

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a white sweater and a grey skirt. The man has a beard and is wearing a white sweater. They are positioned in front of a Christmas tree decorated with white and gold ornaments. The background is softly lit with warm, bokeh lights. The text 'Love by Design' is written in a red, cursive font across the middle of the image. A red ribbon with a bow is at the bottom left.

*Love
by
Design*

**SAMANTHA
CHRISTY**

Love
by
Design



SAMANTHA
CHRISTY



Saint Johns, FL 32259

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE



*K*enny peeks around the corner of my office. And by office, I mean the cubicle that's barely the size of a hotel bathroom. And by hotel bathroom, I mean Motel Six.

I look up from my desk. "What is it?"

"She wants to see you."

I clutch my chest, surprised. "Me?"

"That's what the woman said."

"Well, did she seem... mad?"

He cocks his head. "Honey, Katarina Bellasandr  always seems mad. She's perfected the resting bitch face." He turns to leave then tosses me an exaggerated glance over his shoulder. "But she did seem awfully interested in the photo spread in *New York Magazine*."

I slump over and pound my forehead onto my desk. I was afraid of this. I was a fool to think there wasn't going to be backlash. Katarina has hated me from day one. Granted, she hates everyone, but me in particular. Maybe it's because of the family I come from. Or the size of my bank account. Whatever it is, I fear I've just given her the reason she's been looking for to justify firing me. As if she needs one. She fired an assistant last week for forgetting her morning espresso.

My phone vibrates again with another unknown number. I've been

getting dozens of these calls over the past few days. My number must have been acquired by a spam list. I ignore it like all the others, scared to even check how many voicemails I'll have to weed through to see if there's anything worth listening to.

"*Now, sweetheart!*" Kenny's authoritative, though feminine voice booms across the room.

I jump out of my chair knowing the last thing I need to do is further piss off my boss, who is one of the premier designers in the Western world.

Ditching my comfortable work shoes for the designer heels I reserve for meetings with the boss or public outings, I make my way to her office, praying I haven't royally screwed myself out of my job.

Two years I've been here. I've worked my way up from junior assistant assistant. Yes—that was actually the job title. If they weren't trying to be so appearance acceptable, they would have simply called me a servant. Because when you work for a woman like Katarina Bellasandré, that's pretty much what you are, no matter the title. Even after becoming a junior designer earlier this year, I'm still at her beck and call. Everyone is. And we're expected to eat, live, and breathe Bellasandré.

I pass the breakroom, glancing at the festive decorations lining the walls. A menorah sits on the counter. Holiday cards are stacked in colorful red and green baskets. A Christmas tree stands in the corner, fully lit and decorated by a top-notch holiday decorating service that probably cost more than most people make in a paycheck. Presents are piled beneath the tree, part of the office Secret Santa tradition I've never chosen to participate in. Quite frankly, I'm surprised Katarina allows it. After all, things like Secret Santa parties cut into work time—something she takes more seriously than anyone I've ever met.

I shake my head, as I do every time I walk by the breakroom, hating the fact that all this commercial hoopla does is remind me how much I dislike this time of year.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath as I approach my boss's office. Will this be the last time I ever make this walk?

"Holland," Katarina's newest second assistant purrs from behind her glass top desk that reveals her tight pencil skirt, tailored blouse, and Louis Vuittons. "She's been expecting you."

I swallow and lick my lips, anxiety taking hold. "Thanks, Johanna."

It's not lost on me that she doesn't smile. She's staring at me like I'm a kid who's been called to the principal's office. A lamb off to the slaughter. A girl who may have just ruined everything she's been working for.

I walk around the corner and into Katarina's massive office. The space is almost as intimidating as the woman sitting behind the desk. The furniture may look amazing, but anyone who's ever sat in it knows it's most definitely about presentation and not comfort. Fitting, because I'm about as uncomfortable as I've ever been.

"Good morning, Kata—"

Her finger goes up in the air. That means stop talking. So, like the dutiful soldier I am, I shut up, stand still, and wait for further instruction.

She's silent as she overdramatically pages through *New York Magazine*. Then *People Magazine*. Then the Lifestyle section of *The Times*.

Oh my God. Why didn't I think this through? My grandfather is one of the richest men in New York. Of course his wedding was going to be covered by all the major magazines. Since we sort of sprung the wedding on him, there were no news crews to cover the event. But there were plenty of cameras. And Pappy's new bride was all too eager to give an interview naming yours truly as the person who designed not only her wedding dress, but those of her bridesmaids and the flower girl. I'm sure Rose thought she was doing me a favor. Now I know what I did was career suicide.

After what feels like an eternity of hellfire torture, Katarina closes the last magazine and leans back in her pretentious chair. "Sit."

I do what she asks like an obedient dog.

“Katarina, I can expl—”

“I said sit, not talk.”

I nod. “Sorry.”

“And now you’re doing it again.”

It’s like she’s challenging me to open my mouth a third time. I don’t. I cross my legs, smooth down my skirt, and smile like I’m grateful to have this job that, at merely twenty-four, is making me go prematurely gray.

She puts the palm of her left hand on the stack of magazines, the bengal bracelets on her wrist clanging against one another. I stare at her long, slender fingers, each finger but one adorned with diamond-encrusted rings. The sole bare finger is a testament that she’s married to nothing but her job, a fact that amuses me since she’s never seen without a man. A gorgeous, high-society type. A face-on-the-cover-of-GQ type. And younger—they’re always younger. Usually by decades.

“Holland McQuaid.”

My name comes off her lips like an idea. A statement. Something she’s trying on for size.

“Holland McQuaid,” she repeats, a bit more forcefully this time. “What a unique name.” She pulls a file out from under the magazines. “You’ve been here for two years.”

It’s not a question. So I remain quiet, my heart pounding as I wonder when it’s going to happen. I’ve heard stories about when others were fired. She likes to make people squirm. She’s an expert at not only clothing design, but torture. I think she gets off on it.

“Two years.” A finger taps the stack of magazines. “If you made it that long, I assume you know how to read.”

“I—”

The finger comes up. “It wasn’t a question.” She picks up the top magazine, opens it, and recites, “*My dress was custom designed by the very talented Holland McQuaid, who not only made my bridal gown, but four*

other amazing dresses.” She looks up. “Since I’m sure you’re familiar with the English language, I’m confident you understand that when you were hired you signed a contract clearly including a non-compete clause. And since you have a college degree, I’m going to assume you understand what that clause means. And by violating that clause, you’ve not only put your job on the line, but opened yourself up to a lawsuit which I would win with one hand tied behind my back. After which no designer in the world would hire you.”

Her witchy eyes bore into mine. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

“So, Holland McQuaid. What do you have to say for yourself?” She glances at the large clock over the couch. “I have two minutes before my next appointment.”

I swallow hard. “Katarina, I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry that I found out about your abhorrent violation? Or sorry that you did it?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sorry I did it. Rose married my grandfather. She’s almost eighty years old. I didn’t want her wearing something off the rack that was designed for a twenty-year-old bride. I didn’t use any Bellasandré resources to make it, I promise. I didn’t know what I did violated the contract. I would never do anything to make you look bad or jeopardize my job. And I swear I took no payment.”

Her lips purse. “Yes, I know.”

My eyes snap to hers in surprise. “You *know*?”

“Of course I know. As soon as the story broke, I had it looked into. Conducted my own investigation. I have to know where my employees’ loyalties lie.”

“And?”

My heart almost stops beating as I wait for her answer.

She opens the file folder. “Over the past six months, building security has you checking out no earlier than seven p.m. And most mornings you arrived by seven-thirty. Lunches were primarily taken at your desk with the

occasional outing that lasted no more than an hour. No materials were reported missing. And from the data collected by the private investigator I hired, it has been confirmed no money exchanged hands.”

My jaw slackens. “You hired a private investigator? To investigate... *me?*”

“I did indeed.” Her perfectly manicured fingernail taps the desk causing the bracelets to jingle. “I’m going to do something here that is unheard of, Holland. Something that in all of my forty years in the business, I’ve never even considered.”

“Okay.” I’m trying to keep the *I-love-my-job* smile on my face while my heart is thundering and my brain is wondering what exactly is happening here. Am I about to be sued by one of the biggest designers in the world?

She presses a button on her phone. “Johanna, push off Vera until ten thirty.”

“Yes, Katari—”

She’s cut off when Katarina’s finger comes off the button.

She flips to a page in the magazine and holds it up. It’s a picture of Rose in her wedding dress. “Not many people can pull this off. As you indicated, it’s hard to make an eighty-year-old bride a tasteful wedding gown that doesn’t make her look and feel like she’s trying to be thirty.” Her eyes capture mine. “You, my dear, have done it. And might I say, Bravo.”

Wait, what? Are my ears deceiving me? Did Katarina Bellasandré just compliment me? In two years, I’ve never heard her compliment *anyone*. Not a single soul. She always says kudos don’t get handed out just because someone does the job they’ve been hired to do.

“I, um... I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it.” She scoffs. “That’s an understatement. Dear, you managed to make five dresses for people ranging in age from eight to eighty. You did it all on your own time while maintaining a breakneck work schedule here. And you didn’t expect anything in return. Not money. Not praise. Not even

recognition. You did it just to be... nice.” She scoffs again like being nice is the most foreign concept imaginable.

“I’m a little confused here. Are you mad at me or not?”

“Of course I’m mad. You went behind my back. But the two-hundred-and-fifty calls I’ve gotten demanding you design custom wedding dresses have me going in another direction.”

My eyes bug out. “Did you say two-hundred-and-fifty?” I think of all the ‘*unknown callers*’ I’ve ignored in the past few days. “Oh, my God. I think I might be getting calls too. I thought it was just a bunch of spam.”

“It appears you’ve single-handedly become the most sought-out designer of ‘mature’ wedding gowns this side of Milan.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Holland, this is the part where I do something completely out of character. I’d like to offer you a proposition. I know your family. If you wanted to set up your own business, you could. They’d back you a million times over, I’m sure. But there must be a reason you chose to work here, for me. And you’ve lasted longer than most.

“I know my management style doesn’t suit everyone. I know what my employees call me behind my back. I know I’m hated for a lot of things. But in this business, it’s all part of the job. And the fact that you’re still here means you want to learn from the best. Well, I’m the best. And I believe together we could make this into something.”

I raise a questioning brow. “This?”

She pushes a folder my way. I hold my breath as I open it, trying to keep my hand from trembling. The first page displays a large logo. It reads: ***Bellasandré Bridal by Holland McQuaid.***

Sweat trickles down my spine. My heart beats a million times per second. “What does this mean?”

“Read for yourself. There’s a contract in there. We’ll be partners.” She rolls her eyes. “Not equal of course. I’ll own a fifty-one-percent share and

you'll own the other forty-nine."

I blink a dozen times. "You want me to design wedding gowns for Bellasandré?"

"I want you to design wedding gowns for *Bellasandré Bridal by Holland McQuaid*. And not just wedding gowns, bridal party gowns as well. You'll have a staff of course. An expense account. All the usual things."

Staff. Expense account. My head is spinning.

"I... I don't know what to say."

"Well, if I were you, I'd be saying I want a bigger office."

"I... want a bigger office."

"And two assistants."

I shake my head. "Is this for real?"

"Would you prefer it not to be?"

"No, of course not. I just can't believe it. Yes, Katarina. Yes to all of it."

She cocks her head. "You haven't asked about the pay, Holland."

"I don't do what I do for a paycheck."

Her head bobs up and down. "And that is why you'll succeed. I'll have Kenny put together a list of acceptable assistants and other staff. You'll need at least ten to start, based on all those phone calls." She looks at the time. "That is all."

"That's all? Katarina, I don't even know where to begin."

She nods to the folder. "There are more details in there. And I'll have someone go over the ropes with you. Now, I have meetings to attend to."

"Okay." I stand. "I don't know how to thank you for this opportunity."

"You'll thank me by not making a fool of me. You'll thank me by putting out the best designs possible. You'll thank me by making the Bellasandré brand reach more women than it does now."

"Of course. Yes."

I'm almost out of the office when she calls me back. "Oh, and Holland?"

I turn, waiting for further direction.

“Bring a man to the holiday ball on Friday. Everyone will be there, and you’ll be needing arm candy. Especially now. Bellasandr  executives are expected to uphold a certain” —she holds out her hands, motioning around —“*je ne sais quoi*.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. I’m not dating anyone.”

“I know you’re not, dear. Who has the time? You’ll need someone nonetheless.”

“I suppose I could bring one of my brothers. They’re all very attractive.”

“And also well-known among those who will be at the party. No, you’ll need someone else. Someone interesting. Handsome. Available.” She narrows her eyes in thought. “Leave it to me. I’ll find just the one.”

I go to argue, but her phone buzzes. “Vera is here,” Johanna says.

Katarina waves me off. “That is all.”

Drifting back to my desk, I replay it all in my head, unsure of what really just transpired. Because if I’m not mistaken, my entire life just changed with the turn of a page.

CHAPTER TWO



I stare out the massive window in my office. *My* office. And I shake my head thinking of the whirlwind of the past week. I have a staff. Assistants. A company credit card. And now I'm getting ready for the holiday party, one of the largest annual affairs put on by Katarina.

Holiday lights line the avenue below. Wreaths adorn windows. Bows are tied to streetlamps. It's all so depressing. I've never been a fan of the holidays. This time of year is for families. Couples. Romance. Things I've never particularly wanted in my life. This year, however, with Pappy getting married and my brother's and best friend's wedding coming up, it reminds me of everything I don't have.

I've always been a free spirit. Some may choose the word 'slut' to describe me. I couldn't care less how they think of me. I say I'm independent. Strong. Too strong for any man who's ever tried to work his way into my life.

Still gazing outside, I contemplate something I've never thought until just now. How I'm only twenty-four and already worrying I could end up like Katarina: a sixty-something woman who only has her success and the occasional hired body to keep her warm.

Mel buzzes my phone. "Miss McQuaid, I have a delivery."

"Bring it in please."

Mel comes through the door carrying a garment bag bearing the familiar

Bellasandré logo.

“Mel, I really wish you and Allissa would call me Holland.”

She hangs the dress on a rack along the wall and tilts her head. “You’re so different than every other boss I’ve worked for.”

“Maybe that’s because I’ve never been a boss before.” I nod at the garment bag. “What’s that?”

“Katarina had it sent over. It’s your dress for tonight.”

I glance at the one I was going to wear. The one I specifically picked out to match my favorite comfortable dress heels knowing I’ll probably be standing all night. “Of course she did.”

I know better than to push back. Even now, when I’m basically running my own department, she’s still the boss by two percent. But that two percent might as well be ninety because, either way, what Katarina says, goes.

“What are *you* wearing tonight?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Pickings were slim by the time I got around to the closet.”

The “closet” is really a gigantic wardrobe room that takes up half the third floor and holds at least two sizes of almost every Bellasandré original.

I motion to the dress I had originally selected. “We’re the same size. Wear that one.”

Her jaw slackens. There is a hierarchy around here when it comes to going to the closet, and assistants are at the bottom of a very long list. Her smile is wide as she approaches the mint-green dress. “I’d die to wear this. Thank you Mis—er, Holland.”

“My pleasure, Mel. Go ahead and take off for the day so you have time to get ready. Tell Allissa she’s free to leave as well.”

She takes the dress off the rack, handling it as carefully as one would a newborn baby. “See you tonight.”

I stare at the garment bag just knowing Katarina picked something outrageous for me to wear. She designs new gowns for herself for every party, refusing to be seen in something that’s been worn before. And she

expects the same from all her executives.

Executives. That's me. *I'm* an executive. Not only am I an executive, I'm the *only* executive whose name is on the Bellasandré brand. *Bellasandré Bridal by Holland McQuaid*. It's a mouthful, but it's mine—well forty-nine percent of it anyway.

I unzip the bag to reveal a short, red, sequined dress. The cleavage dips low and the hem is high. It's not unlike other dresses I've worn in the past—I mean, if you've got it, flaunt it—but it's red. My gaze falls upon my shoes in the corner. My *green* shoes. I grin. It is Christmastime. Red and green go together. I can pull this off and still not end up with aching feet. I sort through my jewelry case and find the perfect green earrings to match the shoes, pulling the whole ensemble together.

I like to do my own hair and makeup. Just as I sit down at my desk and get started, my phone rings. Addy's face appears. I smile at my best friend's likeness and answer. "Hey, girl."

"Are you ready for the party?"

"Getting there. Had to ditch the dress, though. Katarina wants me wearing something else."

She laughs. She's heard story after story about my boss. "You're going to look amazing no matter what you wear. I want pictures. Especially of you and the mystery guy."

"You mean me and the escort she hired to be my boy toy?"

"You don't really think she'd hire you an escort, do you?"

"She's done it for herself when she was desperate and couldn't find a celebrity or the son of a gazillionaire to stand by her side. But I'll deal with whoever she got, and I'll do it with a smile on my face. Because I'm living my dream."

"I don't care who your date is, I want pictures anyway. You just know he's going to be hot."

"As my future sister-in-law, I should take issue with that. The only guy

you should be saying is hot is my brother.”

“Hawk is the most handsome man I’ve ever met, Hol. I can’t wait to be his wife. That doesn’t mean I can’t want my bestie to be surrounded by hotness too, right?” She squeals. “Oh my gosh! I can’t believe I’m getting married in just eight days.”

“You’re still coming in Monday for the final fitting?”

“Absolutely. I’m so excited to be your first actual client.”

I smirk, because in reality, I designed her dress six months ago, long before I was promoted. But Katarina insisted in the contract that anything I designed would be under her, uh... *our* brand. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Hey, listen, maybe you’ll like this escort enough to hire him as your date for the wedding.”

