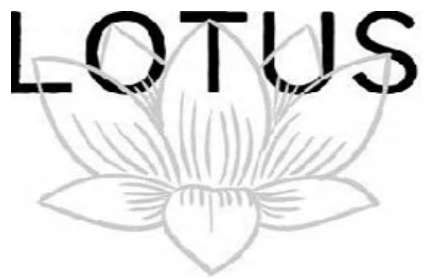


A Love Story

LOTUS



JENNIFER HARTMANN



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Lotus
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DEDICATED TO...

*...the lost and the wandering—
You will find your way.*

PROLOGUE

“GET OUT OF THE ROAD, FREAK!”

I jump back. Vehicles speed past me, loud and obtrusive, flashes of colors and lights. Panicked breaths climb up my throat as I stumble along the side of the roadway.

This is a dream.

There are humans behind the wheels of these vehicles, some hanging out of their windows, pointing a device towards me. They are breathing the air. They are gawking and laughing and shouting clipped words into the dusky evening.

This can't be right.

I break out into a run, a shot of dizziness funneling through my veins. The sound of my heartbeats nearly detonating in my ears has my legs weakening with every urgent step. There is so much noise, so much chaos. I unzip my hazmat suit mid-run, my insides suffocating, and pull it off as I reach for my mask.

I falter.

The sound of a blaring horn startles me, and I almost trip on the plastic bunching around my ankles, revealing my blood-soaked chest and pants. The cold air shocks my skin.

Before I can think it through, I yank off my mask—my final barrier of protection.

I inhale giant gulps of oxygen, breathing in deep, letting the ice fill my lungs for the first time in decades. God, it is glorious. Unrivaled. I drink it in like water, like sustenance, basking in the earthy winter musk I had long since forgotten.

Then I smell what lies beneath—something astringent. Fumes of some sort. My heart rattles with dread.

Oh, God... fumes.

Bradford was right.

I have made a fatal mistake.

Clutching my neck, I wait for death. Chest tight, lungs wheezing, I fall atop the gravel when my knees give out, hitting hard. Vehicles continue to pass, spraying me with sludge and dirt. Through blurred vision, I see one of them decelerate beside me, feet appearing in my line of sight a few moments

later. The feet grow closer, my breaths quickening.

“Sir? Are you all right, sir?” It’s a male voice, similar to Bradford. “I think you’re having a panic attack. I’ll call 9-1-1.”

The voice fades out as I fully collapse, struggling for air. The toxic fumes are consuming me, snuffing out my life. I curl my legs up into the fetal position and whisper raggedly as everything goes dark, “Lotus...”

The Black Lotus has been defeated.

ONE

Sydney

I DIDN'T MEAN TO FLASH THE NEIGHBOR.

I was only running out to grab the mail, so my robe seemed like an acceptable amount of coverage. My neighbors are used to seeing me in paint-smeared pajama pants, assorted beanies, mismatched socks, and oversized t-shirts with nineties prints on them. Usually, all at the same time.

So, the robe seemed like a step up. I felt good about it.

But then I slipped on a patch of ice and fell spread-eagle on my driveway, facing Lorna Gibson's house. I was wearing underwear at least, but the tie came undone, and a boob popped out, prompting the old woman to clutch her rosary and perform the sign of the cross a dozen times.

I tuck the girls back into place and climb to my feet, groaning at the throbbing ache in my tailbone. I wave to Lorna, who dropped her own mail and is staring up at the Heavens, surely praying for God himself to strike me down. "I'm okay!" I call out with forced cheerfulness. She ignores me, still chanting her Hail Marys. "The leopard print panties are on sale at Victoria's Secret if you were curious. Super breathable!"

Lorna gasps with a hand over her heart, shaking her head at me from across the yard. She looks like she wants to personally give me an exorcism. "Blasphemous child," she mutters before scooping up her mail and racing into the house.

Sydney Neville. The sacrilegious tramp of Briarwood Lane.

I chuckle under my breath, unfazed. Lorna has hated me ever since I politely declined her offer to join her Bible club a few years back. I'm assuming it's like a book club with only one book—the Bible.

Considering I like to read dark romances with lots of graphic sex and explicit language, I'm certain I would have been sitting there bored, wondering when Adam and Eve were finally going to get freaky.

"You okay, Sydney?"

I massage my backside, then tighten my robe, turning to face the house on the opposite side of mine. Gabe is poking his head out through the screen door with a worried frown.

