

CHAPTER ONE

A paper cherry blossom falls from the shelf and lands gently on the carpet. I watch Julie bend down to pick it up. She examines each fold before placing it on her desk. Then she lifts a moving box from the floor and says, “Can you grab the other one, Oliver?”

I fold my arms. “I don’t know why you’re packing this much.”

“Four months is a long time.”

“Which is exactly why you shouldn’t go.”

Julie lets out a breath. “You could at least pretend to be excited for me.”

It’s our last day together before she heads to Copenhagen. She’s doing a study abroad program, abandoning me for the next few months. It’s spring quarter of freshman year. Julie and I both attend Central Washington University. Whose door am I going to knock on when I get locked out of my dorm at two in the morning? Who am I going to convince to skip class with me and grab free bagels at the fourth floor of the library?

Julie holds up a candle. “Do you want this?”

“Can’t,” I groan. “My new roommate says he hates ‘feminine’ scents.” Ethan is your standard straight baseball player with whom I have nothing in common. But he isn’t the worst guy in the world.

“I don’t know how you’re gonna put up with that.”

“At least he didn’t sleep with my ex,” I remind her.

“I thought we agreed not to mention Nolan anymore.” She gives me one of her looks. “You better not text him while I’m away.”

I return the look. “And what would I even have to say to him after what he did? That I forgive him for cheating on me . . . *with my roommate?*”

Julie sighs. “I thought you were healing from this, Oliver.”

I stare out the window. “I’ll heal when I’m ready.”

Unfortunately, Nolan is also a student at CWU. I met him a few weeks after high school graduation, when he led my group’s campus tour. I’d thought it was serendipity when we sat next to each other in the same computer science class I was shopping my first quarter. I ultimately dropped it, but he invited me to my first college party. Long story short, he was my first relationship. We spent every day together. We were practically inseparable. It was a great five months until he started hooking up with Connor, my former roommate. I don’t speak to either of them anymore. That’s another reason to be sad Julie’s leaving. She’s one of the few people I have left.

While Julie’s packing up some books, I walk over to her desk and rummage through one of the boxes. I take out a picture frame and hang it back on her wall. Then I grab a stack of books and return them to their spot on the shelf.

Julie turns her head, noticing me. “Oliver, stop that.” She takes the books from my hands and places them inside the box again. “I didn’t invite you here to unpack my things.”

I drop my head. "But I don't want you to go."

"I won't be gone forever. We'll still talk every day."

"It won't be the same though. You're the only friend I have left."

"You're so dramatic," she says, shaking her head. "Everyone loves you. You just need some time to settle in."

As she moves the box away from me, something falls to the floor.

I bend down to pick it up.

It's a guitar pick.

I don't have to ask where she got it. I can hear the strings as his fingers move along them. I turn it in my hands, watching the light bounce off the plastic.

"You can have it, if you'd like," Julie says.

I hadn't noticed her watching. I shake my head and say, "No, that's okay. It's yours." She's given me a lot of Sam's things already. So I hand this one back. I'm sure it means a lot to her.

"Thank you."

We haven't talked about him in a while. I wonder if Julie is thinking the same thing. "You know, it's been almost a year now," I remind her. "Since it happened, I mean." Sam died in the spring of senior year. It took place on the night of the bonfire. As he was driving to find Julie, another car swerved into his lane and crashed straight into him before driving off. I didn't know about it until the next morning, after he'd been found at the side of the road.

"Yeah . . . I know."

"Do you still think about him a lot?"

"Every day."

"Same."

A silence passes. Then she takes my hands and says, "And I know he would want us to live out our lives. I'm sure he would

be happy to know we're friends. And me leaving isn't going to change that."

