

## Chapter 1

Much of Olivia's childhood remained a blur, punctuated by flashes like scenes from movies she'd made. Nearly five years ago, on her sixteenth birthday, she'd stopped blaming her parents for treating her like a commodity. After all, they spent their lives in film and TV, creating for their child the only reality they understood.

In two weeks, she'd turn twenty-one. That special day would bring independence, including access to money held in trust for her beginning with her first acting job at the age of five. New York—no, the world—would open to her, glittering with unrealized opportunities, like choosing her own scripts, her own clothes, and her own apartment.

Two more weeks.

Fizzes of excitement tingled in her stomach, reminding her of the time she'd dropped mint candy into a liter of soda. An eruption seemed imminent.

*Not yet.*

Freedom must be taken by surprise; sneak up from behind and wrestle it to the ground. Otherwise, the elusive prize might slip away.

Fourteen more days of behaving herself, the ever-dutiful daughter judged by the world as worthy, accepted by her parents as pliant. No one would see her jailbreak coming, as long as she left her eyes vacant and her manner docile. An obedient puppy, eager to please, exactly the way everyone wanted her.

*Get back into character, Olivia.* The voice inside her head was her mother's, but the voice would soon be evicted.

Olivia stood in front of three full-length mirrors and examined the gown her mother had chosen. The scoop neck, tight bodice, and floor-length flared skirt shimmered in teal, a playful

color meant to highlight her youth. Always, her youth. Her straightened blonde hair swung to her waist. Behind her, pink walls, bedspread, and pillows offered a Pepto-Bismol backdrop.

She leaned forward, nearly pressing her nose to the glass. Someone had stopped by earlier in the day and applied heavy makeup designed to look barely there. She had to admit, her blue eyes sparkled under long lashes. Even for their little family, a makeup artist at home was unusual, but so was tonight. The McAllister Awards recognized the best actors under twenty-one, which meant this year was her last chance to win the prestigious honor.

She didn't bother to consider whether she *wanted* to win. It was expected of her. Maybe if she won, her parents would admit she was a great actress in her own right. They'd have to see her as a competent woman rather than their little shadow.

Olivia's mother appeared in the doorway and posed. As always, she wore her signature color, this time in a form-fitting black mermaid dress with a plunging neckline. Her dark hair was pulled into an elegant French twist that probably took hours to complete and would be nearly impossible to take down.

Her mother gushed, "Oh! You look fantastic!" After holding her pose another few seconds, she crossed the room but stopped short of a hug. The glamorous Natalia Knight would never risk mussing her hair or creasing an outfit. "Are you excited about winning?"

"Do you know something I don't?"

"Well, I *do* have connections, but no, I don't have that particular information." Her mother waved the question away. "I've been in the business long enough to know you outshine the other nominees. Your performance in *True to Life* was magnificent." She turned Olivia around to examine every angle. "Thank goodness you took advice from your parents on how to

approach the role.” With a frown minimized by Botox, she brushed an imaginary imperfection from Olivia’s skirt. “We take some credit for your success.”

Take credit? If she won tonight, her parents would claim the victory, and their opinion of her would remain intact. *I’m a commodity, an object of value, like their crystal chandelier and Tiffany lamps, and almost as fragile.* Why would tonight be different?

After biting the tip of her tongue, she met her mother’s gaze in the mirror. “Can I have a glass of wine at the after-party?”

“Oh, my goodness, no, not where people can see you. You’d be on the front of every tabloid!” Her mother walked toward the door, and Olivia fell in behind her, trailing in the wake of heavy floral perfume. “Speaking of public perception, don’t forget to thank your parents when you win. No one likes an unappreciative child.”

No one likes a controlling mother, either.

“And if I lose?”

“Thank us anyway. You’ll be ambushed by reporters, and we’ve taught you to be a graceful loser. At least on camera.”

Olivia remained three steps behind her mother as they descended the grand stairway. From the foyer, her father called out, “Wow! What a pair you make!” He spread his arms wide, not for a hug, never a hug, but to display his own well-made tuxedo. “No wonder I only have eyes for two women in my life.”

