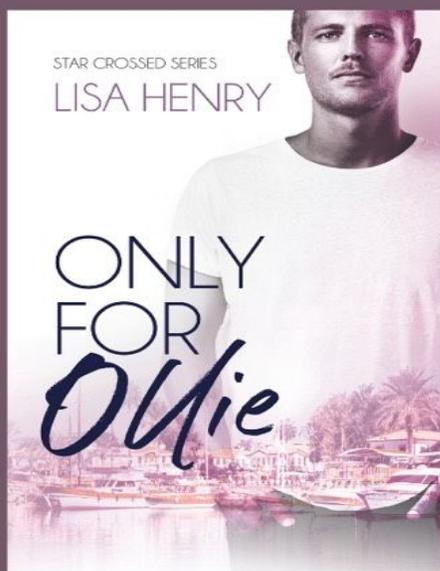




# SETBACK



ONLY  
FOR  
*Ollie*

BONUS STORY

# SETBACK

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AN "ONLY FOR OLLIE" BONUS STORY

LISA HENRY

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## SETBACK

Xander was doing his best to pretend that Dr. Flores hadn't just delivered him the worst news in the world, but Ollie didn't buy it, not for a second. Neither did Dr. Flores.

"This is a setback," he said, blinking at Xander through his glasses. "We always knew there was a possibility, and unfortunately, with post concussion syndrome, sometimes the process isn't as linear as we'd like."

Ollie reached out and took Xander's hand. Squeezed it. He got that Dr. Flores always said "we" like they were a team, but at the same time he was pretty sure that it wasn't what Xander needed to hear right now. If they were all in this together, then why the hell was Xander the only one getting shafted?

"I've been doing all the therapy," Xander said, his voice pinched. "The neuromuscular, the occupational, the—the—*fuck*, what's it called?"

"Sensory motor therapy," Ollie said, and squeezed his hand.

"I knew that." There was a sharpness in his tone now, and Ollie knew it was there because he was questioning himself now. Had he forgotten what it was called just because he was stressed out and tired, or was it another symptom?

"And you've been doing great at that," Dr. Flores said. "We've talked about the brain's elasticity before, and how it maps around the damaged areas, and compensates." His brows tugged together. "Which is phenomenal, but it essentially has you asking twice as much from the undamaged areas of your brain. And if you're asking one pathway to deal with both balance and word retrieval, for example, it's not great at doing both things at once. So the therapy retrains you to separate those pathways again. And that's *also* a lot to ask of your brain, so it's not at all uncommon for symptoms to reappear. I know it feels like regression, but it's not. You're still progressing."

"But the clock resets, right?" Xander pressed his mouth into a thin, trembling line.

Dr. Flores gave him a sympathetic smile. “Yes, I’m afraid it does. You still need to be six months without symptoms before you can get back to racing.”

And that, Ollie thought, was that. It didn’t matter whatever else Dr. Flores told him—all Xander had heard was that he’d been seven weeks without symptoms, and now, just because of one case of the wobbles, he had to start all over again.

This would make it the second time.

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IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, Ollie’s little apartment in the garage of the Finches’ house had begun to feel like home. It was looking like it too—he’d taken down the poster of The Cure and replaced it with one of acupressure points, which Xander had told him looked creepy, but he’d said it with a twitch of his mouth that meant he was joking. Xander didn’t show his emotions in a big way; that was just how he was built. But Ollie knew how to read him.

That afternoon, following the appointment with Dr. Flores, Xander was quiet. Okay, so Xander was *always* quiet, but Ollie knew he was more upset than he was showing. He also knew the worst thing would be trying to force him to talk about it when he wasn’t ready yet. Ollie was the sort of guy who processed things while venting—or rambling—but Xander was the opposite. He kept everything locked down behind a stoic mask until he’d worked through it. And this—this was a lot.

Xander cast Ollie a few curious looks as they moved around each other in Ollie’s tiny kitchen space, putting together a late lunch of sandwiches and salad, almost daring him to say something, but Ollie didn’t take the bait. Not yet. It was only after they’d eaten that he said, “Feel like a massage?” and Xander’s shoulders slumped and he nodded.

Xander wasn’t great with his words, but his body couldn’t keep any secrets.

Ollie set the massage table up in their usual spot by the pool, and Xander climbed up onto it in his underwear.

Ollie drizzled some oil onto his palms, and worked it between his fingers for a moment. Took note of the way that Xander tensed for a second when he touched his shoulders, before he remembered how to relax.

“That okay?” he asked, working his thumb into a knot.

