

CHAPTER 1

My eyelids rebelled against being pulled apart. It took a while for my brain to convince them to cooperate.

Reluctantly my pupils started to focus. I was lying on my back, in the middle of a dark road. I felt disoriented and uncomfortable. Shadows mutated in the moonlight. I screwed my eyes shut and took in a slow breath. On my second inhale, I opened my eyes and sat up. I removed my helmet and scanned the area around me.

My motorbike—or what was left of it—was lying on its side, also in the middle of the road, broken pieces scattered around it. I looked down at my legs. They were fine. I lifted my arms and twisted them up and down. Also fine.

A mangled black Mini fumed on the side of the road halfway up the muddied kerb, the driver's door open. Something felt off. The air was too thick. And what the hell was that sound? Was it humming?

Movement to my left caught my attention. Nina! The most gorgeous girl I had ever met. The girl who stole my breath and scrambled my brain every time I saw her. She was sitting on the verge. Her chin rested on her arms as she hugged her knees. I staggered over and collapsed next to her.

“Oliver,” she whispered. “What happened?”

“We were in an accident.” I crossed my legs and rubbed my hair around on my head before I looked at her properly. “Are you hurt?”

“I don't think so.” She twisted her head to face me. I took in a sharp breath. Her soft blue eyes were glowing bright yellow.

“What...” I rubbed my thumb and forefinger in my own eyes.

“What happened?” she asked again.

“We were in an accident, Nina,” I repeated softly and gestured at the mess in front of us.

“Oh.” Her eyes flitted over the broken scene. “But... I was just at your gig, wasn't I?”

“Yeah...” Vague images of performing in the Guildberry tried to form in my head, but floated away without materialising.

“I think we... I...” She trailed off. A fragile expression crossed her face and an overwhelming urge to comfort her made me lean over to touch her shoulder, but my hand stopped mid-air. Blood was oozing from a cut on the side of her face. It painted a thick line all the way down to her chest.

“Nina!” I fumbled for my mobile to call for help. “Your face!”

“What?” She started scooting away from me. I dropped my phone back in my pocket and tried to cup her face to inspect it, but she shoved me away and pushed to her feet, stumbling back a couple of steps.

“I'm sorry.” I put my hands in the air before getting up as well. “I want to make sure you're all right, okay?”

“I'm fine!” Her voice trembled. “Are you okay?”

“Yes! I don't know.” I pulled on the ends of my hair. “I feel... strange.”

“Me too.” She reached for my hand and I took a step towards her.

My breathing slowed as we faced each other, but I felt sick with fear. Something was off. Way off. My lungs struggled to shift the heavy air. I still couldn't pinpoint where the hell that humming was coming from. Perhaps it was ticking, actually. I wanted to tell Nina that we really should call for help, but my words evaporated. Everything inside me centralised around an inexplicable need to comfort her. To protect her.

For a moment her glowing yellow eyes and bloody face didn't even register. My arm snaked around her waist and I closed the space between our bodies as my mouth crashed down on hers. I held the back of her head with my other hand, drawing her even closer as I devoured her mouth with a desperation I had never felt

before. I pulled away after a few beats and my eyes connected with Nina's.

I tried to scream, but my lungs were two solid concrete blocks. Nina's terrified eyes were still blazing yellow. Blood was still seeping from a wound on the side of her head, soaking her white top in a dark mess. Her lips turned blue. She tried to speak, but blood bubbled from her mouth. She reached out to me, but I collapsed before our fingers touched.

CHAPTER 2

I was aware of a rhythmic tick harmonising with a steady hum before my eyelids started to pull apart again. The smell of anti-septic irritated my nose and my throat was on fire. Everything hurt.

Panic threatened to overwhelm me, but my muddled brain remembered that I wasn't sixteen anymore. My heart burned at the memory. I was twenty-three now. This wasn't then. This didn't feel good. But this wasn't then.

I dragged my eyes over my surroundings. Light grey room, dimly lit. Heart monitor, ticking to my right. Oxygen monitor, humming to my left. Torso, strapped into a tight brace. Wires and tubes, protruding from around my body. Halfway down my bed, slumped over the edge, my sister Sophie, her fingers entwined with mine and her chestnut hair matted around her face.

I untangled my hand from her grip and brushed the hair from her cheek. She let out a sleepy mumble before her eyes flew open and she sprang upright.

"Oliver!" She folded herself awkwardly around my left arm and started sobbing as she buried her face in the space between my arm and my body.