She choked down a giggle before it escaped. Surely her father had been caught with other women enough times for his comment to be ridiculous. Then again, both her father and mother were accomplished actors, adept at projecting whatever persona the moment required.

Olivia’s mother beamed. “Thank you, Andrew.”

The limousine stopped in front of Manhattan Center, a short drive from their home in Central Park South. Complete with welcoming red carpet and requisite paparazzi, the award venue popped with energy and bright lights. The driver opened the door for her father, who immediately turned to help Olivia slide out of the car, always the perfect gentleman, at least in public. She stood behind him, shifting from foot to foot, while her mother slowly extended first one perfect leg and then the other, unfolding herself with impressive ceremony.

Rather than roll her eyes toward heaven, Olivia forced a wider smile. The effort—or embarrassment for her mother’s dramatic display—brought a hot blush to her cheeks that threatened to overtake her ears if she didn’t distract herself.

The crowd cheered.

A reporter pushed into their personal space. “Ms. Knight. Natalia. Do you think your daughter will win tonight?”

Her mother rested a hand on the reporter’s arm. “Well, my fingers are crossed, but all of the nominees are fine actors.” She drew Olivia to her side. “We worked tirelessly on the role, and we hope the fans and judges enjoyed it.” Turning to her daughter, she asked, “Right, Olivia?”

“Oh yes! And we had so much fun working with the team.” Olivia widened her eyes and grinned, as she’d been taught. Here she played the eager young actress who never uttered a bad word about anyone. A regular Shirley Temple. She had to admit, it played well.

The reporter held his ground against the surging mob and smiled back. “We’re pulling for you!”

Olivia’s mother guided her forward as she called over her shoulder, “Thank you!”

After a round of pictures and a few more questions, they made their way to the Hammerstein Ballroom, which pulsed with red and blue roaming spotlights. An usher led them to a table near the stage, either because her parents were considered film royalty or the committee didn't want Olivia to walk far when she won. In the industry, each decision held meaning; each nuance required deep consideration.

Olivia mentally shrugged her shoulders. She'd leave speculation to the gossip mongers lining the edges of the ballroom along with waiters and dark-clad security guards who frowned and folded thick arms across their chests.

At their table sat Martin Lange, an up-and-coming director who brought a fresh new perspective to camera angles. The media called him "edgy," but Olivia called him "boring" since he rarely had much to say. At least he was pretty, with short black hair, green eyes, and a designer tux. He shifted his shoulders and craned his neck as though the bow tie might suffocate him. Poor guy, an introvert forced to play dress-up and make nice with extroverted—often narcissistic—actors.

Her father shook Martin's hand for too long, probably intent on making an impression. Then he waved over a server to order a Manhattan (what else?) and a dirty martini for his wife. For Olivia, he ordered a Shirley Temple. She hated cherries, but tonight was about image.

Several preemptive congratulations later, the ceremony began.

Maybe it was the excitement, bright lights, or snug bodice, but Olivia felt her head tighten. A migraine was imminent. Unfortunately, she hadn't brought a purse, which meant the tension in her head would grow to a pounding, nauseating headache before she located sumatriptan at home. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax her shoulders and imagine herself on a quiet stretch of beach. With each award given, she opened her eyes to smile and clap soundlessly.

Two more weeks. Six hundred and seventy more hours. God, it sounded like a long time.

Her mother squeezed Olivia's leg under the table; it was time for Best Actor in a Children's Film. She leaned forward, once again widening her eyes and smiling for the cameras, if not for the people behind them. The weight of admiring scrutiny threatened to implode her body.

The host's voice thundered through the room. "And tonight, we have a wonderful surprise. Each of our nominees began their journey in acting with their first director. The person who guided them and molded them into the professionals they became. For tonight's winner, the premier director has agreed to hand out the award as a treat for an exceptional young actor."

Olivia's smile froze.

Chuck Dawson couldn't be here. Not here. Not tonight. The pounding above her right eye nearly blinded her as she desperately scanned the stage. Chuck had started her journey, alright, but the journey had included lies and endless workdays not meant for any actor, let alone a five-year-old child.