“I told you I don’t need a date. Anyway, I’ll be busy helping you.”

“And I told you, I want you to have fun.”

“Bringing a date to a wedding is like inviting a guy to have a relationship, Addy. Not happening.”

“That’s where the escort comes in. You still get to have fun with no strings. You’re the queen of no strings, Hol. Just think about it. You work so hard. You deserve to be able to let your hair down once in a while. Especially around the holidays.”

“I’ll think about it.” Then I joke, “And if he’s really hot, maybe I’ll put him on the payroll for New Year’s Eve.” I check the time. “Hey, if I’m going to make it to this thing on time, I’d better go.”

“Bye. Don’t forget the pictures!” she shouts before hanging up.



I’ve just finished putting on my earrings when I receive a text

informing me the limo is waiting downstairs. Katarina wouldn't have her executives arrive any other way. Down at the curb, the flashy vehicles are lined up, one after the other. I roll my eyes. Why don't we all just go together in one? It's so over-the-top.

"Miss McQuaid?" one of the drivers says. "Right this way."

He holds open the back door and I slide inside. My dress is so tight I can barely sit down in the back of the limo. I'd better move carefully or I'll end up with a wardrobe malfunction.

Katarina knows my size. She knows the size of everyone who works for her. In fact, potential employees are required to disclose it on their applications, something that is highly inappropriate if not illegal. Yet she went one size smaller. Is it her passive-aggressive way of saying she wants me thinner? Or does she simply want my boobs spilling out for good press?

A throat clears and I freeze. I'm not alone. Shocked, I look over to see a handsome guy my age wearing a tux. No, not handsome... *hot*.

He leans forward and holds his hand out. "I'm Stryker Taylor. You must be Holland."

Frazzled over this man's chiseled features, perfect hair, and what I can only assume are bulging muscles hidden by his perfectly tailored jacket, I stutter my words. "H-hi. I didn't expect my, um, escort to meet me in the limo." I take his hand, finding the balance between elegant and independent I've worked hard to cultivate. "Nice to meet you, Stryker."

"Escort." He laughs at the word. "I would have waited for you outside, but I didn't want to risk the attention."

Attention? Because he's so hot? *Jeez, cocky much?*

I mean, he should be. He's a veritable Adonis. He must get paid a pretty penny for gigs like this.

"So how does this work exactly?" I ask. "I've never done this before. Do you just stand by my side and look pretty?"

His eyebrows rise. "You've never done what? Gone to a holiday ball? Or

gone on a blind date?”

Now *I'm* the one laughing. “Date? Is that what you call this? Listen, I know Katarina hired you, but let’s get one thing straight. I don’t need my boss hiring attractive arm candy to make me look good. I look good all on my own. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being single.”

“I don’t do paid appearances, Holland,” he says. “Katarina didn’t hire me, she’s a family friend.”

“I’m confused.”

“As am I. Do you... not know who I am?”

I tilt my head and stare, trying to place his face. For the life of me, I can’t. “Sorry, no.”

“So you had no idea who was going to the ball with you?”

I shake my head.

He chuckles. “I’m going to kill my parents.”

“Why exactly?”

“They’re friends with Katarina. I’m doing this as a favor. I was told Holland McQuaid needed a date for this thing and figured I’d kill two birds. But I had no idea you were kept in the dark.”

“Firstly... you know who I am? And second, what’s the other bird?”

“Sure I do. Tucker McQuaid is a big supporter. And”—he shrugs sheepishly—“I suppose I’m trying to make someone jealous and figured this would be the perfect event. Lots of press.”

“Exactly what is my grandfather a supporter of?”

“The Nighthawks.”

I draw my brows together.

“You know, the MLB team here in New York?” he says as if I’ve been living under a rock.

“I know who the Nighthawks are.” Realization dawns. He said his last name was Taylor. *Oh, my God.* My brothers are obsessed with baseball, the Nighthawks in particular, and they’re always gushing about a guy named

Taylor. “You play for them?”

“Yeah,” he says, chuckling again. “I play for them.”

I get my phone out of my clutch and google his name. Oh! He doesn’t just play for them. He’s one of their star players. And he makes—*holy shit*—seven million dollars a year. I look across the limo. “My brothers would die if they knew who I was with right now.”

“I met your brothers at a game last season.”

“I believe Hudson has one of your balls.” I replay the words in my head and feel myself blush. *Wait—blush, me? Never.* “I mean, one of your baseballs. On his wall.”

He laughs. I really like his laugh. It’s low and masculine and comes from deep in his chest. It’s not a fake laugh like some of the guys I work with who pretend to be amused at everything.

“Probably one of my perfect game balls.”

“What makes a ball perfect?”

“The ball isn’t perfect. The game was. A perfect game is where no opposing player ever got on base. No hits. No walks. No hit batsmen, catcher interference, or fielding errors. It’s a pitcher’s holy grail.”

“You’re a pitcher?”

He laughs again. “I think I’m going to enjoy tonight.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say it’s refreshing to be with someone who doesn’t follow baseball. Makes me feel like I can just be normal.”

“Tell me about this girl... or guy... you’re trying to make jealous.”

“Girl,” he says. “Monica. We dated for six months. She cheated on me with an opposing team’s starting pitcher.”

“Stupid girl. Well, you’ve come to the right place, Stryker.”

“How’s that?”

“You’re getting over a relationship. I’m in no position to start one. We’ll make each other look good and give Monica something to think about. Wait

—you wouldn't take her back, would you? This is just to show her what she's missing, right?"

"Take back someone who cheated on me? Not in a million years."

"Smart man." As the limo comes to a stop, I make sure to show just a little more cleavage than I normally would. "I'm glad we can help each other out this evening. And since neither of us is looking for a relationship, this should be fun."

"Not to be nosey, but you seem like a fun person to be around. Why aren't you in a position to start a relationship? You trying to make someone jealous too?"

I scoff. "Hardly. I'm married to my job. And just got an amazing promotion. I barely have time to keep up my friendships let alone coddle a man."

"Not all men need coddling."

"In my experience, they do."

"You don't seem old enough to have had all that much experience."

"I'm twenty-four. You?"

"Twenty-five."

"I don't do boyfriends, Stryker. I've never done boyfriends. So don't get any ideas."

He laughs. "I'm liking you more and more, Holland McQuaid."

I point a finger at him playfully. "I said don't get any ideas, Mr. Baseball."

He chuckles at the name. "I'm not getting any ideas. It's just nice to go out with someone who isn't trying to land a sugar daddy."

"You sound like my brothers. And you know what? Two of them are married and the third one is getting hitched next weekend. So I mean it when I say we can be each other's arm candy for the night, but unless you're game for a one-night-stand, that's as far as it will go."

"I changed my mind," he says with a sultry grin. "I'm not going to kill

my parents. I'm going to thank them."

We're both laughing as the door opens.

I make sure to exit the car by swinging both legs out together. I also use my clutch to cover my chest. I may be promiscuous, but that doesn't mean I want crotch or nipple shots plastered across page six of *The Times*. Because there are no less than twenty cameras snapping pictures of every partygoer.

When Stryker appears behind me, the paparazzi become boisterous, clamoring for him to look this way or that way.

As expected of us, we stop and pose for the cameras before ascending the red-carpet stairway. He slips his arm around my waist, and I like the way it feels as he tucks me into his side. Just to make sure it hits home with his ex, I turn and look up at him as he towers over me, gazing at him as a new lover might.

As soon as we're inside, champagne is placed in our hands. Swarms of people come over to meet the famous young Nighthawk. It's surreal. He's more popular than Katarina. Won't she be upset she's not the center of attention? Luckily she's not here yet. As always, she'll be fashionably late, even if this is *her* party.

When Stryker excuses himself to use the bathroom, I make small talk with a circle of employees. Hennie—short for Henrietta—Morgan silently stares at my cleavage. She hates me. Not like the way Katarina hates *everyone*. Hennie specifically hates *me*. For years, she'd tried, and failed, to design wedding dresses. First on her own, then for Katarina. She's pissed someone half her age was able to do what she couldn't.

An arm slips around me. Stryker leans in. "You need saving, just say the word."

I look up at him. "Word."

"Would you please excuse us?" he says to the crowd. "I'd like to dance with my date before dinner."

"Dance?" I ask as he whisks me away.

“This is a ball, no?”

We deposit our glasses on a nearby table and walk out on the empty dance floor. “I guess if you’re trying to make Monica jealous, pictures of us dancing alone should do it.”

“Exactly.”

His large, calloused hand presses against the bare skin exposed by the super low-cut back of my dress.

“You’re a good dancer,” he says. “How did that happen if you don’t date?”

“I said I don’t do relationships. I never said I didn’t date. Big difference.”

“Touché.” Then he stiffens like a board. “Ah, fuck.”

“What is it?”

He pulls my body tightly against his. “Just go with it,” he says, lowering his mouth to mine.

Surprised at his very public display, I let his lips press against mine. His full, soft, demanding lips. *Oh my.*

The kiss doesn’t last long. A few seconds maybe. Nothing too indecent. Something between a peck on the lips and a good tongue fuck.

“Mind telling me why?” I ask when he pulls back.

“Monica.”

“Oh, is someone taking our picture?”

“No. Monica. She’s here. With *him.*”

CHAPTER THREE



*T*ry to look behind me but Stryker cups my chin. “You can’t look. She’ll know I said something, and she’ll think I care that she’s here.”

“But you did say something, and you do care.”

“I’d prefer she not know it.”

“Put both hands on my lower back and slowly caress my bare skin with your thumbs.”

His eyebrows go up.

“Just do it. Trust me, Stryker.”

He does as I ask, and tingles work up my backbone as he rubs little circles on my skin.

“Now don’t look at her. Look at me. Like you want to eat me for dinner.”

He does that too. And, wow, the dude is a good actor. His hazel eyes burn into mine as he towers over me. Even with my heels on, he’s a good seven inches taller.

I urge him to swing us around. “Which one is she?”

“Blue dress. Dark hair. The asshole she’s with has a tattoo on his neck.”

It doesn’t take me long to spot her since, other than Hennie Morgan, she’s the only one staring daggers at me. “She’s pretty.”

He shrugs. “If you like brunettes. I normally go for blondes.”

“Is that so?” I absently remove my hand from his shoulder and twirl a

piece of my light hair around a finger. “Why did you get together in the first place?”

“She’s what you might call a superfan. Always outside the locker room when we emerge. Showing up wherever the team happens to be.”

“You dated a stalker?”

“She wasn’t stalking me. She wanted to be with an MLB player. It obviously didn’t matter who.”

“And you fell for it?” I shake my head. “Your bad.”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding.”

“Why not just be done with her after she showed her true colors? If you and your seven-million-dollar salary aren’t good enough for her, fuck her.”

He laughs. “I think I like you, McQuaid.”

“Why’s that?”

“For one, I don’t have to worry that you’re after my money. And two, considering you had no idea who I was, I don’t have to wonder if you’re the superfan stalker type who would stand out in the rain or hundred-degree heat just for a glimpse of me. No ulterior motives or weird obsessions to deal with.”

“Ah, I don’t know. I once stood in the rain for hours to see a Taylor Swift concert.”

“Oh, you’re one of those.”

“A Swifty? Yeah, I admit it. You’ve changed your whole perspective of me now, haven’t you?”

He chuckles. “Maybe.”

“Do you still love her?”

He tilts his head. “I’m not sure I ever did.”

“Men,” I scoff. “They’ll say anything to get someone into bed.”

“Holland, I play professional baseball. I don’t have to say *anything* to get women to sleep with me.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “So we’re kindred spirits, you and I. But if you

don't have feelings for her, why go through the trouble of all this?"

"Justin Harrelson—the guy she's with—was in training camp with me. He was drafted into the Nighthawks organization the year I was. There was a lot of friendly competition between us since we're both pitchers. The friendly part ended when I moved up through the ranks faster than he did. I was called up to the majors a year before he was, and he was left playing for the Hawks' minor league team until he got a contract somewhere else. I just wish that somewhere else would have been San Diego, not one of the other teams in New York. Him hooking up with Monica was just his way of getting back at me. I'm pretty sure she regrets it now. He's a douchebag and I'm a nice guy."

"And all this happened years ago? He sure holds a grudge."

"He just wants to rub it in my face that he's won."

I turn his face and make him look at me instead of them. "He only wins if you let him. Don't let him."

He gazes down at my lips. "I'm going to kiss you again."

"Do you plan on announcing it when you do *everything* to me?" I tease. "Like are you practicing for a post-retirement career in broadcasting?" I fake a guy voice. "*Holland, I'm going to suck your tits now. And now I'm going to stick a finger in you and find your g-spot. Oh, babe... I'm gonna put my cock inside your tight walls and make you come hard.*"

He stops dancing and stills.

"What is it?"

"Jesus, Holland. There are fifty people watching and I'm sailing at full mast."

I giggle and look down.

He pulls me against him and makes good on his declaration. Our second kiss is far different from the first. It's more demanding, like he was testing the water before but now he's diving in headfirst. More people are dancing now. We're no longer the center of attention. And I might be mistaken, but this kiss seems like it's less for Monica and more for him.

There's no tongue involved, which tells me he's a respectable guy who doesn't like to put on a show. But that doesn't mean it's not exciting. He softly kisses my upper lip then my lower. Then the corners of my mouth. He sucks my lower lip between his and gives it a slight nip. It's the most sensual closed-mouth kiss I've experienced.

His mouth parts from mine and I'm surprised by how much I miss it. He presses his forehead to mine. "Well that did nothing to solve my rising problem."

My shoulders shake with laughter.

The music stops. The place goes silent. I know what this means. Katarina has arrived.

People part like the Red Sea, making way as she goes right for center stage and takes the microphone, greeting her guests and then asking us to move to the dining hall.

Waiters escort everyone to their assigned tables. Surprisingly, Stryker and I are seated at the main one—a twelve-seater—along with Katarina, her 'date,' someone I recognize from the cast of Saturday Night Live, an older man I can't place, and if I'm not mistaken, a senator.

I glance over at the table to my right where Hennie is glaring at me like I'm the devil incarnate. At the table behind her, my assistants, Mel and Allissa, both give me a thumbs up. I roll my eyes at them.

Once we're all seated, Katarina comes over. The men stand. She goes right for Stryker. "Stryker, love. So glad you could make it. How are you getting on with my new partner?"

His eyes ping pong between the two of us. "Partner?"

"Well, basically. I mean, I'm still the boss, but yes... partner. On the bridal side anyway. I'm surprised you didn't tell him, Holland."

She goes on to greet the other eight people at the table then sits next to her escort who is half her age, a man she didn't even bother introducing.

Stryker leans close. "Partner?" A low whistle tickles my ear. "Katarina

Bellasandré doesn't do partners. Well, unless you count the lesbian lover she experimented with years ago."

"Not equal," I say, giggling. Oh, how I love the way this man makes me giggle. It sends butterflies dancing in my stomach. "She owns fifty-one percent."

"Still, I'm impressed. You must be amazing at what you do."

I grin widely. "As you must be as well."

"Maybe you'll come out to see a game in the spring."

I shrug. "As long as I don't have to stand in the rain with your other groupies."

"I'll get you a suite."

"You don't need to. I can do that all on my own."

"Right. Sorry. I'm not used to this."

"Used to what?"

"Being with someone who's financially my equal."

"So now you're *with me*?"

His striking eyes bore into mine. "I am tonight."

My insides tingle. I'm all for a good romp in the hay, especially with someone as gorgeous as Stryker, but I've never felt so much draw. So much anticipation. I want to skip dinner and go right for dessert. Get to the good stuff. The good stuff being his lips. His hands. His—

"Miss McQuaid?"

I look up to see the senator waiting.

"Sir?"

"I was asking if you'd be so kind as to design my daughter's wedding dress."

"Yes, of course, Senator. I'd be honored. And please call me Holland."

"Damn," Stryker whispers. "Holland McQuaid, designer to the rich and famous."

"Shut up." I swat him under the table. He traps my hand, gives it a

squeeze, and runs his thumb along my wrist before pulling back, leaving me wanting more.

After everyone praises Katarina on her gown, her beauty, her business expertise, and her party, attention is all on Stryker. The men, all successful in their own right, are star-struck by the young baseball player.

Throughout dinner, Katarina tosses unexpected glances my way. I can't get a read on her. Is she pleased with how the evening is going, or bitter at the attention being given to the man she insisted escort me?

With dinner over and everyone back in the dance hall, I finally get my answer when she demands Stryker and I pose for photographs. She is pleased. But why? She's friends with his parents. It could be she's looking out for him, wanting him to be happy after heartbreak. But that's not the Katarina I know. The Katarina I know doesn't do anything for anyone but herself. Her business. Her prestige.

Perhaps she's different with her friends. I laugh, surprised a woman such as herself even has friends.

"What's so funny?" Stryker asks, as we're handed more champagne.

"I'm seeing a different side to my boss tonight."

"You mean your *partner*?"

I laugh again. "Stryker, she's my boss. I'd never fool myself into thinking anything else."

His arm brushes against mine. "You have a great laugh."

"You have a nice smile."

"Well then, I can't wait to see what you have to say about the rest of me."

Those sparks of anticipation shoot through my body again. "Do you think Katarina would mind if we took off?"

"Her star pupil?" he says with a playful nudge of his elbow. "Yeah, I think she'd mind." He takes my hand. "Come. Let's dance. There will be plenty of time later for the rest."

"The rest?"

He leans in. “Yes, Miss McQuaid, *the rest*. What was it you said before? The sucking of tits, the g-spot, my cock inside you...”

I put my fingers to his lips. “Stop now or I’ll soak through my panties.”

“Jesus.” He pulls me against him, and we dance tightly together. This time he’s not looking around for Monica or what’s-his-name. This time he only has eyes for me. “You’re mine tonight.”

