

Transition

(OLIVIA)

The pressure in my chest is so tight, it's like someone's squeezing my lungs in their fists. I can't breathe. Realizing I need to do something to calm the frenzied racing of my heart, I try to adjust my position. But I can't move. And I definitely can't think of a way to release the pressure. If the squeezing doesn't stop, my vital organs will burst and Mom and Dad are going to freak that I've somehow managed to implode in the back seat of their car.

A surge of white light flares from behind my closed eyelids and the silence that follows is deep enough to make my eardrums thud. Steady and low and pulsating. The light fades to a dull red and then a recognizable sound penetrates my skull.

What on earth? Shouldn't I be hearing angel wings and harps? What, you may ask, am I getting instead?

Horses, apparently.

Seriously? I'm a city kid. I've never been around a real horse before, but I'm pretty sure I know my animal sounds. I swear I hear hoof beats and my body now seems to be moving to the same rhythm.

The heaviness in my chest releases and my body feels weightless and fractured, no longer connected to me. Then the sensation is gone and cold air is blasting against my back, shoving me forward into something firm and lumpy. It would help if I could just move, or at least open my eyes. Or *breathe*. I could probably make sense of whatever's happening. Instead, I let myself fall into nothingness and hope for the best.

Before

(OLIVIA)

“Liv!” My dad calls through the house, “don’t forget to grab that pile of snow stuff in the hallway. At the rate we’re going, Gunther’s cabin will be buried by the time we get there.”

Rolling my eyes, I bounce down the stairs gripping my pillow as my backpack thumps against my spine, its heaviness wanting to tug me backward. We’re having Thanksgiving at Dad’s friend’s house. Actually, to say “friend” doesn’t cut it. Gunther is closer than a brother to my dad. We’ve all grown up on tales of how Dad was running as fast as he could into hoodlumdom (which I highly doubt is even a word, but who am I to question the sanctity of the stories?); and here comes Gunther Ryland, ten years older, ten shades darker, and about ten shoulders wider than pale, scrawny Dad.

Dad had been a smart kid. Really. Like skip-grades smart. But he never fit in and was often bored and looking for ways to express his inner hellion. Having no friends and ever-changing foster parents can lead to quirks like that. Gunther was a part of the Big Brother’s program and he started to join Dad both at school for lunch and out of school for “structured activities.” Slowly he got Dad to refocus his “erstwhile energies into productive choices and long term goals.”

Dad is now Dr. Joseph Williams, one of the area’s top pediatricians at St. Helene’s Hospital. While still in residency, he married Mom. Her name is Julia Malory and she’s a Kindergarten teacher at Washington Elementary. They had yours truly and my two little brothers

within a span of a few years. I, Olivia Grace, am thirteen and a half; Sam turned twelve back in July, and Jamie turned ten a week ago. My birthday's at the end of May.

We're taking a couple extra days off from school and driving to Gunther's amazingly spectacular home, six hours away and up in the mountains. He never married and has no kids of his own, but he does some fostering here and there for hard to place cases. Not that he'd ever call them that. Man, his brown eyes glint red if you even suggest one of his kids is a "case" or that they're trouble at all. He's got some magic touch turning them back into kids and getting them settled wherever they belong.

Now, this house of his Gunther calls it a cabin, but it is truly colossal, with exterior log walls and massive amounts of windows. Inside, there are two stone fireplaces and heated wood floors. The bedrooms have bunks, though the area rugs are plush enough you could sleep on those just the same. There's a library, a game room and a media room; the kitchen could be from a restaurant. Numerous patios and balconies overlook all the amazing views of the trees and distant lake.

At least, that's what I hear. I get dizzy going up three floors in an elevator, so I don't do much hanging over balconies or staring out of windows that show me how I could plunge to my death if the glass gave way.

You know, I've never known what Gunther does or if he has family around, but whenever we're with him I feel like we fit right into his carefully molded world. He's that easy to be with.



