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## Chapter 1

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**H**olly Evans-Winters walked into her apartment and dropped her bags. As she looked around, she sighed deeply. Who would have ever thought that a little over a week ago, when she'd left this very apartment for a week's vacation in the mountains over the Christmas holiday, she would return to it *married*? And to the very man she'd always thought to be the most arrogant ass she'd ever known? But it had happened—and all so quickly.

On her first night at the lodge in the mountains, she'd run into Christopher Winters, a co-worker, a competitor for a partnership in the law firm they both worked for. In fact, she'd just landed the partnership a few days before that, the same one they had both been competing for. She had beaten him for the position, but with the stipulation that she agree to act as second chair in a huge case after the holidays. Second chair to Christopher! If they won the case, he would also be made partner. So, she had already been stewing about having to work with him when he had shown up at the same lodge, with the same idea to spend his holiday there alone.

He had asked her to dinner, and she'd reluctantly accepted

his invitation, chalking it up to a business dinner. However, that couldn't have been further from the truth.

As it turned out, over the next few days, Chris had admitted that he had feelings for her, teased her about taming the office ice princess, as the men referred to her, and challenged her. He'd told her that if he wanted a woman, he would make her fall in love with him. And, apparently, he wanted Holly.

Holly had a secret, though. She was also attracted to him, even though she sparred with him often and thought him to be arrogant. She'd made a deal with herself never to date a co-worker, which was what had earned her the nickname of the office ice princess.

So, it had been a struggle. In the end, he'd won her heart, talked her into marrying him while they were in the mountains and staying an extra few days to honeymoon, and had even managed to get her to agree to try a domestic discipline marriage. How had he done it? Only by being the sexiest, sweetest, most dominant man Holly had ever been with, that's how. He'd given her just enough of a glimpse into what they could have together to convince her to throw caution to the wind and take the plunge and to heck with her old-fashioned ideas about being with a co-worker. Hell, the owners of the law firm were married to each other. And it seemed that everyone in the office had known about Chris's affection for her but Holly herself.

So, they'd eloped at a little chapel in the mountains and spent the next few days in bed. Now, though, it was back to reality. They had to go to work tomorrow and begin preparing for the big case that would determine Chris's future with the firm.

They'd discussed it and agreed that she'd return to her own place that night. After all, things had happened so unexpectedly, neither of them had been prepared. So, over the weekend, she would pack her things and move to his place, subletting her place. While she was doing that, her new husband would make his condo ready for his wife. For tonight, though, she was here

alone, and she needed to get ready for the first day back after the holiday before she could even begin to think about all the packing and moving.

Wearily, she picked up her bags and carried them into the bedroom to unpack. Once she'd done that, she got ready for bed. She and Chris had stopped for food before he'd dropped her off. Then they'd kissed for what seemed like hours before she had finally come inside. Now, all she wanted to do was get things ready for tomorrow and crawl into bed. It had been an eventful vacation, and she was still in shock, not to mention tired. And in the morning, everyone in the office would know that she was now Mrs. Christopher Winters.

Mrs. Christopher Winters. She rolled the name around on her tongue a few more times. She liked it. And she was happy. Really happy, for the first time in a long time. Christopher had proven to her that he was everything she needed and wanted in a man. Her family had barely batted an eyelash at the news of their marriage. It seemed everyone was happy with the situation. But reality was going to set in fast when they returned to work in the morning. The big case she and her new husband were going to be working on was an important one. How were they ever going to be able to blend their professional lives with their personal one? She was concerned, but when she'd mentioned it to Chris, he'd assured her they would be fine. He was a bit more optimistic than she was, but she was determined to make it work. She loved him, and she loved her job. It had to work out!

When she had just settled in between the sheets, her cell rang and she answered immediately, "Hello, baby, are you settled in for the night?"

"Just climbed into my lonely bed. How about you?"