Mine. Nobody has ever said that to me before. I never wanted anyone to. Hell, I’d have laughed them off and pushed them away without a second thought. I’m nobody’s *mine*. But the way he says it. And the way he’s looking at me—I want to be his. I want to be his for just one night.

I push up on my toes and draw close to his ear. “Merry Christmas, Stryker Taylor. Tonight, you get to unwrap every inch of me.”

“Fuck, that’s sexy.”

I waggle a brow. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Three hours ago I was dreading this party. Another night of kowtowing to Katarina, singing her praises, stroking her ego. Now, however, as I gaze up into the eyes of a man I didn’t know existed until tonight, I think things are most definitely looking up.

CHAPTER FOUR



*T*he moment we get into the back of the limo, I remove my shoes. Even my comfortable heels couldn't stand up to this night. Then again, I hadn't anticipated all of the dancing.

My body still hums from the feeling of being pressed against him.

The limo is dim and he's busy pouring a drink, so he probably doesn't see me staring. But Stryker is... well, striking. His dark unruly hair touches the very top of his collar then curls up. His facial hair is well-manicured—the perfect length for a good inner-thigh tickle. And his eyes. Oh his eyes. I can't see them clearly right now, but I've loved the way they've looked at me tonight.

After the second kiss, I'm fairly sure he didn't even notice how Monica was still staring at him. If making her jealous was his goal, I'd say mission accomplished.

"Where to?" the driver asks, lowering the partition.

Stryker hands me a glass of champagne and shrugs. "My place?"

I give him a sharp shake of the head. "No. Not mine either."

"Soho Grand," he tells the driver.

Bringing the glass to my mouth, I eye him over the rim. "Stryker, you don't have to impress me." I hold up the champagne flute. "You don't have to wine and dine me either. I'm pretty much a sure thing."

He snorts. “Holland, I get the idea you’re not all that easily impressed.”

“You got that right.”

“Looks like I have my work cut out for me then.”

“You might, assuming you brought enough condoms to keep up.”

A deep belly laugh percolates out of him. “Game on, McQuaid.”

We reach the hotel as we’re finishing our drinks. Stryker asks me to wait in the car. I get it. He’s a sports icon. Maybe the last thing he wants is to be labeled a playboy. Word has surely already gotten out that we attended the Bellasandré ball together. We don’t need the world knowing our evening ended at a hotel.

Five minutes later, there’s a knock on my window. I lower it and accept a room key card from a bellman.

“Twenty-third floor, ma’am. The Grand Terrace Suite.”

He knows. I can tell by the look on his face that he knows exactly who I’m here to... let’s face it... bone. But he’s been instructed to be discreet. Doesn’t mean the guy won’t go blabbing it all over social media the minute I’m on the elevator. Suddenly, I feel protective about Stryker’s reputation.

I reach inside my purse and pull out a hundred-dollar-bill. As I exit the car, I hand it to the bellman. “I know you know a lot. But I’m asking you to please keep that information between us.”

“Mr. Tay—” He stops and looks around, refusing to accept the tip. “Um, I mean your *date* already tipped me, ma’am. He also issued the same warning.”

I tuck the bill into his jacket pocket. “It’s not a warning. Just a request. Please.”

He nods guiltily, as if he knew he had every intention of pulling out his phone the instant I walked away. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thank you. You’re a good man.” I smile and kiss his cheek, hoping the extra attention will have him keeping his promise. “Happy Holidays.”

He lifts his chin. “To you as well.”

With my key card in hand, I walk through the opulent hotel lobby. It’s

fully decked out with Christmas decorations. A massive tree stands right in the center, as if to remind me I don't have one of my own. Ribbons spiral down every column, making them look like candy canes. Menorahs sit on either end of the marble counter of the front desk. And fake presents wrapped in tulle and topped off with bows are scattered throughout.

It's both joyful and depressing at the same time for someone like me, to whom Christmas is just a day like any other. The kicker this year though, is that it won't *just* be me, my brothers, and our younger half-sister. All three of my brothers are married this year. And they all have kids. It's an unbelievable thought. My brothers—the former bachelors of Calloway Creek. Playboys. Cocky, arrogant heirs to Pappy's fortune. Nobody ever would have guessed that *one* of them would end up the way they did, not to mention all three. And now, every single one of them could sit for a Norman Rockwell original.

How did I somehow end up the odd man out? It's something that's never crossed my mind. Never bothered me. Not until now.

It must be Hawk and Addy's upcoming wedding that has me feeling this way. Well, that along with the normal melancholy that tends to afflict people like me this time of year.

"Hold the elevator," a man calls behind me after I'm inside.

I spin around and come face to face with Stryker. I figured he'd have already been in the suite. A family with young children walks in behind him. Stryker moves into the corner and tries to become invisible. He grins at me from across the car and holds up the small paper bag.

I try not to laugh. He's gone to fetch condoms.

The family gets off on level four, never having recognized him. And then we're alone. He strides over to me, trapping me against the mirrored wall. He leans in, his hot breath flowing over my ear. "I got a six-pack. Buckle up."

The elevator dings and the doors open on the suite level. There's no one in sight, so he takes my hand and pulls me hastily down the hall. Would he have done so if others were watching?

I giggle at his eagerness. Then again, he's getting me with a free pass. Most men are just as eager.

I wonder, for just a second, if my promiscuousness is the reason I've never been in a long-term relationship. I grew up with a mother who never failed to remind me that men won't bother buying the cow if they get the milk for free. I dismiss the thought just as quickly. I'm the one who doesn't call. I'm the one who refuses second and third dates. I'm the one who resists being called anyone's girlfriend.

My therapist—yes, I've been to one. After all, it's the trendy thing to do—would say it's my parents' divorce that plays a part in my life choices. More specifically, my father. He was a rich heir who swept my mom off her feet. Then he proceeded to cheat on her with every pretty face in a skirt.

The suite, though one of the top ones in the hotel, is not novel to us, nor impressive. Both of us are used to being able to afford whatever we want, whenever we want it. It's kind of nice, however, that both of us are on the same page. Neither of us cares that it's huge and could sleep a family of eight. Neither of us pays any mind to what must be an amazing view of the city. Neither of us bothers to fawn over the magnificent flower arrangements, the fresh canapés, the wine fridge filled with expensive selections.

The only thing either of us seems to be interested in right now is each other.

I toe off my shoes, relieved to be on flat feet again, and groan my appreciation.

"Feet hurt?" he asks.

"You try standing and dancing on heels all night."

He tosses the bag onto a nearby table and holds out a hand. "Come here. I've learned a thing or two about massages over my years as a ball player."

"Really?" I look down at my feet. "You want to touch my bare feet?"

"Holland, considering the things I'm going to do to you tonight, you really think I have a problem with your *feet*?"

A rush of tingles zap through my entire body. I let him lead me to the couch. I lie down and he sits and gathers my feet in his lap. Then he proceeds to give me the best foot massage I've ever had. Come to think of it—the *only* one I've ever had.

His thumbs press into the sole of my left foot, rubbing circles of tantalizing pleasure. He bends each toe back and forth multiple times. He squeezes and releases my heel. It feels amazing. And there's only one thing running through my mind: if he can do this to my foot, what can he do to *other* parts of me?

After five minutes or so with my left foot, he moves to the right.

I can't control the sounds coming out of me. I'm in pure heaven.

"Holland?" He stops rubbing.

My eyes open. "Mmm?"

"Those noises you've been making have me so hard I'm afraid I might come before you even touch me."

I laugh, hop off the couch, retrieve the bag, then hoist up my dress and straddle him. "Well, then, let's give you a quick release, Mr. Baseball." I lean down and touch my lips to his ear. "But rest assured, the five other times will be slow, sensual, pleasurable torture. And I mean that in the best of ways."

He cups my face. "*Five?* You must be forgetting about the times I'm going to make you come with my fingers or my tongue. Or both at the same time."

"Remind me to thank Katarina," I say. "She doesn't normally give out gifts to her employees. But I feel you should have come wrapped in a big red bow."

I bounce up and down when he laughs. "Likewise," he says. "I'll be sure to send her a note of gratitude tomorrow."

I loosen his bowtie—impressed it's not a clip-on—and pull it out from under his collar. Then I unbutton his shirt, loving the small manly smattering of hair between his nipples. "Make sure it gets delivered with flowers and

candy, because in about six hours, you'll be so grateful, you'll be asking me to marry you."

He lifts a brow.

"It's actually happened," I say. "I'm *that* good."

He groans. Then he goes all caveman and rips my panties right off me. Damn, I love how strong his hands are.

I leave his shirt on, but fully open, and go for his belt. Then his button and fly. "Hold onto me," he says, then he lifts up, with me in his lap, and pushes his pants down past his thighs.

When I look down and get the first glimpse of his rock-hard erection, I salivate. My mouth actually waters. If I thought his muscles were big...

"I'm that good, too, Holland," he says as I unabashedly stare. "Are you ready for me?"

I shrug a shoulder provocatively. "You tell me."

He chuckles as his large hands work between us and a finger slips inside, causing me to gasp.

"Fuuuuuuck," he drawls, closing his eyes when he feels my wetness. He opens them again, looking directly at me as he removes the finger and puts it in his mouth.

Oh my God, that's sexy.

"Mmm," he hums, his finger making a popping noise when it comes out of his mouth. "I can't wait to taste every bit of you. But right now, if I don't get inside you this second, you're going to see this pitcher foul right over this couch."

I love the way he makes me laugh.

He gets a condom and I lean back, giving him room to roll it on. Five seconds later, his hands are on my hips and he's guiding me down onto him. He seems to effortlessly pick me up and bring me back down with each of his thrusts. I love the way he's topping from the bottom.

"You're so goddamn sexy, Holland, and I haven't even seen all of you."

My dress keeps getting in the way, so I quickly reach around, unzip it, then pull it over my head. He's left staring at my bare chest as I'd gone braless.

“Ho-lee-shit.” His eyes bug out. “Merry fucking Christmas to me.”

I squeeze my walls tightly, wanting to give him the best orgasm. He releases my hips and I take over, riding him without his help as he palms my breasts and then pinches my nipples.

I undulate faster, needing this release. Almost wanting to get it over with so we can get on with the exploration of each other. I've never been with an athlete before, and I have every intention of taking advantage of all the punishing workouts he puts his body through. I want to touch every muscle. Feel every ripple. Tongue every crevice.

“Jesus, Hol—, unnnngh.”

He thrusts a few more times, then stiffens, his fingers grasping my nipples tightly. And that's just what I need to fly off the edge of the cliff and join him in the only simultaneous orgasm I've ever experienced with a man.

I collapse onto his shoulder. “I never thought I'd say this, but I love my boss.”

He chuckles underneath me, then, once he recovers, he stands up, me in his arms, grabs the other condoms, and takes us into the bedroom.

CHAPTER FIVE



I roll over in bed. Before I even open my eyes, the smell reminds me where I am. Sex. It permeates everything around me. Stretching my sore muscles, I remember exactly what happened in deliciously painful detail.

“Morning,” Stryker says.

My eyes fly open, surprised to hear his voice. “You’re still here.”

His low guttural laugh bounces the bed. “You expected me to do the walk of shame at—what time did we finish—four a.m?”

I move my aching neck from side to side. “I think it was five. Are you as sore as I am?”

He cracks his knuckles. “I’m a professional athlete, Holland. It’s my job to be in good shape. I lift hundred-pound dumbbells before breakfast.” He winks and rolls a shoulder. “But, yeah, I’m a little sore.”

“Are you calling me a dumbbell?”

He chuckles and sits on the side of the bed. I admire his broad shoulders, his muscular back, his perfect ass. And I realize I don’t want him to leave.

“So all these women you don’t need to say anything to in order to get them to sleep with you. Just how many are we talking?”

He turns his head and eyes me from over his shoulder. “Isn’t that a little bold for a one-night-stand to ask?”

I hit his ass with a pillow. “Just answer the question. Enquiring minds

want to know.”

He grabs the pillow, tosses it aside and climbs on top of me, pinning me against the mattress. “Three,” he says. He leans close. “Not counting you.”

I’m completely dumbfounded. Is he lying to make himself look better? “Bullshit.”

“It’s true. My job is demanding. Women can be a distraction.”

“What about Monica?”

“Monica who?” He shakes his head. “After last night, I can’t remember my own name let alone hers.”

I smile triumphantly.

The moment is broken by a loud knock on the suite door.

Stryker hops off the bed and pulls on his boxers. “Room service. I ordered breakfast.”

“And you’re going to answer it like that?”

He laughs and walks out into the other room. A minute later, he returns, placing a tray of food on the end of the bed. “I wasn’t sure what you liked. I ordered a bit of everything.”

“As long as there’s coffee, we’re good.”

He thumbs to the bathroom. “I’m going to take a quick shower.”

I look at the large spread of food. “You aren’t eating?”

“I’ll pick over whatever you don’t want.”

He pads across the floor to the bathroom, but before he’s inside, I say, “You didn’t ask me.”

He turns, cocking his head.

“You didn’t ask how many guys I’d slept with. It’s only fair.”

“A gentleman doesn’t ask such things, Holland,” he says. Then the door closes.

I get a hotel robe out of the closet and settle back onto the bed. Last night was exactly what I said it was. A hookup. A one-time thing. So then why, somewhere deep inside me, is there disappointment that he doesn’t want to

know more about me?

Sipping coffee, I peruse the food, settling on a croissant. After only one bite, my phone rings in the other room. I race out, knowing if I don't answer by the second ring, Katarina will have a conniption. But it's not her. It's Addy.

"Hey, girl." I put her on speaker and walk back to the bedroom to finish my breakfast.

"Sooooo?"

"So, what?" I ask as if I don't know what she's talking about.

"Are you really going to make me draw it out of you? It's all over social media, Hol. Stryker Taylor? Hawk almost shit his pants this morning when he saw it. You do know he idolizes the man. How on earth did your boss arrange *him* to be your escort?"

"I guess his parents are friends with Katarina."

"I didn't know your boss had any friends. Just employees."

"Yeah, me either. I don't suppose they're tight or anything. I mean, they weren't at the ball."

"You looked hot, Hol. That dress. And dare I say the two of you looked mighty fine together."

I take a bite of croissant, talking around my food. "We did kind of rock the place. It was epic, his ex was there, and we really did a number on her."

"I'll bet. From the way he was looking at you in one of the photos, I'd say he put on quite an act."

"An act. Yeah." Suddenly, I remember what last night was about. Making Monica jealous. Will he tell her about the half-dozen condoms we used? The eight times he made me come?

"Hol? You sound a bit disappointed. Were you not able to seduce him?"

The bathroom door opens and a wet Stryker wearing only a towel, appears. "Are there any more robes? I don't want to put the monkey suit back on yet."

“Oh, my God,” Addy yelps. “He’s there?”

He steps forward to the edge of the bed. “Didn’t know you were on the phone.”

“It’s Addison Calloway, my best friend.”

“Hello, Addison Calloway,” Stryker says.

Addy giggles. “Hi.”

“Apparently our pictures have hit social media,” I tell him, hopping off the bed to grab him a robe from the closet.

“It was bound to happen.”

Back on the bed, I pick at my breakfast. “Addy, I should go.”

“Wait! Stryker, are you still there?”

“In the flesh,” he says, as he drops his towel to reveal all his nakedness before donning the robe, grabbing a muffin, and sitting next to me. “What’s up?”

“My fiancé is a huge fan.”

“You want me to sign some swag for him?”

“No, he has some of your stuff already. I know this is a huge ask, but we’re getting married next Saturday. And Holland is my maid of honor. And she really needs a date. Can you do a girl a solid and escort her to the wedding?”

“Addison, no. That’s a crazy idea.” I roll my eyes and tell Stryker, “She’s marrying my brother, Hawk.”

“Ah,” he says into the phone. “I met him at a game last season.”

“I know,” she says. “Believe me, I heard all about it then, and again this morning. Oh, and I believe you also know my brother, Tag.”

“Tag Calloway is your brother? His marketing firm represents the Nighthawks. Small world.”

“Say you’ll come. It would mean a lot to all of us.”

“I don’t know,” Stryker says. “If I show up, I might draw attention. The day should be about you and Hawk, not any of your guests.”

“Are you kidding?” she squawks. “It would be epic. Consider it a wedding gift to my future husband.”

I grab the phone and take her off speaker. “Addy, it’s a terrible idea. Like I said, I’ll be busy with you, and he’s right, with him there, you’re not going to be the center of attention.”

“But—”

“Not to mention it’s a huge imposition on Stryker as I’m sure he has much better things to do.”

The phone is swiped out of my hand. Stryker puts it to his ear. “Addy? Can I call you that? Okay, listen. I’d like to do you a solid here. Maybe I can show up in disguise.”

He pauses and it’s killing me not to know what Addy is saying.

Stryker laughs. “Sure. And hey, it’s no imposition. I’m happy to do it.”

More talking from Addy that I can’t hear.

“Bye, Addy.”

He ends the call and tosses the phone onto the bed.

“So that’s it?” I say, my jaw slack. “The two of you just go make plans without any regard to what *I* want?”

Secretly, though, I can’t help being a little excited about the prospect of spending more time with him.

He shrugs. “Two birds. One stone.”

“Right.” I put the rest of the croissant back on the plate, no longer hungry. “Another favor for a friend, and, as an added bonus, it’ll bug the hell out of Monica.”

“Those weren’t the birds I was talking about, but now that you mention it, I suppose going to a wedding with another woman ought to do it, don’t you think?”

“Yup,” I quip, launching myself out of bed and into the bathroom. “That ought to do it. You can let yourself out. I’ll see you next Saturday.”

“I had a great time,” he says through the door.

