

OBLIVION – CHAPTER ONE
(subject to change)

“The moment I heard my first love story I began seeking you, not realizing the search was useless. Lovers don’t meet somewhere along the way. They’re in one another’s souls from the beginning.”

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi

Tears streamed down my face as I ran into my bedroom and slammed the door behind me. I reached for my diary—the familiar pink leather journal that was filled with my deepest thoughts. My shaky fingers pulled the gold fabric ribbon page marker, taking me to my last entry, and began to frantically scribble down everything I was feeling at that moment—all the pain and fear that raced inside me as the screaming escalated an octave higher between my parents outside of my room.

They’re fighting again. It’s been happening more and more frequently, each time worse than the day before. I wish they wouldn’t be so unhappy. I wish my parents didn’t hate each other so much. I wish I was anyone else but myself right now. I wish I was anywhere else but here.

As if hearing my thoughts, I heard my father roar, “If you want a fucking divorce, you can have it! But I’m going to warn you just this once: if you walk out that door, don’t ever think about coming back again!”

“I don’t plan on it!” I heard my mother spat back. “I’m leaving first thing tomorrow, and I’m taking Liv with me!”

“No!” I cried, my mind racing with everything I was about to lose.

Just then, my room and the diary in my hand faded away into the background as my mind registered a soft, steady beeping in the distance. *What is that?*

When I turned toward the sound, I found myself running across a familiar street in the middle of the night. I was wearing a jewel-encrusted blush-pink evening gown that weighed down on my body and restricted my movement. The air was bitter cold and cutting, but the adrenaline that coursed inside me seemed to shelter me from the cold like a blanket.

Suddenly, I saw two bright, blinding headlights speeding toward me at high speed. The sharp screeching of car tires filled the air, drowning out all other noise. I felt the impact of cold metal against my body as I was lifelessly flung sideways against the solid pavement.

I braced myself for the impact of pain that would greet my body.

But it didn't come.

Instead, the distant beeping came back, but this time, it was louder. Then a conversation seeped through my consciousness.

"There's nothing we can do for her right now, Mr. Brady. As you know she has suffered some significant brain damage, so all we can do right now is wait for her to wake up and see from there." The female voice seemed miles away, but for some reason, I knew she was talking about me.

"Okay. Thank you." The man's voice was strained and low as I heard him walk toward my direction.

I felt my head throb in pain; in time with the beeping that became increasing louder.

"She's very lucky to have someone like you to visit and be by her side every day. You must really care about her."

"Yeah. I do." The male voice was closer than before.

Then I felt a warm hand on mine, bringing me into the present. My mind registered the bed I was lying on. The smell of stale, chlorine air filled my senses. The beeping came into focus and I could hear it coming from a machine a foot away from me. *Am I in a hospital?* My fingers twitched as I tried to move my body.

"Nurse!" The man's voice cried out in alarm. "I think I felt her move."

My eyes fluttered open and closed, struggling against the heaviness of my lids.

"I think she's waking up!" The man squeezed my hand as he inched closer to my face. "Liv?"

"Mr. Brady, let's give her some room." The man loosened his grip on me as I heard him move away.

I opened my eyes again, and this time, it was easier. My vision was blurred as I looked around, but I could detect two figures close by.

“Ms. Stuart?” The female voice was gentle as she moved toward me.

“Where am I?” I blinked and after a couple of seconds, her face came into focus. “Who are you?” I looked around the room and found myself in a surprisingly-large and luxurious hospital room.

“Ms. Stuart, you were in an accident and you’re at the University of Pennsylvania hospital. I’m Nurse Betty and I’ve been taking care of you.”

“An accident.” I repeated her words and tried to think through the dense fog consuming my every thought. I winced at the throbbing pain in my head.

“Are you in any pain?” She looked at me with concern.

“Just a horrible headache.” I reached for my head.

“I’ll let the doctor know and we’ll get you something for that.”

“What happened to me?” I searched her face for answers.