I don't say anything. Even though Julie and I have known each other since sophomore year, we only became friends in the last several months. It's funny how shared grief can bring people together. I know she'll be back at the end of the summer. But then Julie is transferring to Reed College in the fall. She received her acceptance letter a few weeks ago. It was always her plan to move out of Ellensburg. A plan that had once included Sam. "I was thinking about visiting him later," I mention. "Bring him some flowers or something. If you wanted to come with me. We could grab something to eat on the way."

"You know I would love to," she says, squeezing my hand. "But I still have a lot of packing to do. And I should probably spend time with my mom before I go."

I frown. "I'll go alone, then."

"Don't be sad," she says. "Everything's going to be fine, alright? Four months isn't that long, if you think about it. And we'll video call every day."

"Alright, I'll stop guilt-tripping you."

"Good. Because my flight is nonrefundable. Maybe I'll see you again before I leave?"

"If I can wake up that early."

Julie smiles. Then she checks the time. There's a pile of clothes on the bed that need folding. "I should probably get back to packing."

"You don't need any help?"

"I think you've done enough for today, Oliver."

"Sounds like my cue to leave."

I give her a hug goodbye and see myself out. There's a slight chill as I make my way through town. Usually, I listen to my

“sad boy” playlist on these walks alone. But I left my headphones back at the dorm. My new roommate is probably there, blasting country music.

I take out my phone and send a text.

Julie is moving tomorrow

What am I supposed to do
without the both of you?

It brings me comfort to see his name on the screen. *Sam Obayashi*. Even though he's gone, I still text him sometimes. Maybe more often than I'd like to admit. It makes me feel like we're still connected. Like he's still here. After all, he passed so abruptly and I never got the chance to say goodbye. I didn't plan for the messages to continue this long though. Maybe this is my way of keeping him alive. I like to imagine he's receiving my texts in an alternate universe or something.



I haven't had much to eat today. My favorite bakery is a few blocks from here. They've been around forever, and they have these almond croissants I always treat myself with after failing an exam. All of my birthday cakes growing up were made there. Sadly, the place is closing down soon. They've been struggling to compete with the chain supermarket that just opened across the street. So I should probably enjoy them while they last.

As I turn the corner, the red-and-yellow-striped canopy comes into view. Maybe I'll also grab something to bring home for Mom. She loves their cardamom buns. But when I try the handle, the

door is locked. I press my nose to the window and look inside. All the tables and chairs are gone. There's a sign next to the door.

WE THANK YOU FOR THIRTY YEARS OF BUSINESS

But I thought they were closing next month? I didn't even get to have one last almond croissant. Now I'll have to find somewhere else to go. I turn around and make my way into town. The sign for Sun and Moon blinks across the street. It's the local café where Sam used to work. I've been avoiding it lately for obvious reasons. Even though it's been almost a year, I always think of him when I step through that door.

If I close my eyes, I can see him behind the counter, waiting for me to show up. I used to stay until closing time, blasting music through the speakers while he cleaned up. Thankfully, the place isn't too crowded today. But I'm not planning to stay very long. I just grab a chocolate muffin and head outside again.

"Those are scones," he'd always correct me.

"Tastes like a muffin to me."

I finish it on my way to the flower shop at the corner. Sometimes, I'll go in to look at all the bouquets they have displayed. But I'm here for a different reason today. I grab some white roses and pay at the counter. They always remind me of the night of our school dance, when Sam pinned his boutonniere onto my shirt.

"I knew it would look better on you."

It's not a long walk to Memorial Hill. I've been enough times by now to know all the shortcuts. The iron posts near the entrance gates stand like giant sentries. I continue past them and make my way up to Sam's grave.

As usual, there are some flowers here already. Someone else must have visited him recently. I have a feeling it was Julie. I kneel down and arrange the stone vase, placing the roses in the middle. I wonder if he would know which ones are from me. *I*

remember how much you wanted flowers. I'm sad this is the reason you're finally getting them.

I usually keep him company on nice days like this, sitting in the grass while the clouds roll by. Sometimes, I'll even play music from my phone. We never had the same taste though. He was more of a classic rock guy. Sam and I used to fight over who got to control the speaker. Now I miss the songs he used to play. There's this one that's been stuck in my head. But I can't remember the name.

