

Chapter One

Olive

Up to the day I met Jason Thorn, my dreams were made of fluffy white clouds, pretty pink dresses, tasty apple pies, and of course, our neighbor Kara's big brother.

"I don't want to hear another word about this, Jason. You are always welcome to stay here, sweetheart."

I was about to go down to help my mom set the table when their voices carried up to me and I stopped.

"See, I told you it would be okay. Come on, let's go up to my room."

"Hold on, Dylan. Not so fast."

I heard mom's coffee cup softly clink on the kitchen counter a few seconds before I heard her speak again.

"Jason, are you sure you don't want us to call anyone? Maybe they should check on your mom and make sure everything is okay, or we can call your father and let him know that you are spending the night with us. I bet he would be worried if he called your house and couldn't reach either one of you."

My mom was a soft, compassionate woman—soft as in she carried a heart that was purely made of shiny liquid gold. I'd heard my grandpa tell her so countless times for putting up with my father, so as a child I knew it had to be true. There was also a side of her that could be seen as vicious at times, as she was fiercely protective of the ones she counted as her family.

Other than that, she was a sweetheart, as my father liked to call her. She had this secret way of making anyone smile, even when they were sad about something. I knew that because she always made me laugh when we were at the dentist, which was a big scary place for a six-year-old (almost seven!). If she was in the room, chances were she'd have you beaming up at her in no time.

It wasn't just me and my brother; she had the same effect on my friends too. Whenever it was her turn to pick us up from school, they all looked up at her with these big, silly smiles stretched across their faces. Actually, now that I think about it, they reminded me of Buzz, the puppy Kara had gotten a few weeks before. Oh, how

much I loved watching Kara's brother Noah play with that puppy; I'd always thought we could rescue a few puppies for ourselves after he asked me to marry him.

Sigh...

Anyway, I hadn't been allowed to have the puppy in the house, and of course I would never ever sneak him in whenever my mom was out—*ssh, don't tell anyone*—but I did see the faces the little guy made when he wanted something from Kara.

All in all, back then, I believed it was tough to be a kid, but having a mom like mine made everything a bit easier. That's why I'd always wanted to be like her. I'd wanted to make people happy, make them forget about their worries for a while, be their sunshine, as she was ours.

There had been only one teeny-tiny issue...the blaring fact that I didn't have a golden heart because I was never good at being peaceful or graceful, where my mom, on the other hand, was the epitome of those traits.

It wasn't my fault though; it was always Dylan who made me angry. If blame were to be assigned, it would fall squarely on Dylan's shoulders, not mine.

Dylan was my big brother, the one who kept ruining everything for me, probably since the day I was born. Unfortunately, I didn't remember those early years of my existence, but I was pretty sure that he'd been messing with me back then, too. According to my mom and dad, a few days after they brought me home from the hospital, he told them they should take me back to where they'd found me—next to the garbage cans.

Can you believe the audacity? My loving big brother.

It didn't even end with a cleverly veiled threat either. I remembered myself that he would steal my stroller and run around with me in the park. Why, he was probably trying to kill me with sheer excitement!

At an early age, I'd come to the conclusion that I would get to have my own golden heart when Dylan wouldn't be around to throw me off of my game. Whenever he was around, chances were he'd do something and I'd lose my cool, which would lead to us getting into a screaming match.

There was nothing graceful about screaming your little heart out at someone because they wouldn't play My Little Pony with you.

Jason's carefully chosen words brought me back to the present where I was plastered to the wall just to the left of the staircase, listening in on them.

“Thank you, Mrs. Taylor, but I don’t think my father cares about where I’m spending the night. And...um...my mom will probably be okay in the morning. I’m sure she just fell asleep. It’s my fault really; I should’ve checked the time and made sure I was home before six.”

“We were playing catch on the street, Jason. Like, right in front of your house. I don’t think you are the one to blame here. And who goes to sleep at six, Mom? Even Olive stays up later than that.”

“Dylan,” my mom said in a low voice before sighing.

I grinned, feeling proud. I could stay up pretty late. Sometimes I could even go until nine.

There was complete silence for a few moments, and then the feet of the chair scraped the floor as someone got up from the table.

“Okay, Jason.” I heard mom’s strained voice breaking the thick silence. Who was this boy they kept calling Jason? Maybe he was part of the family that had moved in across the street a few houses down a few days ago?

How come Dylan hadn’t introduced me to his new friend?

“You are always welcome in this house. I want you to remember that, okay?”

“Thank you Mrs. Taylor. I appreciate it.”

“Why don’t you go and get cleaned up while I get dinner ready? After dinner we’ll call your dad and make sure he knows you are safe.”

“That’s not really necess—”

“Let’s say it’s for my own peace of mind.”

“Come on, Jason.” I heard my brother murmur. “I’ll show you the new video game my dad bought me.”

Oh, about that...I’d always thought it was quite rude of him to hoard all the toys. He never let me play with him.

I turned on my heels and was about to run back to my room to check out who the new boy was through the small opening of my door when my mom said, “Dylan, can you stay and help me set the table first? Then you can join Jason upstairs until I call you guys down for dinner.”

“Sure, Mom,” my brother answered readily. “The bathroom is the second door to the left, Jason. My room is next to it. I’ll be right up.”

“Is there anything I can help with, Mrs. Taylor? I wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh, you are too sweet, Jason. How about you be our guest for tonight, and any time you come by after today, you’ll give me a hand, too, okay? And you call me Emily from now on.”