She flashed me a kind smile. “There’s actually someone that’s been here waiting for you to wake up. I’ll let him tell you what happened.” She moved aside and my eyes focused on the other figure in the room—the tall, handsome man in a tailored charcoal suit standing anxiously behind her.

“Hi.” I looked at him, unsure of what to say to this stranger.

“Liv? Thank God you finally woke up.”

I smiled at him. His warm hazel eyes were filled with concern as he moved in front of the nurse to grab my hand. I studied him, wondering why he seemed so familiar.

He reached for me. Deep creases formed between his brows as he furrowed them in worry.

“Liv, how are you feeling?” His familiar voice was smooth and gentle.

I placed my hands to my head and groaned. “Besides this killer headache, I’m okay.” I tried to get up but my arms felt weak as I moved to sit up. He reached over and helped me lean up against on the headboard of the bed.

“It’s so good to see you awake.” He held my face and kissed me gently on my forehead.

I frowned and looked up at him. “Who are you? Have we met before?”

His expression changed immediately and he whipped around and turned to the nurse. I saw them exchange a look that I didn’t understand. He then turned back to me and frowned, his eyes filled with sadness. “You don’t remember me?”

I studied his face and thought about it. “No,” I finally said as I shook my head.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” he asked me tentatively. I didn’t need to know this man to see the anxious expression on his face.

I stared at him and tried to rack my brain, searching for anything I could remember. I shook my head in frustration as I buried it in my hands. My head was pounding in pain as if I had just awoken from the worst hangover of my life.

“Liv, are you okay? What’s wrong?” The alarm in his voice exacerbated the panic that was building inside.

“Why do you keep calling me Liv?” I felt annoyed as I looked back up at him. My annoyance turned to worry when I saw the shocked expression on his face.

The nurse stepped forward. “Do you remember your name?”

I opened my mouth, ready to answer her simple question, but then stopped when it dawned on me that I didn’t actually know the answer. “I...I can’t remember.”

“Is there anything you do remember?” Her tone was gentle and cautious.

I searched my thoughts, trying to grab onto any memory. But everything outside the last few minutes seemed like a distant memory lost in time. *Why can’t I remember anything?* I shook my head in frustration. “What happened to me?”

“I’ll let Mr. Brady here tell you what happened. I’ll go get Dr. Miller.”

“Honey, I’m Connor. Connor Brady. Are you sure you don’t remember me?” The man moved back toward me, a mixture of sadness and anxiety painted across his face.

“Connor,” I repeated in a monotone voice. I stared at him. There was something about him that was familiar, but as hard as I tried, I couldn’t seem to place him in my thoughts. I shook my head slowly. “I don’t even remember my own name.”

“Your name is Olivia Stuart. Your friends call you Liv.” He sat down on a chair next to my bed and held my hand. His hand was warm and familiar but it felt weird to have this stranger holding me in this intimate way. But I didn’t pull my hand away. I needed answers and this man seemed to have them, so the last thing I wanted to do was to offend him.

“What happened to me?”

“You were in a hit and run accident.” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “You were thrown several feet by the impact and you hit your head on the cement and suffered some bone fractures along the left side of your body.”

My eyes trailed at the left side of my body and nothing looked out of the ordinary. There were no blood, casts, or signs of injury.

He saw my confusion and continued. “It’s been four months since your accident.”

Panic and confusion swirled around me at the idea of losing so much time without knowing it. “Four months? But...but I don’t remember any of this! Why don’t I remember any of this?” I felt frantic as my mind came back blank as I tried to push through the fog.

“The doctors say that this could be just temporary. You might slowly regain your memories back.”

“Really?”

Just then a middle-aged bald man with a friendly face wearing a white lab coat walked in the room. “Ms. Stuart. I’m Dr. Miller. How are you feeling?”

“What’s wrong with me, Dr. Miller? Why can’t I remember anything?”

“It seems like you’ve suffered some memory loss from your accident. It’s not uncommon for someone to lose their memory after a traumatic event like the one you’d experienced.” He studied clipboard in his hands. “The good news is from all the tests we’ve run on you, it doesn’t seem like there was any damage to the areas of your brain that stores your long-term memories.”