I sit on the toilet. “Yeah, uh-huh, me too.”

“See you soon, McQuaid.”

“Yup. Saturday.”

I expect him to say more. Maybe I even want it. But he doesn't. And five minutes later, I hear the front door of the suite open and close.

I cover my face with my hands, wanting to erase last night. Because all I can do is think about him. His perfect body. The way he carried me to bed. How he made me come. His impeccable manners.

This is me—Holland McQuaid. I don't think about them once I'm done with them. Not ever.

I shower, put on my dress from last night, minus the ripped panties, and make the proverbial walk of shame through the hotel, giving the finger to a snooty woman who eyes me up and down like I'm a two-bit hooker.

My phone rings in the cab on the way to my apartment. This time it is Katarina.

“Please tell me you're not too hungover to work today,” she says in lieu of hello.

“On my way, Katarina. I'll be there by ten.”

“Good. Because you have a lot of work to do. The senator already had his daughter send over pictures of her favorites. This one is important, Holland. It could define you and your future. Don't mess it up.”

The phone goes dead before I can respond.

And I remember why relationships don't work for people like me. My job will always come first. And nobody else could ever understand that.

CHAPTER SIX



I've barely had time to eat or use the bathroom this week with all the back-and-forth with the senator's daughter, not to mention Addy's final fitting. I'm juggling about fifty balls right now, with multiple gowns in various stages of design. My team is starting to mesh together and work like a well-oiled machine. It's only Thursday. I haven't even been running the department for two weeks, yet it's amazing what can be accomplished when you have the name Bellasandré backing you.

This entire week has been a whirlwind of activity. A designer's dream. It's everything I've fantasized about since I was a little girl, walking around with a sheet around my body like a toga, making various designs with it.

Mel brings lunch in, chicken salad on rye and a bag of kettle chips. My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since yesterday, so I put down the fabric selections I'm weeding through and take a small break.

I run my finger across the touchpad on my laptop and awaken the screen. Chewing my sandwich, I do a search for Stryker Taylor. I've thought about him more than I'd like to admit this week. Truth be told, I've probably been working myself harder just to get the chiseled Adonis out of my mind.

I stop eating mid-bite when a picture of him in his baseball uniform pops on the screen. *Oh my!* I scroll through the many articles of not only Stryker, but his super-famous dad, Brady, who was also a star pitcher for the

Nighthawks years ago. There's a picture of the two of them together. I'd like to say Stryker is a spitting image, but in reality, he looks nothing like his father. Dark hair is the only feature they seem to share. He must have gotten all his traits from his mom.

Why am I thinking about him so much?

Eight orgasms. That's why.

I close the laptop, refusing to give him another thought.

My intercom buzzes. "Katarina would like to see you," Allissa says.

"Right away."

I might be her 'partner,' but I've no doubts about who's really running the show. I take one more bite of lunch, toss the rest into the trash, and put on my heels.

In the hallway, a low whistle comes from Kenny's cubicle as I pass. Then his head pops over the partition. "You and that baseball hottie?" He fans himself. "Oh, imagine how adorable your children would be. With his chiseled features, and your amazing hair and eyes. Gah!"

I roll my *amazing* eyes and flip my hair as I pass him, eliciting the expected eye roll in return.

As I approach Katarina's office. Johanna waves and buzzes Katarina, then tells me, "You can go in."

I walk in and stand in front of her desk, a dutiful soldier awaiting orders.

She finishes up whatever she's doing and looks up. "You may sit."

I'm no longer afraid of being called to her office. It's happened a lot over the past ten days as I acclimate to my new position. But it's still intimidating as hell. Neither of us knows exactly how this will go. My first official designs won't go public for months. Rose and Addy will be the only two to wear my bridal designs until then. I still have a lot to prove, and we both know it.

She pulls out a slip of paper. "Have you checked the order list this week?"

"I've been busy organizing the ones from last week."

“Well, you should. They’ve gone up substantially. Since Saturday, the waiting list for one of your custom designs has gone from three months to over a year.”

My eyes go wide. “Really?”

“It’s Stryker. People like the dynamic.”

I shrug. “I like to think it’s me.”

“Yes, well, a little PR never hurts. Especially when it’s with New York’s star baseball player.”

She pushes an envelope across the table. Inside is an invitation to the premier New Year’s Eve event in New York City. One only celebrities, royalty, and uber-rich elites get invited to.

“Wow,” I say. “You’re going to this?”

“We’re going,” she says. “I have my own invitation. This one is yours. And they both include a plus one. You’ll take him.”

“Mr. Baseball?” I choke on his name but don’t miss Katarina’s amusement. “I mean Stryker. No. I couldn’t—”

“Ask him. That is all.” She lowers her head and goes back to what she was doing. I’ve been dismissed. And I know better than to argue.

I get up and leave, invitation in hand, wondering how I got into this mess. She wants me to ask him? It’s going to be awkward enough bringing him to Addy’s wedding.

Back at my desk, it dawns on me. Katarina giving me the dress for the ball. Inviting Stryker as my escort. Us sitting at her table with the who’s who of New York. It all makes sense now. The ball was my society introduction. And Stryker was there to prove my worth. To validate my position within the company.

I lower my forehead until it meets the desk. Is he really the reason for the influx of orders?

Katarina will do anything to further the company. Apparently that includes using me and baseball’s hottest star.

The rest of the day is a blur of checking the order list mixed in with the distraction of figuring out ways I can get out of the New Year's Eve event. Surely he has plans already. It's only two weeks away, and anyone who's anyone has plans. Unless you're a pathetic workaholic like me.

"Kenny!" I shout when I see him walking down the hall as I exit the bathroom.

"What's up, love?"

"Just how mad would Katarina be if I didn't follow a direct order?"

"You mean would you be in hot water if you didn't bring the hottie to the biggest and most luxurious bash of the year?"

"You know?"

"I'm her first assistant, sweetie. I know everything. And Holland, unless the man is six feet under by then, I'd say you'd most definitely be putting yourself in an awkward position if you defied her wishes."

"Just because she wants me to bring him doesn't mean he'll come."

"Somehow I get the feeling he will."

"How?"

"Because the man is standing behind you right now." He blows out a long, slow breath. "My my my, how I wish he played for the other team. And I'm not talking about sports."

I stiffen. Stryker is *here*?

I turn. He's at the end of the hall coming from Katarina's side of the building. He's wearing faded jeans, with a sweatshirt and ballcap from one of the high-end brands he's the face of.

I swallow. Because he's just as gorgeous in casual attire as he was in his tux.

"McQuaid," he says, approaching us.

Kenny pokes me incessantly in the back.

"Oh, uh, Stryker, this is Kenny Serratto, Katarina's first assistant."

Kenny holds out his hand the way a woman would when she expects a

man to kiss it. Stryker chuckles, grips his hand, and turns it to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“You can’t blame a red-blooded gay man for trying,” Kenny says, shooting us air kisses as he walks away.

“What brings you here?” I ask.

“Well, one, you never reached out to me with details. I figured I should coordinate my tie to match your dress. Isn’t that what people do?”

“Right. Sorry. I’ve been super busy. I should have contacted you.” I motion back down the hallway. “Let’s go to my office and I’ll show you the dress.”

“I was actually surprised you didn’t call. Most women do. In fact, most women never stop calling. I’ve had to change my number a few times.”

I look up. “Seriously?”

He nods. “But not you. Why not?”

“Why didn’t I call? Because you know as well as I do that what we had was a one-time thing.”

His thumb and forefinger work his jaw. “Mmm. So you don’t think anything will happen between us after the wedding? I mean, I figured we’d at least take advantage of the opportunity. I thought maybe we’d go for nine this time.”

I laugh. “You athletes are always trying to break records, aren’t you?”

“Hell yeah, we are. What’s the point in being mediocre?”

“You think what we did Friday night was just mediocre?”

He looks me right in the eye. “What we did Friday night was epic.”

My inner self is jumping up and down and wanting to high-five someone. But I remain cool. Because I’m not sure I understand who I’ve become around this man.

I open the garment bag containing my dress for the wedding. “Here it is.”

He studies it. “It’s nice. One of yours?”

I nod.

“It’s incredible. I mean, obviously you’re talented beyond belief or Katarina wouldn’t have put you in charge of an entire division of her business.” He touches the bodice. “What color would you call this?”

“It’s called pistachio. Addy wanted her colors to reflect the season. Her theme is green and gold with red accents thrown in.” I remove a sample of fabric pinned to the bag. “Here, take this and use it to match. But really, it’s not a big deal if you don’t.”

He tucks it into his pocket.

“You could have called, you know,” I say, going back behind my desk. I feel like I need distance between us. There’s a certain energy when I stand close to him. Energy I’m not used to. “I’d have given you the details over the phone.”

“I had another reason for coming. I was hoping you’d join me for an outing.”

“An outing?” I eye him suspiciously. “You don’t mean a date, do you?” I look at the clock. “Because I really don’t have time for—”

“Holland.” He steps around the desk and puts his hands on my shoulders. “It’s seven o’clock. My guess is you haven’t eaten. I get it, my job is demanding as well. But in my experience if you only work and never play, you’ll burn out.”

“Play?” I narrow my eyes. “How is it that *you* have time for this? Shouldn’t you be at practice or something?”

“You don’t follow baseball, do you?”

“Or football, or hockey. Who has the time?”

“Well, it’s our off season. We don’t report to training camp until February. Until then, my time is my own.”

“You have *nothing* to do?”

“Well, not nothing. I still work with a personal trainer four hours a day. And I go to our practice facility. I’m not about to get rusty and let some punk drafted right out of college take my job.”

“Weren’t *you* drafted right out of college?”

His crooked grin makes an appearance and I realize my faux pas.

He nods to the door. “Come on. Live a little.”

I look at all the work piled up on my desk and think of what Katarina said earlier about the one-year waiting list. Then I look back at Stryker. And stick a damn fork in me, because for the first time in my life, I choose a guy over my job.

CHAPTER SEVEN



*I*narrow my eyes at him when we enter a huge building that appears to be an athletic facility. He walks to a control box, flips a switch, and lights illuminate the entire place, coming on one at a time from the front end to the very back.

There are nets everywhere. Batting cages I presume. At least a half dozen of them. And machines with mechanical arms. Bats upon bats in bins lining a far wall. And a whole bunch of other stuff I don't understand.

"Why are we here?" I ask. "Weren't you just telling me I needed to play, and yet you bring me to work?"

"Sometimes work *is* my play, Hol. I love what I do. Besides, coming here can be a great way to let off steam, something it looks like you need."

My hands land on my hips. "You don't know me well enough to make that observation."

"Fair enough. But since we're here..."

He holds out a hand. A strong, calloused, manly hand. When I look at it, I remember every little thing it did to me last Friday. I ignore every caution signal in my body telling me this isn't a good idea and put my hand in his. "Fine. But don't expect me to do anything but watch. I've never even held a baseball."

He stares at me like I'm an alien. "Never?"

“Nope. Never held a bat or thrown a ball... well, unless you count all the ping pong balls I tossed into red cups in college.”

His whole body shakes with laughter. “Why do I have the feeling you were wild back then?”

“Back then?” I raise a sultry brow.

“Okay, touché. So you still have a little wild in you.” He walks us over to a raised mound of astroturf. “Stand here.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because I’m going to teach you how to pitch.”

Now I’m the one laughing. “You do know I deal in needle and thread for a living?”

He takes off his sweatshirt, leaving him in a snugly fitted T-shirt that—wow—really shows off his arm muscles. He jogs over to a nearby wall and comes back with a few of those big mitt thingies. He holds one out. “This glove ought to fit. One of our trainers has small hands. Try it on.”

I stare at the glove. “Why do I need this? I thought you were going to teach me to throw.”

“I am. You need to warm up first. Cold muscles don’t stretch easily, and they make you more susceptible to sprains, cramps, and other injuries.” He retrieves a ball from a nearby bucket, hands it to me, and backs ten feet away. “Toss it over.”

I lob it over to him, missing him by at least four feet to the left. He steps over, stretches his arm out and catches it anyway. He gives me a cold hard stare. “Holland, this isn’t softball, we throw overhand here.”

“You said toss it. I tossed it.”

He shakes his head. “Hold your glove out.”

I put the glove out to the side.

“Hold it in front of you, like this.” He demonstrates for me, parting his legs, crouching down slightly and holding the glove in front of his midsection.

When I mimic his stance, he throws the ball. I close my eyes and put the glove in front of my face. Then I feel a thump as the ball hits my glove, and the glove hits my forehead.

“Jesus, Holland.” He runs over. “Are you okay?”

I lower the glove. “I told you I’m shit at this.”

He chuckles. “Okay, okay, so you can’t catch a ball. But you can still throw.” He pulls a distant net closer to me then carries over a large bucket of balls. He hands me one. “Throw it into the net. Try to hit the center mark. Don’t throw as hard as you can at first, you still need to warm up.” I go to throw, but he stops the motion. “Overhand, Hol.”

“Right, sorry.”

I do what he says. It’s even harder this way and I miss the target by a mile. He hands me another ball. “Again.”

After fifteen or twenty more, I’m getting closer. When I finally hit the net, albeit along the very rim, I squeal and jump up and down. “I did it!”

“Great job. Okay, now really give it your all. Do it like this.”

He turns sideways, focuses on the net, winds his arm back and throws, hitting the bullseye in the center of the net dead on.

I playfully swat his shoulder with my glove. “Stryker, you said we should warm up.”

“This *is* me warming up. The net is fifteen feet away. Normally, I pitch at a distance of sixty feet.”

“Oh. Well, whatever.”

He laughs at my complete and total lack of knowledge about his job.

I scold him with my stare. “What are *you* laughing at, Mr. Baseball? Next time we do something like this, it’ll be me teaching you how to sew a running stitch by hand.”

A smile a mile wide creeps up his face. “*When* we do this again?”

“If,” I say. “I meant if.”

He steps closer and gets in my face. “No... it’s *when*. Now watch me

closely and then do it again.”

Time slows as he gets into position and throws more warm-up pitches. Each one has his muscles rippling. His body works in one fluid motion, and he seems to effortlessly throw the ball as if it’s an extension of himself. The way it comes right off the end of his fingertips is fascinating.

I swallow, thinking I must watch more baseball if all players look this sexy while playing.

He trots to the net and moves it further away. “Your turn.”

I bring the glove and the ball up toward my face. Studying the target just as he did, I overdramatically do the whole wind-up thing and then release the ball, surprised when it actually hits the net.

“Hey!” he shouts boisterously. “There you go. Try again.”

As I learn to control the ball, hitting the net more and more, he moves it back farther. Then he trots over to the wall, grabs something off it, and goes behind the net.

“Do you have a death wish?” I ask.

“I’m behind the net, Holland.” He holds up something that looks like the thick barrel of a gun. “This will tell me how fast your pitches are.” He crouches down. “Now, aim for my head.”

I peer at him from over my glove. “Do you know what I’d give to be able to do this to some of the other guys I’ve hooked up with?”

He laughs, then stiffens, looking angry. “Wait, why would you want to throw a baseball at their heads?”

I shrug. “No reason in particular. I’ve just never had great taste in men.”

His free hand clutches his chest. “Ouch.”

“Relax, Stryker. I didn’t choose you. You were chosen for me.”

He smirks. “And would you say Katarina has better taste in men than you do?”

“The jury is still out.”

He gets back into position and lifts his chin. “Give me all you got,

McQuaid.”



Two hours later, a cab drops me off at my apartment. I turn to Stryker. “I’d invite you in but—”

“But the jury is still out?”

I snort. “No. It’s been a long day. A long week. And I have to be at work early. Plus, tomorrow is Addy’s rehearsal dinner.”

“No explanation needed, Holland. I get it. You have a demanding life. I understand that. From the minute I go to training camp in February, through the end of the playoffs—and, God willing, the world series—my time is not my own.”

I cock my head. “You *do* get it, don’t you?”

“A hundred percent.” He reaches over me and opens my door. “I’ll see you Saturday?”

I inhale his scent, wanting to take a piece of him with me. Saturday is only two days away, but suddenly it seems like forever. I kiss his cheek. “Saturday.”

I hop out of the cab and enter my building. Turning around, I see the cab is still there and Stryker is still watching me. He waves and then the cab takes off. And as I watch him leave, it occurs to me that I had more fun tonight than I’ve had in years. Stryker was right. I needed to let off steam.

As I ponder the truth behind that, another thought occurs: he never brought up New Year’s Eve.

Maybe he wasn’t coming from Katarina’s office after all. Or maybe he’s just waiting for me to ask.

I fall into bed, and for the first time since I was a teenager fantasizing about a guy who was on a poster on my wall, I dream about a man. A *real*

man. One with a strong arm, a killer smile, and skillful fingers. Oh, his fingers. And I feel something I haven't felt in ages... content.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“*W*here’s your date?” Addy asks, pushing her veil aside.

“Sister, you’re getting married in thirty minutes, and you want to know where Stryker is?”

“Tell me again why he didn’t come with you?”

“Because it’s not a date, Addison. Just like Katarina made him escort me to the ball, you strongarmed him into coming.”

She gives me a punishing look. “There was nothing strong about it, Hol. He seemed more than willing to come.”

“Still, you asked him, not me. It’s not a date.”

Her jaw slackens. “Oh my gosh, you want it to be, though. Don’t you? It’s written all over your face. You *like* him.” She shrieks and claps. “I’ve waited so long for this day.”

“Of course you have, it’s your wedding day.”

Her eyes roll. “No, silly. I’ve waited for you to find your Hawk. Your Prince Charming. Your other half.”

“And you think after seeing him only two times I’ve found it?”

“Two?” Her perfectly manicured brows slash sharply.

I shrug. “He may have come by the office a few days ago.”