“Mmm.”

Yeah, it was going to take a while to loosen him up enough to talk.

When he was a kid, Ollie had wanted to be a faith healer—before he’d figured out it was all bullshit. But he loved the idea of believing so hard in something that you made it true. Of seeing someone in pain, and laying your hands on them. Of taking that pain away from them with the sheer force of your will. Drawing pain out, and pushing healing power in. Massage was a little bit like that. There was no magic involved, no faith, and the end result had nothing to do with Ollie’s will at all, but it was still a sort of a power. It was still using his hands to heal. Xander carried all his tension in his body—all his stresses and his anxieties and his insecurities—and Ollie imagined slowly crushing them with each touch, and turning them to dust.

Each sweep of his palm, each press of his fingers, said, he hoped, ‘I love you.’

He worked his way along Xander’s shoulders carefully, gently at first, and then gradually increasing the pressure.

The day was warm and quiet. Ollie could hear a string trimmer somewhere in the neighborhood, but it was a long way away and no louder than a buzzing insect. The pool filter burbled a little. A pair of sparrows rustled in the shrubs alongside the pool’s edge.

“Gonna have to call Sep,” Xander said at last, when Ollie was still working on his shoulders. “Let him tell the rest of the team.”

Ollie hummed.

Xander’s rib cage expanded as he took a breath. Held it for longer than he should have. It shook as he released it, and when he spoke again there was a hitch in his voice. “This is bullshit.”

“Yeah,” Ollie agreed softly.

Xander's shoulders stiffened. He clenched his jaw. "I'm not...I'm not ready to give up."

Ollie leaned down and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. "I know."

Xander sucked in a shaking breath. "But when do I cut my losses, you know? Like, at what point does this become...stupid? *Pathetic?*"

Ollie didn't like the venom in his tone. He kept his own voice calm and soft. "Xan, were we even at the same appointment this morning? Because Dr. Flores said you're still progressing, right? If he'd told you that there were no signs you were getting better, then maybe this would be a very different conversation, but that's not what he said. That's not where we are."

Xander's breath shuddered out of him. "If I can't race, then who the fuck am I?"

Ollie worked his thumbs down the sides of Xander's spine. "I was so jealous of you, you know?"

Xander half-lifted himself off the table, twisting to look back at him. "What?"

"Lay down," Ollie said, and waited until he was settled again before resuming the massage. "You have this one thing that you love and you're amazing at. I've never had a thing. I like my job, but it doesn't drive me, you know? Like, the fact you've dedicated yourself to racing since you were a *kid*—that's amazing to me. Half the time I was a kid, I couldn't even be bothered getting out of bed early to watch cartoons on the weekend, let alone driving for hours to get to some race. You must owe your parents a fortune in gas money, by the way."

That wrung a begrudging snort of amusement out of him. "Probably."

Ollie worked on his lower back, digging the heels of his hands in. "So, yeah. I was a little bit jealous when I met you, because you knew what you wanted from the time you were a kid, and you were doing it."

"I'm not doing it. That's the problem."

"No, I think the problem is what you said yourself. You don't know who you are if you're not racing." He swept a hand down

Xander's spine. "But I know who you are."

Xander made an inquisitive sound.

"You're Xander," Ollie said. "You're a son, and a brother, and an uncle, and an *amazing* boyfriend. And you're still all of those things even if you're not on a motorbike." He wiped a smear of oil off the top of Xander's spine, and pressed his mouth to the warm skin there. Tasted coconut. "I know you want to race. I know what it means to you, and I wish I could tell you that there are a million other things out there that will make you feel the same, but I can't. You have to discover those things yourself, you know? But I can help you look for them."

Xander stirred. "Like what, though?"

"Like anything," Ollie said, and kissed his spine again. "Like fixing up bikes with Julio. That's fun, right?"

"Yeah, that's been fun."

"You could buy a yacht," Ollie said. "Or a vineyard."

"A *vineyard*? Seriously?"

Ollie laughed. "See! That's what I mean. I can't tell you what you'll love. Some people buy vineyards. I don't know. I'm just spit-balling rich people ideas here."

"Pretty sure I'm not a vineyard kind of person."

"God, me neither."

"Or a yacht person."

"It was just a suggestion."

"It was a terrible suggestion." Xander's voice was tempered with a smile.

"Okay, but it's two more suggestions than you've come up with, smart guy!"

Xander's laugh was silent, rippling through his body like bow waves from the yacht he was never going to own. "I haven't been hiking in a while."

"Hiking?"

