

The background of the entire cover is a deep magenta or purple. Scattered across this background are several heart-shaped candies in different colors: yellow, orange, light purple, and teal. Each heart has the word "LOVE" written on it in a reddish-brown, slightly distressed font. Some hearts are whole, while one in the lower-middle section is broken into several pieces.

SO HAPPY

TOGETHER

"As addictive as it is entertaining."

—LIV CONSTANTINE

a novel

OLIVIA WORLEY

SO HAPPY TOGETHER

A NOVEL

OLIVIA WORLEY



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For the girls who get attached a little too quickly

PART ONE

The Lovers

NOW

It's a beautiful thing, watching something die. I never understood it until now—except he was wrong, in a way, because no one's dead yet, at least not by my hand, but still, I think I know what he meant. It's this: the look in those eyes, knowing the line between life and death rests in my palm, a prophecy foretold by branches and ridges that only I can read.

And what does it say?

The truth: it was always going to end like this.

Love stories always do. To believe anything else would be delusional—but I've fallen for plenty of delusions. Another one: I told myself that I could be good.

I see it now, sharp as a blade between my ribs. I was holding so tight to something that died long ago, a corpse clutched to my chest, convincing myself that it was still breathing. In the end, all I needed was to let it go. They say that's what to do when you love something. And maybe some part of me still does. Always will.

It's what I tell myself, a new whispered mantra in the shadows of my heart, as I raise the knife.

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

1

On the night he breaks my heart for the second time, Colin is wearing my favorite sweater. It's turquoise, the bright kind of shade that most men are afraid to wear for fear of looking soft—and it is. Soft, I mean. A little faded, like it was thrifted, or at least long loved, with a fuzz of pilling that I could only see up close. He wore it on our first date, even though it was a little too warm for a sweater, and I knew instantly that he was gentle, that he takes care of things, but not overbearingly—the type who would throw his sweater in the dryer, screw the pilling, just so it will feel warm and clean. I wanted to bury my face in it instantly, make it mine.

Now, he wears it at a cozy table, across from *her*. Because it's his date sweater, and for the first time in a long time, I feel the sharp and sudden urge to watch the life drain from another person's eyes.

"So you write plays and stuff," Axel says. "That's sick."

Axel, twenty-six, consultant at Big Five. Originally from the Bay Area. Looking for a short-term relationship, open to long, whatever that means, fan of tequila shots for the table and girls who don't take themselves too seriously. I googled him, like I google all my dating app dates, and as far as I can tell, Axel is his actual name—at least, it has been since he was in high school, which is as far back as I could find. I don't know which is worse: choosing a name like Axel on purpose for yourself or being born to parents who looked down at your wriggling pink body and said, *This boy is an Axel*.

I wouldn't ordinarily go out with an Axel on principle alone, but Axel is far from the point of tonight. They never are.

"Yeah," I say, tucking my hair behind my ear. It's part of the script I've perfected over the course of the past two months: short response, humble, because any more than that and you sound too full of yourself, too high on this idea that you're some kind of artist.

Colin never made me feel like I had to follow a script. He didn't ask me if I write *plays and stuff*, either. He called me a playwright. Like it's a given, like I don't need to earn it because I already have. To him, I wasn't just Jane, twenty-four, playwright, looking for a long-term relationship, and weirdly attracted to the Oxford comma. He wanted to peel back the layers, see what's inside.

He's watching her now, drinking her in as she talks about something I can't hear. First date, I decide. I've been deliberating since Axel and I sat down about an hour ago, but it must be. Colin's looking at her in that way of his, like she's a complicated pattern he hasn't worked out yet, his chin in his hand, and my stomach tightens. He did this exact pose in his newest profile photo, the one he added a week after breaking things off with me because we were too *serious*.

That's what he said in the text, two days after we had sex for the first time.

I thought I was ready for something this serious, but I'm not. I'm sorry.

And then, he went and updated his profile, like I wouldn't see it—like he didn't feel even a shred of sadness, of mourning this loss.

So much for *sorry*.

Now, Colin laughs at something the girl has said, a crooked grin spreading like melted butter and achieving, I guess, what he wanted all along: cracking me open. Seeing inside.

"So, what do you *do*, though?" Axel asks, pulling a hand through his too-blond, too-slicked hair.