“And you didn’t *tell me?*”

“Addy, you’ve been a little busy with other things this week.”

Allie Montana and Mia Cruz, the other two bridesmaids, join us in the bridal suite.

“Oh, Addy,” Allie sighs. “You look amazing.”

Addison spins around, showing off her dress. “Holland did an amazing job with the dress.”

“It’s you that makes the dress,” I say. “Not the other way around.”

“Holland,” Mia says, pointing to the door, “someone is outside asking for you. And when I say someone, I mean last season’s MVP and the hottest man alive.” She comes closer. “Stryker Taylor? Are you kidding me? We have a *lot* to catch up on, girl.”

“He’s right outside?”

“And looking as yummy as ever. The new haircut... wowza!”

I cock my head. “Haircut?” I think back on the internet searches I’d done and it seemed like his hair was always the same in each photo. Long-ish, down to his collar, a bit unruly.

“Would you just go see for yourself,” Addy demands.

I look at the clock. The ceremony starts in less than twenty minutes. “I think right here is where I belong. This day is about you, Addy.”

“Mia,” she says. “Invite him in. Just make sure Hawk is nowhere around. He can’t see me.”

“Addis—”

She holds up a hand. “My wedding. My day. My rules.”

I roll my eyes.

Mia cracks the door, says a few words, and then opens it fully. The world stops spinning when my eyes connect with Stryker’s. *Oh. My. God.* I thought he was hot before, but this version of him is off the charts. He’s not in a suit. He’s dressed in a winter white dress shirt with tailored khaki slacks. His longer hair has been cut into a nice fade that perfectly blends into his expertly trimmed beard. I can’t wait to feel it on my thighs.

I step closer. “You cut your hair.”

He scrubs a hand across the top of his head as if he's still getting used to the feeling.

"Why?" I ask. "I kind of got the feeling it was your trademark."

"I didn't want to draw attention away from the real stars of the show."

"You shaved your head just for the wedding?"

He shrugs. "You needed a date."

I cross my arms. "I did not *need* a date." I toss a look to Addy, who, along with our other friends, is very interested in this conversation.

"Well, you've got one, like it or not."

Like it, I think to myself. *Maybe a little too much.*

I introduce him to Addy and the girls, then I belatedly notice his tie. It's the exact color of my dress. The perfect shade of green. It's not an easy color to match. I should know. Ties that color do not grow on trees. He must have put some real effort into finding one. I reach out and straighten it. "I like your tie."

His gaze lowers to my cleavage. "I like your dress. I knew you'd look amazing in it." He leans in. "And as much as I like it, I'm really looking forward to seeing it on the floor of my bedroom."

A rush of emotion surges through me. Anticipation. Desire. Passion. I can almost feel his head between my legs. I've never been a fan of short hair, but this man is rocking it like no other, and suddenly, I'm changing my stance.

"I won't keep you," he says, knowing good and well what he's done to me. "Congratulations, Addy. I hope today is everything you dreamed it would be."

The minute the door closes behind him, the chatter starts. But I put a quick end to it. "This day is about Addy." I walk up behind her and admire her in the full-length mirror, smoothing down the back of her dress. "No one else and nothing else is more important than this."

There's a knock on the door and Jonathan Calloway sticks his head through. "How's my girl?"

His world seems to stop as he takes in the sight of his daughter. I know exactly what he's thinking. That six years ago, he thought he was going to lose her. We all did. In the end, all she lost was her leg—something that would have broken so many other people, but I swear it just made Addy stronger.

“My God,” Jonathan says. “I’ve never seen a more beautiful bride.”

“Daddy, you can’t make me cry.”

“Sorry, sweetie. It’s just... wow. I hope Hawk knows what a lucky man he is.”

“He does. He tells me every day.”

He holds out his elbow. “Let’s do this then.”

The five of us go out the door to an empty hallway, everyone having been seated in the sanctuary.

After Addy’s mom gets seated, the processional starts. Mia is escorted by Addison’s brother, Tag. It just goes to show you how far our families have come. Calloways and McQuaids used to hate each other because of a stupid bet going back generations, but Addy and Hawk getting together changed all that. And this wedding just solidifies it.

My brother Hudson takes Allie’s elbow, and they follow Tag and Mia. Then my other brother, Hunter, takes mine. Technically, Hudson and Hunter are both ‘best men.’ They flipped for who got to stand next to Hawk during the ceremony.

When we’re at the front in our places, I watch Hawk’s face as Addy appears. They’ve been together for two years, but it’s like he’s seeing her for the very first time. My oldest brother; my protector since birth; this former cocky playboy—he does something I’ve never seen him do. He cries.

Tears of joy roll down his face as he watches his bride come closer. And it makes me wonder if anyone will ever look at me the way he’s looking at her.

Suddenly, my focus is no longer on Addy, but on the guests, as I scan

them for Stryker. I find him sitting inconspicuously near the back row. He wasn't lying when he said he wanted no attention on himself. He cut his hair for this.

For me?

His eyes capture mine and a slow confident grin works up his face. He raises his hands and displays nine fingers. I almost laugh at what would be the most inappropriate time.

Then, with a smile a mile wide, I turn and watch my best friend become my sister.

CHAPTER NINE



C hampagne has been flowing for hours. High heels are scattered on the edge of the dance floor. Men’s shirts are sticking to their bodies with sweat. All signs of a successful and fun reception.

Stryker tugs me against him—something I’ve learned he really likes to do—and asks, “How long do I have to wait to get you out of that dress?”

I giggle. “Addy and Hawk will be leaving soon. I have to stay until then.”

He nods to Mia, who has been carrying around the bouquet for an hour as if it’s an extension of her arm. “How come you didn’t participate?”

“Not looking for a husband.”

“Ever, or just now?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t decided yet.”

“I think being perpetually single is overrated.”

I lean back and stare. “Okay, I’ll bite. Tell me why.”

“For one, I think it’s perfectly fine at our age, in our twenties, when we have so much life ahead of us. But then I look to the future and think of people like my parents, how happy they are together. I see the life they built, the struggles they had to go through and all the adversity it took to get there, and it just all makes sense. There are truly people in this world who are fated to be together.” He shakes his head as if he hasn’t meant to be so serious. “And if that didn’t get you, how about this: say you fall and break your leg,

who will be there to fetch your crutches, help you to the bathroom, and get you into cabs?”

“A roommate could help with that.”

“If you have one, which you don’t.”

I cock my head. “And you know this how?”

“I may have asked around.”

I let that sink in and try to determine how it makes me feel. Stryker Taylor—baseball star, millionaire, and from what I can tell so far, honorable guy with a tongue as impressive as his pitching arm—has been asking about me.

“Oh, come on, Hol. I know you looked into me too. You knew I got drafted out of college.”

“Yes, but as a woman I was just doing my due diligence. I needed to make sure my date wasn’t on the FBI’s most wanted list.”

He laughs boisterously and swings us around. When he leans in and kisses my neck, my eyes close. Because it feels so damn good. His lips feel soft, warm, and so freaking perfect.

“I wish I could tell you my parents’ relationship was as good as yours,” I say. “My dad is not anyone I’d consider a role model. Mom divorced him when I was young. She has since remarried and is totally happy now.”

“I think everyone goes through hard times. It’s how you deal with it that matters.”

“So your parents? They’re good? How long have they been together?”

“Twenty-two years.”

“Wow—so one of them clearly wasn’t ready to jump off the single wagon back then. I mean, you’re twenty-five, right?”

“Brady isn’t my biological father. He adopted me when I was four.”

“Really? I guess I didn’t do enough stalking after all.”

“My mom was his physical therapist after he broke his elbow. Dad has a tragic past. He was married before. Had a kid, even. They were both killed

during a home invasion.”

I stop moving as I absorb his words. “Oh, my god, that’s horrible.” Tilting my head toward Allie, I tell him, “Allie’s brother recently lost his wife and baby. Dallas went off the grid and has been living in a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere for almost six months now.”

“Hopefully he’ll be able to find someone as great as my mom to help him through it.”

“I really hope so.”

His hand caresses my lower back. “So back to the dress. I’m thinking thirty seconds to take it off, another thirty to carry you to my bedroom, and…” He looks busy in thought. “Say ninety seconds to get you off with my tongue.”

Heat flushes through me. Oh, how I like his little games.

“Ninety seconds, huh?”

“Less if I get started in the cab.” He twirls me around then looks down at my dress. “Your dress is long. I’m thinking it will be easier if you go into that bathroom over there and take off your panties. That way, on the ride home, I can—”

The music stops and Addy’s father taps the microphone.

Noooooooo. On the way home he can what?

“Excuse me, folks. The bride and groom will be making their exit. Please come over and get your bubbles to help us send them off.”

“To be continued,” Stryker declares with a cocky smile.

“You bet your ass it’ll be continued. Now excuse me, I’ll be right back. Get bubbles for me, okay?”

I rush to the bathroom, pee, then take off my panties. But with no purse to stash them in, I have nowhere to put them. I look down at my dress and just stuff them into my cleavage. By this point in the evening, people are way too drunk to notice.

I find Stryker and he hands me a tiny bottle of bubbles. But before Addy

and my brother make their getaway, they spot me and walk over. Addy pulls me into a hug. “You helped me pull off the most amazing wedding. I couldn’t have dreamed of a more perfect day.” She gets close to my ear and whispers, “I’m going to do the same for you one day.” Then she pulls back and smiles brightly at my date.

Hawk sweeps his bride into his arms.

“Isn’t that a little premature?” I ask. “Save that for the hotel threshold, brother.”

“My leg is about to fall off,” Addy says. “Literally. My stump is pounding. I really pushed myself to the limit.” She gazes up at my brother. “But it was all worth it.”

He plants a kiss on her lips. “You’re what’s worth it, sweetheart. Now let’s blow this popsicle stand. There are things I want to do to you tonight that will make porn stars blush.”

She giggles in his arms. The smile on her face is so luminescent it brings tears to my eyes.

Hawk carries Addy through the sea of bubbles to a waiting limo, stopping right before they get in to plant kisses on his daughter’s face. Rivi is staying the night with our mother so they can spend the evening alone before the three of them head off on their honeymoon.

Stryker comes up behind me. “Are you telling me you don’t want that?”

I wipe the wetness from my cheek and turn abruptly. “It’s a wedding, Stryker. I have hormones like every other female. Of course I’m going to be a bit affected by all this. It doesn’t mean I want to be next.”

“Not next doesn’t mean never, McQuaid.”

“I’m just trying to do my new job and get through the holidays, Taylor.”

“Get through? You say it like it’s a bad thing. Don’t you love Christmas? The lights. The snow. The ice skating?”

“I like *that* part of it. It’s all the other parts I don’t like.”

“Such as?”

I shrug. “Trees. They smell and they leave needles everywhere. I swear I track them inside my apartment every time I come home.”

“You... have one though, right?”

“A Christmas tree? No. Never.”

“Never?” He could catch flies with that mouth.

“Of course I had them growing up. My parents always get one. But me, personally, since I’ve lived on my own... no.”

“Holland, you’re like an alien from another planet. What else don’t you like?”

“Carolers. Well, Christmas songs in general. And sappy holiday movies. And mistletoe. My God, do you know how many men go around with a poisonous plant in their pocket just to justify forcing themselves on unsuspecting women?”

“Don’t hold back on me, McQuaid.”

“The worst part of the holidays? New Year’s Eve. Why must every woman be pressured into finding a date for New Year’s Eve? Like if she doesn’t have one she’ll be labeled a pathetic spinster.”

“Ahhh, and so we find the real reason for your complete and utter disdain.”

I narrow my eyes.

He chuckles. “Is it me specifically you don’t want to invite to the party, or all men in general?”

I sigh. “So you know about that?”

“Katarina reached out earlier this week. She wanted to make sure I was free.”

“And are you?”

“No. I have plans. Big plans. Game night with my sisters. It’s a bit of a family tradition. It’s not the same as it used to be. They’re much older—all teenagers now. Nina, who’s almost eighteen, would rather spend time with her boyfriend. Ana said she’s not sure she wants to participate. Said it was for

babies. Tara's the only one who seems okay with it, but probably just to appease my mom." He leans in. "But I suppose I'll go anyway. Unless something better comes along."

He gazes at me, his stare pointed and hard. Almost punishing.

I roll my eyes. "Are you seriously going to make me ask you?"

"Why do I get the idea you don't have to do that often—ask a man out?"

"Because I don't. I mean, I haven't."

"Ever?"

I shake my head.

He grabs my hand. "We're leaving. We have so much to do."

I laugh. "I know, I know. Nine times."

"And during one of those, you're going to ask me out. Properly. As in, *Stryker, would you like to be my date for New Year's Eve?*"

"You want me to ask that—*during sex?*"

He nods slowly. "Oh, yeah."

I giggle. "I almost forgot." I look around then pull my panties out of my cleavage and hand them over.

He gapes at them, then swipes them from me and stuffs them in his pocket. "Holland, that might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Now, go say goodbye to whomever you need to say goodbye to, because in thirty minutes, I'm going to have you screaming my name in that invitation."

CHAPTER TEN



*H*e spouts off an address to the cab driver.

“We’re not going to the Soho Grand?” I ask.

“My place.”

I shoot him a look of disapproval. “Stryker.”

He puts a finger to my lips. “Cool it, McQuaid. It’s not a marriage proposal.”

I guffaw and smack his leg. He traps my hand. He doesn’t even bother looking at the driver to make sure he’s not watching; he just lifts my long dress and runs a hand up my leg. There is enough material to obscure the driver’s view anyway. However, I’m fairly sure the middle-aged Italian-looking man can see the expression on my face.

When Stryker touches me *there*, I try not to be obvious. I keep my cool even though I’m careening on the inside. He leans in and whispers, “Have you been this wet for me all night?”

“Only since you made me remove a certain article of clothing.”

“It’s hot, isn’t it? Going commando.”

My jaw slackens and my gaze goes to his lap. Oh how I wish we were in the back of a limo instead of a cab.

He slips a finger inside me. Then two. I hold still. I’m in total control of my body and my emotions. That is until he declares in a heated whisper, “I’m

going to make you come with just my fingers.” He nibbles my earlobe. “Right fucking here.”

I almost admit he doesn’t have far to go. Stryker touching me secretly in a public place and then telling me he’s going to make me come has my insides wound as tight as a spring.

“Isn’t the Empire State Building amazing with all the Christmas colors?” he says loudly.

He’s not fooling anyone. I’ll bet the driver knows exactly what he’s up to, and somehow that makes this even dirtier. Hotter. So damn forbidden.

His thumb circles my clit as he works two fingers inside me. I’m building, swaying, swinging from the top branch and hanging on by my fingertips. There’s not a big enough mountain on this planet that could stop this freight train.

My head rests back against the seat. I’m beyond caring what anyone sees or hears. My breaths become short succinct puffs of air as my body gets pulled under and churned up by the vortex that is Stryker Taylor.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” he whispers.

That’s it. That’s all it takes. I grab his thigh. Hard. And clamp down on his fingers still inside me, biting my bottom lip to keep from screaming.

When I open my eyes, I’m met with the very amused stare of the driver. I point. “Eyes front, fella.”

He snickers. I’m sure this isn’t his first rodeo.

“Eight more to go,” Stryker says, appearing extremely satisfied with himself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I wake up in a strange place. A man's house. This is a first for me. I always go home. I never sleep over. And now I've basically had two sleepovers with the same guy.

It's early. Stryker is still asleep. I quietly get out of bed, wrap myself in one of his button-downs, and explore his apartment. In the large living room, there's a Christmas tree in front of huge picture windows overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge in the distance. I turn slowly and take in the whole place. It's big—a bachelor pad for sure—but I almost expected more. More opulence. More lavishness. More luxury.

It's modest as far as wealthy sports stars go. I think. I've never actually met one before.

I walk through his kitchen that most chefs would kill for, wondering if he cooks. I open a cabinet, but it's not filled with junk food like mine. It has protein powder, quinoa, oatmeal, and high-fiber bars. Another reveals a case of arnica cream.

I hear a noise behind me and turn to find Stryker leaning against the doorway wearing only black boxer briefs. My mouth waters as if Gordon Ramsay has just put the most phenomenal-smelling breakfast right in front of me.

"See something you like?" he asks.

I cross one foot over the other. “Don’t even think of it. After last night, my vagina might need to go to rehab.”

He laughs and steps forward. “Not *me*.” He waves his hand to the open cabinet. “*This*.”

I shut it. “If you didn’t want me snooping, you shouldn’t have brought me here.”

“Snoop all you want. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“I was actually looking for coffee cups.”

He points. “The far cabinet.”

I pad over, open it, and peruse his collection. I pull out one with a cartoon mushroom on it. He strides over, takes it from me and throws it in the trash. “Not that one.”

I raise a brow.

“It was Monica’s.”

For a moment, I’m jealous. I’m jealous of the ex he was trying to make jealous. I lean against the counter. “Would you take her back?”

“We’ve covered this topic before, Hol. She cheated on me.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“Is her cheating on you the only reason?”

“Do you want there to be another?”

I turn my back on him and fiddle with his coffee maker. He comes up beside me, brushing against my arm as he reaches for the coffee grounds. My eyes close of their own volition, wishing—stupidly—that there *was* another reason.

“I like you wearing my shirt.”

“Is that something else Monica did?” I ask more petulantly than I meant to.

He pulls me against him. “Not nearly as well as you do.”

I choose a different cup and take a seat at the table.

He studies me. “Listen, Hol. I have a past. I have exes, as I’m sure you do. As everyone does. So she had a coffee cup here. She had a toothbrush too.” He looks behind him. “I think she even left one of her bras somewhere.”

“You’re not over her, are you?”

“Oh, I’m over her.”

“Then why do you have all her stuff here?”

