

This is NOT



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*Chicken
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*For Diane Tettamble, who encouraged me to write,
even after I killed her off in each of my stories.*

Prologue

The fact that my aunt's front door was unlocked should've been a red flag. Just about every horror movie I'd ever seen featured a stupid, oblivious guy wandering through an open door that definitely should've been locked, only for said idiot to get slammed in the face with a surprise axe. But this was New York City. My aunt's building had a doorman. Wasn't that so she didn't have to lock her front door?

I collapsed on to the couch, sleep immediately creeping around the edges of my vision. Closing my eyes, I tried to remember the last time I'd slept normally. It was before this whole stupid weekend, before I ruined basically every relationship that ever meant anything to me. In fact, I'd probably never sleep again, plagued instead by memories of me attempting to dance like someone that didn't look high on hard drugs, or the way I almost *wanted* Olivia to make fun of me, to be on the other end of her sharp wit, because at least then I knew she cared about me.

At the thought of Olivia, my stomach dropped, cueing the memories of this weekend to start cycling through my

head on a never-ending loop.

Olivia, saying goodbye.

Olivia, disappearing through the iron gate of the shady Brooklyn music venue. Alone.

Me, trailing after her, always too late.

Clark and his stupid leather vest.

The way Olivia looked at me when—

A loud thump echoed from down the hall of my aunt's apartment, momentarily breaking me out of my head. It sounded like a towel slumping on to the tiled floor of the bathroom.

I flattened one of the fancy velvet pillows crowding the couch over my head, as if that could shield me from the oncoming sounds of concern and flurry of movement that were almost certainly on their way.

'I've basically had the worst night of my life and if you ask me about it, I'm gonna throw up,' I shouted to my aunt, Karen.

But when she didn't come sliding down the hallway on the balls of her slippery, socked feet, I dragged the pillow off my face and frowned.

'Aunt Karen?'

Only then did I realize how quiet the apartment was, the surrounding silence hard and cold. It was the quiet right before a grenade exploded, as the little metal canister arced through the air and you waited helplessly for the explosion. For the deafening boom. For the blackness.

My feet landed hard on the wooden floor, adrenaline surging up my throat. Somehow, I knew it wasn't my aunt

or even an axe murderer in the bathroom. I knew instantly that it could only be one person, that the night could only end one way.

My sprint down the hallway only lasted a half second, but by the time I slammed my shoulder into the bathroom door frame I was already breathless. As I took in the scene, my brain stuttered. The shrunken figure slumped underneath the sink, her trademark white-blond hair looking green in the bathroom's dingy light.

'Olivia?' I said, barely above a whisper.

At the sound of my voice, she didn't move. But just seeing her like that, I knew. I didn't need to touch her neck to feel for a pulse or see her glassy eyes rolled back in her head.

I knew. Olivia Moon was dead.

1

Four days earlier

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING

Posted in MOVIES by [Hugh.jpg](#) on November 10 at 9:13 p.m.

After hours and hours of battles, ghosts, a seriously long journey, quests for honour, glory and orc blood, how did the final movie of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy close with a pillow fight, a basically silent bar scene and a wedding nobody went to? Even Frodo, equally bored, was like, ‘Yo, I would literally rather die than be here right now.’

I could tell by the way she sidestepped carefully along the roof that Olivia Moon had climbed a house before.

‘What is she doing?’ I said to myself, leaning over the truck’s centre console and watching her through the passenger-side window. Then, under my breath, ‘The eff is she wearing?’

The last time I saw Olivia Moon – which had to have been a few days before our high school graduation – she’d

been wearing nothing but basketball jerseys and shiny leather pants. Now, she was in a beige, oversized Hawaiian shirt and baggy khaki shorts that unzipped at the knees. Looped around her wrists were a pair of thick leather bracelets, ones a kid in our class said made her look like she'd just rolled out of an eighteenth-century porno. That earned him a punch in the mouth that knocked out one of his front teeth, courtesy of Olivia.