I close my hands around my glass of cider—my go-to date order because I am *chill* and *cool* but *not a beer girl*, *not one of the boys*. It's cold against

my palms, and I keep them there to stop myself from reaching for the nearest fork to impale my own thigh.

“I also edit college application essays.”

It’s the only acceptable answer because it’s true. I don’t make a living as a playwright—I don’t make any money writing at all, not yet—but I hate the way he makes me say it.

Colin never asked what I do, not the way Axel just did, with that implied *really* before the *do*. Colin accepted me as I am, no asterisk required. He wouldn’t let me if I tried, and I did: the first time he asked me what I do, I launched right into my prepared dialogue. The *I’m a playwright, but*. And Colin got this look in his eyes, all serious and honey brown under those thick lashes, and told me, *But what? You’re a playwright. You don’t need to undercut that with something else for it to be true*.

“That’s cool,” Axel says, clearly uninterested. “I think it’s sick how you’re trying to do something artistic, though.”

I clock it as the fourth *sick* of the evening. I also clock the *trying*, and I have vivid daydreams of Axel getting crushed by a window AC unit when he leaves this bar.

“My friends always told me I could have made it as a DJ,” Axel continues, unaware of my seething contempt or the fact that he’s a caricature of himself. “But financial stability has always been more important to me. Like, I’ve got mad respect for people trying to be artists, but I’d much rather have a salary and my own place, you know? You should see it, by the way. Sick view.”

As Axel launches into a detailed description of his square footage in Murray Hill, clearly meant to seduce me—with no self-awareness for the fact that he lives in *Murray Hill*, the EPCOT of fraternity man-children who want to pretend they’re real New Yorkers—I watch the girl. I can only see her from behind, with a hint of her profile every time she turns to admire Colin’s favorite East Village date spot, probably impressed like I was the first time: it’s comfortable, designed to feel like a dive, but the cocktails are pricey enough that you know he isn’t being stingy.

She's pretty, with bouncy chestnut curls that she keeps raking her hand through to make them cascade over her bony shoulders like a shampoo ad, only less pristine, like she doesn't care where they fall because she knows they'll look perfect every time. She's white, my age, and I can't quite tell when she's sitting, but she seems taller than me, thin and willowy in a supermodel way. Colin, at six foot one, still probably has at least a few inches on her.

She's so pretty, in fact, that it makes my stomach hurt, makes it feel so hollow it's like I reached inside and laid my guts out on the table as a pitiful offering, all slimy tubes and a barely pumping heart.

Marketing, I think. Maybe fashion merchandising, if that's even a real thing. She has that look about her: tight white crop top and wide-leg jeans over these chunky loafers, the kind of outfit that suggests ease and unbotheredness, even though it's still trendy. She swirls a straw in her drink, something fruity and girlish.

Suddenly, my own date outfit—black slip minidress, white Doc Martens—feels too try-hard, too basic. My drink, too. Cider is what a girl picks to make a boy think she's down-to-earth but still feminine. It's the drink for someone who thinks too hard about her decisions, who's too afraid to pick up a maraschino cherry by the stem and pop it between her lips without a brush of irony.

I should just leave, I think, give up on this whole stupid endeavor, but I can't stop watching them. The fear of letting them out of my sight is somehow worse than the fear of what I'll see.

And the plan. Tonight, the plan is finally working.

I notice the absence of Axel's drone, and when I glance back at him, he's taking another sip of his beer, watching me. Waiting. I should ask him a question.

"So, what's it like being a consultant?" I ask.

Axel launches into another monologue—mission accomplished—and I catch movement at Colin's table: a server bringing over the check. Colin and the girl have been here since Axel and I arrived, so I'm not sure how long

their date has lasted. I hope it wasn't much longer than ours. The pit of dread in my stomach knows otherwise.

Colin sets his card down, beating the girl to the punch—she does *the reach*, even if she doesn't mean it—and instantly, my heart picks up again, my palms going slick. I brush a hand through my hair, splaying it over my shoulder.

It's torture, looking interested as Axel talks. Shaping my face into the proper expressions, my voice into the appropriate amount of *hmms* and *ohs*. The whole time, I'm too aware of the distance between my body and Colin's, like I can feel the atoms colliding, a buzz in the air.

