

TYLER

In “Love Blooms - Under the Heartbreak,” Olive and Tyler are regular cyclists. On one outing, Olive gets into an accident on her bike. This is the chapter written from Tyler’s point of view.

The July sun is scorching hot as I cycle in front of Olive along our planned route. I love cycling, even in the early summer heat. There is something freeing about being on the bike, just the open road ahead of me. I’ve been looking forward to this ride for weeks, especially knowing it has been something Olive has put her focus into, a fun event on the horizon when the past few weeks have been difficult for her.

The road ahead of us is a winding hill. For me, hills are always better if I go faster at the start, but my bike feels sluggish. I signal to Olive that I’m stopping, and I steer my bike in the direction of the grassy verge beside the road. I dismount and look at my back tyre, groaning a little when I see it looks like there is a puncture.

Olive stops her bike next to mine, as I knew she would, but I urge her to carry on. After a bit of back and forth between us, she relents and starts to cycle away, but not before she's stuck her tongue out at me.

I start gathering things so I can fix my bike and catch up with her. I glance up the road to where Olive is cycling, smiling to myself. At the top of this long hill is the pub we've agreed to stop at for lunch. I'm looking forward to chatting over lunch.

I'm busy fixing my bike when I hear the car. It's too fast, too loud, and when I look up, too close to Olive. My heart feels like it's stalling as I'm frozen in my spot, watching everything unfold ahead of me. It's like a horror movie playing in front of my eyes. Olive's bike hits into the crash barrier, and then she flies over the handlebars and disappears into the sloping ditches at the side of the road.

It's at that moment I unfreeze, though my heart doesn't seem ready to beat as normal. Now, instead of feeling like it's stalled, it feels like it's going twice the regular pace.

"Fitz!" I scream. There's no noise other than the music playing from the car and the sound of my footsteps as I race up the road and towards the crash barrier.

I pass the driver as I run but I don't register anything about him, my sole focus is on getting to Olive. In my head, like a mantra, I'm chanting. *Please God, please let her be okay. Please God, please let her be okay.*

I jump over the barrier, shouting her name again as I skid down the steep slope in my haste to get to her. When I reach her, I crouch beside her and reach to touch her cheek. My hand is shaking as I'm fearing the worst, wondering if she's seriously injured.

"I'm okay." Her voice is the quietest I've ever heard it. I'm not used to this volume from her. She's always so full of life and even when

she's melancholy, she's never this quiet. My heart pounds as I think she must be seriously hurt to sound so lifeless.

“God, Fitz... Don’t move.”

“I think I can move,” she replies, her volume a little louder. She squints up at me. When her eyes meet mine, there’s the biggest thud in my chest, like a lightening bolt out of nowhere.

“Jesus.” It’s all I can manage. I sit on the ground next to her, exhausted.

“Ty, I really thought I was going to die with ‘*Freek’n You*’ playing in the background,” she says after a moment of silence, and then she sings along to the music that is still loudly playing from the car.

“Are you concussed?” I ask, but every word feels like an effort to get out. I still feel like I’m being hit by lightening bolts. It’s making my breathing heavy and thick.

“Are they okay?” A voice calls out. It’s the driver and I’m suddenly furious by their very existence in the world. They’re the reason Olive is lying on the ground right now. They’re the reason I could have lost the most important person in my world. Before I know it, I’m on my feet, the fury spilling out of me as I shout up to him. I’m so lost in my fury and yelling at him that it takes a second for me to realise Olive has grabbed hold of my ankle.

“I was following the sat-nav, I thought the rest of the road was straight, the last bend took me by surprise,” the driver calls back.

I’m aware he sounds like a scared kid, but I don’t care. This is his fault. I force myself to take a deep breath. He might be at fault here, but I might need him. If Olive needs to go to the hospital, it’ll be quicker to put her in his car than it would be to call for an ambulance.

“Wait there,” I barks, and then I crouch back beside Olive. She looks at me again and I feel that same bolt of lightning hit me.

“Can you help me up? I think I just had the wind knocked out of me, but I’m okay to move.” She sounds certain but I don’t know whether she should move.

