

Chapter One

Olivia hung precariously from the tree limb, waiting for the boys to pass by underneath her. It was taking them forever. Her cheeks were puffed out while she held her breath, her face felt flaming hot, and her sight was going a little bit fuzzy. By the time all three of them were finally far enough that she felt safe to move, her eyes were just about to bulge out of her head. She let out a gushing burst of air as she swung her legs up over the branch, and smiled. She had done it. She had found the perfect hiding spot. Now she just had to wait for her brother and his friends to pass by again, and she would give them the scare of their lives.

She felt inside her pocket to make sure the poppers were still there. She had stolen them from Levi's room when he was sleeping. He never even noticed they were gone. But he would surely notice when she tossed them from the tree, and they exploded down at his feet. She covered her mouth with her hand to suppress a giggle as she imagined the look on his face. Maybe he'd be so scared, he'd pee his pants.

Olivia leaned back and pulled out her tattered copy of Huckleberry Finn, preparing for a long afternoon of waiting. The book lay opened in her lap as she sat staring at the sun through the leaves of the tree, daydreaming about her brother and his friends congratulating her on her perfectly executed prank – after the smoke cleared, and they were done being mad at her, of course. If Levi would just let her tag along like he used to, she wouldn't have to resort to such measures of retaliation. But she was tired of being pushed aside.

It hadn't always been that way. Up until last year, when Levi had started junior high, he and Olivia had done everything together. Even when he was with his best friends, Matt and Bobby, he had always included Olivia. Now they all thought they were big shots or something. They were like the three musketeers, and there was no room for a girl.

"Pssst, hey Olive!" came a voice from the ground.

Olivia froze. Now who was that? She'd just watched all three boys disappear through the trees, heading toward the lakeside beach. She leaned over and peeked down between the branches. Her heart did a small leap when she saw Matt looking right at her.

"Olive!" he half whispered, half shouted.

"Don't call me that!" she called down. "You know I hate that name." It was a nickname Levi had taken to calling her lately. He had said it was because she was so sour, but she wasn't sour, she just had a bit of a temper when she didn't get her way.

"Sorry," Matt said. "Hey are you coming down here?"

Olivia crossed her arms, pouting. Her plan had not only been foiled, but Matt had found her hiding spot. Now she had no choice but to scrap the whole plot and start fresh. "Go away, Matt. Go follow your stupid friends."

"I'm coming up."

"No, don't!" Olivia straddled the branch she was sitting on and sat straight up. She contemplated climbing back down, but didn't want Matt to see her awkward descent. She was as clumsy as she was clever, though she would have never admitted that to Levi in a million years.

"How did you know I was up here, anyway?" Olivia asked as the top of Matt's head popped up over the branch beside her.

"I saw your legs flailing when we walked by earlier. Levi and Bobby must be blind or something."

Olivia felt a funny fluttering in her belly. "Well, thanks for not ratting me out."

"What are you doing up here, anyway? Spying?" Matt looked at her square in the eyes without smiling, but she could tell he was teasing her. She wasn't sure if she liked that.

"I wanted to scare the daylights out of Levi. He deserved it for the way he tricked me out of the tubing trip the other day."

Matt looked at her with a hint of embarrassment. "Oh that. Yeah, that was a little mean, what Levi did."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Just thinking about it made her want to tear up. She had been standing outside the five and dime on Main Street, with her towel wrapped around her bathing suit, waiting for Levi to run in and get a pack of gum. She waited for a long time, wondering why it was taking so long. By the time she went inside to check on him, he had snuck out the back and had run all the way to the lake to catch the river tubing bus without her. She had been crushed.

Later, after Levi had come home, all sunburned and full of stories from his fun day on the river, he had apologized to Olivia. He had even sounded sincere and looked appropriately chagrined. But Olivia couldn't let it go. He had hurt her feelings, and in her state of self-pity, she had failed - or just plain refused - to understand that sometimes 13-year-old boys did not want to hang around with their 10-year-old sisters, no matter how cool that sister might be.

"It was mean for sure, and Levi will have to pay for it." Olivia said.

Matt nodded as he settled in on the branch next to her. He rested his head against the trunk and closed his eyes. Olivia glanced over at him several times before she was convinced that it was safe to take advantage of the moment to stare at his face, unnoticed.

He had long, dark eyelashes that rested on his cheeks, which were red from the sun. His hair was dark and needed washing, his tank top was smudged with dirt, and his shorts had a rip near the hem. Her parents would have never allowed her or Levi to leave their house with ripped clothes, but Olivia knew that Matt's mother probably hadn't even noticed what her son was wearing. In fact, his mother was rarely awake when he left his house, or anytime during the daylight hours, come to think of it.

She sank back a little and sighed, secretly doing mind cartwheels at her good fortune of having Matt all to herself, even if only for a few minutes. Ever since Matt had moved in next

door, just last summer, Olivia had claimed him as her own special friend. She knew from the moment she marched herself over to his house and introduced herself to him, that he was different than all the other boys in Bear Cove. He was smart and kind and he didn't act like an idiot like most boys. He probably wouldn't mind if Olivia went swimming with them in the lake, or came along tubing, unlike her own brother.

"Can I ask you a question?" Matt asked. His eyes were still closed, but his lips formed a bit of a smirk making Olivia think he knew she'd been staring.