I grin through my shrug. "Oh, you know, just pissing off old ladies before

I've even had my morning coffee. The usual."

"Troublemaker," he winks, propping his elbow against the frame. "You hurt yourself?"

"Just my pride and sparkling reputation."

"So, you're good, then."

"Fantastic." I smile wide. "*Always Sunny* marathon tonight?"

He points a finger at me. "Make that taco dip and it's a date."

I give him an agreeable salute and watch as he disappears back inside.

Gabe Wellington is my best friend. We're like siblings, having grown up together over the past twenty-six years. I moved into this house with my parents when I was only three, then bought it from them last year when Dad retired and wanted to pursue his lifelong dream of living on a golf course. Gabe grew up in the house next door with his father and stepmother.

And Oliver.

But we don't talk about Oliver anymore.

Gabe's stepmom passed away over a decade ago, and his father, Travis Wellington, remarried and transferred the title of the house over to his son.

So, we're still neighbors, still friends, and still making terrible decisions together.

I wander into the house, flipping through my credit card statements and utility notices. I push my dark-rimmed eyeglasses up the bridge of my nose, reminiscing over the days I would look forward to getting mail—back when I was on the receiving end of a *Teen Beat* subscription and money-filled cards from Grammy.

My tabby cat, Alexis, purrs as she circles my ankles, and I tug at my messy bun before leaning down to scoop her up. I make my way into my office with the orange cat tucked under my arm, prepared to sort through e-mails and get to work. I'm primarily a graphic designer who focuses on building websites for clients. That's what pays my bills, anyway.

I also paint.

Painting is my true passion, and I'm grateful that it provides an additional financial cushion to help support my coffee habit and dirty book collection. I've had a few pieces shown in art galleries, as well as auctions. I attend craft fairs and vendor shows, and I take on personal requests through my Etsy shop.

It's a dream life in a lot of ways. I'm independent, and I work from home doing what I love. I even bartend on the occasional weekend so I can pretend

I have a social life outside of Facebook and my cat.

But I won't lie and say it's perfect—loneliness creeps in more often than not. My parents live an hour away, and my sister, Clementine, has her own life with a young daughter as she battles through a messy divorce.

After powering up my laptop and settling in with my mug of coffee, I get to work, scrolling through e-mails and corresponding with one of my favorite romance authors who I have the privilege of designing a website for.

While I reach for my cell phone to turn on a *Lord Huron* playlist, I accidentally elbow Alexis, who jumps from the desk and knocks my coffee over in the process.

"Shit!" I curse, realizing my Arabian mocha has just toppled onto a stack of paintings I had carelessly placed beside my workstation. "No, no, no..." I act quick, grabbing a discarded t-shirt and rushing back over to the scene of the crime. My breath catches when I notice the painting that caught the brunt of the mess.

It's a painting of Oliver Lynch.

My childhood best friend.

Gabe's stepbrother.

The little boy who went missing on the Fourth of July almost twenty-two years ago, never to be seen again.

I frantically begin dabbing at the portrait, tears springing to my eyes.

Not this one. Please not this one.

I spent eight long months working on this painting. It was based off the computer-generated, age-progressed photo of Oliver released by the media. It's an image of what he may look like today if he were still alive.

The shirt soaks up the dark coffee, and I watch it seep into the cotton fabric before setting it aside to trail my finger down along his jawline. It's been over two decades, but the wound feels fresh. My heart still aches when I think about the boy with light brown hair and eyes like a burgundy sunset. I can still hear his laugh and picture his dirt-smudged overalls.

Sometimes, I swear I *feel* him or hear him whisper my name...

Syd.

Oliver's old bedroom is adjacent to my office, which used to be a playroom when my sister and I were kids. I have vivid memories of shouting knock-knock jokes from window to window, playing 'telephone' with a string and two tin cans, and telling ghost stories with flashlights underneath our chins. On that final day, July 4th, 1998, we made plans to go see *The*

Parent Trap when it released later that month. Our mothers were best friends and loved taking us to the movies—we'd giggle through our popcorn and gummy candy, while my mom and his mom, Charlene, snuck wine into the theater and giggled more than we did.

I never did see *The Parent Trap*.

To this day, I still haven't seen it. It never felt right seeing it without him.

With a final glance over to Oliver's window, which is now dark and filled with boxes and junk, I finish drying off the portrait and move it to a safer location in the corner of the room. I choke down my emotions and try to refocus.