Axel is still talking when the server comes back with Colin's receipt, and this is it. I've never been an actor, but it's time for the show.

At the first break in Axel's monologue, I lean in, painting a soft smile across my lips.

"So you have a view, huh?"

He grins like a boy who saw his Christmas presents early, leaning back in his seat.

"Sounds like a girl who wants to see."

In my periphery, I see them approaching, see her slip a leather jacket on.

Under the table, I brush Axel's leg.

"Maybe," I say, and they're closer now, almost at the door. "But you should know I'm not easily impressed."

And then, I feel him see me. I don't have to look to know—that's how connected we are—and it makes me want to shiver, like the ghost of his lips on my neck, my collarbone. I wait one second, another, and then, I look up.

Colin, standing with one hand on the door and his eyes locked on mine.

He waves. A hint of a smile, his freckles lit up in the glow of the streetlights outside.

The girl looks between us, and I know she can sense it, the history crackling there, the shock and disbelief and, yes, regret on Colin's face—because I know in this moment that I was right. He misses me, he was scared

of what he felt for me, and now, he's wishing he could take it all back. He's wishing it were him across this table from me.

But I'm moving on now, I'm *chill* and *cool* and a girl who looks away first, back at Axel. I smile, reaching for my cider, as I hear the door swing open and shut, hear the city swallow them back up. I don't even check to see if Colin glances back through the window, because I know he will. And I won't be waiting for it.

"Want to get out of here?" Axel asks.

I nod, smiling and silent.

"Sick," he says, and something in me has shifted, filling with so much hope and victory that I lose count of his *sicks*, that I don't think I even care anymore. He signals for the check, and when it comes, he lays his card down, making sure I can see it's one of those thick metal ones that screams *rich and corporate*. I even enjoy the sound of it, the definitive thud.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom, and then we can dip," he says.

Even better. He goes, and once he's gone, I allow myself a full grin, silly and childish. Let everyone here think it's about Axel. I don't care. He deserves love, too, doesn't he? We all do—which I guess is the kind of thought it's easy to have when you know you've found it again, or at least the promise of it, small and bright and blooming.

Eight weekends of Friday night first dates at this bar, just a few blocks from Colin's apartment, waiting for the day when he would be here to see me moving on. I wasn't expecting him to be here with a date, not this soon, but I know now that it doesn't matter. Colin was here, he *saw* me, and I looked away first—perfectly staged, perfectly executed. I know that he won't bring this girl back to his apartment, he won't even kiss her when he walks her to the train, because he'll be thinking about me. Wondering who my date was. Wondering if I'll be going back to see his view.

I shrug into my denim jacket, worn in and oversized and so much less pretentious than that girl's shiny faux leather. Then, standing, I reach for my tote bag. I could let Axel pay—he made it very clear that he can afford it—but I'm moved by a sudden generosity and love for the universe to grab two of

the crumpled tens I was going to use to get quarters for my laundry. I let them fall on the table.

Then, I knock back the rest of my cider, set the glass on the table, and head into the night, knowing I didn't even need the drink. I'll feel buzzed on this night the whole way home.

2

When I first moved to the city, it was easy to fall in love every time I got on the train. Hurtling through the underground, I could see New York like a play: dim, flickering light and gritty tile, the perfect setting for so many different characters to come together, pumped through the city's arteries. They all have stories, I thought, and they're all beautiful.

It's a philosophy that, once you've lived here long enough, New York will teach you is bullshit. The subway isn't some magical portal, some great equalizer. It's infrastructure. And infrastructure isn't romantic or sexy—it just *is*, like the dust in my apartment, the rusty-black stains caked too deep into my shower tile to ever bleach away.

Still, every so often, the romance of the city will come back to me with feverish force. Like when I was with Colin. In our nearly two months together, I tapped my toes along with every shitty subway performer, gave them whatever cash I had in my pockets, if I hadn't already spent it on chocolate from those kids with their boxes full, eating it right there, warm and half-melted from the summer heat. I could've cupped a rat in my palms and sang a stupid little song to it, like a delirious, diseased Disney princess. I didn't care. I didn't need to, because I had someone, even when he wasn't there with me—because he was always there, either as my favorite phone notification or a lingering smell on my clothes.

And tonight, I feel it again.

As the A hurtles from West 4th to 168th, I slip my earbuds in, open up Spotify, and shuffle the playlist of songs that remind me of him.