“Because I’m busy.”

“Says the guy who has nothing to do but work out until the season starts.” I wave my arm around. “Well, if you plan on having me back here, I’d suggest you get rid of it.” I stand and trap him against the counter. “I prefer to be the *only* woman in a man’s apartment.”

His lips cock into a half smile. “Says the woman who doesn’t do relationships.”

“Who said anything about relationships? I still don’t want some other skank’s panties in a drawer next to your bed.”

He pours me a cup of coffee. “I’ll be right back.”

He leaves the room while I drink and ponder just why in the hell I care that her shit is here. Hell, most times I prefer it. If a guy is into another woman, it’s less likely he’ll pursue me.

Stryker comes back carrying a small trash bag. “Would you prefer we burn everything? Or can I just throw it in the trash bin?”

I roll my eyes. “I may have been a bit overdramatic. I couldn’t care less what you do with her toothbrush. Use it for yourself if it makes you feel better.”

“No, you’re right. It’s time I get rid of this stuff.”

“Why now?”

He leans against the counter. “Holland, I’m not sure you understand the dynamics between men and women. I have a beautiful woman wearing my shirt sitting at my table. A woman I’ve just had the best night of my life with. And she’s telling me she won’t come back if I have traces of my ex. Only an

idiot would keep this shit around after that.”

He fishes the mushroom coffee cup out of the kitchen trash, adds it to the bag he’s holding, exits his apartment—still in his skivvies—and comes back a minute later sans bag.

He brushes his hands off. “There, all done. Now you’re free to come back here with me on New Year’s Eve. Although by the time we actually get here, it will be New Year’s Day.”

I feel heat crossing my face as I remember how I asked him. It was during orgasm number four. Or maybe five. I was riding him on his couch. He was coming at me from every angle. His cock was gliding in and out of me. His thumb was on my clit. Fingers were working one of my nipples. It was the trifecta of sexual perfection. And I shouted his name along with the invitation, just as he insisted I would.

“Yeah, about that. I feel any man in your position would have agreed to anything, including being burned at the stake. I’ll give you a pass if you need one.”

“No pass needed. I’m looking forward to it.”

“To another pretentious evening spent with rich people trying to one-up each other with their success, wealth, and impressive portfolios?”

He strides over and traps me into the chair, his hands on either side of me. “In case you haven’t figured it out by now, McQuaid, it’s not the party I’m going for.”

I look down at my crotch. “Right. At least my vagina should be healed by then.”

He chuckles and pulls me out of the chair. “Come on, we have things to do.”

“You mean *I* have things to do.” I set the cup down. “I have to work today.”

“It’s Sunday. Nobody works on Sunday.” He laughs. “Unless you’re a ball player and it’s March through October. Or if your personal trainer tells

you you're slacking and need to put in extra hours. Or if—"

"See, you understand my job. You might be the only one. Nobody else gets it. I have to work a lot. Hundred-hour weeks sometimes. If I don't, someone else will be all too happy to. Like Hennie Morgan. What if she was the one who designed a dress for a relative that got noticed by Katarina? All of this could be happening to someone else. But it's not. It's happening to me. And it's because I work my ass off."

"So we're two of a kind then. Fine. I'll drop you at work. But it's only eight thirty. Surely there's time."

I crease my forehead. "Time for what?"

"You'll see. Go shower. I'll pick out something for you to wear that's more appropriate than a bridesmaid's dress."

"I thought you just got rid of all of what's-her-name's stuff."

He grins, liking the fact that I don't want to say her name. "I'll find something. Go."

Twenty minutes later, I smell like him. His body wash. His shampoo. I could stand here all day and inhale. I look at myself in the mirror, wondering if it will be a distraction.

"Clothes are on the bed!" he shouts.

I open the door, wander naked to the bed, and laugh when I see what he's left me. A Nighthawk's T-shirt, a pair of sweatpants, and black skivvies. I swallow at the thought of wearing his underwear.

"I know you'll probably swim in them, but I think we can make it work." His eyes wander up and down my body. "Unless you just want to stay like that."

He's wearing sweats himself; ones that are now tented in front.

"Oh, no." I point at him. "Stay back, mister. These thighs are closed for business."

"You can't blame a guy for trying." He walks over, takes the boxers off the bed, and leans down. I step into them, one leg at a time, thinking it's

almost as sensual as having underwear taken *off*. Then he pulls the shirt over my head. “I know it’s big, but I figured you could tie it on one side.”

I gather the material and easily tie a knot, leaving a sliver of my stomach showing.

“Now the pants.” Again he dresses me, and I realize just how much I like it. I’ve been undressed by men a hundred times. But never have any of them bothered to put clothes *on* me. Not until *this* man. Not until Stryker.

There are things going on in my body right now that I don’t understand. Feelings. Emotions. A longing I’ve never experienced. And I’m not sure why I’m fighting it. Maybe because Katarina picked him for me. Maybe because he’s still getting over an ex. Maybe because I was just hired to run a new line by the premier designer in New York.

“They’re too big. But if you sinch them tight and roll them at the waist they might just work.”

I look in the mirror. “I look ridiculous. I can’t go anywhere like this.”

“I have an idea.” He runs out of the room, coming back with a pair of jeans. “Try these.”

I give him the stink eye. He holds up a hand in surrender. “They aren’t hers; I swear. My sister Nina left them here. I have a pair of her sneakers as well if you’d prefer them over the heels you wore last night.”

The jeans fit perfectly. The sneakers are far too big. So I walk out the door wearing an oversized shirt, jeans that aren’t mine, and last night’s pistachio green heels. I’m a sight for sure.

At least Stryker lets me borrow a long overcoat that camouflages it all.

“If we’re meeting anyone, I will kill you and hide the body parts.”

“*All* the body parts?” he asks, playfully elbowing me. “You wouldn’t keep just *one* for yourself?”

“Gross,” I say. “Anyway, I have plenty of toys at home, I don’t need a decapitated penis.”

“Toys?” His brows meet his hairline. “I’d like to see those someday.”

“Where exactly are we going?” I ask as we round the block.

“Almost there.”

We come around a second corner into a small park filled with Christmas trees.

I stop in my tracks. “Seriously?”

“Oh, this is just step one in my plan to get you prepared for the holidays. You even have a holiday name, *Hol*.”

I roll my eyes. I’m doing that a lot with him. Usually I roll them because of the stupidity or the daftness of the man I’m with. With him, it’s different. I almost think I roll them because I’m... smitten.

“That one.” He points.

I put my hands on my hips. “It’s huge. How do you even know it will fit in my apartment? In fact, how do you even know we’re close enough to have it delivered?”

“You aren’t the only one with a laptop and a browser, Holland.”

“My address isn’t public. The apartment isn’t in my name.”

“Okay, so you aren’t the only one with connections that happen to have personal records on their employees.”

“So that’s what you were doing in Katarina’s office? Asking for my address?”

He shrugs. “A guy’s gotta do what a guy’s gotta do.” He turns to the attendant. “We’ll take this one.” He hands the man some cash and a slip of paper. “Deliver it here. The doorman will let you in and someone will escort you to the apartment. Put it—” He looks at me. “Where?”

I shake my head at his audacity. “By the window next to the desk. I’ll clear a space.”

The transaction done, Stryker takes my hand. “There, that wasn’t so hard, now was it? And look, we even have time for breakfast.”

He tugs me toward a diner, pulling his hat low on his forehead so as not to be recognized.

“I’m not used to this,” I say.

“To what?”

“Being handled. Men are usually intimidated by me.” I cock my head.
“But not you.”

“I believe you were the one who handled me last night, Ms. McQuaid. Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Sleep is overrated.”

His head shakes slowly from side to side. “Not if it’s being done next to the right person, it’s not.” He squeezes my hand. “Which reminds me, don’t get out of bed next time. I was looking forward to waking up next to you.”

“I’m not the kind of girl who stays in bed, Stryker. If you want one of those, best go find another Monica.”

He stops abruptly, swipes hair out of my eyes, and looks at me. “What if I said I didn’t want another Monica? What if I said the only woman I want is you?”

CHAPTER TWELVE



“*H*olland?”

I look up to see Hennie standing in my office doorway. “Yeah, sorry. What?”

“I’ve been standing here for two minutes. You must be lost in some design you’re working on.” She walks in without an invitation and comes over to see the blank sketch pad on my desk. “Or not.”

“Was there something you needed, Hennie?”

“I just thought if I spent some time with *The Chosen One*, some good mojo might rub off on me.”

I sit back and try not to sneer. “Hennie, you’ve hated me since day one and now you’re asking me to help you get on Katarina’s good side? News flash. Nobody is on Katarina’s good side. If you want to impress her, just be innovative. Be bold. Be daring. Just whatever you do, don’t break the terms of your contract.”

She laughs. “Just bend them like you did.”

“I made dresses for a family wedding.”

“The family you’re inheriting a great deal from. I’d say that counts as payment, wouldn’t you?”

I’m beginning to lose patience with the woman who has shown me nothing but disdain. And it’s becoming more apparent that she hates me for

my money. “Is there a point to this?”

“That guy you were with last weekend. The baseball player?”

“Stryker?”

“Is there anything going on there? The rumor is he was just doing our boss a favor.”

“You shouldn’t listen to rumors. But in this case, it’s true. He was.”

Even without looking at her, I can feel her judging me. “As long as that’s *all* it was.”

I look up, tired of being the target of her misplaced passive-aggressiveness. “Hennie, so what if that’s *not* all it was. It’s really none of your business.”

“I know his ex.”

So this was an information-gathering expedition. She’s spying for a friend.

“Then you also know she cheated on him. Found some other guy with a bigger bank account and a smaller cock. Whatever it was, she lost her chance. So what he does is no longer her business. Just like anything I do isn’t yours.”

She huffs her displeasure. On her way out the door, she stops at my credenza and pages through one of my sketch pads. I quickly hop up and close it. Nobody sees my designs before they go into production. “Was there anything else?”

She reaches the door and turns. “Just one more thing. Where are you spending Christmas?”

“Same place I always do. With my family in Calloway Creek.”

“Ah, well, happy holidays, Holland,” she says, like we won’t both be working until five o’clock on Christmas Eve like the rest of the staff.

“And to you.”

Mel walks in, watching Hennie leave. She turns to me. “That seemed strange.”

“You’re telling me.”

She goes to her desk just outside my office and picks up a large poinsettia. “This came for you. Aren’t you popular this week?”

I nod to the table on the back wall under the windows. “Just add it to the rest.”

People have been sending me flowers and gifts, all wanting the same thing. To be the next to wear a *Bellasandré Bridal by Holland McQuaid* wedding gown. I stopped reading the cards days ago.

“Holland, you might want to read this one.” She hands me the card.

My eyes snap to hers.

She shrugs. “I’m your assistant, I need to know if anyone is sending you threatening notes.”

I laugh. “Oh, is *that* why?”

“It’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

She leaves and I open the card. There’s a pretty wreath on the front and on the inside it reads *Happy Holidays*. Only, the last part of the second word has been scribbled out and re-written so now it reads *Happy Holland-days*.

And happy they have been, the salutation reads.

It’s signed: *Love, your Christmas Elf*

Who else could it be from? It has to be him.

His words from earlier echo through my head. “*What if I said the only woman I want is you?*”

I thought he was talking about sex. Is he talking about more? And more importantly... am I willing to consider it?

I get the plant off the table and move it to my desk, suddenly more in the Christmas spirit than I can ever remember.

My cell phone rings and Addy’s face appears.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?” I ask.

“Layover. Now spill. Mia texted me. Said you and Stryker couldn’t get out of there fast enough after we left. I need details.”

“Hold on, Mrs. McQuaid.” She giggles when I call her that. “You think I’m one to kiss and tell?”

“Girl, you’ve been one to kiss and tell since we were thirteen years old. You aren’t going to stop now. Plus, we’re officially sisters, you have to tell me.”

“I’m staring at a plant he bought me. A poinsettia. And, Addison, he made me get a Christmas tree this morning.”

“Eeek!” Her squeal is so loud, I have to pull the phone away from my ear. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“Hawk and I have a bet going. He doesn’t think you’ll end up together.”

I scoff. “You guys are betting on me?”

“Not just us, I think there may have been a pool at the reception.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, please tell me I’m going to win. And do it quickly, they just called our flight.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble. Stryker and I are just having fun. Besides, there were still traces of his ex at his apartment. That is definitely not a guy interested in a new relationship.”

More excited shrieks. “Hol, you went to his *place*? You *never* do that. This is serious.” Her voice becomes distant. “Just a minute, this is important.”

“So’s our flight to Tahiti,” I hear Hawk say in the background.

“You’d better go,” I say.

“You can tell me all about it later.”

“Go. Enjoy your honeymoon. We’ll talk when you come back after New Years. By then, there won’t be anything to talk about anyway.”

“I very much doubt that. Okay, I really do have to go.”

“Give my adorable niece a kiss for me. I still can’t believe you’re taking her with you.”

“I’m not sure either of us could spend the holidays without Rivi. Oh, but Hawk did hire a nanny for the whole time we’re in Tahiti.” She giggles.

“How things have come full circle for you. Just make sure he doesn’t fall for *her*,” I joke.

“Holland, you’re the worst.”

“Go have fun. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up, thinking how it wasn’t so long ago that all my brothers were like me. Well, not exactly like me. They were cocky playboys. At least I’m nice. But we all like to have our fun. Addy, although she acts it, isn’t even Rivi’s mom at all. She was her nanny. Hawk had zero intention of changing his ways, getting into a relationship, or even raising his own child. All it took was one person, Addison, to change everything.

I touch one of the red petals on the poinsettia, deep in thought, then finish out my day.

Back at home, the apartment looks totally different. The tree is up. It’s even decorated. Was he here? Or did he pay the guy at the tree place to do this?

It smells like him in here. Of course that could be me, I did use all his shower stuff this morning.

Then I notice a familiar red and green envelope under the tree. It’s from him. I know it. I look around, almost wishing he’d come out of the bedroom wearing nothing but a huge red bow—a present for me to unwrap even though I’m not sure I’m healed from the numerous times we did it last night.

But my apartment is silent.

I open the note. It’s the same holiday card with the same wreath and the same word scribbled out and re-written.

The message is different, however.

I tipped your concierge season tickets to decorate the

tree. I'm out of town for a few days on a ski trip with my parents and sisters, but when I return, I'd rather like to see if he did a good job.

Love, Your Christmas Elf

I turn off all the lights, flop down onto the couch, and stare at the beautiful tree. I realize how much I love it, even though nothing will go underneath it. Christmas has always been at Mom's house, even after she and Dad divorced.

And then... then I do something I never do.

"Alexa, play Christmas music."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Mom proudly serves Christmas dinner. It's her favorite time of year. Especially these days with all the grandkids. And with the exception of Addy, Hawk, and Rivi, everyone is here.

My niece, Izzy, and my nephew, Travis, keep a keen eye on Izzy's brother, Myles, who is not only celebrating Christmas, but his first birthday. Mom went all out. Half the living room is decorated in holiday décor, the other half in a massive blue and white birthday balloon arch.

Mom is totally in her element. She was born to be a mother. Sometimes I envy her. Others, I wonder if raising children and not working outside the home can be satisfying. With my half-sister, Dani, fourteen now, maybe she'll dabble in something. Or maybe she's content doing the charity work she does.

Myles tugs on my shirt. "Up up up." It's one of his only words.

I pull him onto my lap.

"I can take him," my sister-in-law, Willow says. "You should eat."

"Hey, you need to eat, too. Besides, I don't get much time with this little guy. It seems whenever I see him, he's doing something new. I can't believe how well he's walking now."

I balance him on a knee, give him a small slice of turkey, and manage a few bites myself.

“You should come by the new building Hunter and I are renovating,” Willow says. “It’s right around the block from your work.”

“I wasn’t aware you were working again.” I look down at Myles. “Isn’t he a little young to be around a construction site?”

She scorns me with her stare. “People can have kids and jobs, Hol. We have a great babysitter who Izzy and Myles both love. Don’t get me wrong, being a mom is priority number one for me. But I have to have something for myself, even if it is a hobby more than anything. I just love renovating and decorating. Putting my personal touch on something, you know?” She giggles. “Of course you know. You do the same thing every day.”

Travis runs by with one of Myles’ new toys. Myles sees it and squirms out of my lap.

Mom gets up to refill the gravy boat. After she puts it on the table, she stands behind me, puts her hands on my shoulders, and kisses my head. “How about you come caroling with us after dinner?”

I crane my neck and look up at her. “Since when have I ever done that?”

“There was that one year—”

“The year you threatened me within an inch of my life?” I nod to Hunter and Hudson. “How come you never made them come?”

“They can’t carry a tune.” She nods to her husband. “Jonah’s kids, though, they could be in the church choir.”

Colt, one of my stepbrothers, hears the conversation. “Heather, we’ve decided to skip it.”

“We’ve sort of aged out of Christmas carols,” Storm, one of Jonah’s other sons, adds.

Gray says, “We only did it because Dad forced us to anyway.”

Mom looks at Jonah. “Is that true?”

Jonah holds up his hands. “Guilty. I know how much you like Christmas, sweetheart. I was just trying to make it special.”

She walks over and plops herself onto his lap right here at the dining

table. “You make every day special.”

“Get a room,” Hudson says from the other end of the table.

Mom smiles and takes in her family. “We are so very blessed. Do you all realize that?” She extracts herself from Jonah and takes her seat. “So many of us have gotten our happy endings.” She looks at me. “And those who haven’t yet... will.”

My mother. Ever the optimist. Even after being married to my father, who is arguably the biggest narcissistic sleazeball on the planet, she still found her prince.

“At least stay the night, Hol,” Mom says. “Whoever wants to go caroling can join us then we’ll come back for eggnog.”