"Water," I croaked, trying to pat her back. She sniffed as she sat up and wiped her eyes before she reached over for a cup of water on the bedside cabinet. She placed the straw between my lips and I sucked deeply for a few moments. "What time is it?"

"Just after four." She looked at her watch. "Sunday morning." It confused me, but she carried on before I could calculate the days

in my head. “I was afraid you were never going to wake up.” She started crying again and covered her face with her hands.

“What happened?” I rubbed a hand over my own face.

“You were in an accident.” She pulled several tissues from a box on the cabinet as she mumbled, “Thursday night,” between blowing her nose.

Thursday? Two, three days ago? What the hell? The questions tumbled through my mind, but before they could order themselves enough to come out of my mouth, a memory of Nina settled in my gut.

I was working behind the bar when she whirled through the door like some mystical damn fairy. Or something a bit more wicked, perhaps. My heart missed several beats when I realised it was her. I wasn't sure where the hell she'd come from, but it seemed like she was everywhere I bloody looked recently. It was the seventh time I'd crossed paths with her this week. This was the first time we'd come face to face, though.

She leaned over the counter to place her order, but her eyes widened and she took in a long breath. She recognised me as well.

The oxygen left my lungs when I noticed that her eyes were the same ridiculously light, almost translucent, blue as mine. I didn't know why it felt so significant. I'd obviously seen lots of people with blue eyes, but I didn't think I'd ever met anyone whose eyes were quite as pale as mine. She noticed it too and stood there staring at me without saying a word. She didn't even blink. I knew at that moment that this girl was seared into my soul.

The tiniest of grins tugged at the corner of her mouth before her lashes flicked downwards and she pushed her hair behind her ear.

I screwed my eyes shut and cleared my throat when Sophie took my hand in hers again and pulled me from the memory. “What’s wrong with me?” I nodded at my body.

Sophie swiped her cheek with the back of her fingers to catch a new trickle of tears before her eyes flicked down to my legs. I immediately realised that my head was pounding, my throat was

on fire, my ribs strangled my lungs every time I took a breath, but I could not feel my legs. At all.

“I’ll go and tell them that you’re awake.” She pushed herself up, but I tried to grab her hand.

“Is it permanent?” I whispered, but she just shrugged out a heavy sigh.

“Right.” I nodded, allowing an unsolicited tear to slide down my own cheek as well.

“Morning, Oliver.” A nurse with a tight grey bun and a friendly smile appeared. “Welcome back, dear. See, Miss Lawrence, I told you he just needed a bit more time.” She pulled a tablet from the end of my bed and waddled over to my side, checking readings on monitors. “How is your pain?” She adjusted some settings.

“My head... and my chest...” A snippet from the Guildberry played through my head again.

“Come on, Ols.” Kellan slapped me on the back.

“In a minute.” I sprayed the counter and wiped it down.

“Go on, Ollie. I’ll do it. You need to get up early.” Jack stuffed my share of the evening’s tips into my hand before he started wiping the same spot I’d just cleaned.

“Thanks, Jack.” I grabbed my jacket and helmet from the back.

“You need to be there for ten. The ferry leaves from Portsmouth at eight.”

“Yep.” I shrugged on my jacket.

“Isle of Wight is a big deal, Ollie. Don’t fuck it up.” He made his eyes wide as a smirk almost tugged at his cheek.

“I know.” I grinned, pulled up my zip and turned around.

“Have fun.” He laughed and I lifted my arm in a backward wave as I headed out to join Kellan and Charlie where they were leaning against Ian’s van. I felt my pockets and cursed when I couldn’t find anything. Ian joined us and handed over my cigarettes, one dangling from his lips.

“I was looking for that.” I frowned.

“I borrowed them earlier when I went outside with that blonde with the nice...” He gestured at his chest. “You know, the one who used to work at

the gym, Kel.” A smirk rippled across his cheek as he looked at his brother. I rolled my eyes. “Do you know what else I saw while I was outside with...?” Ian gestured at his chest again, blowing smoke from the side of his mouth and wiggling his eyebrows at me.

“I don’t know, Ian. Her arse?” I sighed.

“Naturally. But I also saw Nina getting into a right strop when she left.”

“Yeah?” My heart missed a beat. I couldn’t remember ever being so affected by a girl. She’d been on my mind all week and I couldn’t keep my eyes off her this evening. “Why?” I asked before I could stop myself, but then told myself to at least try and maintain some dignity. They didn’t need to know the extent of my sudden and unwelcome obsession.