Three hours into the trip, frozen rain has begun to splat against the car windows. Dad's driving at the pace of a two-legged bug and the sky has become this non-color of whitish-gray. Snow will come next. The windshield wipers whir and scrape back and forth. I sigh and gaze over at Sam's video game, but I watch too long and feel my stomach begin to roll. Jamie's fallen asleep with his head lolling to the side, his drool teasing Sam's shoulder.

Car trips are not an area in my life where I shine. I close my eyes again and lower the volume of my iPod just enough to hear the rounded sounds and cadences of my parents' voices, but not enough to make out actual words. The SUV drones with a steady hum and I feel cocooned by the cushy seats and armor-like exterior.

When I wake up, my watch reads just after 4:30. It's awfully dark already. I pull out my ear buds and Jamie's wondering how much longer we have; I want to know the same thing, but I'm glad I wasn't the first one to ask, being the oldest and all.

"Sweets," Mom says, "we've got to go slow. We're in a white-out and Dad's doing what he can. We just have to sit tight till we make it over the pass, and then we'll be able to make our turn-off."

Great. Because then come the switchbacks, the lack of any shoulder, and the sheer cliff drop down the right-hand side. Joy. If I didn't love Gunther so much I'd seriously consider demanding to be left right here on the side of the road, snowstorm or not.

"This is taking forever," groans Jamie, shifting in his seat "I can't even look out my window 'cause I can't see anything."

It *is* almost impossible to see anything, with the snow doing the whole “warp speed ahead” thing in our headlights. In the low beams, the trees could dub as a forest from Narnia. It’s called a white-out for a reason, and I’m pretty sure we should not be attempting to drive through it, but there’s nowhere to pull over, and who knows if someone’s behind us. Dad’s turned off the radio and I can tell he’s leaning forward, as if being five inches closer to the windshield is going to help him see better.

“What about a story?” Mom asks. About a million years ago, when I was almost three, she began to use car trips as a storytelling forum, to distract me from my impending hurl-fests. They should maybe seem dorky to us now that we’re older, but they’re not. We view them as a sport.

Mom calls them “Thunder Stories” and incorporates each of us kids into a Grand Adventure. We get to pick out a random animal or magical creature and then she has to be able to fit them all into the storyline. Things can get kind of funny when she’s trying to piece together a badger, an octopus, and a fairy’s missing shadow. Somehow it always works out and the story flows like it’s something she’s read before.

They always begin the same: “Once upon a time there were three amazing children named Olivia, Samuel, and James. They all lived together at the tip-top of a beautiful mountain with their magical horse named Thunder, who loved them dearly and took care of them.”

Thunder could run so fast he actually flew through the air, with the wind whipping across our backs as we held on tight; always Sam in the front, then Jamie, then me. I suppose I was the one responsible for keeping us from falling off Thunder’s broad back. He had these magic saddle bags, like something from Harry Potter, which could hold any supplies we packed for our

mission; Thunder would lead us to our destination and then let us go. We were on our own, saving talking animals, magical creatures, ourselves, or the world in general.

Most often, the stories end in a celebration including lots of food. Mom loves food. She claims she runs almost any chance she gets, just so she can eat. I don't know if that's healthy or not, but I run with her so she can have the company. We've even done some local races together, so we've got this whole competitive thing going on. And even though Mom likes to claim it's about "bonding," I think it's just plain fun to have some time together. She doesn't have to get so psychological trying to explain it.

Anyway, this evening she tells a tale of a blinding snowstorm and the wondrous Thunder who soars through the sky carrying these three amazing children who must save an angel, a bat, and a Velociraptor from impending doom. Before we can get to the good stuff about the feast, our car gets hit from behind, hydroplanes across the road, and spins until it slams into a wall of rock. Where it crumples like a soda can.

After

(OLIVIA)

I wake up and try to turn my head, but I'm in so much pain every fiber of muscle that even thinks about moving whimpers in agony instead. My brain deems it best to go back to sleep, and, without hesitation, I comply.