He'd called her "Thing One" on the set, a label most people assumed was meant to be funny and affectionate, but Olivia never knew a second of warmth from the man. Each morning, one of her parents dropped her with a nanny and left for a day of whatever kept them busy, well-dressed, and perfectly coiffed. Olivia remembered falling asleep on set, only to be nudged awake by Chuck's shiny white tennis shoe. "Up and at 'em, Thing One. Lazy is for losers." Late into the evening, the nanny tucked her in a car and roused her from sleep after the short drive home.

One afternoon, a friendly background actor brought her a box of crayons and a coloring book; the box displayed a rainbow of beautiful colors, and the book held unicorns and fairies with butterfly wings. During lunch, she sat alone at a table, hunched over a fairy masterpiece of

purple, pink, and green. She'd give it to the director as a present so he'd be nice to her. Before she could color the wings, Chuck ordered his assistant to "get rid of the distraction," and a soft-faced man slid the book and crayons away, whispering, "I'm sorry, Livvie."

She hadn't cried.

Before she left the studio, she rummaged through the trash near the snack area and found three of her crayons: white, black, and red. Still clutching them in one hand, she followed the nanny from the studio, intent on owning a piece of the fleeting happiness. The magic crayons would be good luck when she begged her mom to take her away from Chuck, the set, and acting. She pinched herself to stay awake on the way home, and when she walked in the front door, she approached her mother lounging in the sitting room, a full martini in her hand.

"Mama." She needed to talk, but the ideas in her head were far too big for a child. "I don't want to— Can I please...stay home tomorrow? Can I stay with you? I don't like—"

"Good heavens, Olivia, speak up. You're supposed to be an actress." She sipped her drink. "Staying home tomorrow is out of the question. When you make a commitment, you don't abandon people who are counting on you. Besides, you have a contract." Olivia's mom turned back to her drink.

Discussion closed.

"But I—" Then the tears did come. She dropped her crayons on the antique jade rug. They weren't magic, after all.

"Get yourself together, child." Her mother looked everywhere but at Olivia. "You need to learn a work ethic."

After what seemed like years but could only have been weeks, Olivia stumbled onto the set for a scene requiring her to cry. In the script, her character was lost in a mall, and Chuck ordered her to curl up beside a fountain and sob for her mom.

The soft-faced man positioned her beside the fountain.

“Picture’s up!” Chuck yelled. “Action!”

Olivia said her lines and tried to produce tears. She used a trick where she thought of something sad, like losing her coloring book under mounds of sticky food, but her heart felt nothing. After several takes, Chuck whispered to someone behind a camera and approached Olivia, hunching down beside her.

“I have some bad news, Thing One.” His breath smelled like hot onions. “Your mom was in a bad car accident, and she died.”

What was he saying? She’d seen her mother this morning. She couldn’t be dead.

“Do you know what it means to die?” A hard glint in his eyes took her breath away.

Around the edges of her vision, the room turned gray, and a sharp pain wracked her tiny chest, ripping through her like the kitchen knife she wasn’t allowed to touch. Her body curled itself into a ball, trying to get smaller and smaller until she disappeared. While she shrunk like *Alice in Wonderland*, sobs escaped, making way for more pain.

Her mama was gone.

She’d never again see her, hug her, or kiss her cheek.

Who would take care of her? Her dad? A nanny? Who would love her? Through a haze of confusion, cameras rolled forward. Were they moving? Or did they look bigger because she was shrinking?

It didn’t matter.

Her mama was dead.

“Cut!” Chuck bellowed. “We got it.” He approached Olivia again. “I was teasing, Thing One. Your mom isn’t dead. A pretty good joke, right?” Whistling, he sauntered away, leaving Olivia to wipe her tears and try to fill the hole in her heart.

Through an eternity of filming, she learned to sit quietly and wait to be called to the set. She stopped imagining a way out, a happier place, or coloring books. Each night, she climbed into her princess bed and squeezed her stuffed bunny to her chest, trying to make sense of feelings her mother called “silly.” By the time the film wrapped, her body felt as empty and shriveled as a raisin. Olivia had learned a valuable life lesson: She couldn’t count on adults.

