

# TYLER

*In “Love Blooms - Under the Heartbreak,” Olive is taken to hospital one night when she is ill. This is Tyler’s experience.*

I block Blake’s contact number from my phone, lock the screen, and throw it onto the little table in disgust. I cannot believe that guy. I’ve never understood what Fitz sees in him. If she were any other woman, I’d assume it was for superficial reasons because even I’m aware that Blake’s a good looking, smooth guy. Except, Fitz isn’t like that. There’s something about Blake that I know she likes – something she finds comfortable and safe. It can’t be the way he treats her because his reaction to the news she’s in hospital is inexcusable. Or, maybe, the way he treats her convinces her he’s safe enough to stay with, because he’s never going to push her for anything more. Fitz doesn’t want more. She’s not ready.

I’ve tried making allowances for him since Fitz started talking about him. I told myself he’s young and immature. Yet, I remember being twenty-five. I was with Anna. I was seeing the future with her-looking

for a house to buy and checking out the reviews of local schools for the children we said we'd have. I would never have ducked out on her if she were sick.

I would also never have grabbed the ass of another woman—either in front of her or behind her back—nor would I have ditched going on a date with her.

There's the smallest fraction of a second where my brain reminds me that I've done exactly the same thing to Harriet tonight.

*It's not the same.*

Fitz is sick. Really sick. That's a valid reason to cancel on Harriet. Not because I'm off seeing a band or forgot to turn up for a planned night or ducked off mid date.

*You've done it before.*

The voice seems insistent on reminding me again that I've cancelled on Harriet in favour of Fitz, but I remind myself there is a valid reason. She was injured. I was shaken. It wasn't some whim because I thought there was something better.

I am nothing like Blake.

“She seems a little better,” a voice comments. I twist in the uncomfortable hospital chair and look at the nurse who has just entered the room. She pulls a pen from the pocket of her uniform and busies herself at the bottom of the bed that Fitz is in.

“I’m guessing you’re going to kick me out at some point?” I ask. I glance at my watch for the time. It’s long past visiting hours. It’s way past procedure for me to be here.

“Hmm, and risk her screaming the place down again when she gets agitated. I’ll stick with you quietly taking up a chair if it avoids that,” the nurse jokes.

“She’s not usually so... aggressive,” I explain.

Aggressive is not a word I'd use to describe Fitz. She's always kind, calm, gently. Her outrage earlier was so out of character. The nurses seemed to take it in their stride, but it had left me a little shaken. Fitz's ranting had swung between sounding aggressive and sounding absolutely terrified. I've never heard her sound like that before. Even when she's told me her deepest secrets and talked about the biggest scars, she's only ever sounded sad. A terrified Fitz is not something I ever want to hear again. I'm sure I'd sell my soul to make sure she never sounds so unsettled again.

"A kidney infection can do that for you. The number of patients I see who are delirious with the fever and pain is shocking," the nurse comments.

I'm sure she's probably breaking some sort of confidentiality rules by telling me what is actually wrong with Fitz, but there's part of me that wonders if she's been talking freely because I probably look so damn terrified about what is going on.

The nurse writes a few lines onto Fitz's chart. She steps towards Fitz, and I swear it's like watching somebody triggering a trip wire. All of a sudden, Fitz is scooting on the bed, moving away, whimpering, murmuring 'no, no, please, no, leave me.'

Her voice might be quiet but there is no mistaking the agony and fear in her tone.

I drag the seat closer to the bed. I grab Fitz's hand.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I soothe. I rub my thumb across her hand. She whimpers.

"It wants to hurt me," she weeps. Her eyes are still tightly closed.

"She doesn't, Fitz. I promise. She's going to make you better. You're sick. Just let her do her job, let her make you better," I coax. Her hand feels clammy as she clutches me.

"It's a monster," she cries. "Why can't you see, Ty?"

I keep one hand around hers and with my free hand, I smooth her hair back. She's sweaty and clearly still running a high temperature. She shudders slightly. I lean closer towards her.

"I won't let anybody hurt you. Okay, Fitz? I will never let anybody hurt you. Never," I murmur.

She stills a little. There's the tiniest nod. The acceptance that she knows she's safe with me. The realisation that, although she's afraid of everything right now, she's with me, and I will protect her.

The nurse fiddles with the monitors that are attached to Fitz. Heart rate. Temperature. Blood pressure. All numbers that are apparently not right—too fast, too high.

"All done, for now. Her temperature is coming down. Slowly, but it is moving in the right direction. That's a good sign," the nurse says.

She steps away from the bed and writes everything down on the chart before putting it back onto the end of the bed. She walks away, giving me a small, sympathetic smile as she leaves.

"Thank you for taking such good care of her," I call, just before she gets to the door to Fitz's room. She turns and looks at me.

"Do you want a cup of tea or coffee? Something to keep you going as you watch over her?"

"I—" I start. I shouldn't bother her for anything. They're busy—understaffed, underfunded, overworked, and overwhelmed.

"I'll bring you a drink. It isn't a problem. You just carry on what you're doing. I'm sure she'll be much better in the morning," she says in a gentle tone.