The next time my eyes open I see it's lighter and recognize my lungs can take in air. Those minute details are big for the "chipper-up" portion of my day. Which is only slightly diminished by my sad lack of viable swear words. At the moment, I'd adore anything beyond "ye gads" and "blimey." Blast my parents for ingraining in me the fear of having an overly-foul mouth. These words come nowhere near to how I wish to express myself.

Just in time, I discover I can turn my head after all, heaving my remaining innards onto the floor beside me. Something crunches under my head as I roll back. Pine needles. What the jeebers have I been doing?

Giving credence to my belief that my parents are harder on me than my younger siblings, my ears pick up some wonderfully selected curses from somewhere beyond my head. I must have spattered some vomit onto Sam's foot. Hmm ... this might make up for the boogie incident of third grade.

"Are you okay, buddy?" I croak out. "Where is everyone? Where are we for that matter?"

From my left, I hear Jamie's voice. "Man, I'm glad you're all finally awake. I was starting to worry."

“Just starting?!” I exclaim. The way I feel, I started worrying at least a hundred years ago. “Can either of you move? Because I can’t much. Hey, are Mom and Dad around? What’s going on? What happened?” No one else can remember either, so I bite back my fear and lie motionless next to my brothers, waiting for sleep to overtake me.



As I slip in and out of life, breathing my way back into reality, I’m not much aware of the passage of time, but I am very conscious of the presence of someone warm and caring. That’s what I’m going with, anyway, because otherwise it would just be creepy. We are harbored in a cave of sorts, and though the air feels cold around the edges, a fire crackles and pops between us and the cave’s mouth. Beyond the opening, past the glare of the flames, I can make out dark mounds I surmise are snowdrifts.

“Livs, Jamie?” Sam crows, the first morning he’s able to get up and move around. He’s standing at the entrance of our cave. “Check this out!” He drags over this ginormous, honest-to-goodness Santa pack. I don’t know whether to be freaked out or excited. It’s like Christmas.

“Someone’s gotta be around here! I’m going to take a look.”

I’m lying on the ground, on my bed of pine needles. Jamie and I still aren’t able to move without bursts of pain. Sam’s foot, at my eyelevel, is already stepping away.

“No, Sam,” I yelp, grabbing his ankle, and sitting up. “It might not be safe.”

“Not safe? Why? Whoever it was left us presents. *Presents*. It’s not like the pack is anything dangerous.”

“How do you know? We haven’t looked in it yet. Anyway, I’m not talking about the pack; I’m talking about what’s outside. We don’t even know where we are and we haven’t seen anyone around. This could be from some kidnapper guy.”

“You think we’ve been kidnapped?!”

“I don’t know what to think, but you’re not going out there until we all can. Right, Jamie?”

“Sure, Liv,” Jamie agrees. “But I don’t think it could be too dangerous. I mean, what’s stopping anyone from coming in here? It can’t be worse, us going out.”

“Someone has been coming in!” I shout. “How do you think we’re still alive? Someone’s been feeding us and cleaning us and treating our injuries!” That thought quiets me down, even as I speak the words. We’d all had really bad injuries, which are healing with more speed than I would have thought possible. “What do you think happened to us?”

“I dunno,” mutters Sam, sitting between the two of us gimpy people.

“You guys think Mom and Dad could’ve left us here?” Jamie’s voice is skeptical, but I can sense the hope behind it; if they’d left us, it means they might return. I don’t want to feed him false hopes. Better to face up to whatever the worst could be. Sam beats me to it.

“I’ve been thinking” He pauses and I can hear his swallow. “The one thing I can come up with is there must’ve been a car accident. Weren’t we going to Gunther’s? What’s the last thing you can remember?”

Jamie answers without pause. “Getting in the car. What about you guys?”

“Yeah,” we both reply. An accident makes more sense than being kidnapped and beaten, but it still doesn’t answer the question about who’s been coming around. Or how we got here.