She doesn’t look like anything is broken. I’ve seen her moving her limbs, and she is coherent. It looks more like scrapes and bumps, more superficial than anything serious, but I’m still not convinced moving her is the best thing. When she moves again, I’m sure it’s probably okay to move her but I don’t think she should try to walk yet. Instead, I scoop her up into my arms, resting her against me so I can carry her up the slope and over the barrier. She’s light in my arms given her slight frame, and she fits against my chest easily, like I’ve been carrying her like this for years. Usually, when I carry her, it’s piggybacks when her shoes are too painful, or over my shoulder when I’m joking around.

When we reach other side of the barrier, I look at the driver.

“Lower the back of the truck,” I tell him. It seems like a logical place to put Olive so I can examine her. I put her down gently onto the truck bed.

“I’m so sorry.” The driver puts his attention on Olive, looking too afraid to meet my eye.

“Have you got a warning triangle? Can you put it out so if anybody drives up, they’re not taken by surprise?” I ask. I want him out of the way. I don’t want him gawking at us as I tend to Olive’s injuries. I don’t want him near me at all. The driver heads away and I touch Olive’s face, pulling a larger piece of gravel that is embedded in her cheek.

“I’m bleeding,” she says, sounding surprised.

“Not too badly, but yeah, I’m going to have to take you somewhere to get you cleaned up.”

“I don’t think I can get back on the bike just yet.”

The idea of her getting back onto her bike seems crazy.

“No shit, Sherlock.” I roll my eyes.

“I think it’s just some cuts and scrapes. I don’t think I need a doctor.”

“It might be good to get you checked out.”

“I feel fine, Ty, just sore,” she tells me. I frown as I pick more gravel from her skin. “How’s my face?”

“Not too bad. I think it’s just a few scrapes. Helmet took the brunt of it,” I say, unclipping her helmet, grateful she isn’t a rider who insists they’re not required. There’s a good chance this helmet is the reason she’s so coherent and steady after a fall like that.

“Well, it’s fortunate we’re such careful riders,” she jokes, but I don’t laugh because my heart still feels like somebody is squeezing it.

“What can I do to help?” The driver is back.

“You’ve scared this guy, Ty,” Olive scolds.

“I’m so sorry, I just lost it on the bend and I... I thought I’d killed you,” the guy mutters.

“I’m Olive. Sorry, probably best if I keep my bleeding hands to myself.”

“Oh, I have a first aid kit,” the guy exclaims. He moves around the truck and rummages around in the back before coming out with what seems like an industrial sized first aid kit.

“You’re well prepared,” Olive comment.

“Well, you never know when you will need to help a pretty lady,” the guy replies.

I snap at him, losing the remaining threads of my patience.

Sometimes, when friends of mine complain about things men have said to them, I’m surprised and assume they must somehow meet the worst offering from the male species, but then I meet people like this driver who seems to want to hit on the woman who is bleeding and white-as-a-sheet in front of him.

“Sorry, I... I don’t think before I speak when I’m nervous. Let me start again, I’m Matthew.”

“Why don’t you sit in the car for a minute, calm your nerves?” Olive suggests with more grace than I can muster. Fortunately, he disappears into the car, out of my way.

I mutter under my breath, but Olive hears, scolding me that I’ve scared the driver.

“He could have killed you, Fitz.”

“He didn’t. It was an accident, and I am fine.”

She doesn’t look fine. Over the years, I’ve seen Olive during terrible times. I’ve seen her break down, I’ve seen her cry and rage at the world, I’ve seen her looking completely lost, but I’ve never seen her so pale. Despite saying she’s fine, she looks like she could do with a stiff drink, or at least, a bucket full of chocolate and sugar.

“Can’t be friendly with the guy, Fitz, I’m still reeling and replaying the image of what happened in my head. Going to take me a while to calm down,” I mutter.

She doesn’t respond, she lets me focus on cleaning her hands with the antiseptic wipes from the first aid box. I remove all the gravel I can see, my stomach flipping as I deal with the cut that is close to her cheekbone. I cut away her cycling leggings, turning them into a pair of impromptu shorts so I can deal with the cuts on her legs. I bandage what I think would be better to be covered up. She complains when I’m finished given the amount of plasters and bandages but lets me leave her on the truck bed as I go get Matthew from the car so we can inspect the damage to his front bumper and Olive’s bike. When I’m done, I walk back to my bike and get my phone from the holder on the handlebars.

When I dial to connect the call to Leo, I see my hand is shaking. I keep my gaze on where Olive is sitting while the call connects.

“Hey, I thought you were out cycling all day. What’s up?” Leo asks as he answers.