Again, I wonder what is written on my face. Maybe I have as much stress, worry and agony on mine as Fitz does on hers when she's awake. I force myself to smile and nod at the nurse and she disappears, leaving me alone with Fitz, holding her hand and still smoothing down her hair.

“You’re safe, Fitz. I promise,” I whisper.

“I want to go home,” she whimpers. Her eyes are still shut, but I see the tears that still escape.

“I know you do, but it’s okay. I’m not leaving,” I promise.

“Please don’t let me float away,” she pleads.

I wonder if we’re back to that now; the delirium she’d had earlier from the medicine they’d given her, where she shrieked and panicked that she was going to float off into the air.

“I’ll hold on,” I soothe. I move her hair again. Tuck it behind her ears. Use my thumb to wipe away the tears from the corner of her eyes.

She stills under my touch.

“Please don’t leave me. I love you so much,” she whispers.

“I won’t leave.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or if she is still under the fog of the medicine and the temperature. In the car drive over here, I was sure she was talking about James.

“I love you. So much. Don’t go. Please. I love you, Ty,” she murmurs.

I freeze. *I love you, Ty.*

It isn’t the first time she’s said she loves me. I’ve told her a hundred times I love her too. I know she’s delirious. I know she’s not really present in this moment. Except something about the way she’s talking doesn’t feel like the way she’s said it before. She’s always said it as a proclamation–acknowledgement that I’m her favourite person–I’m her best friend. Now, it sounds like a promise, a revered vow, and a declaration of forever.

“Fitz,” I whisper.

“Please don’t leave me. I love you. Ty. Please, please stay with me,” she keeps up her little whispers. She squeezes my hand.

“I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

I lean forward and I kiss her forehead. She lets out the softest murmur of contentment.

“I love you.” It’s the merest hint of a whisper now. She slips back into sleep. Her pinched facial expression disappears, relaxing as she falls into a deeper slumber. The only thing that doesn’t change is how tightly she’s holding onto my hand.

I stay next to her, holding her hand, staring at her, and wondering. *I love you. I love you. Ty.*

It’s not a declaration. It can’t be. She’s just delirious. She’s ill. She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She thought the doctors and nurses were monsters and aliens. The only thing she seems certain of tonight is that I’m here with her. I can’t take anything she has said tonight as truth, not when she’s ill and uncertain.

Except this declaration seems like the surest thing she’s said since I got her in the car to bring her to the hospital, and I’ll be damned if my heart isn’t thumping in my chest. It’s like somebody is hitting the inside of my ribcage with a hammer.

She can’t love me. Not beyond the love we have for our friendship—bonds of love that I could never risk. Those bonds—our friendship—it’s the reason I’ve never told her how I really feel. It’s why I chose to tuck away everything I feel for her and buried it deep down. Sometimes, it bubbles up to the surface again, like when she fell from her bike and I thought she died. Then it was natural for the feeling to come up to the top, demanding to be heard because I’d felt what it was like if I lost her.

Losing Fitz is something I cannot comprehend, in any form. Risking our friendship to tell her I have feelings for her—unrequited feelings—would be something I could never do. It would fracture the bond we have, chip away at the level of openness we have.

She can’t be in love with me. She doesn’t mean that.

*But what if she does?*

What if she feels for me the same as I feel for her? What if she's been too afraid to admit it for the same reasons that I've always held it close to my chest—too afraid to say to words and shake up the contentment and synchronicity.

Not for the first time, I'm thinking about the type of future we could have together if I were lucky enough that she could feel for me the same as I feel for her. I know it would be beautiful. We'd have a small wedding because neither of us would want anything too large. We'd smile and say our vows in front of our closest friends, and we'd know we were the luckiest people in the world. We'd do some traveling for a honeymoon. We'd go back to our favourite places and experience it as a couple in love. We'd put down our roots and start a family. I imagine a couple of daughters, both of us coming home at the end of the day and shutting the door behind us, knowing that everything we hold dear was under the same roof. We'd watch our kids grow up—see them go out into the world as their own people and have their own adventures—and then we'd start our own adventures again. We'd hold each other's hand and go see the world together.

It's the dream I'm always afraid to let myself lean into. It's a fantasy. One that cannot exist because Fitz does not love me. I'm alone with this dream.

Tonight is another night that the feelings have bubbled back up to the surface. A night where I'll lean into it before I bury it all again. Tonight, I'll feel it all so intensely, like the feelings are going to burst out of me. Then I'll have to bury them. I'll bury the dream and the feelings with the same skill I've done for years because I have to. There are too many complications. I can't risk out friendship. I cannot.

I have Harriet.

She has Blake.

I can't bulldoze our friendship and simultaneously ignore the two other people in this equation.

"I love you," Fitz whispers in her sleep. Then she curls up in the bed. Still holding my hand. She looks tiny in the bed but for the first time tonight, she looks peaceful.

I sit in the chair, staring at her, taking in every inch of her face. It's a face I know so well—one I could map every inch, every contour, and every freckle. One that I've seen a million expressions of emotions on—joy, amusement, annoyance, frustration, sadness, and grief. But I swear, tonight is the first time I feel like I've seen love and contentment on her face, and I'm unable to stop myself from pinning my hopes on the idea that it's genuine, and that she could love me in the way I've loved her all these years.

*I love you, Fitz. I always will.*