At the first sound of the guitar intro, warmth floods my stomach. “Crash into Me,” Dave Matthews Band. It’s one of Colin’s favorites, and when he first said so, I laughed because it sounds like a band someone’s dad would be into, but somehow, for him, it’s perfect. Slow and soft and sticky sweet, a little bit nostalgic, and something thrumming underneath, something building.

I don’t know, he’d said. Kind of reminds me of you.

The subway car rattles like a drumbeat against my spine, in perfect sync with the music, and I’m not embarrassed to bob my head along. I want people to know that I’m happy, to wonder who’s responsible.

I don’t check my phone once, just let the playlist shuffle on, enjoying the light and the movement of the city, the comfort of knowing that when I finally do, his name will be there again. It’s a game of self-restraint, almost a flirtation, deciding not to look yet.

When I climb out of my station in Washington Heights, the early November air nipping my cheeks, I leave my phone in my pocket. It stays there until I’m back at my apartment on 171st, the door shut gently behind me.

The small kitchen space is empty, air thick with the lingering smell of Anna’s Trader Joe’s gyoza. Judging from the light shining under her closed door, she’s in for the night, studying whatever it is a Columbia med student is supposed to study.

Harmony is out, I’m assuming—she always has plans on Fridays, shows to see and clubs to hit without ever inviting Anna or me. As an actor, Harmony was particularly thrilled about living with a playwright, until she realized that I am both unlikely to write her a Tony-winning role and also a general drag to be around. A quality of mine that, fine, *maybe* I exaggerated to ward her off as soon as I realized that rooming with an actor means hearing pop songs belted with a ridiculous amount of vibrato through the thin walls every day.

But tonight, Harmony could be home screaming along to the full soundtrack of *Dear Evan Hansen*, for all I care. I'm so giddy, I even consider knocking on Anna's door to say hi, but she's busy, and I have more important things to do.

I step into my room, lock the door, and flop onto my bed, reaching for my phone and clicking to wake it up.

Nothing. My heart sinks a little, but I know it's coming—Colin probably just needs time to process what happened, to let this girl down easy. For all I know, he's still trying to explain it to her.

I'm sorry, I imagine him saying. I've been trying to ignore my feelings for Jane, but after tonight, I just can't.

I turn onto my side, breathing in the smell of my pillows. Even though it's been over two months since he slept on them, I'm almost certain I catch a hint of his smell, clean and bright without the unwelcome loudness of cologne.

I could text him, I know. But I'm *moving on* and *looking away first*, I'm cider and my hand on someone else's thigh, and it would be pathetic of me. I have to wait.

Lying this way, my laptop is in my direct line of vision. It's abandoned on my small, rickety desk, the fourth leg of which is still balanced on a balled-up sock because one of the pieces came broken. I could write, put my phone away and channel all this swirling energy into the Ophelia play. I've been working on my reimagining of *Hamlet* for a while now, with visions of falling petals and a claw-foot tub and other watery stage magic, but with draft after draft, I can't decide if what I have is brilliant or a contrived Sarah Ruhl rip-off.

Anyway, I'm too wired to write, floating too high to bring myself down with the solid feeling of a keyboard under my hands.

I reach for my phone and open TikTok.

I don't know how to feel about the fact that I'm a person who uses TikTok. At twenty-four, I'm hovering somewhere between too old and just young enough to understand the niche micro-brands of humor that make up

this collective digital hellscape. Sometimes, they make me laugh. Sometimes, I get good hair tips.

And sometimes, they tell my fortune.

Like now—the first post on my For You page is another tarot video. I’ve been getting a lot of them, lately: women with candles and dangling earrings, shuffling cards with abandon until a handful slide out of the pack at random to prophesize—always—that a *divine masculine energy* will be returning to my life. So long as I like, comment, and share to “claim,” of course.

Objectively, I know they’re a crock of lies. They’re only here because, when I was newly bruised from losing Colin, I watched enough of them to convince the algorithm that this is what I want to see. Maybe it makes me weak, but the truth is, they help. It feels good to have something to believe in, declaring I didn’t make it all up: Colin felt it, too, and he’ll come back to me, if only I’m patient.

And tonight, he did. A new card held up to the light, a return and a beginning all at once.