“I have to be up early for work.”

“Aren’t you the boss now?” Hunter asks.

“I’m forty-nine percent the boss,” I tell him. “Until it’s even-steven, I still have to more than pull my weight.”

“And when might that be?” Hudson asks. “You’ll never get what you want unless you ask for it.”

He’s talking about work, but my brain goes elsewhere. There *is* something I want. Badly. Not a thing, a who. A who who’s currently skiing the slopes of Vail, Colorado. Is he thinking about me? Is he picturing large Christmas dinners full of kids and grandkids with me sitting on *his* lap?

Jeez—where is all this coming from? I really need to spend less time with my family. They’re rubbing off on me a little too much.

My phone buzzes with a text. Probably from Katarina reminding me tomorrow is a workday. She hates holidays. One less day to work, produce, and keep her at the top of the design game.

My smile is enormous when I see the text is not from her.

MR. BASEBALL:

Happy Holland-day!

The text comes with an attachment. It’s a photo of him with his family.

They're all standing in front of a large fireplace, wearing ugly Christmas sweaters. Stryker's sweater looks like Santa's suit jacket that's open down the center, showing off a chubby, hairy, midsection.

I laugh out loud.

"Something from Addy?" Willow asks.

"Yup."

Mom narrows her eyes. "It's awfully early in Tahiti for her to be up, don't you think?"

Crap. Busted.

"Who's the text from?" Hudson asks.

"I don't have to tell you everything."

Dakota whispers to him. His eyebrows shoot up. "No way. You and Stryker Taylor? I mean, I know he came to the wedding, but I thought that was like Addy's wedding gift to Hawk."

"Men." Mom rolls her eyes. "They aren't very observant are they? Did none of you see the way they were dancing? The way his eyes followed her around the room every time she walked away?"

"Mom, that's ridiculous."

"It's true," Willow says. "Everyone was talking about it."

Mom nods to my phone. "So, is it him?"

I shrug.

Hunter swipes my phone like a twelve-year-old. "It's him." He studies the picture. "He looks much better in a Nighthawks uniform. Ugly sweaters for Christmas—that's cheesy."

"I think it's divine," Mom says, looking over Hunter's shoulder. "Looks like a man who loves his family to me. You could do a lot worse, Holland."

I hold out my hand. "Mind if I have my phone back?"

Another text comes through.

MR. BASEBALL:

It's customary when one party sends a photo of themselves, the other will reciprocate.

I take a selfie and send it.

MR. BASEBALL:

Holland, you're wearing blue. Since when is blue a Christmas color?

ME:

You know, Jack Frost. Cold. Blue. It could work.

MR. BASEBALL:

You're full of shit, Hol.

ME:

How's the ski trip?

MR. BASEBALL:

Great. But don't tell anyone. I'm not supposed to participate in any activities that might result in injury. It might negate my insurance policy.

ME:

You're only 25. You have a life insurance policy?

MR. BASEBALL:

It's an insurance policy on my arm.

ME:

You can insure a body part?

MR. BASEBALL:

Sure. It's done all the time, especially in the world of sports. I've also heard of actors who insure their smiles. Models can insure their legs. One very famous celebrity has even insured her ass.

ME:

Okay, wow.

MR. BASEBALL:

You should change into something more festive.

ME:

I don't have anything. I'm at my mother's house.

The doorbell rings. Everyone at the table looks at everyone else wondering who'd be calling on Christmas when everyone we know is here. Hudson goes over to answer it.

"It's probably Tucker and Rose," Mom says. "They spent Christmas with the Calloways but I invited them to stop by."

Hudson comes back with a rectangular box wrapped in holiday tulle with a large red bow. When he hands it to me, I look up. "This is for me?"

"That's what the delivery guy said."

My phone vibrates with a text. I ignore it and look back in the direction of the door. "People deliver things on Christmas?"

"People do all kinds of things if they get paid enough," Hudson says. "Open it."

I hesitate. What if it's an inappropriate gift from Addy? We've been known to prank each other from time to time. I remove the bow and ribbon and carefully lift the lid just a bit so I can peek inside. I laugh, removing the lid completely. I pull out the most hideous Christmas sweater—half green/half red with a large vertical gold ribbon down the middle and a bow that goes from armpit to armpit.

Finally, I check my phone.

MR. BASEBALL:

Send me another picture.

How did he even know the exact moment it was getting delivered? I guess when you make seven million dollars a year, things like that are possible.

I excuse myself, go in the bathroom, put on the sweater, snap a picture in the mirror, then change back into my blue top and text him the photo.

MR. BASEBALL:

Beautiful. I wish I was there to unwrap you. Now send me another one. Right now.

When I don't reply, he sends another.

MR. BASEBALL:

You took it off, didn't you?

I'm not sure how a guy I've only known for thirteen days gets me so well.

ME:

It's embarrassing.

MR. BASEBALL:

What are your plans for the rest of the day?

ME:

I'll be heading home in an hour or so. Work tomorrow.

MR. BASEBALL:

Do you ever take a vacation, Hol?

ME:

Designers don't have an off season, Stryker.

MR. BASEBALL:

Fair enough. See you soon, Holland. Oh, and promise me you'll put on the sweater when you get home. Put on the sweater and enjoy the tree.

ME:

Thanks for that, by the way. I really like the tree. And yes, I promise I'll wear it later at home.

I feel slightly guilty that I didn't reach out and thank him for the tree days ago. We'd exchanged numbers that morning, but I wasn't about to be the first one to text. I didn't want to seem too eager. But that's exactly what I've been: eager. So eager, it's been hard to concentrate on work. And every night for

the past four days, I've looked forward to going home and sitting by the tree he so carefully picked out. Every night I look at the lights and think about the two incredible nights we've spent together. And every night, I wonder if this is for real, or just a holiday fling, something for him to pass the time during his off season.

MR. BASEBALL:

You're welcome. Text me another picture later. You wearing the sweater by the tree. Even better... you NOT wearing the sweater by the tree.

I laugh.

ME:

Bye, Mr. Baseball.

MR. BASEBALL:

See you soon, Hol.

Soon. Suddenly New Year's Eve can't come soon enough.

Two hours later, the kitchen cleaned and my packages all crammed into a large shopping bag, my stepdad drives me to the train station.

Back in the city, walking to my apartment is different. It's the same walk I always do from the subway to my street, but it's changed somehow. Near the entrance to Central Park, I'm acutely aware of couples happily strolling hand in hand, wearing their new coats, scarves, and sweaters. A man in the distance lowers to a knee as snow showers sprinkle the shoulders of his dark jacket. The woman he's with is all too excited to accept the ring he's offering.

Then I think about Addy and Hawk on their honeymoon. The perfect couple in the perfect place.

And for the first time ever, I experience a longing I've never known.

Then, I almost drop my bag when I approach my building. Because, if my eyes aren't playing tricks on me, Santa is leaning near the door, showing all

his manly chest hair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Stryker smiles at me, pulls mistletoe from his pocket, and holds it over his head.

Every cheesy Christmas movie flashes through my head. I want to run over, jump into his arms, and kiss him like the ending to every girl's childhood fantasy. Instead, I play it cool.

"Santa," I say, eyeing his ugly sweater up and down. I flick the white ball on the end of his Santa hat. "You're just so sexy. Is your head cold now that you barely have hair?"

He removes the hat and rubs his head. "It's coming back in already." He leans close. "It's at just the right length to really rough up your thighs." He waves his hand above his head, still holding mistletoe. "You aren't going to leave your Christmas elf hanging, are you?"

I smile and kiss him. It's a respectable kiss on the lips, nothing too flagrant. But he holds me against him like it's a promise for more.

"Now let's go get that ugly sweater on you."

I bite my lip. "I was thinking we'd take yours off instead."

His low, guttural laugh percolates out of him. "There will be time for that later. First, I have other plans."

"Such as?"

He holds up a bag and I look through it. It contains every classic holiday

movie ever made. “Movie marathon,” he says. “You, me, our ugly sweaters by the tree, and”—he closes his eyes, reaches in the bag and pulls out a DVD —“apparently, Richard Attenborough. Unless you’re tired of this one.”

“I’ve never seen *Miracle on 34th Street*.”

His eyes go wide. “Never?”

I shrug. “I told you. I’m not big on Christmas.”

“And I’ve just made it my mission to change all that.”

He picks up another bag at his feet. “What’s in there?” I ask.

“You’ll see. Now are you going to invite me in, or what?”

“What happened to skiing?”

“It was great. But I kind of missed New York. I flew back this afternoon.”

He missed New York, or he missed *me*? The urge to ask is strong. But I don’t. This is all foreign to me.

“Come on, my nuts are freezing out here. And I kind of get the idea I might need them later.”

I laugh. “That’s quite presumptuous.”

“Not after you said you wanted me out of this sweater.”

I play dumb. “That’s just because it’s a stupid sweater.”

“Of course it’s stupid. That’s the point. Now I believe you promised me a picture by the tree.”

We catch an elevator up to my floor. When I stop in front of my door and get my key out, Stryker looks up and down the hallway. “You do realize you’re the only one on this floor without any holiday decorations. I mean, jeez, Hol, spring for a festive doormat, why don’t you.”

“Who has time for all that?”

“Everyone,” he says with a hard stare. “If you don’t take time to appreciate what’s important in life, what’s the point?”

“My job is important.”

“As is mine. But I still stop and smell the roses.”

As soon as we walk through the door, he pushes me against the wall,

shutting the door with his foot. He drops his bags, I drop mine. Hands begin exploring. Lips are everywhere. It's like we're two animals going in for the kill but not knowing where to begin.

His tongue tangles with mine. Then he runs it down the cords of my neck. Then he picks me up, I wrap my legs around him, he walks me to the couch, and we kiss like horny teenagers for ten minutes.

He blows out a long, slow breath and runs his thumb across my swollen lower lip. "Damn, I missed these lips." He looks at the tree. "Nice tree. Jensen did a great job."

"You know the concierge's name?"

"Of course I know his name. I wasn't about to pay someone for a service and not introduce myself."

I study his profile as he admires my tree. "You're different."

"From what?"

"From most of the other rich guys I know."

"Because I don't sleep around?"

"Because you're... nice."

"*You're* nice." He sweeps a piece of hair behind my ear. "I thought everyone in the fashion industry was like Katarina. She's told me how cutthroat it is and that you basically have to eat barbed wire for breakfast to make it. Honestly? When she asked me to escort you to her holiday ball, I was hesitant. I was sure you'd be like her."

"Then why did you? Oh, right. Monica."

"Who?"

"Your—"

He starts laughing. I swat his leg.

"You're different, too," he says, glancing around. "You're the heiress to a fortune and the hottest thing in fashion since the invention of the minidress, but you live *here*? I expected the penthouse at the very least."

"You're disappointed?"

“On the contrary. I’m impressed. Looks like we’re two of a kind.”

“How’s that?”

“Neither of us lets success or wealth go to our heads.”

I glance across the room. “What else is in the bag?”

He hops off the couch and gets everything we left by the door. “First thing’s first.” He sifts through my bag, finds the ugly sweater he sent me, and hands it over.

I unabashedly shed my blue shirt and put on the sweater.

He’s staring like a hungry wolf. “Not yet,” he mumbles to himself, and I smile.

“Where do you want me?” I ask.

“That’s a loaded question, Hol. But for now, how about by the tree.”

I do as he asks, and he snaps some pictures of me. Then he joins me and takes some selfies. He admires one. “Damn, we look good together.”

I look at it over his shoulder. “It’s not exactly like the pictures at the ball or the wedding.”

“No, these are better. They’re regular photos of regular people having regular fun. That reminds me though, what are you wearing to the New Year’s party?”

“Probably whatever Katarina tells me I’m going to wear.”

“You won’t have to kowtow to her for long, Holland. I predict one day you’ll be her equal.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.”

His lips brush my ear. “As long as you don’t let it go to your head.”

Tingles dart through me. His kisses. His touch. Just the way he looks at me—they all have my body in a constant state of arousal. It’s humming. It’s singing. Hell, we’re harmonizing.

He gets the movie out. “You queue this up. I’ll be right back.” He takes the other bag and disappears into the kitchen. Minutes later, he returns with a tray of goodies and two glasses of eggnog.

“Take your pick,” he says. “I have all the traditional holiday stuff. Snowball cookies, rum balls, gingerbread sugar cookies, peppermint brittle, decorated butter cookies, and madeleines. I even have fruitcake.” He turns up his nose. “I wouldn’t try that one though.” He hands me one of the glasses of eggnog. “And this has bourbon in it, so go easy. You don’t want to fall asleep during the movie.”

“What if I do?” I take a sip. It leaves foam on my lip. He wipes it with his thumb.

“If you do, I’ll have to resort to certain tactics to wake you up.”

“Such as?”

He puts the tray of treats and his cup on the coffee table then gently guides me down onto the couch, leans over, his legs between mine, and traps me against the cushion. “Such as reaching under your shirt and pinching those lovely nipples of yours. Maybe toying with your clit. Oh, there are just so many ways.” He sits next to me. “See what you did. Now I have a boner. I’m not sure Santa would approve.”

“You did that to yourself,” I say laughing. Then I snuggle next to him as the movie starts. His arm comes around me as naturally as if he’s done it a thousand times. His thumb traces circles on my arm. He watches the movie, looking as content as I’ve ever seen a man. I glance at the tree and close my eyes.

“Hol? You okay? Would you rather watch something else?”

I shake my head, my emotions almost getting the best of me. I’ve never had a man in this apartment. Not one I wasn’t related to anyway. I’ve never snuggled up with eggnog and watched a movie with one. Never worn an ugly sweater for one. Never wanted more with one.

But more is exactly what I want. More of this. More of him. Just more.

“No. This one is perfect. *Everything* is.”

He kisses my temple, squeezes me, and focuses on the TV.

Me—I try to make heads or tails of the fact that I’m fairly sure I’m living

in a Hallmark Christmas movie. Another fact: in the last twenty seconds, I think I just fell in love.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*I*t's been six days since I had the revelation that I don't want another one-night-stand. Ever.

I'm sitting in front of the mirror, putting on the finishing touches when the doorbell rings.

"Wow," is all Stryker can say when I open the door.

His eyes take me in from head to toe. First, he stares at my hair, at the sparkles I added in various colors to match my outfit. His gaze lowers to my dress, an original design. It's a kaleidoscope of colors, and, depending on which way I turn, the dress will either appear silver, purple, or red. His mouth falls slightly open as he looks at the outside of my thigh through the slit that extends all the way down my left side. I extend my leg through the slit to show off the super strappy heels that complement the dress perfectly. I know my feet will pay the price, but sometimes fashion has to win.

I swear it's minutes before he's done taking me all in. And I can feel his gaze to the depths of my soul.

"Now *that's* a dress," he says.

"Thanks. It's one of my designs. I was surprised Katarina allowed me to wear it. I thought for sure she was going to pick my outfit like she did for the ball."

"I thought you designed wedding gowns."

“Officially, yes. Unofficially, I’ve been designing clothes since high school. I must have a hundred sketch pads full of ideas, a closet full of half-finished dresses, and a secret vault with never-before-seen originals like this one.”

“Secret vault?”

“Okay, so it’s my coat closet.”

He laughs. “Katarina let you wear it because she sees you as an equal.”

“Ha! Nobody is Katarina Bellasandr ’s equal.”

He tugs me close. “Except Holland McQuaid, apparently. Katarina is a brilliant businesswoman. She knows a good thing when she sees it. And she knows damn well you could open your own line and become a direct competitor. Come to think of it, why don’t you?”

“For one, I have no idea how to run a business. I just like to make the dresses, Stryker. I’ve never been the type of person who needs my name up in lights. I mean, yeah, it’s great that she’s given me a line that bears my name, but honestly, I just like to design. Unlike some people I know, I don’t have any desire to take over the design world. And if you don’t believe any of that, there’s a non-compete clause in my contract that extends five years beyond my affiliation with Bellasandr , not to mention that any ideas I come up with during my time with the company belong to the company.”

“You and I are more alike than you know.”

“How’s that?”

“I love baseball. Like, to my core. I’d play for free. I’d play even if I had to live in a broken-down shack. It’s what drives me. It’s my life.”

“The difference is, I bet you’ve *always* felt that way. Before I got my job, I was just another trust-fund kid. I was living in Calloway Creek on my grandfather’s money. I only applied to Bellasandr  because I promised my mother I would. She thought my brain was turning to mush doing nothing but shopping.”

“Were you sketching back then?”

“Every day. Sewing too. I just never dreamed it would actually turn into anything. Although he’s never said as much, I think Pappy may have even gotten me the job. My grades in college weren’t exactly stellar.”

He shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter how you got your foot in the door. All that matters is what you do once you’re inside. It’s no different with me. My dad was a legend. Not to say I wasn’t good back when I got drafted from the University of Florida, but I knew being Brady Taylor’s kid had a lot to do with it. On some level, I think that made me work even harder to prove myself.”

I nod. “For me, it’s the money. People think when you come from money, everything is easy. But the reality of it was I had to work twice as hard as everyone else when I first started at Bellasandré because everyone was scrutinizing the privileged rich girl.”

“See—two peas in a pod.” He motions to the elevator. “Are you ready to ring in the new year?”

He has no idea just how ready. I haven’t seen him since Christmas. The holidays are hectic for designers. And New Year’s Eve is the worst. Everyone wants the perfect dress. The one that’s going to make headlines on TMZ. The entire week has been nothing but fittings and revisions. It was all hands on deck. Katarina pulled resources from every department, including mine, to make sure each celebrity and socialite was taken care of and satisfied.

It barely left time to eat, sleep, or even think. Yet I did. In fact all I did was think. About him. About our three incredible nights together. About how I never dreamed I’d feel about anyone the way I feel about him.