“What does that mean, doctor?” the handsome man in the charcoal suit cut in to ask.

“Well it should mean that Ms. Stuart hasn’t suffered any long-term memory loss.”

“So I don’t understand. Why can’t I remember anything?”

“That’s the thing we don’t know at this time. The brain is a miraculous and mysterious thing. It’s unlikely that you’re suffering from brain damage and permanent memory loss.”

“So what’s the problem?” Connor asked, his grip tightened on top of my hand.

“Sometimes the brain will suppress memories after going through a traumatic experience. That memory hasn’t been forgotten in the traditional sense, but it’s locked away by your subconscious and removed from your conscious mind.”

“So does that mean I’ll get my memories back?” I looked at the doctor hopefully.

“The chances are good, but it’s not a guarantee either. The best thing for you is to go back to your life before the accident and surround yourself with the things that matter to you—those are usually the things that will help trigger your memories.”

“Liv, baby, I promise to help you through this.” Connor held up my hand between both of his as he pulled it close to his chest. He looked up at Dr. Miller. “Doc, when can she check out of here?”

“Her vitals are all normal and her physical injuries have all healed nicely. I want to run a few more tests on her today, and if they come out normal, then she’s free to leave by tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s great news!” Connor beamed at me.

But as much as I tried, I couldn’t seem to adopt his excitement.

As if sensing my unease, his expression changed. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“I’m not sure where I’m supposed to go when I check out.”

“I’ll take you home, Liv.”

As if taking this as a signal, the doctor cleared his throat. “Ms. Stuart, we’ll let you guys talk. I’ll check up on you in an hour or so to run those tests.”

Anxiety built inside me as I watched the doctor and nurse slip out of the room. Even though I knew this man in the charcoal suit seem to know who I was, being completely alone with him made me uneasy.

“What are you thinking, Liv?” he finally broke the silence.

“Liv...Olivia.” I said my name aloud. It sounded foreign from my mouth. I then met Connor’s gaze. He smiled at me as he studied my expression. “I still don’t know who you are.”

His face fell and I saw the sadness in his eyes. “I’m your fiancé.”

“Fiancé?”

He nodded. I followed his gaze as it darted down to my left hand. To my surprise, there on my ring finger was a sparkling, large diamond ring set on top of a platinum, diamond-encrusted eternity band. *How did I not see this earlier?*

I looked back at him, overwhelmed by everything.

“This must be a lot for you to take in right now. And I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I’ll be happy to answer whatever I know. Let’s just take this one step at a time. We can go at the pace you’re most comfortable with.”

I drew in a deep breath as thousands of questions whirled around in my head, fighting for my attention. “Thanks.” I gave him a small smile, grateful for his patience and understanding. At

that moment I thought about how hard this must be for him as well—to be engaged to and in love with someone who doesn't remember you or feel that same love anymore. "Can we take this slowly? I just feel really overwhelmed."

"Of course, Liv. Whatever you need. Just tell me what you want. Okay?"

I nodded. "Who are my parents? Do I have any siblings? Do they know I'm here?"

I saw the pained expression on Connor's face and knew I wouldn't like the answer.

"I'm sorry, Liv. Your mom passed away a few years ago. You don't have any siblings."

"Did you know my mom? What kind of person was she?" Tears streamed down my face as I felt the loss for the mother I couldn't remember.

"She passed away right before we met here in Philly. I believe you left New Jersey and moved here to start a new life."

"Oh. And my dad?"

He shook his head. "You rarely talked about him. From the little you had said, you haven't seen him since you were twelve—"

"—when my parents got a divorce..." I finished his comment as I remembered the flashback I had right before I woke up.

"Yeah." Connor looked at me in alarm. "Are you remembering things?"

"Maybe. I had a flashback of them fighting when I was young right before I woke up."

"Oh. Did you get any other flashbacks?"

"I don't know. I think a little bit from the accident."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I think I was running across the street and then a car came toward me and hit me."

“I’m so sorry, Liv.” Connor buried his face in his hands. “It’s all my fault.”