I can’t find the words to talk immediately. It’s only when I hear him call my name a couple of times that I feel like I can talk.

“Are you busy?” I ask.

“What do you need?” Leo asks. I’d have done the same if he phoned me, no matter what is going on, anybody calls another person in our friendship group and we’re there.

“She’s okay but there was an accident. Some guy was driving like an idiot, and Fitz fell off her bike. It’s just cuts and bruises but...” My voice trails off.

It’s just cuts and bruises, but it’s *Fitz*. It’s automatically more than just cuts and bruises. Anything to do with her is always more than it is because of what she means to me.

“Where are you? I’ll come out and get you both.”

“You’ll need your bike rack. She can’t cycle back to my car. I’m not even sure her bike is roadworthy right now,” I explain after I’ve given him the address for the pub where I’m planning on getting Matthew to drive us to.

“It’s fine, I’ll bring it. Don’t worry.” There is a pause. “Are you okay, Tyler?” he asks.

Am I okay? Logically, yes, I’m fine. I’m not the one injured. I’m not the one who was almost hit by the car. I’m not the one who flew over my handlebars. I’m not the one who is battered and bleeding in the back of a truck.

Yet, my heart feels like it doesn’t know how to beat properly. My stomach is in knots. My mouth is dry. And all I want to do is scoop her into my arms and hold her close, kiss the top of her head, and tell her how much she means to me, how I wouldn’t have survived if something worse had happened.

“I’m fine,” I reply.

“Tyler? Have a drink when you get to the pub. Have a couple. I’ll drive your car back. I’ll see you soon,” Leo promises.

The car journey to the pub is excruciating. Everything feels off. The music jars me. The air in the silence after I turn it off feels heavy. My jaw hurts and I realise I’ve had my teeth clenched the whole of the short journey.

Matthew pulls up into the car park and we get out to offload the two bikes. Olive’s bike doesn’t look like it will take too much to fix. I exchange contact details with Matthew who had offered to pay for the repairs. Once I’m done with the bikes, I open the door to the backseat of his car.

“Do you think you can walk?” I ask, looking at Olive. She nods and scoots across the back seat. Instinct tells me to pick her up, but I know she’ll insist on walking.

“Olive, I am sorry about everything. I will pay for any damages to your bike. I gave my details to your boyfriend.” Matthew says.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Olive shakes her head.

“Oh, you’re single. Maybe I could have your number, in case it’s better to sort the bike out directly between us.”

“You almost knocked her off her bike, now is not the time to shoot your shot.” I roll my eyes. Honestly, this guy is getting on my last nerve.

“No, right, I just thought...”

“Thanks for the drive, Matthew, and the first aid kit,” Olive says cheerfully. We walk to the pub together, leaving Matthew behind. All I want to do is get her seated and get her something to eat and drink, let some calmness return between us.

After a bit of calming down the lady behind the bar who looks horrified at Olive’s injuries, I guide Olive to a comfortable looking

table, pulling out the bench for her to sit on. I slide into a chair opposite her.

“I’m not looking forward to cycling back to the car. How does the bike look, will it be okay to ride?” she says, breaking the silence.

“You’re not riding anywhere. Leo and Becky are coming to meet us. They’ll drive us back to my car. It’ll be a while, so we can wait here and eat if you’re feeling up for some food.”

“Okay, I think something to eat will help.”

“I thought food might help, otherwise I’d have asked Matthew to drive us to my car. I’m kinda glad I didn’t as I’m not sure I’d survive a longer drive with him.”

“You mean you’re not sure he would survive it,” she teases. She’s not wrong.

“Maybe.”

“I think everybody will get a kick out of the idea that some guy almost runs me over and then asks for my number.” She laughs but a flash of pain crosses her face. I knew I should take her to the hospital to get checked out.

“What hurts? I still think you should still go see somebody.”

“I’m fine, just a little sore. I will survive.” She brushes away my concerns. I reach across the table for her hand. I rub my thumb across the top of her hand but before I can speak, the woman from behind the bar arrives to take our order.

I order the food that Olive and I had talked about earlier when we’d been looking at the menu for the pub, and I ask for a chocolate dessert for her. I order drinks and ignore the look of surprise on Olive’s face when I order myself a double whisky.

“The most chocolately dessert? I should fall off my bike more often.” She grins at me when the woman walks away. I’m not ready to be making jokes.

“Please don’t.”