Sensing he'd lose to my big-sister bossiness, Sam gives in. "Fine; I won't go out yet, but at least let's look inside the bag."

"Fine, yourself, but if something grabs you ..." I sit up and help Jamie get closer to the fire. Sam reaches in and grabs out clothes, books, food, medicine ... and weapons. A knife, a bow along with a full quiver, and a slingshot.

"Ha! See? Something dangerous was in there!" I'm triumphant.

"Ha! See, yourself!" mimics Sam in a good-natured tone. He waves the slingshot in front of my face. "It's not a kidnapper; it's someone who wants to help us! No kidnapper would give us a way to fight back."

"Um, then why don't they take us *home*, Sam? Or a hospital? Why stick us in a dirt cave? It's winter! People who help people don't keep them stranded."

"Be quiet, you guys. We've been kept warm with the fire, and now we have more gifts to be thankful for." Jamie sounds like Dad. "Let's see what the books are about; it'll help pass the time. And what kind of food is it? I'm starving!"

I separate the books into two piles: "fun" and "educational." The fun stack is filled with books about kids in crazy new worlds and societies—action adventure stuff that I love, where smart people like us get to save the day. The other pile is nonfiction. Each book in that group is about some sort of survival skill for wilderness living—action adventure stuff I've never had to deal with before. I read us to sleep that night, and for some reason all I dream about is a blasted horse.



It's our first family jaunt out of the cave and we're trying to work our way through the foot-deep snow. We're on a mountain, just like the ones we drive through to get to Gunther's, and one thing is hard to miss: We're completely isolated. Airplanes stubbornly refuse to soar across the sky; helicopters totally fail to drone above our heads. There is no other sign of human life, and our parents are nowhere to be found. Except for where we step, the snow lays in a pristine blanket of white crystalized fluff.

Making visible progress, I am jubilant at the thought of getting somewhere safe and inhabited by people and buildings. We'd shredded the red bag and made satchels for each of us. Inside our bags, we've put our food and spare clothes and other necessities. The weapons are tucked away, also. I've claimed the dagger and Jamie the bow, which he wears slung over his back; Sam's got the slingshot.

The snowball splatting the back of my head makes me jump. I don't even have to look to know who the culprit is. "Samuel Riley Williams!"

An all-out scuffle ensues before we proceed, wet and frozen, down the slope. I make Jamie walk in front to keep an eye on him, but it's me I should have been concerned about; I slip on an icy patch, grab Sam's shoulder, and pull us both down. He gets to his feet first and stoops to help me. When we stand back up, Jamie's nowhere to be seen and a hugely out-of-place fog bank is rolling in, obliterating our view.

"Wha—?"

"Hey, Jamie! Where are you?" Sam's worried shout echoes around me, but there's not a peep from our youngest brother.

“Jamie!” I spin around, watching the ground to locate his footmarks. Inside, I’m panicked; Jamie is not the brother who’d pull this kind of trick. Now, if Sam had disappeared . . .

I turn back to ask Sam if we should split up or what, and feel the icy droplets of mist brush against my exposed skin. The fog’s coming fast, and I watch in alarm as Sam’s shadow-form melts away, just as Jamie’s must have.

“Sam?! Jamie?!” I holler, grimacing when I get no answer in return. I grope my way forward, flinching at both real and imaginary obstacles as I push through the dense vapor. Breathing too deep makes me cough, so I hold my breath and hope that also helps to keep my heart from leaping out of my mouth. It does no good. I let out a yelp as I stumble over my own feet and catch myself against the frozen ground. When I stand, the fog is dissipating and I can see the outlines of my brothers. They’re no more than a hundred yards from me, right next to the mouth of our cave.

Less than two minutes ago, we had been nowhere near the mouth of our cave.

After a minor freak-out, we decide to head the opposite direction, this time at a run. Cue the fog. Replay the unexpected arrival at our cave. Repeat.

No matter how many times we try, no matter where we start, if we hit the fog, the end result is the same. After a while, we stop trying. It was either that or go insane.