"What," she said, dragging her eyes away from him and trying to focus on a nearby cluster of leaves instead.

"Why don't you ever hang out with any girls from your class? Wouldn't you rather spend time with them instead of us?"

Olivia shrugged. She could see from the corner of her eye that Matt was looking at her now, but she didn't turn her head. "The girls my age are stupid. Besides, girls mature faster than boys, so you and Levi and Bobby are really like my equals."

Matt chuckled. "I wouldn't say that!"

Olivia just shrugged again. "I like hanging out with you. You talk to me like a person, not like I'm a freak. And usually Levi does too, and Bobby... Well, Bobby just ignores me, but at least he doesn't call me names and whisper and giggle every time I walk by."

Matt nodded and stared down at his hands where he was playing with the frayed hem of his shorts, ripping them more than they already were. Olivia was relieved he didn't say anything. She didn't want him to feel sorry for her. The truth was, even though it sometimes bothered her that the girls her age were stand-offish, most of the time she really didn't care. She knew she was different, but she made no apologies for her abnormal intelligence, even though it resulted in unmerciful teasing more than she liked to admit.

They settled into a comfortable silence, Olivia lost in thought about not only getting revenge against Levi, but in possibly eliciting assistance from Matt as well. She wondered if he would go along with whatever she came up with.

A dark ominous shadow fell over their leafy sanctuary. Olivia frowned. She could smell the storm coming, and knew there was no way she would be able to avoid climbing out of the tree while Matt watched. Storms were fast-moving near the lake, and an idyllic sunny day could turn black and scary in an instant. She would probably slip and fall, or maybe cut her leg on a branch again. The possibilities of embarrassing scenarios seemed endless.

Matt must have seen the panic in Olivia's face, and misinterpreted it as fear of the impending thunder and lightning. "Hey, I'll go get Bobby and Levi. You climb down and head right home. They'll never know you were here, and we'll be back in town before the storm rolls through."

She nodded, but Matt had already begun to climb down, not waiting for a response. The sky seemed to darken even more, and she quickly made her way down, surprisingly sure-

footed, landing with a solid thump on the ground. She glanced back in time to see Matt's back disappear through the trees, and she headed in the opposite direction. The wind had kicked up now, and it came in powerful gusts. A low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

She fought her way toward the lake path, shielding her eyes against the dirt and leaves that blew unmercifully in her face. She hadn't made it more than a hundred feet, when the wind completely abated. The sudden stillness in the air made Olivia stop. Her brows knit together, and an uneasy feeling came over her.

Without any warning, the sky lit up with a bolt of lightning that was so close, she swore she felt the ground sizzle. She started walking again, quickening her pace, when she heard the scream. The rain was coming down now, but she didn't give it a second thought before turning and doubling back toward the lake. Another scream pierced the air, and her body began moving with a renewed burst of adrenaline.

By the time she reached the clearing, the rain was coming down sideways, the wind whipping long black strands of hair against her face. She shielded her eyes with both hands, but the rain made it impossible to see more than two feet in front of her.

There were a half a dozen people standing at the edge of the lake. Olivia recognized some of the boys from town, but didn't waste the time to think of their names. She looked out at the lake. It was so dark and shadowy she couldn't make out much more than shapes. She saw two heads bobbing out of the water, struggling to stay afloat, slowly making their way toward the shore.

Without caring who saw her, or how mad Levi would be that she was there, Olivia started toward the small crowd, hoping to get a better look. She tripped over a protruding rock and fell to the ground, just behind the wall of spectators. No one seemed to notice her at all. She lay there for a few stunned minutes, the storm settling down to a dull roar. As the wind died down and the rain stopped, the voices and sounds around her grew clearer, and she tried to make sense of what she was hearing. She didn't want to believe it, but she had to see for herself.

She rolled over, then scrambled to her feet, wiping the rain off her face with a muddy hand. She limped over to the edge of the water pushing through the bodies that now stood in a semi-circle on the beach, staring down in an eerie silence. When she saw what it was they were staring at, Olivia's eyes opened wide and she began to shake.

She tried to look away from the lifeless figure on the bank of the lake. She knew she would have nightmares for days, maybe even weeks. But she couldn't bring herself to avert her eyes or, at the very least, blink. A choking sob from just behind her, caught her attention and she turned her head.

The look on her brother's face scared her almost as much as the horrific sight of the twisted, bleeding form of the boy on the shore. He was white as a sheet, and had a stunned, wounded look as if he'd just been slapped or punched in the gut unexpectedly. Terror filled her

whole body, from the tangled dripping hair on her head, right down to the soles of her muddy bare feet.

Curiosity got the better of her, and Olivia shuffled a step closer to the figure lying limply beside the now calm lake water. She knew he was dead. There was a giant gash on his head and he was so still. He wasn't breathing, and he wasn't going to ever again. She wanted to touch his face, just one time, to see what it felt like. Would he be cold and clammy, or would his body still be warm? In a trancelike state - her eyes focused, her mouth hanging open to let in as much air as possible - she reached out her hand and willed her body to move just a little bit closer. But before she could make contact, she felt a wave of blackness pulling her down, and she crumpled to the ground just short of her goal. She felt strong arms cushion her fall before she slammed down.

The last thing she remembered was the terrifying sound of her big brother crying.