On her sixth birthday, the day of the film’s premier, her first migraine ripped through her head, and she was sure she’d die. Her father had dragged her to the premier, dissuaded only when she vomited on a microphone shoved in her face. She’d seen her mother’s shame before the famous Natalia Knight smile hid her true feelings. The rest of the night blurred behind boiling clouds of pain and dry heaves that left her stomach sore.

To this day, she’d never watched the film.

Over the years, through numerous roles, she’d worked hard to put the past behind her, locking it up in a little black box and storing it on a shelf in the far reaches of her consciousness.

Until now.

Maybe she wouldn’t win the award. She could go home and huddle in her bed until the migraine released her.

The announcer continued, “And the award for Best Actor in a Children’s Film goes to...Olivia Knight!”

The audience clapped and called out their support for the judges' decision. Olivia's mother stood and waved to those around her, then hauled Olivia from her seat. The woman was stronger than she looked. "Go on, honey, get up there. We did it!"

In a daze, Olivia looked up at the stage to see Chuck Dawson holding her award and grinning at the audience, his dark-blue tuxedo offset by those damned white tennis shoes. Although his brown hair was shorter now, from this distance, he looked the same as he had fifteen years ago. Standing at the podium, he smiled and waved at her as though delighted by their impending reunion.

Sweat trickled down Olivia's back. She could march up there and punch him in the smile. Or kick his shin. Or nudge him with aggressive intentions. Yes, she might get away with nudging.

Applause continued.

Time ticked by.

Her mother tugged her toward the aisle. Without thinking, instead of turning toward the stage, Olivia turned toward the exit and took a step before her mother caught her arm. The audience laughed like it was a delightful joke.

Through clenched teeth, her mother hissed, "Get it together. You're a professional."

Right, she was a professional, and this was required of her. She pasted a smile on her face and marched up to the stage. Someone held her hand as she ascended the stairs, and soon she found herself facing the one person she'd hoped never to see again.

Chuck held her award and kissed her on the cheek, acting like a doting uncle. He reeked of sweat and whiskey. She stared at his profile as he turned and waved to the cheering audience.

With his free hand, he clutched Olivia's arm and pulled her toward the podium, where he clearly planned to stay in the spotlight.

He leaned toward the microphone, yelling over the din, "This is one talented young lady!"

Olivia wrapped her fingers around the award. *Let go.* She tugged the award from his hand.

The crowd cheered louder and rose to their feet.

Thank goodness Olivia had a minute to pull herself together while the crowd settled and the room quieted. They expected a speech. She clamped her teeth together and reminded herself she had an image to portray. The world was watching.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my parents, who have always guided me through a profession they themselves know well. I've had every advantage, and I'm thankful." Her headache surged again, and she swallowed hard, pressing her lips together against the vomit inching up the back of her throat. *Not now.* "I'd also like to recognize Chuck Dawson for opening my eyes to the torment of child labor. He taught me how to cry on set and on demand, how to push through twelve-hour days, and how to abandon the magic of childhood." She held her award aloft and smiled. "But as Chuck would say, 'Lazy is for losers.'"

The audience laughed again, treating her comments like a teasing roast of her mentor and choosing to believe all was well in their glamorous world. Chuck reached his arm across her shoulders for a hug, saying into the microphone, "Thanks, kid."

While he squeezed her shoulders, Chuck's fingers dug into her upper arm, and Olivia tried not to wince in pain. She scanned the beaming, dazzling crowd.

This was her world.

These were her people.

She glanced at her mother and saw the silent reprimand even as she smiled, playing the part of proud mama for the cameras. Her mother knew the brief speech wasn't playful. Olivia would get an earful later, but for now, her mother stood trapped by social expectations. Her daughter had won a prestigious award. The spotlight allowed only compliments.

Olivia backed up a step, breaking Chuck's hold on her, and waved to the audience. "Thank you, and God bless!" Before Chuck could reach for her again, she ran off the stage and back to her parents, where they, and those nearby, offered congratulations.