“What do you mean? Were you driving that car?” I looked at him in alarm.

“No, of course not!” He shook his head. “I...I just feel responsible for you.”

I frowned. I could tell there was something he wasn’t telling me. “Do you know how my accident happened? Were you there?”

He nodded and avoided my gaze. “I wish I could take it all back. I wish...”

“What happened? Please tell me.”

He looked up at me and I saw the regret in his face.. “It was the night of our engagement party at the Franklin Institute Science Museum.” His eyes glazed over and he smiled as he thought back to the night. “You looked absolutely gorgeous in that jeweled gown.” He paused and his expression turned somber. “But we had an argument toward the end of the night and you ran off and out the reception hall...I went after you and when I got outside, I saw you running across the street...that’s when the car hit you.”

I took in the story and felt a chill run down my back. “What was the argument about?”

He looked away again. “It was over something really stupid. About our guest list for the wedding. You wanted to keep it under 200, but I wanted to include more business associates. It was really stupid.” He shook his head in regret.

I stared at him in silence, at a complete loss for words. *How come I don’t remember a thing?* I thought in frustration.

“I’m so sorry, Liv. I need you to forgive me. We shouldn’t have had that silly argument, and I shouldn’t have let you run off like that.”

“You didn’t know this was going to happen.” I saw the anguish in his eyes and reached for his hand to reassure him.

“But it did.” I saw his body stiffen and knew it wasn’t going to be easy for him to forgive himself.

“Connor, please don’t.”

He looked up at me with pained eyes.

“There’s nothing you could’ve done differently when you didn’t know. I wish I had my memories. I wish I’d never run off that night. I wish things were different. But sometimes we don’t always get what we wish for. Sometimes we can only work with the hand that we’re dealt.” I was surprised by the sudden acceptance I felt for what had happened. *Maybe those that say that “ignorance is bliss” is right.*

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

I looked at this stranger and somehow I knew I would remember him again. I knew he was important to me. I looked down at the engagement ring on my finger and instantly felt a loss for all the special memories that I didn’t have anymore.

“What’s wrong, Liv?” He saw the tears in my eyes that were threatening their way down my cheeks.

“It’s just a lot to take in all at once.”

“I know.”

I watched him gently brush the tears from my cheeks and from the way his hands caressed my face, I knew he’d touched me many times before. *Were we happy before this accident? What kind of person was I when we were together? What did I enjoy doing?* It wasn’t until then that another question hit me like a ton of bricks. *What did I look like?*

I gave him a weak smile. “Connor, I’m sorry but I’m really tired. I need some time alone to digest all this.”

His brows furrowed with worry but he didn’t try to object. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow. If you’re cleared by Dr. Miller tomorrow, I can finally take you home, and maybe being in familiar surroundings will help you with your memories.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I wasn’t ready to be too hopeful. I wasn’t ready to face the disappointment if he was wrong.

He leaned down toward me and kissed me gently on my forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow. I love you, gorgeous," he whispered.

As I watched him leave, the hospital room suddenly disappeared. For a split second I found myself in a grand, sun-drenched bedroom laying naked on a large luxurious bed under lush layers of satin sheets and comforter. I screamed out and my back arched upward as intense pleasure radiated throughout my body. I felt another naked body on top of mine from somewhere under the layers and a second later, Connor's face emerged out from under the sheets. He flashed me a wicked smirk as he slowly licked his lips. "And that's how much I love you, gorgeous."

I gasped at the memory that just hit me, my body tingled as if that moment had just happened. I looked down at my body and the question that had blindsided me a few minutes earlier crossed my mind again. *What did I look like?*

I slowly got up from the bed, and felt my muscles weak from the months of being bedridden. It took me several minutes to move to the bathroom where there was a full-length mirror along the wall facing the door.

Standing in front of the mirror was like standing face to face to a complete stranger. Nerves prickled through my body like ice cold needles as I studied every inch of the unfamiliar person in front of me. Nothing about my reflection looked familiar. She had a long wavy hair that cascaded down her small frame. Even through the boxy hospital gown, I could see the curves on her body. Her radiant blue eyes stared back at me. I watched as this stunning woman staring back at me touched her face with both hands. I felt her fingers move across a face that felt new.