I send him another message.

I can't remember the name of that one song you said you liked. It's from that band with the color in their name.

The violet something?

Where the guitar goes na naa naaa and the guy's kinda mumbling about his daughter or something like that

This is going to bother me for weeks. I wish I had a made a playlist of all his favorites. So I could listen to them whenever I missed him. When I first started coming here, I would talk to Sam for hours. Update him on everything going on in my life. But it feels like he isn't here anymore. Like no one is listening. That doesn't stop me from visiting him, because I think he would do the same for me.

I stare out at the hill, watching the clouds form overhead. The weather says there's a chance of showers. So I'll have to keep this visit short. Maybe I'll stop by again tomorrow. I hang around for a few more minutes before heading home.



Things are quiet when I return to my dorm. My roommate must be at practice or something. Ethan is on the college baseball team. He and I don't talk very much unless he's asking me where I put his protein powder. But his parents paid for a flex wall to separate our beds and even installed a ceiling curtain for extra privacy. So I can't really complain. Especially when he was probably expecting to live alone this quarter.

Originally, my plan was to live at home the first couple of years. That's what Julie's been doing to save some money. But Mom and I moved to a one-bedroom apartment after she left my stepdad, and the place is too small for the both of us. At least I'm getting the traditional experience of living on campus, even though I'm only a short walk from home.

I sit at the foot of my bed and text Sam again.

Just got back to my dorm

the white roses are from me btw

Out of habit, I scroll through all the messages I've sent him. Paragraphs upon paragraphs with no response. I know this can't go on forever, but there's something comforting about it. I've managed to keep this a secret from everyone. I haven't even told Julie about it. I wonder what she would say if she found out. *"It's time to let him go, Oliver. Sam would want that for us."*

Sometimes, it feels like everyone else has moved on with their lives. They even took down the picture of him on our school's website. Meanwhile, his things are everywhere in my room, covering it like handprints. His plaid shirt on the back of my desk chair. The photo of us on the edge of my mirror. Tomorrow will

be exactly one year since his accident. I'd promised myself the messages would have stopped by now. That I would finally say goodbye.

But I don't know if I'm ready to give this up yet. After thinking it over, I decide to write to him one last time. Give him a proper goodbye.

I'm sure you noticed I've been
texting you more recently

Maybe you already guessed why

It's hard to believe it's been a year since you
died. It feels weird to even write it out. I don't
think I've said the words out loud yet

Some days have been harder than others.
Writing these texts helps me forget you're gone.
But it's starting to feel like I'm talking to myself.
That you're not reading them anymore

You know, Julie keeps telling me you'd want us
to move on. I'm sure she's right. In a different
universe, I never lost you. Sadly that's not the
one I'm living in

I think about you every second

But it's time to let you go

So this will probably be the last message from me

Goodbye Sam

Sorry it took me a year to say this

I'll miss you more than you know

I read over the final message before hitting send.

I should delete his number, too. Otherwise I'll end up texting him again in a moment of weakness. I pull up Sam's contact information. As I press the delete button, a prompt appears on my screen with his name in bold letters.

*Are you sure you want to delete **Sam Obayashi**?*

My finger hesitates over the screen. This is somehow harder than I imagined. *Sam is already gone*, I remind myself. *It's only a number on my phone. So just delete it already.*

But I can't seem to press the button. It feels like I'm erasing him from my life. And I can't do that to him. So I hit cancel instead.

That's when I hear something. A ringing coming from the phone. I must have accidentally called the number. I should probably end the call. For some reason, I let it continue. Maybe it will go to his voicemail. Should I leave him one last goodbye message?

Suddenly, someone answers the phone.

"Hello?" says a male voice.

Time goes still for a moment. I must have imagined that, right? Because it couldn't be . . .

"Sam?"