As the tarot reader croons into my ear, I scroll through the comments. A parade of women profess that their love will come back with heart and prayer emojis, and tonight, I don’t feel shame or disgust at all of us for losing ourselves in this fiction. I like a few of their comments, filling up the heart outline with my support.

Sometimes, hope is rewarded.

I keep scrolling through my For You page, sinking comfortably into the sea of strangers, as soft and mindless as my pillows.

“Want to know the secret to making him obsessed?”

I jolt up, my whole body buzzing like it’s just been dunked in cold water. I recognize the girl who’s just appeared on my screen. It’s her. Colin’s date, cupped in my palms.

I pause the video and pull her closer. She’s even prettier now that I can see her clearly: button nose, thick eyebrows, and long lashes, with the kind of dewy, barely there makeup look that I can never seem to achieve.

Her handle: @zophorescent. When I click to view her full profile, I can see her full name, Zoe Ember. Fake name, almost definitely. It's too attention-seeking in the way that my full name, Jane Williams, sounds too anonymous to feel real.

Zoe has twenty thousand followers and a few videos with over a million views, including the one I was just watching. I click on it again, let it play through.

"I'm serious, you guys, this works for me every single time," she says. "Try it out, and I swear to god, you'll get a text like *that*."

She snaps her fingers, showing off her manicured nails, the color of red wine, and an intrusive image invades: those nails scratching down Colin's back. I wonder if he would like that, if he wishes my nails were longer like Zoe's instead of the short stubs I maintain so I don't have to feel them tapping against my keyboard.

"All you have to do," Zoe says, lowering her voice like she's letting all one million of us in on a secret, "is take him off that pedestal. I'm serious. Sometimes, when we want someone so bad—when we're trying to manifest that Specific Person—we give them all of our mental energy. But honestly? That's the fastest way to push them away. You need to shroud yourself in that divine feminine energy. You are here to *receive*."

The logical part of my brain knows that this is more bullshit, what she's saying—the verbal equivalent of paying eighty dollars for a candle that's supposed to smell like your own vagina—but somehow, I can't stop watching. Maybe it's the unnatural green of her eyes, but something about the way she looks into the camera feels like she's looking directly at me, like she can sense my judgment and she doesn't care, only welcomes it.

"So, here's what I want you to do: first, I just want you to close your eyes and envision yourself as the most divine version of you. Picture yourself the way you want your SP to see you: smart, powerful, confident, sexy, whatever. And yeah, I know. But stick with me."

She gives a twinkling laugh, and it's smart of her—making it seem like this is a joke we're all in on, even though she clearly wants us to believe it's

real. The logical part of my mind clocks it as cult leader behavior, but I lower my head back to the pillows, my eyes closing, letting my phone rest beside me on the bed as Zoe's sweet, melodic voice shimmers in my ear.

"Really *see* that version of yourself. I'm talking vivid detail. What does the highest plane of you look like?"

I try to imagine myself as Colin saw me on our first date at that East Village bar. I was wearing the same boots and denim jacket, but instead of the slip dress, I had a white halter top and a black miniskirt, and I felt cute in a bookish sort of way, my hair clipped up with my bangs falling around my face. As I was walking from the train to the bar, though, I was hit with a sudden wave of self-consciousness, wondering if I should have let my hair down, if guys like that more, and then I felt awful for even thinking that, because why should I dress for anyone but myself? But as soon as I met Colin, I knew it didn't matter.

Because when he looked at me with that goofy, wide grin, I knew he wasn't just Colin, twenty-four, software engineer, looking for a long-term relationship, into bookstores and old movies—he was someone I could fall in love with. And the way he looked at me, I knew he felt the same thing.

"Now, picture your SP," Zoe says, and she's in my head, because I already am. I like the way it feels, too, thinking of him as my *specific person*. My own. I can see him so clearly, the way he looked at me tonight: Colin, frozen in the glow of the city, that flicker of a smile, one hand on the bar door, the other raised in greeting, caught between where he is and where he's meant to be.

"I want you to picture yourself saying this mantra to them: I am loved, I am whole, and I release you. Breathe in deep. Release. Now, say it with me. I am loved."

Colin gently tucking my hair behind my ear, the look in his eyes just before he kissed me.

"I am loved," I echo quietly.

"I am whole."