“It isn’t like you to drink the hard stuff this early in the day,” she comments. It isn’t judgement in her tone, but surprise.

“Never been terrified this early in the day before,” I reply, honesty pouring out of me as I’m not sure I’ve ever been as scared as I was when I saw the accident unfolding in front of my eyes. To distract myself from the replay in my head, I run my thumb over hers. “I thought you’d...” I start, but my voice trails off because I don’t know how to finish.

I can’t make myself say those words, admit how easily it would have been for everything to be so different, how if she wasn’t smiling and joking in front of me right now, I’d never have found the strength to get up again. I’m not as strong as she is, as strong as she has had to be. All I know is, if things had unfolded differently, I wouldn’t be the same Tyler after it.

“But I didn’t,” she replies simply, like there isn’t any other option in the world. She twists her hand so she can hold mine properly. We stay like that until the food and drinks arrive, but I wish I could stay like that forever and never let go.

Becky and Leo arrive after we have finished food. Olive looks better, but still a little shaky. We wrap everything up at the pub and then Leo drives us back to where my car is parked. I leave Olive in Becky and Leo’s car, Becky to drive them home as Leo drives my car because I’ve followed his suggestion and had a drink.

Leo doesn’t force me to talk. He doesn’t make inane chatter as he drives us in the direction of my house. It isn’t his style.

“I need to stop and get some things from the chemist. I bet Fitz will have a bath and she’ll need to rebandage that leg,” I say once we closer to home.

Still Leo doesn't say anything. He pulls up next to the chemist nearest to my house and I get out, buying bandages and more plasters, antiseptic creams, and anything else I think she might need tonight. I don't want to be caught short if she needs something.

I get back in the car and Leo starts the drive again but when we reach my street, he stops at the bottom of the road, pulling to the side and switching off the engine.

He turns to look at me. "You need to tell her." His tone is firm.

"What?"

"You need to tell her you love her."

"Fitz knows I love her," I protest but Leo shakes his head, smiling wryly.

"You need to tell her you're *in* love with her. There's a difference, and you know it."

I sit in my seat, staring out of the windscreen. I remember the first time Leo had called me out on my feelings for Olive. I'd clearly been talking about her too much during our phone calls when we were still in lockdown. He'd asked me then if I'd fallen in love with the woman who was supposed to be my temporary landlord. I'd laughed but then the laughter had died on my lips when I'd considered what he'd said. It had been months since I'd moved in with Olive, but I'd been too blind to see what was happening. She'd become more than my landlord, my best friend. Somewhere between all our heart-to-heart conversations and hugs, my heart had let her in, not just that but embraced and rejoiced at the idea she was there. I'd tucked it tightly away in my heart since because I knew she didn't feel anything for me. It just feels like the accident today has chipped away at the armour around my heart, seeping some of those feelings out, but I know I can pull it back in because I could never risk my friendship with Fitz.

“Fitz doesn’t feel for me anything other than friendship. It would be madness to say anything; I’d ruin everything between us. I can’t risk our friendship on that.”

“How do you know she doesn’t feel more for you?”

“I know Fitz.” I shrug. “She’d have told me. She’s incapable of keeping her emotions to herself.”

“You don’t think there’s a chance she’s as reluctant to tell you how she feels as you are to tell her?” Leo asks.

“No. Besides, she’d have said something to Becky. Becky tells you everything,” I point out.

“I haven’t told Becky that you’re madly in love with Olive,” he replies, a small grin on his face.

“I’m fine with how things are. My friendship with Fitz, it’s everything. I don’t want to say anything that could change it. Besides, she’s with Blake, and I’m with Harriet.”

“Does she love Blake? Do you love Harriet?” Leo challenges.

I think about Olive and Blake together, their relationship something I don’t fully understand. Olive still seems to keep him at an arms-length, and if he’s the guy she loves, I wish he’d act like he knew he deserved it, focus his attention on her and only her.

I think of my relationship with Harriet. I’m fond of her. I’ve been waiting to feel that bolt of love, to get that acknowledgement that she is the woman I love. On paper, Harriet’s great. She’s nice, sweet, smart, pretty, she likes me, she likes my friends.

She’s just not Olive.