Before I can settle in again, my ringtone goes off. It's the *X-Files* opening credits music, which means it's my sister. I send her to voicemail, flustered that I've made zero progress with my deadlines and it's already almost ten A.M.

She shoots me a text instead.

Clem: *Answer me, hoochy*

I groan.

Me: *I'm working, skank*

Clem: *I need you to watch Poppy this weekend. Pretty please. No cherries on top because I ate them.*

A grin slips as I sigh and text her back.

Me: *I'm working at the bar this weekend, but I can bring her with me. We can make fabulous memories and learn about what choices not to make when she grows up. Plus, Brant is sure to teach her some colorful new words, AAAND there's a wet t-shirt contest going on. #auntniecebondingherewecome*

Clem: *I'll ask Regina.*

Clem follows up her text with an abundance of aggravated emojis, and I can't help but laugh, silencing my phone and running downstairs to make another pot of coffee.



That asshole stood me up.

Gabe and I decided on seven o'clock for our *Always Sunny in Philadelphia* binge-fest, and it's almost eight. The taco dip is dwindling away with every scoop of my tortilla chip, while Alexis lies perched in my lap. I pluck off my glasses and reach for my cell, prepared to blow up Gabe's phone with David Hasselhoff memes. He probably found a hot girl to cozy up with tonight, which is perfectly fine, but he could have filled me in on his change of plans.

Instead, I see a missed text from Clementine.

Clem: *Sis. Turn on the news.*

I frown. She knows I don't have basic cable—only Netflix and Hulu like most millennials these days. I'm about to open Facebook, my preferred news source, when I notice flashing lights reflecting in my television screen. I pull myself up to my knees on the couch and peek through the curtain, my mouth going dry.

Gabe's house is surrounded by police cruisers.

What the hell?

At first, I wonder if he's having one of his parties, but there are no other cars in the driveway, and I didn't hear any music or loud noise.

Shit. Something's wrong.

Nausea sweeps through me like a windstorm, taking my breath away. I don't think twice before pulling on my winter boots and running out the front door in nothing but my sweatpants and *Rugrats* t-shirt. The crisp air is a welcome contrast to the heat prickling my skin.

My head twists to the right, spotting Lorna Gibson standing on her front porch, taking in the scene. One hand clasps her cross pendant while the other cups her mouth, and her eyes aren't filled with their usual scorn and judgment—they are filled with tears.

Heart racing and knees begging to buckle, I gather my courage and trudge through the thin layer of snow coating my lawn. The police lights are blurry as I make a clumsy trek over to Gabe's, realizing I forgot to put my glasses back on. When I reach his front stoop, I don't bother to knock. I yank open the screen and push inside, almost hitting an officer with the door. Three

unfamiliar faces turn to look at me with pinched brows and tight lips.

“Are you a friend of the family?” one of them asks.

My voice trembles as I respond, “Where’s Gabe? Is he hurt?”

But then I see him.

An officer steps aside, revealing my friend. Gabe is sitting on the edge of his couch, elbows to knees, his hands tented in front of his face. His eyes are red and bloodshot, rimmed with tears, and he gazes up at me with the most haunting expression I’ve ever seen.

My heart clenches through chaotic beats, confusion and fear battling it out inside of me. “Gabe... what the hell is going on?”

Gabe stands, scrubbing his face with his palms as he takes slow steps toward me. His dark blonde hair is stuck to the sweat glistening on his forehead. “Sydney.”

I stare at him, waiting with wide eyes and quivering limbs.

“Sydney...” he continues, then heaves in a deep breath. “It’s Oliver. They found Oliver.”

The air leaves my lungs with a giant whoosh, and I teeter on both feet, wondering if I misheard him. My foggy vision becomes even more hindered as fresh tears coat my eyes. “Wh-what?” A strangled gasp escapes me, the words registering one at a time.

They found Oliver.

They. Found. Oliver.

I manage to get one more question out: “Where was his body?”

His body. His bones.

His dirty overalls with popsicles stains.

Gabe takes a few more steps forward, his throat bobbing as he swallows hard. He reaches out to squeeze my shoulders, and I’m grateful for that, I’m so grateful, because his next words rip the rug out from under me.

“He’s alive.”

I collapse.

TWO

Sydney

A POWDER BLUE HOSPITAL CURTAIN is the final barrier hovering between me and my childhood best friend—the man discovered on the side of a snowy highway thirty miles west of his hometown, shirtless and bloody, with a protective hazmat suit gathered around his ankles.