“No, never mind. I don’t care,” I huffed and Ian shrugged as I stepped on my cigarette. “I’m going home.” I swung my leg over my bike and put on my helmet as they started filing into Ian’s van. “See you in the morning.” I flipped my visor down.

“We’re picking you up at six!” Kellan called from the window. Charlie waved and Ian hooted as they drove off.

“Dr. Harold will be here to see you shortly.” The nurse forced my attention back to the present. “The pressure will start easing soon.” She adjusted the IV again and patted my hand before she squeezed Sophie’s shoulder and hurried out of the room.

“Do you know what happened?” I turned my head back to Sophie.

“You were on your way back to Haslemere when you crashed into a car,” she started, but the memories became clear in my mind before she finished her sentence.

It was just past midnight, so the traffic through Guildford was still hectic, but the minute I hit the A3 the road cleared and I opened my throttle, flying down the road towards Haslemere. Before I reached the Hindhead tunnel, I swerved left into the Brook turn-off.

I loved that road. It was bloody magical at any time of the year. In autumn, it was covered in a blanket of rusty leaves that fluttered up and

lingered suspended in the air before floating down lazily whenever I sped past. In winter, the naked tree branches glistened as they poked at the bitter sky. And in spring, it felt like riding through a tunnel of daffodils.

That night, in early June, there were clear skies and the almost too-full moon that hung low above the treetops made the lush forest next to the road glow. I instantly felt happy to be alive and opened my throttle a little more, letting the sensory overload of the club leave my body.

I geared down and went around the last bend, realising too late that there was a car in front of me.

Right in front of me.

Everything started happening in slow motion. I lifted off my Ducati and heard the metal screech and glass scatter as I coasted over the car and looked down at its deformed shape. Nina levitated between the front seats and the shattered windscreen. The sound of cracking bones drilled through my ears and the air burst from my lungs as I landed on my back on the other side. I thought I heard Axl whine in the distance about not having any hopes or dreams, but the stars started going blurry and then everything went quiet.

“Soph,” I whispered. “I remember. I crashed into a car on the Brook Road.” Images of Nina’s face moving towards the windscreen flashed through my mind again. “Nina! Nina was in the car. Is she okay?” I tried to struggle up and Sophie put her hand on top of mine, the frown deepening between her hazel eyes.

“Shh, Ollie, breathe, okay,” she said and I tried to take in a breath. “I don’t know, Ollie. I heard she’s in a coma, but don’t know anything else.”

“Can you find out?” My voice was slower than it should have been. The drugs were pulling on my eyelids already.

“Okay, Ollie, shh. Just rest now, okay?” She patted my hand.

I must have fallen asleep after that because when I looked at Sophie again she had changed her clothes and brushed her hair. The room was brighter too. She put the cup of water to my mouth even

before I asked. I carefully pushed up on one elbow and sucked it empty in a few gulps.

“I’ve told the guys you’re awake.” She smiled weakly and I felt an unwelcome panic stir in my gut. I couldn’t let them see me like this. I couldn’t face them. Thankfully a doctor entered the room and saved me from freaking out.

“Morning, Oliver.” He looked to be in his early, perhaps mid-, fifties. “My name is Malcolm Harold, head of neurology.” Fine lines creased his face as his green-brown eyes smiled at me. He reminded me of my dad. An unsolicited warmth settled in my chest. “Has the pressure in your head and in your lungs eased at all? How is the pain?” He shone a light in my eyes and I had to force myself not to jerk my head away.

“It’s better than before.” My voice came out flat.

“Are you feeling confused? Any memory loss?” He moved his fingers in front of my face so that my eyes followed them from one side to the other.

I couldn’t help turning my head away. “No.”

“Good, good. So”—he took in a long breath—“your limbs are intact, which is unusual for a motorcycle accident, so that’s certainly positive. You do have a hairline fracture in your skull and we’ve had to relieve the swelling in your brain with a small incision at the base of your skull, but hopefully you should only endure these headaches for a few more days. It’s important to let us know if you feel any nausea or confusion.” He paused until I nodded. “You also have five cracked ribs. None of your organs are pierced, but your lungs are heavily bruised and it will make your chest feel very tight.

“Right, your back.” He sighed and I held my breath. “You’ve sustained an incomplete burst fracture to the L4 and L5 lumbar discs in your spine.”