“I’m just shaken up about everything that happened today. I thought she’d died. When I went over that barrier to check on her, I thought...” I start, but my voice trails off because I can’t speak. It feels like there is an elephant on my chest. The car feels too small to contain me and the pressure on my chest and I’m out of the car before

I realise what I'm doing. I pace up and down, one end of Leo's car to the other and back again, repeating and repeating. Leo gets out of the car, leaning against the bonnet of the car, watching me pace and get it out of my system.

"You've got to tell her," he says again once I stop pacing. "You're going to tear yourself to pieces if you keep this in."

"I'm going to call Hattie and cancel my plans to see her tonight. I can't face it. You drive the car to the house. I'll walk, and then I'll sort the bikes out," I say. He gives me a smile that can only be described as sympathetic and then gets back into the car. I start to walk the short distance to the house. I dial Harriet's number.

"I wasn't expecting to hear from you until later," she says when she answers.

"I'm really sorry, Hattie, I need to cancel our plans for tonight. I hope it's okay."

"What's happened?"

"Fitz had a nasty fall on her bike, and I am exhausted after sorting everything out."

"Is she okay?" Harriet asks after a moment of pause.

"Yeah, just banged up. You'll see what I mean when we all go out again. I just feel like I wouldn't be good company, so I'll see you tomorrow evening instead, if that's okay?"

"Yeah, okay, that's fine," she replies with much more grace than I probably deserve.

I hate how Olive always accepts Blake blowing her off and I realise I'm probably no better than him right now, but I know if I pick Hattie up later for our date, I'll be in a terrible mood and no company for either of us. That feels marginally better than Blake's reasons for ditching Olive last minute.

Harriet ends the call just as I walk down the driveway to the house. Leo's pulling Olive's bike from the bike rack.

"I'll take it," I say, arriving next to him and taking the bike from him so I can push it to the garage where Leo's already left mine. Leo gives me another sympathetic smile and the disappears into the house.

I put the bikes away as quickly as I can and then hurry to follow him into the house, wanting to check Olive is okay now that she's home.

As I walk down the hallway, I hear Olive talking. She sounds much brighter than she had earlier and I'm glad.

I step into the living room, and she gives me one of her big smiles when she sees me.

"You are looking better," I comment. Becky gets up from where she is sitting next to Olive.

"Leo and I are going to dash. We are off for dinner tonight," she explains.

"Thank you so much for everything today." Olive beams at Becky.

"You two are the best," I add.

"Anytime you need us, you know we are there but try not to have any crazy accidents going forwards." Becky leans to give Olive a kiss and then she and Leo head out of the house.

I sit down next to Olive, dropping the bag from the chemists onto the floor.

"Did you do all your running around?" she asks.

"Yeah, I've just packed the bikes away. I'll sort yours out tomorrow."

"You don't have to do that. I can sort it in the week."

"It isn't a problem. I picked up some new bandages from the shop." I pull out a new bandage from the bag and gestures for her to rest her leg on my lap. I re-bandage her gash.

"Thank you," she says when I'm done.

"No problem, Fitz."

“Are you okay now? You seemed really stressed earlier.”

“I’m sorry, it just shook me up, seeing you go over the barrier like that, and then to see you lying on the ground,” I explain, and again I curse that I can’t keep my voice from wavering.

“I was really worried when you yelled at Matthew.”

“He was driving like a dickhead. It’s just sheer luck that you weren’t seriously injured.”

“I just worried because he could have reacted badly... he could have...” Her voice trails off.

“I can handle myself,” I reply. When she speaks, her voice is quiet.

“I think James would have thought that about himself, too.”

The guilt that washes over me is intense. I think back to her holding onto my ankle, like she was afraid to let go, gripping me harder with every second. I hate that I’ve made her feel like that, reminded her of a time when an argument escalated, and she lost everything. I pull her close to me and kiss her forehead.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just lost it for a minute. I didn’t think.”

“I can’t lose you, Ty,” she whispers.

“I can’t lose you either, Fitz,” I reply. Sometimes I feel like the two of us are stitched together in ways we’ll never be able to unpick, even if I wanted to. I pull away from her, even though I’d happily hold her like this for the rest of the night. “So, have you plans for tonight?”

“No, you?”

“Nope.”

“I thought you were seeing Harriet?” She looks at me, curiosity on her face.

“I rearranged to tomorrow because I’m feeling knackered and awful. So... film and takeaway later, after I’ve showered?”

“Sounds perfect.” She gives me a nod and I’m grateful she wants to sit together, because I can’t think of a better ending to a day like today than sitting quietly with the woman who means the world to me.