again and miss it, like I did last time."

"Oh for goodness sake, Olly! Now you really are being ridiculous! You'll be thirty-one. That's hardly ancient, especially for a Keeper, and you're the best Keeper England has had in years. No one's going to replace you. And, all right, yes, you could get injured, but then again you could get run over by a bus tomorrow! There's no point worrying about it until it happens. Anyway, if there's anyone who deserves a bit of luck with injuries, it's you."

Oliver seemed to consider her words for a long moment, but then he found a new objection. "The press are going to slate us," he muttered.

"No, they won't," Katie objected. "And if they do, ignore them! You did amazingly to get to the Final. Everyone knows that. The fans'll be proud of you all."

"But I didn't do enough!" Oliver burst out. "I didn't save it for us!"

"No one can expect you to single-handedly win every match for us!" Katie let out an exasperated sigh. She decided she needed to adopt a sterner tone to see if that would work, as nothing else had. Oliver didn't even seem to notice though. "We wouldn't have even made it out of the Semis if it wasn't for your last minute save for a start. That's the problem everyone's got so used to you doing things like that, they take it for granted. But they shouldn't! You played brilliantly today. I'm not just saying that because I have to! And, all right, you didn't make some spectacular last-ditch effort to save the game, but you just can't beat yourself up over that. There's nothing you can do if the rest of the team don't give you the chance. It's not up to you to win by yourself. I thought we'd already been over that!"

Oliver wasn't really listening though, she could see, and she was running out of ideas. She did still have one ace up her sleeve, but if that failed too, she didn't have a clue where to go from there.

"Now come on, get changed and let's get out of here," she said. "The rest of the team'll be thinking you've drowned yourself. Martin and Mark have already threatened to stand guard in our room tonight to stop you hurling yourself off the balcony! But, to be honest, I can think of much better ways to distract you! Unless of course you're too tired..." She added the last with a wicked grin and noticed with relief that, for the first time, a flicker of something other than dejection or anger crossed Oliver's face.

Sliding gracefully from the bench, she knelt on the floor so that she was at his eye level and took hold of one of his hands. She waited until he had lifted his head to meet her eyes before she continued.

"Look," she said gently. "I know nothing's going to stop this hurting, but you don't have to face it tonight. We can face it together... tomorrow."

"You just aren't going to leave me in peace, are you?" Oliver demanded, but there was something not unlike a smile forming on his face.

"Not a hope in hell! I'm here for the bad as well as the good, remember," Katie replied and leaned forwards to place a tender kiss on his lips.

Oliver started to respond, drawing her against him with his free arm, but she pulled away with a grin. "Not yet," she teased him, dropping the hand she held back onto his lap. "Go get a shower and get dressed," she ordered. "Your team's waiting for you."

"They could wait a little longer..." he suggested, drawing a feather-light finger across her cheek and then tangling his fingers into her long hair.

"I don't think so," she said with a smile, glad that she seemed to have finally gotten through to him. She shook her head lightly to dislodge his questing hand from her hair and then sat back on her heels, out of reach. "It's definitely past Matthew's bed time," she joked.

Her comment drew a genuine laugh from Oliver, who was always amused by her insistence on mothering his youngest team-mate, who was only eighteen. Katie seemed to think he needed to be looked after at all opportunities. It had become an exaggerated, running joke within the squad, much to Matthew's combined amusement and disgust.

"In fact," she continued, laughing too. "When we get back to the hotel, I ought to tuck him up in bed with his teddy bear." Oliver perfectly mimicked the look of horror that they both knew would cross the younger man's face if she tried anything of the sort, and she laughed harder.

Suddenly though, her laughter died and her tone changed. "And then..." she said, playing her ace the way that she always knew she could reach him (he was, after all, a man, and in Katie's experience, in the end, they were inherently pretty simple creatures) her voice dropping and taking on a huskier note. She caught Oliver's eyes and his laughter stopped abruptly too. "... I'll take you to bed."

"Now that's the best idea anyone's had all evening," Oliver said, and it definitely wasn't disappointment that laced his tone now as he lent forwards to kiss her again. Katie knew then that she would be able to bring him back to her, that he would be all right.

A/N: This story was actually inspired by England's defeat in the Rugby World Cup Final. So at least something good came out of that depressing evening!