I lock up my apartment and take his elbow.

“You don’t want a coat?” he asks.

“And cover up this amazing dress? Are you kidding?”

He leans down and plants a kiss on my bare shoulder. “If you get cold, just say the word. I’ll give you my jacket.”

It was an innocent gesture on his part, but I feel his lips on my shoulder long after they're gone. Does he have any idea how profoundly his presence has affected me? How his coming into the picture has uprooted my life as swiftly as if a tornado had torn through it? How my plan to become a powerful single woman—one who doesn't need any man—is in complete upheaval? Because somehow, over the period of two weeks, everything has changed. I *do* need a man. But only one man. I need *him*.

At the ground level, he escorts me through the door and to the limo waiting at the curb. "I hope you don't mind sharing a ride with my parents."

I stiffen. "Your parents?"

I barely have time to react when a stunning middle-aged man exits the car. I recognize him from the pictures I saw online when I googled Stryker. He holds out a hand. "Brady Taylor. It's a pleasure to meet you, Holland."

I shake his hand. "And you."

He motions for me to step into the limo. There is a beautiful woman inside. Nearing fifty perhaps. Even sitting, I can tell she's petite. She has brunette hair that falls past her shoulders in loose waves. And for some reason, I love the fact that, like me, she hadn't bothered to pin it up in some fancy updo.

"Holland McQuaid, finally we meet. I'm Rylee Taylor."

Finally?

"It's wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Taylor."

"Rylee please. And wow, your dress. You'll be the talk of the party."

"Holland made it. It's one of her designs," Stryker says, sliding in next to me.

"Well, now I understand how talented you are. And Katarina sings your praises."

I look at her with crazy eyes.

She laughs. "I know, she can come off as queen bitch of the universe. But deep down, she's a lovely person."

Brady leans in. “Deep, deep down.”

We all laugh.

“And how did you come to be friends with her?” I ask.

“Katarina designed a dress for me years ago. But she had difficulty due to getting carpal tunnel syndrome. I’m a physical therapist, so I helped her out.”

“Oh, right. That’s how you met your husband, isn’t it? When he was injured playing baseball?”

Her smile is wide as she looks between me and Stryker. “Yes, yes that’s right.”

Stryker pops open a bottle of champagne. He pours us each a glass, and I love the fact that he hands one to his mother first. “To the new year,” he says. “May it be filled with hopes, dreams, and”—he looks directly at me—“possibility.”

Brady raises his glass. “And a bid for the World Series.”

Stryker laughs. “I’ll drink to that.”

I’ve never met a man’s parents before. I never wanted to. Never had an occasion to. Never liked a guy enough for it to even cross the radar. So I find it fascinating just how well I get along with them. The entire ride is filled with firsts. It’s the perfect start to what I hope will be the perfect evening.

When we arrive, the limo waits in a long line to deposit us on the red carpet. There are photographers everywhere. People line both sides of barriers around the path leading up to the venue. My eyes are glued to the window. “It feels like we’re going to a movie premiere.”

“I did hear Pierce Brosnan would be here,” Rylee says.

Brady kisses her temple. “Trading me in for a silver fox?”

She runs a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “I’m going to have one of those myself in a few years.”

I love the way they look at each other. It’s the way Mom looks at Jonah. The way my brothers look at their wives. It’s the way I didn’t even know I wanted to be looked at—until now.

The door opens. Stryker gets out and then offers me his hand. Brady and Rylee follow.

Unlike Katarina's ball a few weeks ago, this one has reporters on the red carpet and marks for partygoers to stand on to be interviewed in front of backdrops. It really does feel like a movie premiere.

"Stryker! Over here!"

Fans and photographers are all clamoring to get a photo of him. They're yelling for Brady too.

We stop and pose. I try to step aside, but Stryker won't let me. "I'm *your* guest," he murmurs in my ear. "Not the other way around."

"But it's you everyone wants to see."

He puts a hand around my waist, tugging me close. The crowd collectively inhales as if his action was some sort of declaration.

"Stryker! Who's the woman?"

He ignores the shouts from the crowd as we approach the first mark. An entertainment reporter waits for us to get into position then says to the camera, "Not that he needs an introduction, because unless you've been living in Siberia, you know I'm here with Stryker Taylor, pitcher for the Nighthawks. And would you mind introducing your lovely friend?"

"My pleasure. This is Holland McQuaid."

The reporter gives me a second glance. "As in one of the heirs of McQuaid Motor Corporation?"

"As in one of the star designers at Bellasandré," he says.

The reporter's eyebrows rise. "Ahh, am I to assume this amazing gown is a Bellasandré original?"

"It is," I say. "Though I do mostly bridal, this is one of my designs."

There's a commotion to our left and, suddenly, I feel wetness on my neck. Security guards appear and detain someone in the crowd as we're quickly escorted away. Looking back, I get a glimpse of the woman being held. It's Hennie.

“Bitch!” she yells. “That should be me! You’re nothing but a spoiled rich girl!”

We’re ushered inside, past all the other reporters, as she continues to scream at me.

“Are you okay?” Stryker asks.

His parents rush up behind us. “Oh my gosh,” Rylee says. “What just happened?”

“That was Hennie Morgan. I work with her,” I say, my entire body shaking from the shock of the incident. “I don’t understand why she would throw water on me.” I wipe the wetness off my neck, and when I look at my hand, I see it’s not water. It’s paint. Hennie threw paint all over me. I look down at my dress. It’s covered in dark green goo. Shock instantly turns to rage. “It’s completely ruined.”

Rylee takes my elbow. “Come with me.”

She whisks me away to a bathroom, bustling us inside and locking the door behind her. Rylee wets several hand towels and carefully wipes paint off my dress. Despite her efforts, I know it’s a total loss. I sit on the bench near the sink and contemplate the catastrophe I’m wearing. “What do I do now?”

“For one, you don’t let that awful woman ruin your night. It doesn’t matter what you wear, Holland, you’re still beautiful. But I already knew that before tonight. My son has spoken of nothing else for weeks.”

I look up, the ruined dress all but forgotten. “Really?”

“Stryker has a one-track-mind, Holland. Baseball. It’s all he ever talks about. Or it was. Now it’s the beautiful dress designer who hates Christmas.”

I frown. “I don’t hate Christmas. I just never had much of a reason to like it is all.”

“I feel like there might be an ‘until’ in there somewhere.”

I smile. “He calls himself my Christmas elf.”

“Stryker has always loved the holidays. I think part of it is that they fall during his time off when he can really relax and enjoy the season.” Her grin

widens. “And enjoy this off-season he has. I’ve truly never seen him like this. He cut his skiing holiday short to come back and see you. Did you know that?”

“I suspected. But I didn’t want to assume.”

“Assume away, Holland. In case it has escaped you, my son is utterly taken with you.” Rylee takes my hand. “It happens fast, doesn’t it? It’s almost like you know at the first touch. As if our hearts realize it before our heads do.”

“Realize what?”

“That we’re in love.”

I swallow. “It’s far too soon to be throwing that word around.”

She stares at my reflection in the mirror. “Is it?” She stands. “Now let’s go out there and hold our heads high. Your dress is already colorful, what’s one more?”

I laugh. “You’re right. I can’t let her ruin this night.”

I wipe the paint off my neck and turn left then right, surveying the extent of the damage. It’s really not all that bad. If you think about it, there’s probably someone somewhere who has designed a dress with paint on it like this—and probably charged a lot for it.

She holds out an elbow. “Our princes await.”

I decide I like Rylee. She’s married to a baseball legend, someone who’s recognized everywhere they go. I’m sure they have a fat portfolio. Yet she’s as down to earth as the quintessential girl next door.

As soon as we exit, Katarina walks up looking as elegant as ever even though her face is seething as she eyes my dress. “If nothing else, that woman should be jailed for ruining such a masterpiece.”

“I don’t understand what happened.”

“I fired her this afternoon is what happened.”

My eyes snap to hers. “You did?”

“She was stealing designs. From *you*.”

“What?”

“Security contacted me about unusual activity on Christmas Day. Nobody was supposed to be in the office that day. But she was. *Your* office to be exact. Taking photographs of all your sketch books. They went back through security tapes and found she’d done the same to other designers before you. I did some investigating and discovered she’s been selling designs to competitors. I was going to tell you tomorrow. I didn’t want to ruin the evening.” She sneers at my dress. “Looks like she took care of that for us.”

“She didn’t ruin anything—well, except the dress.” I look over at Stryker, waiting patiently with his dad.

Katarina follows my gaze, sees the way Stryker is looking at me, then looks back. “Oh, Lord. What have I gone and done?” She comes close and whispers, “Your children will be gorgeous.” Then she laughs, spins on a heel, and snaps her fingers for her escort to take her arm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



This entire night has been surreal. The collective star power in this room is beyond imaginable. Celebrities. Politicians. Sports stars. TV personalities. I think I even recognize two of the members of the famous band Reckless Alibi.

We drank. We laughed. We danced. Oh, how we danced. My feet are killing me. My calves are sore. But I don't care. It's getting close to midnight and I'm exactly where I want to be.

I brush the palm of my hand across the lapel of Stryker's suit. Paint splattered on him as well. "I'm sorry about this."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. It wasn't your fault. Besides, I'm the one who always wants to match what you're wearing."

I laugh. He always makes me laugh. Even when I don't want to smile. It reminds me of something my mom used to say. I can hear her voice telling me, "There will be lots of good-looking guys out there. Rich ones too. But marry the one who makes you laugh."

Stryker is the whole package. A package I never knew I wanted.

"What is it?" he asks, his voice and expression pensive.

I shake my head and smile. But what I really want to do is tell him. Tell him how in two weeks he's turned my life upside down.

"You look like you want to say something, Hol."

“It’s nothing. I’m just... happy I guess.”

He presses a hand into my lower back, drawing me even closer. “Happy is just *one* of the emotions I’m feeling.”

“One?” I lift a brow.

“Come on, Hol. You feel it too. I know you do. It’s why I wanted you to meet my parents.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and look up at him with sultry eyes. “Are you saying you like me, Stryker Taylor?”

“Oh, I think it’s safe to say I more than like you. I think it’s safe to say I fell for you the moment you got into the limo that first night. Safe to say I haven’t been able to get you out of my head because of how perfect we are together. I’m saying I’m fucking head-over-heels for you, McQuaid. And I also think it’s safe to say that one day, not so far off in the future, you’ll be designing another kind of dress for yourself. One that you’ll wear when you’re walking down the aisle directly toward me.”

My heart is pounding. He said everything I’ve been thinking. About how quickly I’ve fallen for him. About us being perfect for each other. About me dreaming of making my own bridal gown.

The room becomes boisterous as the final countdown to the new year begins.

“New year, new life,” Stryker says, looking down into my eyes.

Everyone starts yelling, “Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one! Happy New Year!”

While fireworks, cheers, and singing carries on around us, he cups my face in his hands, leans down, and gives me the kiss of a lifetime. And I realize the aggregate of my future is spelled out by the touch of his lips. My entire life is being defined by the feel of his body against mine. My very existence has been amplified by finding him.

It becomes clear that my future was determined the moment I stepped into that limo. We are two independent people who somehow become

stronger, more complete, when we're together. He is the other half of my soul.

And suddenly, I'm whole.

EPILOGUE



*K*atarina comes into my office, stopping at the playpen to ruffle her goddaughter's hair. "Hey, sweet pea."

My daughter, her namesake, is just about the only person in this office Katarina is nice to. Me being the other. She doesn't have any children of her own. I'm her family. Stryker and Kat are too. And I'm now a full-fledged partner in *Bellasandré Bridal* by Holland McQuaid.

Technically I'm no longer a McQuaid. I'm a Taylor. But Katarina would have had a seizure if I'd insisted on a name change after nearly two years of smashing success. So I let her win that battle. Because, knock me over with a feather, Katarina has let me win so many more.

I bring Kat with me to work two days a week. Our nanny stays with her the other three. And my weekends are all my own, dedicated to family. Kat and I even occasionally travel with Stryker and the team. I truly am living the dream.

My partner looks at the TV in the corner, tuned to the first game in a Nighthawks' double-header. "How's our boy doing?"

"Great. It's a no-hitter so far." I close the lid to my laptop and walk to the closet in my office, quickly changing from business attire into Nighthawks' superfan gear. I sweep my eleven-month-old daughter out of her crib and strap her into the stroller. "Come on, Kitty Kat, we have a baseball game to

go to.”

Katarina plants a kiss on her cheek, and we head out of the building where a car is waiting at the curb to drive us to the stadium.

By the time we arrive in the suite, game one has ended. I spy Dakota, who’s both my friend and my sister-in-law, carrying eighteen-month-old Eliana and I push the stroller over. I’m determined that since they’re relatively close in age, and cousins to boot, Kat and Eliana will grow up to be best friends. I don’t see her son, Travis, or my brother. “Where are Travis and Hudson?”

“Are you kidding?” she asks. “Trav used to be obsessed with soccer, but since you and Stryker got together, baseball is all that kid talks about. Your brother took him down to the locker room. Stryker is giving them a tour.”

Stryker comes up to the suite before the second game, sweeping Kat into his arms and blowing strawberries on her cheek, eliciting the most adorable giggles and squeals. Like he still does with me, Stryker makes her laugh every single day. Thanks to technology, we spend hours face-to-face even when he’s traveling.

“Dada!” she says.

Stryker and I freeze and look at each other in surprise. Kat just said her very first word. And how fitting that it was that one. They have such an amazing relationship. I’ve never seen a father so attentive. So devoted. So mesmerized by his child.

“Oh, my gosh. She just said my name!” he gushes.

My husband. I smile in wonder and awe. He’s a big guy. A force of nature. Yet he’s just been brought to his knees by a toddler. He’s holding back tears. Lord, I love this man.

He puts Kat down and kisses me. “Have I told you lately that I’m the luckiest sonofabitch who ever walked the earth?”

I laugh as he pulls me close. “Yes, Mr. Baseball, you have. Every single day.”

He nods to the door. “Gotta go to work now.” He smiles down at our daughter. “But what do you say when we get home, we make another one of those?”

I don’t have to talk. There’s no need to answer. Since the moment we met, Stryker and I have always understood each other. We’re connected in a way few people can understand. We read each other’s thoughts. Finish each other sentences. Our love transcends space and time.

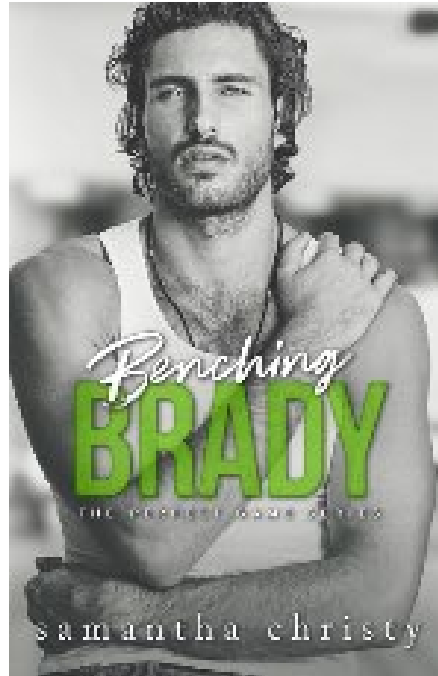
What he doesn’t know, however, is that another baby has already been made.

He turns back one more time before leaving, stops, looks down at my belly and smiles.

Okay—so maybe he does.



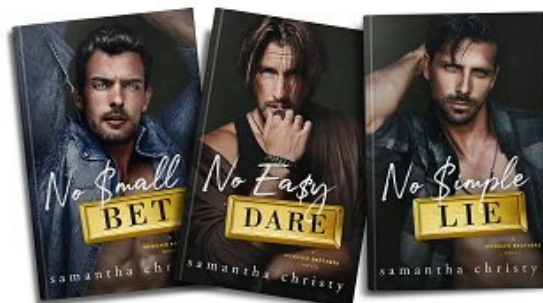
Thank you for reading my very first novella. I hope you enjoyed Holland and Stryker’s story. To learn more about Stryker’s childhood and journey into baseball (and his hottie dad, Brady), read [Benching Brady](#).



Universal link: <https://geni.us/BenchingBrady>



To find out how Holland's former trash-talking brothers got their HEA's, dive into the [McQuaid Brothers series](#).



Universal link: <https://geni.us/McQuaids>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gah! My first novella. And I loved the experience so much, I can tell you with certainty, it won't be my last.

It was an impulsive decision to write *Love By Design*. You all wanted Holland's story, but I hadn't worked her into the next series – the *Montana Brothers*.

A quick and unplanned book, I didn't even have time to use any beta readers. But I must generously thank my ARC team and my editor, Michelle Fewer, for working me in very last-minute, especially around the holidays.

The real genius here is my invaluable assistant, Julie Collier. Julie not only designed the amazing cover but came up with the title as well. I truly couldn't do this job without her.

Now... onto the loveable Montanas and their winery. Blake, Dallas, and Lucas will all be put through trials and tribulations to get their HEAs. I can't wait for you to go on their journeys.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Samantha Christy's passion for writing started long before her first novel was published. Graduating from the University of Nebraska with a degree in Criminal Justice, she held the title of Computer Systems Analyst for The Supreme Court of Wisconsin and several major universities around the United States. Raised mainly in Indianapolis, she holds the Midwest and its homegrown values dear to her heart and upon the birth of her third child devoted herself to raising her family full time. While it took time to get from there to here, writing has remained her utmost passion and being a stay-at-home mom facilitated her ability to follow that dream. When she is not writing, she keeps busy cruising to every Caribbean island where ships sail. Samantha Christy currently resides in St. Augustine, Florida with her husband and four children.

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