It's the only *physical* barrier, anyway.

My sneakers pegged to the sticky hospital floor provide an equally effective excuse to remain on the opposite side of that curtain, chewing on my fingernails. Hands shaking violently, eyes closed tight, the dense lump in my throat refuses to budge.

Much like my feet.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting to find when I walk through that curtain, and that's exactly why I'm stalling. That's why I'm scared shitless, near tears, tongue-tied and teetering. Part of me thinks I'll see that same little boy from twenty-two years ago with freckles on his nose and shaggy hair, bangs cloaking two curious eyes. We'll share a popsicle and a knock-knock joke, then everything will go back to the way it was before.

The way it's supposed to be.

Another part of me expects a ghost.

Oliver Lynch can't be real... he can't be *alive*, walking and talking, warm flesh, blood flowing. He can't be more than a pile of brittle bones and soil.

A beautiful memory.

The last twenty-four hours have overthrown everything I thought I knew, shattering the walls I've constructed over the years, dismantling each and every misaligned theory I force-fed myself, just so I could *cope*.

Just so I could move forward with my life without him.

But part of me knew—part of me fucking *knew* he was still out there, and I hate myself for not looking hard enough.

Gabe's hand floats to the small of my back, causing me to jump in place. "You okay?"

I forgot he was even standing beside me.

Nodding through a watery smile, my lie is as transparent as my nerves. My hands continue to tremble, nailbeds raw from my teeth, legs hardly holding

up my weight.

God, what am I supposed to say to him?

Will he even remember me? I look nothing like the seven-year-old girl he left behind with sun-kissed pigtails and chubby cheeks. I'm a grown woman now.

And he's a man.

"What did he look like?" The question squeaks out as a whisper, my gaze fixed on the curtain as if my eyes might gift me with x-ray vision, allowing me to steal a peek at him.

I know all I need to do is pull back the drape and step inside, I *know* this... but if he doesn't remember me, if he doesn't look at me and see fireworks and oatmeal cookies and laughter beneath the summer sun, I swear my heart will shrivel up and die.

Gabe's hand travels up and down my spine with languid strokes, curling around my shoulder and offering a comforting squeeze. He replies in an equally strained whisper. "Lost. He looked... lost."

My insides twist and ache as I fight off tears. "They still don't know what happened to him?"

"Not yet. He's confused and not entirely coherent. The doctor wouldn't even let me see him right away because they didn't know if he was violent, or..." Gabe falters through a pained gulp, dipping his chin to his chest. "He didn't recognize me."

No.

I realize Gabe was only in preschool at the time of Oliver's disappearance, but Lord help me, I want him to remember *everything*. Every single detail from our magical childhood that has been carved inside me, permanently engraved.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

My dismissal is quick, despite the fact that my feet are still rooted in place, idle, refusing to press forward. "I got this."

"Yeah?" He quirks a grin amidst the emotional turmoil swimming between us. "Because I'm literally holding you up right now."

Gabe lets go of my shoulder to prove his point, and I stumble, almost plowing through that ugly curtain like a human wrecking ball. He catches me by the wrist before I make an overly dramatic entrance. "Ugh, point taken," I bite out, inhaling a giant breath of courage and slamming my eyes shut. "But I need to do this alone."

“I get it, Syd.” Gabe taps his knuckles along my upper arm with a light punch before stepping backwards. “I’ll be in the waiting room. Text me if you need me.”

Gnawing my bottom lip between my teeth and resisting the urge to drag Gabe into the room with me as a security blanket, I bob my chin, seeing him off.

And then I inch towards the curtain, counting to ten, chanting words of encouragement under my breath as I try to zap away the rattling nerves.

I raise my hand, bunching the stiff, itchy fabric between my fingers to move it aside.

That’s when I see him.

That’s when my eyes land on Oliver Lynch for the first time in twenty-two long, devastating years. The curtain drops from my fingers as my hand shoots up to cup my mouth, preventing a strangled cry from escaping. I’m frozen in the entryway with Oliver directly in front of me, lying partially covered beneath a white blanket. He’s hooked up to various cords and monitors, and I’m thankful they are beeping and buzzing, filling the air between us, otherwise all we would hear is the sound of my heart screaming and choking with the weight of each breath.