The house's second storey had two rectangular windows, each one painted with a white trim I could tell was faded and worn, even from across the street. Olivia glanced up at them, hands on her hips, before kneeling and trying to open one of the windows from the outside. It didn't budge.

I watched in silence as Olivia tried the other window, clenching her fists at her sides when she discovered it was also locked. Even though she was clearly preoccupied, I still hunched down in my seat in case she turned around and noticed me very unsubtly watching her from my sister's ice cream van across the street.

'Is this the part where I do something?' I said out loud, to no one.

Call someone? Text someone?

I picked up my phone from between my legs and stared at the blank screen. But before I could type anything in, a knock on my window yanked me back into my seat. On the other side of the glass was a group of boys that were probably in middle school, their bikes tipped over on the sidewalk.

‘Are you open?’ said the kid closest to my window.

I waved both hands at them and mouthed, ‘Go away.’

Somehow, Olivia didn’t seem to notice, her face now pushed against one of the house windows, hands cupped around her eyes.

‘Uh, hello?’ another one of the kids said. He slapped his flat palm against the glass. ‘Can we get some ice cream?’

‘I heard you the first time,’ I hissed, still waving my hands. ‘Get. Out. Of. Here.’

The main kid rolled his eyes and held up his middle finger as the rest of them grabbed their bikes and pedalled off. When I turned back to the house, my mouth went dry. Olivia was standing on the edge of the roof with her hands on her hips, staring directly at me.

‘Can I help you?’ she shouted from across the street.

This is the part where I probably do something, I thought.

That much, I could figure out.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I slowly climbed out and edged around the truck, dragging my hand across its metal nose.

‘Hey,’ I said, drawing out the word so it lasted at least ten seconds.

Olivia was staring at the front of the house again, so she could look up at the tiny circular window on the third storey, which was most likely the attic. On her head was a bucket hat she pushed away from her face, white-blond hair chunking out underneath and spilling across her shoulders.

‘Do you always watch girls out of ice cream vans or

is this the beginning of your creep career?’ she asked without turning around.

I didn’t really know what to say to that. She kind of had a point.

‘Did you forget your keys or something?’ I said.

‘Not my house,’ she said simply.

A memory of Olivia in her backyard surfaced in my brain. Her eleventh birthday party, a rollerblade cake, Miley Cyrus in the speakers.

‘You live in Columbia Heights,’ I said. The same neighbourhood as me.

‘Do you stalk me there too?’

My face flushed red. ‘I went to your birthday party in elementary school, the one where we played One Direction on a stage your dad rigged up in your backyard.’ I swiped my hand through my hair, toe digging into the sidewalk. ‘I don’t know how I forgot. That kinda thing scars a person.’

A white drainpipe ran up the side of the house, its plastic criss-crossed with vines. Olivia grabbed on to the pipe and leant back as though she were testing its strength.

‘Beats me,’ she said, the pipe wobbling under her grip. ‘I’m sure your rendition of Harry Styles was truly groundbreaking.’

‘Please tell me you’re not gonna try to shimmy up that drainpipe,’ I said. ‘That’s how people die.’

‘Probably,’ Olivia said, stepping backwards. ‘But Clark stole something from me and I need to get it back.’

‘Shit, this is Clark Thomas’s house?’

My head whipped around as if Clark might jump out of the bushes with a machete. Clark was the guy who once put our high school's lunch lady in a chokehold after she called him 'young man', because apparently no one had referred to him as a human before.

Clark Thomas was Olivia's boyfriend.

'Nobody's home,' she said, like this made everything better.

'Yeah, I figured that out by the way you're trying to break in through a window.'

Olivia swiped her hand across the top of her head. She craned her head back so she could see something high up on the house, maybe that third-storey window, which had a slight lip jutting out around it.

'Yeah, well, what Clark took from me is very important,' she said.

She took another step backwards, except this time, she was so close to the edge of the roof that her heel, setting down hard, found nothing but air.

My body went straight. 'Shit, look—' I said, but before I could get the sentence out, Olivia was already tipping backwards, her back curling slightly and her arms flailing as they grabbed at nothing.