"Yeah. Used to go sometimes. There are some great trails around here, and on Santa Cruz Island."

"See, we probably need that yacht to get over to the island."

"I could probably hike," Xander said. "Nothing too strenuous, or with climbing."

Ollie slapped the back of his thigh gently. "Absolutely no climbing. And not just because of your concussion, but also because I'm coming with you, and you know that would end in disaster."

"You'd come with me?"

"Yeah." Ollie kissed his back again. "I guess you're not the only amazing boyfriend in this relationship, huh?"

Xander sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the table and tugging Ollie into an embrace. He kissed him, not even complaining when Ollie slid his oily fingers through the bristles of his close-cropped hair. "I guess I'm not."



"OH, MY GOD!" Ollie collapsed on the side of the trail like an upended turtle. Should probably have taken his backpack off first. "Did we take the extreme trail by mistake? My thighs are killing me. I can't keep climbing this mountain."

Xander stood over him, blocking out the blazing sun. "Babe, it's..." He gestured. "It's the botanical gardens. It's barely a hill."

A kid on a tricycle pedaled up the track past them.

Ollie moaned.

Xander snorted, and held a hand down to him. "Sit up. That can't be good for your spine."

Ollie let Xander pull him into a seated position. "Oh, my god. That *view!*"

Xander sat down beside him, drawing his legs up and resting his forearms on his knees. "It's beautiful, right?"

All of a sudden walking up that mountain—it was definitely a mountain, whatever Xander said. Probably as steep as Everest, honestly—didn't seem so bad. Ollie gazed out over Ventura. Distance papered over all the ugly parts. Pierpont Bay was spectacularly blue all the way to the horizon. A few soft streaks of cloud, light as cotton candy, painted the sky above Anacapa and Santa Cruz Islands.

"It's so beautiful," Ollie said, the words escaping him on a sigh. He leaned into Xander, and Xander put an arm around his shoulders. For a moment they sat there quietly, the sound of the kid's tricycle and the parents' footsteps fading in the distance, and then Xander flashed a grin at him.

"You're not a hiker, are you?"

"I once got a blister going up and down the aisles at Trader Joe's."

"Of course you did." Xander jostled him slightly, then unzipped his backpack. He took out Ollie's water and pressed it into his hands. "I won't make you come next time. There's a group I might join."

"Oh, thank god." Ollie sagged with relief. "I mean, this really is beautiful, but I have sweat in gross places. Really gross places."

"Thank you for coming with me, even though you knew you'd hate it."

"I didn't *know* I'd hate it," Ollie said. "I was like ninety, ninety-five percent sure I'd hate it. But there was margin for error there." He caught Xander's hand and squeezed it to show him he was joking. "But this view is almost worth it. And the company's not bad either."

Xander's smile was soft and pleased.

Ollie screwed the lid back on his water bottle and gazed out at the ocean. "It's the same color as your eyes. The ocean. It's gorgeous."

Xander wrinkled his nose. He was terrible at taking compliments. Or even comparisons. "So, um, this time last week? When we got back from seeing Dr. Flores, I thought it'd take a while before I had a good day again. Not with my balance and shit like that. I mean, one where I'm happy." He swallowed, and cleared his throat. "But today's been a good day, Ollie."

Ollie beamed.

"I still wanna race," Xander said. "I do. But...but it's not the end of the world if I can't, is it?"

Ollie couldn't imagine how hard it was for Xander to say those words. "It's not," he agreed softly.

Xander swallowed again, and squeezed Ollie's hand. "I love you. I think...I'd be so fucking miserable if I hadn't met you, Ollie."

"Same," Ollie said, his heart stumbling over a beat. "Like, on both counts. My life would be totally shit—it was a mess, you saw it—and...and I love you too. So much."

He kissed Xander. Well, first he jabbed him on the forehead with the brim of his cap, but it was the thought that counted. And sometimes love was a bit like that kiss too. It didn't solve all your problems, and maybe even gave you a couple you weren't expecting—Xander rubbed his forehead ruefully—but it sure was nice to share it with someone.

Ollie didn't have all the answers for Xander, and that was okay.

They were together, and they loved each other, and all the rest? They'd figure it out along the way.

"Carry me back to the parking lot?" Ollie asked.

Xander snorted. "Hell no."

Ollie sighed and climbed to his feet. Brushed the dirt off his ass and held a hand down to haul Xander up. "Can we get Neapolitan shakes from In-N-Out on the way home?"

Xander grinned. "Hell yes."

They held hands all the way back down to the parking lot.