Oliver doesn’t look at me. His eyes are trained on the popcorn ceiling, a slight frown marring his forehead. Maybe he doesn’t realize I’m in the room, or maybe he’s lost inside his head, but while his focus is elsewhere, I take a moment to drink him in, my gaze soaking up every incredible inch of this man—this stranger, in a way, and yet... *so much more*.

He is beautiful.

That same light brown hair falls at his shoulders, shaggy and untamed, infused with hints of amber. A shadow of scruff lines his sharp and masculine jaw, emphasizing sleek cheekbones and a sallow complexion.

My gaze slips lower, and I’m surprised to discover a man who seems to have been well-cared for. Despite whatever circumstances he’s endured, Oliver is not overly thin or malnourished as I had anticipated—the opposite, in fact. Biceps peek out from his hospital gown encompassing broad shoulders and a strapping chest that heaves with his own weighty breaths.

Tentative feet carry me closer to his bedside, his name croaking out between my lips and addressing him for the first time in decades. “Oliver.”

My God, those three syllables caressing my tongue force out a sob that finally catches his attention. Just barely.

Oliver blinks. Long eyelashes flit and flutter, his gaze still pinned on the ceiling, his fingers gripping the bed covers between tight fists.

Moving closer, I pull my lips between my teeth, unsure of what to say or do. I don't want to startle him. I don't want to spook him.

I just want him to look at me—to *see* me.

“Oliver,” I repeat. My own hands move behind my back, wrists crossing as a way to prevent them from reaching for him. “I’m Sydney. Do you remember me?”

I monitor his micro-expressions carefully. The subtle twitch of his mouth. The tensing of his jaw. The muscle spasm in his right bicep.

The slight widening of his eyes—so quick, I wonder if I imagined it.

I continue forward, stepping closer until the front of my sweater grazes the guardrail and I can feel his body heat warming my skin. Curling my fingers around the rail, I mutter softly, “It’s me, Oliver... it’s Syd.”

A flash of recognition washes over him; I swear it, I’m *convinced* of it.

My throat tightens on a sharp inhale, ribs vibrating with delirious beats. The side rail is the only thing keeping me from collapsing onto him, a mess of tears and heartbreaking joy.

Oliver cranes his neck as he finally pulls his focus off the ceiling, head shifting lazily towards me until our faces meet.

Eyes of blue incredulity meet his haunted, hollow pools of burgundy and brown. I can't express what the moment does to me. Emotions so raw and unbidden, so inconceivable, threaten to drown me. I want to weep and wail and hug him so tight, he won't be able to escape.

He can't leave me.

Not again. Not ever.

As his eyes search my face, both wandering and heavy, Oliver inhales a choppy breath. Gold flecks shimmer back at me, masking years of mystery, of unknown horrors that have whittled away the carefree, fun-loving boy I can recall with agonizing clarity.

When he speaks, his voice is laced with a touch of disbelief, a hint of awe, as if he can't believe what he's seeing. I think he's about to say my name, but instead, he rasps out, “Queen of the Lotus.”

What?

The air between us thickens. I have no idea how to respond to the words that just broke free. A tear tracks down my cheek like a quiet reply, while the back of my wrist lifts to swipe it away. We hold our stare, and I watch as

confliction etches itself into his features, pulling his brows together, narrowing his eyes with bloodshot bewilderment. Something new washes over him, something frightening, replacing that fleeting pocket of recognition with... *panic*.

Oliver shakes his head back and forth, his hands tightening around the covers as he twists away from me. "No, no, no... this isn't real."

I wet my lips as I determine what to do next, my nerve-endings tingling and frayed. I want to reach for him, to console him with my touch and heartbeats and words of solace, but I'm afraid I'll only make it worse. "It's okay, Oliver. You're safe."

"This is all wrong. I'm dreaming..." Oliver continues to chant under his breath, head swinging side to side, knuckles white from fisting the sheets. "You can't be real..."

Tears burn while my heart breaks for him. "I'm real. I'm—"

"You're fine, Oliver. It's all right."

A nurse enters the room, stealing away the rest of my words and causing me to flinch back from Oliver's bedside. I glance at her, visibly shaken, my palms clammy as I wring them together in front of me. "I-I'm sorry. I'm not sure what upset him."

The woman offers me a cheerless smile. "He's confused and easily agitated. There's no telling what may trigger him," she explains, tinkering with a long needle. "I'll give him a sedative to help him relax. He'll be okay."