Only a single scream echoed down the block, and I wasn't sure if it was from me or Olivia. One leg drifted up as Olivia's body fell, hair floating around her face as if she were underwater. Her back and shoulders crashed into the concrete path just underneath the porch, head bouncing violently like a rubber ball and arms stretched out on

either side of her in a limp, perfect T.

Her body sprawled out across the concrete, unmoving. My brain screamed at me to move, to go help her, but everything else in me was frozen, as if it were operating on a five-second lag. Olivia was just lying there as the seconds ticked by. And then, as if something in my head clicked, I darted across the lawn, heart hammering in my throat. By the time I reached her, Olivia still wasn't moving, the brim of her hat pushed down over her forehead and blocking her face.

Up close, her skin was glassy and pale, only her mouth visible underneath her hat. I dropped to my knees and pulled the brim back slightly so I could see up to her forehead. A puddle of blood was already blossoming on the concrete underneath her head, pooling out so I had to edge away from it before it reached my knees.

'Olivia?' I said quietly, afraid if I spoke too loudly, I somehow might scare her.

My voice was almost unrecognizable, small, shaking, faraway. Everything felt like we were suspended in time, the trees swaying slowly on the front lawn, the air warm and still. Even the street was silent, the cars rushing into downtown Washington seeming light years away instead of a couple blocks off.

I couldn't look at Olivia without feeling sick. Her head, clearly flattened into the pavement, the thin trickle of blood leaking from her mouth. Everybody in movies who bled from the mouth or ear ended up dead. And I'd just watched her die.

Turning away from Olivia's body, I fumbled in my pocket for my phone. As I did, there was a rustling behind me, a scraping almost, the sound of tennis shoes swiping against concrete. I turned slowly and widened my eyes cartoon-big.

One of Olivia's fingers was twitching.

I blinked. I blinked again.

'How . . .' I whispered to myself but couldn't finish the sentence.

As if testing the movement and sending the OK to the rest of her body, the other fingers on Olivia's hand began to flex and wiggle, followed by her whole right arm, then her left.

'You can't be alive,' I said breathlessly. 'You can't actually be alive. Your head's inside out.'

As if to prove me wrong, Olivia blinked. Her eyes, glassy and lifeless just a few seconds before, were now bright and darting around the sky as if to assess the situation. Olivia arched her spine, rotated her ankles and unhinged her jaw, the bones cracking loudly back into place.

'Don't get up—' I started to say, hand outstretched in her direction, but Olivia sprung quickly into a sitting position and yanked her hat down the front of her face.

The back of her head was just a flat smear of deep red, the pink squish of her brain pulsing faintly and broken apart by splinters of creamy-white skull.

'Macaulay Culkin,' I said with a gag. 'I'm gonna puke.'

Olivia was still, hands splayed on the ground as her breath came softly, patiently. That's when I saw it; her skull,

shattered at the back, was starting to stitch itself together again, slowly filling the gap like a puddle of water spilling backwards. I watched with my mouth open as the skin on her head formed over the newly healed skull, then as hair sprouted and grew until it matched the length of the hair that was still left.

‘What. The eff. Is happening,’ I said slowly, my voice a supercharged whisper.

Once her head was back intact, Olivia pushed herself on to her knees, groaning with the effort. She tilted her head from side to side, then shook her shoulders as she muttered under her breath and wiped the blood from her mouth.

I must have made a sound because she turned toward me, lips pursed. At the sight of me crouching on the path, she somehow looked even more confused than I did.

Olivia knit her eyebrows together and said, ‘What?’

A tidal wave of words and thoughts crashed through my head but none of them made enough sense to put into a sentence. All I could do was stare at Olivia, her eyes fogging over with what looked like anger.

‘How did you – what just – I just saw – you’re alive,’ I sputtered finally.

Olivia stretched her neck again so her bones popcorn-popped. ‘Apparently,’ she said.

‘But I saw you die,’ I said. ‘Your head was caved in and it looked like – like a crumpled-up Hershey’s Kiss wrapper.’

‘I think the word you’re looking for is tinfoil,’ she said.