"I'm Olivia Stuart." My whispered words filled the silent room and seem to hang in the air as I continued to study myself in the reflection. *Will this ever stop feeling so strange?*

The following afternoon, I felt slightly better and hopeful about everything. The tests Dr. Miller ran all came out normal and I was free to leave today.

"Hey, gorgeous."

I looked up to find Connor at my door with a large bouquet of pink roses.

"Hi." I smiled, happy to see a familiar face. "You came back."

“Of course I’m back, silly. I told you I was going to take you home.”

“Oh, right.” Our eyes met and I felt my stomach flip nervously. I immediately looked away and felt my face turn beet red when I remembered yesterday’s flashback to the intense orgasm this man had given me. I knew that for him, we were lovers in love, but for me, I felt embarrassed that this handsome stranger knew me more intimately than I knew myself.

“What’s wrong?” He walked over to me and kissed me lightly on my cheek.

“Nothing.” I pushed my thoughts aside and flashed him a smile.

He handed me the bouquet in his hands. “Pink roses are your favorite.”

“Thank you. They’re beautiful.” I took the stunning bouquet and was instantly intoxicated by the smell that greeted me.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I responded honestly.

“Are you ready to blow this popsicle stand?”

I let out a light chuckle and nodded.

Thirty minutes later, Connor had helped me finish all my paperwork to check out of the hospital. I had changed into a white Splendid cotton silk tee, dark-washed J Brand jeans, and a pair of black Christian Louboutin patent leather pumps that Connor brought for me from my closet. Accordingly to him, this was one of my favorite casual outfits. I had stared dubiously at the heels when he had handed them to me. They looked more painful than comfortable to me. But when I put them on, I was surprised how at ease I was walking around in them.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Connor looked up from the hospital paperwork when I walked out of the bathroom. “You look like you’re back to your old self.” I watched as his eyes moved up and down my body, and a nervous shiver ran down my body.

“I guess my muscle memory’s still there,” I joked as I looked at my heels.

He chuckled and shook his head. "I never did understand how you could walk in those heels. You know on one of our first dates, I called you Wonder Woman when I saw you running in a pair just like those."

I smiled. "Why was I running?"

"We had just had another amazing date at Tria, this wine bar in Philly, and you had a few glasses too many and you were running and skipping down the street without a care in the world and giggling uncontrollably." He laughed at the memory and beamed at me. "It was at that moment that I knew I'd fall in love with you."

I laughed along with him, wishing I could remember that memory.

A few minutes later we walked out of the entrance of the hospital.

"Liv, I'm going to go get the car. You okay with waiting right here for me? I'll be back in a few."

I nodded and smiled.

He leaned in and kissed me gently on the forehead. "I love you, gorgeous."

"Thanks." I cringed inside as soon as the word came out. I wasn't sure what to say. I had a feeling he wanted more, but telling a stranger I loved him wasn't something I was ready to give.

He gave a light chuckle and smiled. "I'll be back."

As I watched him walk away and turn the corner toward the entrance of the parking garage, I was preoccupied with thoughts of how the following days, weeks, months will be for us. Suddenly I heard people approach me from the left.

"Excuse me! Please make way!" I turned and saw a couple barreling toward me. It was a man holding up a pregnant woman who appeared to be in a lot of pain. "My wife's water broke! Please move!"

I finally realized that I was standing in the middle of the hospital entrance and blocking their path. I hastily took a step back to give them room to pass me, but it was too late. The man pushed passed me and as I took a step back, my heel caught onto a crack and I lost my balance and fell backwards.

Just as I thought I was about to fall onto the ground, a strong arm caught me from behind and pulled up. I gasped in surprise at my near-fall and found myself in someone's arms.

“Careful there or you're going to hurt yourself in those crazy heels.”

I looked up and saw a pair of very dark, smoldering brown eyes staring down at me.