My bottom lip catches between my teeth and I bite and nibble until it hurts. Gaze floating back to Oliver, my stomach pitches at the sight of him so broken, so unhinged, so *confused*. His eyes are squeezed shut, lips moving with jumbled, mixed-up blather.

He recognized me in some way, I'm sure of it, but did he truly *see* me?

Does he *remember* me?

"I think we should let him rest now."

I blink at the nurse's request, taking that as my cue to get lost.

Swallowing, I produce a small nod, pacing backwards from the room with my eyes fixated on the man who is now curled up onto his side, blanket to his chin, knees drawn up like he's trying to hide. The image is a swift punch to my gut, dizzying my feet until I find myself tangled up in that awful, goddamn blue curtain.

I break free and push through to the hospital hallway where I steady my ragged breaths, the heel of my palm pressed against my breastbone.

One question floods my mind as my shoulders heave up and down.

What happened to you, Oliver Lynch?

I know it's a question for another day, so I hold back a new onfall of tears and whisper softly, "Goodbye."

It's a goodbye for now.

Not forever.



Three weeks later, I'm watching through cracked curtains as Gabe opens the passenger's side door of his Challenger and waits for Oliver to step outside. I observe the hesitation, the fear, the uncertainty, as Oliver clutches his knees between tense fingers and stays implanted to the leather seat. He's wearing one of Gabe's plaid button-down shirts, along with jeans that appear too tight for his more muscled physique.

Oliver stares at the raised-ranch house made of honey-colored bricks and dark shutters, his jaw taut, his eyes flickering with unease.

I want to run to him.

I want to tell him it's okay, *it will be okay*, but Gabe and I decided it was best if I let Oliver get acclimated to his living arrangements before coming over. He's overly sensitive to new faces, new environments, and to stimulation in general.

Oliver slowly plants his shoes on the pavement and pulls himself out of the vehicle. He's exceedingly tall, well over six feet, towering over Gabe who is at least a few inches shorter. It's incredible staring at these two men, side-by-side, after twenty-two years. My last image of them together consists of sticky popsicle fingers, bowl cuts, and grass stains on their knees. Now they are grown men—both handsome and striking in appearance, though, vastly different.

And one of them looks utterly terrified.

Ashen.

I clutch the neckline of my shirt in a trembling fist, the other holding the drapes away from the window as my eyes stay locked on Oliver. He scratches at his overgrown hair, his gaze darting around the yard with suspicion. I can see that his own hands are shaking while he studies his surroundings,

prepared to bolt at the slightest threat. Gabe reaches out with a cautious touch, placing his palm against his stepbrother's broad shoulder, and Oliver flinches back, startled.

My heart clenches.

After a few moments of indecision, Oliver finally moves his feet to follow Gabe up the cracked stone walkway towards the front of the house. As he presses forward, he pauses to glance around once again, still unsure, still noticeably hesitant. His eyes peruse the right, then the left, and before he drags his sights back to the house, they land on me through the bay window.

My breath catches as my hand squeezes the curtain so hard, I almost tug it right off the rod. Oliver narrows his eyes slightly, trying to read me or understand me somehow—as if he's attempting to fit me into the complexities of his mind, like a missing puzzle piece.

We are yards apart, separated by a pane of glass and twenty-two long years, but I feel something pass between us. A current. A frisson of wayward memories and new possibilities. I want to know what he's thinking as he stares at me, studying me with a rigid jaw and inquisitive eyes. I'm overwhelmed with not knowing what the hell to do or how to break this clutch, so I offer a small smile and lift my hand with an awkward wave.

Lame.

Oliver blinks away our hold while Gabe turns to face me from his driveway. He smiles at me, a sad, unsettled smile, and pulls Oliver from our stare-down.

I let out the air trapped in my lungs and loosen my grip on the curtain, watching as the two men continue their trek to the front door and disappear inside.

Does he remember me?

I still don't know.

Police and detectives are trying to piece together the details of Oliver's captivity. He hasn't given much information—in fact, he's hardly spoken at all.

Gabe visited Oliver a few times after he was transferred to an inpatient psychiatric unit for monitoring, but his ramblings mostly consisted of “lotus” and “Bradford” and “the end of the world”. Nothing coherent. Nothing cohesive. If authorities have gotten more out of him, it hasn't been revealed to us yet. I have no insight into the reality of his life—I don't know the horrors he's faced or the obstacles he's had to overcome. I don't know if he's