“Okay, Mrs. Tay—umm...Emily. Thank you so much for letting me stay here tonight. I’ll be in your room, then, Dylan.” His footsteps started up the stairs.

I stood still and patiently waited for the owner of those footsteps to reach me. Since Dylan wasn’t with him, I could say hi and welcome him to our neighborhood without getting into trouble.

Argh Dylan... Just because he was four years older didn’t make him the boss of me.

Would he be blond? Maybe he would have dark eyes and dark hair and be all dreamy, exactly like Kara’s big brother, Noah, who had turned eighteen just a few weeks before. My mom thought he was a little too old for me, but she had also once said a girl should always dream big. While I loved my mom dearly, clearly she wasn’t right all the time.

Anyway, since this Jason seemed to be friends with Dylan, I highly doubted he would be something to dream about.

Suddenly my stomach got all fluttery for some reason. I frowned and smoothed down my dress. Dylan’s friend or not, he would be a guest in our house and I thought I should be welcoming since he sounded very stressed out about staying with us.

Tommy, one of my best friends from school, believed that we would get married one day, but I’d never said yes to him. I’d never even gotten excited whenever we were on playdates.

First, I saw Jason’s sneakers. I still remember: they were white and very clean for a boy his age. I thought maybe he wouldn’t be that bad and make fun of me like Dylan’s other friends.

Putting on my best smile, I slowly lifted my head up to meet his eyes. His steps faltered when he saw me hiding next to the wall. I got a good look at him and my smile slowly vanished as my mouth dropped open.

Jason? Jason what?

Butterflies? Were those tiny flutters in my stomach butterflies? The ones my mom had told me about? It sure felt like it. Thousands of them. Were these the same butterflies my mom had felt when she’d met my father?

What was his last name?

I wanted—no scratch that, I *needed* his last name to be my last name.

Not the day after, not ten years or twenty years later. I needed it to happen that day—right at that moment to be exact.

He seemed surprised to see me for a second, but recovered faster than I did. He gave me a stupidly cute smile with a dimple showing on his left cheek.

“You have a dimple,” I breathed out, totally lost in that tiny little crevice. It was almost magical.

I closed my mouth and felt the heat rise up to my cheeks. I managed to return his smile with a wobbly one.

“Hey, little one. You must be Dylan’s little sister. I’m Jason.”

“Hi,” I greeted sheepishly as I gave him a small wave.

His smile picked up a notch, and I felt my face flush again. Tucking a loose hair behind my ear, I smiled bigger.

Oh, boy.

He was so cute.

I cleared my throat and extended my hand, just like I saw my dad do when he was meeting someone new. “I’m Olive. My friends call me Liv or Oli because they think I have a weird name.”

Quirking his brow, he looked at my hand then up to my eyes as he gave it a good shake. “Do they now?” he asked, and I nodded enthusiastically, hiding my hand behind my back again. “I think you have a good name, little Olive. It would be hard for someone to forget a name like Olive. You have very beautiful green eyes; I’d say the name suits you.”

Beautiful?

Beautiful?!

I was never going to wash my hand again.

My smile got bigger, and I believe it was the first moment I fell in love with the mysterious boy who had an adorable dimple and was going to spend the night right across from my room.

“Are you our new neighbor?” I asked. He had to be our new neighbor. I had to see him again.

“Yes, we moved in last week.”

I nodded. That was good news—more time for us to be together.

“Since you like my name, would you like to marry me?” I asked.

His face turned red and he opened and closed his mouth a few times.

Finally he laughed and said, “What?”

I shrugged. “My dad doesn’t want me to get married for at least another thirty years, but I don’t think we should wait that long. So, can we get married sooner?”

He scratched his head and even made that look cute. “I think we are too young to get married, little one.”

Crushed, I looked down at my feet. “My dad says that, too. I’ve always thought I would marry Noah, our neighbor, but my dad is pretty set against that. Even my mom thinks he is too old for me. I think I can wait for you to get older, though.” I nodded to myself. “Make sure you wait for me too. Okay. I’m gonna go down and help mom with dinner. Dylan always screws it up. You know,” I started, clutching my hands behind my back as my eyes fell to his shoes. “I helped her bake the apple pie and the vanilla sauce earlier. I’ll make sure you’ll get the biggest slice. You’ll love it, and I’ll give it to you first.”

I knew guys cared about food because my dad had always appreciated a good home-cooked meal. My little heart had fallen in love for the first time and I was hoping Jason would fall for me, too, after he tasted the pie.

He chuckled and touched his finger to my chin. Surprised at the contact, my head flew up, my eyes huge. When I saw his smiling face, I had to bite down on my lip so I wouldn’t grin like a little girl, which would surely be a dead giveaway that I was in love with him.

“Thank you, little one. I’m sure it’s delicious if you had a hand in it. I better let you go then. I’ll look forward to seeing you at dinner.”

Passing by me, he tugged a piece of my hair, his smile still going strong on his lips as he headed for the bathroom.

I fidgeted with my hands so I wouldn’t wave him a goodbye and sigh like my friend Amanda did whenever she saw Dylan.

Inside, I was dancing on the clouds.

He had touched my hair.

He had touched my chin and looked into my eyes.

Jason.

Our one-dimpled new neighbor. Had. Touched. Me.

Ah...

I was pretty sure he'd fallen in love with me, too. I mean why else would he smile, look into my eyes, and touch me, if he hadn't?

Right?

Right?!