The image was seared into my brain, repeating itself on a continuous, stomach-turning loop. ‘Your head was legit

flat. There was so much blood,' I said, picturing it. Now that I'd managed to form a sentence, I couldn't keep them in. 'How did you do that?'

We both glanced down at the pool of blood still fresh at her knees as if to make sure it'd really happened.

Olivia sighed through her nose. 'It's kind of complicated ...' She gingerly touched the back of her head and winced. 'Hank, is it?'

I swallowed. 'Hugh.'

'Hugh. I'm not really in the right frame of mind to talk about the details. My head is pounding.'

I tried to shift my body so I could see the back of her head again but she turned with me, obscuring it.

'What just happened?' I said, pointing. 'Your head stitched itself back together.'

Olivia jammed her hat back on to her head and tied the straps underneath her chin. 'What're you doing over here anyway?' she said, ignoring my question. 'Don't you live in Columbia Heights too?'

I pointed at the truck across the street. 'Selling ice cream,' I said.

'Oh,' Olivia said. 'Obviously.'

The ladder she used to get on to the roof was still propped up against the house. She stood and wiped her hands against her shorts before reaching for it, then grunted as she tipped the ladder sideways and started disassembling it at the joints so it got smaller and smaller.

'Wait, I'm sorry, can we rewind for a second? What is going on right now?' I said.

A set of stairs hidden behind a big fluffy shrub led down to what I guessed was Clark's basement door. Olivia tucked the ladder there, leaning it against a small window striped with iron bars. Then she skipped up the house's porch steps and yanked out the plastic table and chairs sitting underneath the front window, probably looking for a key.

I blinked, not actually believing what was going on. 'We should go to the hospital so you can at least have a brain scan or something.'

'A brain scan?' Olivia spun around. The laugh that came out of her was sharp and breathy. 'Does my head look messed up to you?'

She tugged her hat up and pointed at her skull, then spun away again so I could see the back of her head, where her hair had been patchy and matted just seconds before. Now it was as if nothing had happened. The new hair even looked brushed. But at the sight of my expression as she turned around, Olivia's face softened from furious to just really annoyed.

'Look, I'm fine. You don't have to do anything except leave me alone.' Olivia gave the front doorknob one last shake, her entire body moving with it, before she stepped back and sighed. 'The one time this family locks their doors,' she said under her breath before thundering down the porch stairs.

'That's probably because Clark knows there's something you want in there,' I pointed out.

Olivia paused as she walked by me and scowled. 'Great observation,' she said.

And then, before I could say anything else, Olivia was on the sidewalk, hands folded across her chest as her shape got smaller and smaller down the block.

‘Wait, you’re really just leaving?’ I called out to her.

Everything about my body was on fire. My fingers, my feet, my neck. Olivia was walking down the street so coolly, so normally, it looked like she was just going to the grocery store instead of away from what felt like something out of a Marvel movie. We couldn’t just leave this all here. There were too many questions. I needed more answers.

‘Do you need a ride?’ I shouted after her lamely.

But Olivia didn’t turn around.

After a few seconds, I pushed myself to my feet, feeling shaky and stunned, the events of the last few minutes whirring by so quickly, they fell out of order. Olivia’s smashed head. The kids on their bikes. That scream. Not knowing what else to do, I turned away from the house and carefully avoided the pool of Olivia’s blood. It was already starting to seep into the concrete, caking into a dried, muddy black. Nagging at me was the feeling that I should still call an ambulance or something, but I wasn’t sure where Olivia was going. She’d already turned the corner at the end of the street, leaving as quickly as everything had started.

As I turned the truck back on and felt the engine hum underneath me, there was one thing I couldn’t get out of my head. It wasn’t that I’d just seen Olivia dead-man drop off a roof, that I was pretty sure I’d never erase the image

of her flattened skull out of my head, or even the fact that there was a very good chance I'd either just seriously hallucinated or Olivia Moon was a real-life superhero. It was something so lame, so utterly self-absorbed, I felt almost embarrassed tiptoeing around it.

What bothered me most was that she didn't know my name.