"Same. This doesn't seem right, does it?" Holly laughed softly into the phone.

"It's only for tonight. After work, tomorrow, you can pack enough to get you through until the weekend and come here. I've

cleaned out some drawers and space in the closet for you. This weekend, we'll get more. I can't stand being away from you for more than one night."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll see if my brother is available to help us this weekend. Maybe the rest of the family can, too. If enough people help, maybe we can get it all moved at once."

"Hopefully, they'll be able to. That will make things go much faster. I'm going to let you get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be nuts, you know."

"I know. I miss our little mountain retreat already. I love you."

"I love you, too. Want me to pick you up in the morning?"

"Sure, at least we can walk into the office and face the barrage of questions together." She laughed again. "You know there will be plenty."

He chuckled and replied, "I'm sure everyone will wish us well. We'll take some good-natured ribbing, for sure, though. I'll swing by around eight. Sleep well, baby."

Holly turned out the light and placed her cell on the nightstand, remembering to plug it into the charger before she rolled over and attempted to get some much-needed rest.

The next morning, she was up early, glad that she'd had the good sense to do her laundry before she left the lodge. This way, she could just throw some things into a bag and be ready to head over to her new home with Chris after work.

She made a cup of hot coffee in her Keurig and lingered over it before she took a shower and dressed for the office. As she looked through her closet for something to wear, she finally decided on a dark blue dress with a matching jacket. She slid her small feet into a pair of black pumps and grabbed her laptop and purse before she went back out to the coat closet for her long, wool coat. It was cold outside, according to the weather report she had listened to while she was getting ready, so she added a scarf and gloves.

Holly waited for Chris to pick her up, and he was right on time.

He stepped inside her apartment when she opened the door and pulled her in for a quick kiss. "I missed you last night. Whose idea was it for you to stay here again?"

She laughed. "I think we agreed it would be the easiest thing to do. But don't worry; I'll come home and grab some things and be at your place before you even have dinner ready."

"Me? Have dinner ready? Who said that?" he teased. "Pasta, right? See, I didn't forget."

"We should get going. Traffic will be atrocious the first day back after a holiday."

"Oh, so we're back to professional Holly Evans now." He chuckled. "Ice princess extraordinaire."

"Watch it there, Mr. Winters. If you want me to help you win that case—"

He interrupted her with another kiss. "I promise to behave." He took her laptop bag from her and walked with her to his car.

Several minutes later, they walked into the office, where most of the staff had already gathered as if they were waiting for them to arrive. How had they known already? Of course! Carol, one of the firm's owners, must have called them to give them all the news. Now, Holly wondered what they had planned.

A cake was wheeled out, amid congratulatory shouts from their co-workers. Someone pushed her forward, so that she could see what was written on the cake. "Congrats, Holly and Chris." *How original*, she thought as she looked up and smiled.

"Winters, you old dog, you," someone said as he patted her husband on the back.

"We all knew you had it bad," another man said.

The women were crowding around her, asking about the wedding.

Carol finally stood in the front of the office common area and shouted above the other voices, "Give the newlyweds some

time, you guys. Holly, Christopher, we just wanted to throw a small party for you before we all settle into work for the new year. This marriage has been a long time in the works, whether the two of you knew it or not. We're all very happy you finally came to your senses. Grab some coffee, everyone, and we'll cut the cake before we get down to business. Cake for breakfast after all that holiday food. What was I thinking? Diets start tomorrow!"

Holly sat down with a slice of cake someone had handed her and a cup of coffee. Chris sat beside her, and they talked to each co-worker as they came through a makeshift receiving line.

"I can't believe you guys eloped! Didn't you want us at the wedding?" one girl asked with a grin.

"I think it's so romantic. A secret wedding in the mountains over the Christmas and New Year holiday," another one said.

On and on it went. Finally, Holly told them all that her family was planning a reception, and she would make sure they were all invited.