Martin held a chair for her, and as she settled in and turned to thank him, she followed his gaze to her upper arm. Chuck's fingers had bitten into her flesh hard enough to leave angry red marks. Martin frowned, and his lips pressed together, jaw flexing tightly. Apparently, Martin hadn't gotten the memo ordering everybody to play nice.

She whispered, "It's okay."

"No, it's not." His simple assertion let her know he saw her pain, judged Chuck, and was angry on her behalf. Maybe it was the headache or the stress of the night, but Martin's protective comment felt like the first normal response of her nearly twenty-one years. She choked down tears and tried to concentrate on smiling. Martin returned to his seat, bursting the protective bubble holding the two of them for a few precious seconds. What would it be like to have a man like him in her corner, anchoring her to a safe world?

She missed him already.

Her mother leaned toward her. "Are you feeling okay? You look pale."

"No, I have a headache."

“Another one? The doctor said they’re psychosomatic. Take deep breaths. This is your moment!” Her mother looked up and smiled at the cameras.

Olivia mumbled, “I think I might get sick on the carpet.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Go backstage and get some water and a snack. I’m sure they have a place to rest for a minute. And it would get you out of view until you feel better.”

*Thank god.*

Olivia scooted toward the aisle and made her way through a side door leading backstage. The white walls showed the wear and tear of rolled equipment scraping deep, black, unforgiving furrows. This was a working area, where blemishes and damage would never be repaired; time would chip away more of the surface until a patchwork of black lines created art no one wanted to see. Years would turn to decades, and the once pristine walls would bear the scars of careless people.

Would she suffer the same fate?

Olivia found an empty dressing room reeking of stale cigarettes and stretched out on a brown pleather couch. When the light seared her eyes, she flopped onto her stomach and buried her face in the cushions, hoping for ten minutes of quiet.

When she awoke, memory lagged by a few panicky seconds. The room was unfamiliar, and a figure loomed over her, casting a shadow across the couch. Fear, quick and cold, jerked her head up. Instinctively, she braced herself, certain that danger was near.

Chuck Dawson smiled—an evil smile he’d reserved for her years ago. “Hey, Thing One.”

She jumped to her feet and stepped away from him in the small space, suddenly feeling five years old. How dare he use the awful nickname fifteen years later. “My name is Olivia.” She

tried to channel fearlessness, show him an adult's self-possession and poise, but the long-ago helplessness was back.

He moved closer, standing over her so she had to look up. "Nice little speech you made out there."

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, dry and thick. Swallowing produced a defeated clicking sound Chuck must have heard. He looked ready to hit her...or worse. She could simper and scuttle around him like a cockroach, begging for mercy from her tormenter, or she could secretly admit defeat but go down fighting.

"It, um, was the truth. Working with you was a nightmare." Olivia tried to summon an indignant frown, but her face betrayed her with tears.

"Oh, so *now* you can cry!" He shouted, shaking the room with his intensity. "You were the laziest actor I ever worked with, and the only reason you've made it in this business is because I demanded good performances! You're probably still *lazy* and *entitled* and *spoiled*—"

The door banged against the wall.

Martin—handsome, strong, quiet Martin—stood in the doorway, shrinking the room with his bulk. His frown and tight jaw told her he hadn't forgotten the red handprint even now beginning to fade. Without taking his eyes from Chuck, he growled, "Olivia, I think your mom is looking for you."

She scooted toward the door. "Thank you." He moved to let her pass, and her full skirt brushed against his legs on the way out. She touched his shoulder briefly, hoping he'd understand the meaning she tried to convey. *Thank you for caring. Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for being here right now.*

Martin graced her with the force of his sharp green eyes, and although he didn't smile, his anger wasn't for her. In his eyes, she saw the compassion of a champion, a man who would take on a bully and win. She almost felt sorry for Chuck.

Almost.

As she backed away, Martin slowly closed the door.

Before Olivia walked far down the corridor, she heard deep male voices from the room, followed by a loud crash. Curious, she tucked herself around a corner and watched the door. Within a minute, Martin emerged and walked in the other direction, shaking his right hand as though he'd hurt his fingers.