I zoned out. I understood what “fracture” meant, but the rest meant fuck all to me. I never understood why doctors couldn’t speak in plain English, or any one of the other languages I spoke.

“It means you have a broken spine, Oliver. The two lower discs are cracked in several places, but not shattered apart entirely. At the moment your legs are paralysed, but like I said, the fracture appears to be incomplete, which means the vertebrae could still be attached in some places. I’d like to send you for further MRI scans now that you’re awake and the inflammation has come down a little. I’m hopeful for confirmation on our best option.”

“Okay.” I pursed my lips as a strained breath escaped from my nose.

“Are you happy to continue?” He lifted an eyebrow and I thought it was the most moronic question I had ever heard. What the fuck was the alternative? “Do you have any questions?” he asked and I wordlessly shook my head.

“You need to read through these forms and give your consent.” He handed me the tablet from the end of my bed. “Somebody will be around to take you down to radiology shortly. Please do not eat or drink anything until we have the results. With any luck we can get you into surgery today.” He strolled out of the room.

I closed my eyes for a long moment and took a few deep breaths. When I opened them again, Sophie was staring at me.

“You’re going to be okay, Ollie.” She squeezed my hand, probably trying to convince herself more than anything. I just about managed to tip my lips up into something that I hoped mimicked a smile.

“Ready to go, Oliver?” The nurse from earlier returned and looked at my tablet again.

“Yeah,” I sighed as she started adjusting things around me.

“He’s going to be a few hours, Miss Lawrence,” she said to Sophie when another nurse appeared to help her push my bed out of the room. “Perhaps a good time to get something to eat? Some fresh air?”

“All right.” Sophie bent down and kissed my head. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Thanks.” I made another attempt to smile, but my heart was pounding in my chest again.

I spent the next two hours being scanned and X-rayed from all possible angles and I was beyond exhaustion by the end of it. Eventually they took me back to my room and pumped me full of pain-killers again. I was already falling asleep when Sophie walked in. She spoke to the nurse and I tried to listen to what they were saying, but I couldn't focus on them long enough to form any comprehension as I drifted off into oblivion.

When I woke up again Sophie was sitting in a chair across the room, next to the window, and came over when I cleared my throat with a painful croak.

"Sorry." She rubbed ice on my lips. "You can't have anything yet." She sat down next to my bed and stroked the hair from my eyes. "I've spoken to Dr. Harold about your test results, Ollie. He's quite positive that they might be able to repair the damage." She bowed her head and I frowned, not yet sure what she was saying. "The surgery sounds complicated and you're going to need some intense rehab, but there is a possibility that you will be able to walk again one day." A smile spread across her lips and I exhaled slowly.

I could feel the tears prickling in the corners of my eyes again and I covered my face with both of my hands until I heard footsteps enter the room.

"How are you feeling, Oliver?" Dr. Harold pulled up a chair and sat down next to Sophie.

I nodded that I was okay.

"Your sister explained that our investigations showed some promise? So, to prevent any further risk of movement in your discs I would like to perform a procedure called spinal fusion this afternoon. It means that we will repair the damaged discs before fusing them together in order to strengthen them. This method usually has a high success rate. Of course there are no guarantees, but in my opinion, this is your best option for hopefully making a full recovery." He gave me a small smile, but I'm not sure I reacted. "Are you happy to continue?"

Again with the idiotic questions. I nodded once.

“Good. Excellent. Here are some more consent forms to read through and agree to.” He handed me the tablet. “Somebody will take you to the operating room now. Under the circumstances this is rather positive, Oliver.”

He left the room when the same nurse from earlier returned to read my tablet and unplug the numerous machines around my bed.

“Ready to go?” She smiled, but I barely responded.

“I love you, Ollie,” Sophie leaned over and I held her as close as I could. My own eyes burned as I felt her tears against my cheek. I knew she must be struggling as much as I was to accept yet another devastating accident.

“I love you, Soph.” I squeezed her tighter, ignoring the pain. “I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

She sniffed as the nurse started rolling me out of the room. I lifted my hand in a small wave before we disappeared around the corner.

When we arrived in the operating room everybody was already prepared and waiting. The anaesthetist introduced herself and explained the procedure. She asked me to count backwards from ten and I started saying the numbers as I tried to focus on her soft brown eyes. I lost my train of thought and probably didn’t even make it to seven.