When the food had been put away and everyone slowly drifted to his or her own office, Carol and her husband Nick came over to offer their own well-wishes before they were finally free to start to work.

"Let's meet in my office to start discussing the case," she suggested to Chris. "I'll put the coffee on."

"I'll grab the notes I made before I left for the holidays and meet you in a few," he said as he turned to Nick, who was waiting to speak with him.

Holly went to her office, unlocked the door, and gathered the materials needed to work before starting the coffee pot. When Chris joined her, he looked worried.

"What's up? Did Nick say something to upset you?" she asked as she poured two mugs of coffee and handed one to him.

Chris sat down, taking the mug from her. "He wanted to tell me some things about the case. It seems we are going to have our

work cut out for us. The witnesses in the case are all suddenly refusing to cooperate."

"That makes sense, don't you think? Their employer has gotten to them, obviously. Probably offered them something to keep quiet or maybe even threatened them."

"Oh, I'm sure that's the case. But without their testimonies, it's going to be difficult to prove wrongdoing."

"We have some of the facts and figures," she reminded him. "And our client, who is also a former employer, hasn't dropped the case yet."

"She is under protection, so, hopefully, she'll stick with us and see it through to the end."

"This could get ugly," Holly pointed out.

"Yes, it very well may," Chris agreed as he took a sip of coffee. "Let's go over what we know so far, okay?"

Holly agreed, and they got down to work.

"Hawthorne Plastics is a very big company. They've been in business for several years and have grown extensively in the last five, since the original owner's sons took over," Chris said as he read over his notes.

"Our client is accusing them of environmentally unsafe practices and loss of personal income. She claims that in her position as a supervisor, over the past two years, the company has done some questionable things, and since that time, profits have soared."

"Which led her to believe the two are connected. She is of the impression the mob is behind this, and that her bosses are working for them. They are doing these unsafe practices in order to bring down expenses and fatten their wallets. The police blew her off, so she thinks there is a connection there, too. Like, maybe the mob has them in their pocket as well," Chris explained.

"So, she was fired and is bringing suit against the Hawthorne brothers. Word got back to the bosses that she had tried to blow

the whistle. But not all the police can be crooked, since they are offering protection."

"No, the police are not protecting her. Nick hired a private security firm to protect her."

"Oh, I see," Holly replied as she took the notes Chris handed her.

"Old Mr. Hawthorne must be rolling over in his grave. He prided himself on building his company from the ground up, and he was known to be an honest man. What happened to the boys, I wonder?"

"Must have been given an offer they couldn't refuse. Or they're greedy. Or both," Holly surmised.

"Like I said, we have our work cut out for us. We need to contact some of the witnesses."

"I doubt they'll talk to us, if what Nick told you is true," Holly said.

"Doesn't mean we can't try."

"Why don't I arrange a meeting with our client, Sally Ford?" Holly suggested.

"Good idea. You do that, and I'll try to make contact with some of the other witnesses who were backing her up and have now stepped back."

Chris got up to go back to his own office to make his calls while Holly picked up the phone on her desk. She waved to him as he left and waited for Ms. Ford to answer. Nick had given Chris the number to a private number to reach the woman, in case her own phone was tapped, and he had given it to Holly before he left her office.

After the third ring, a voice came on the line, "Hello."

"Ms. Ford?"

"Y-yes. Who is this?"

"It's Holly Evans. I wondered if we could meet for lunch today?" Holly asked, using her maiden name. She and Chris had decided that she would continue to use it for her professional



name, although her new legal name was actually Holly Evans-Winters.

"Um, okay, where?"

Holly told her to meet her at the office at noon. She asked the woman what she would like, explaining that she would order take out for them.

Sally and her guard joined her at exactly twelve o'clock.

"Ms. Evans, this is Bruce," Sally said as she introduced them.

"Bruce, thank you for bringing Ms. Ford to speak with me. I appreciate all your company is doing to help us."

When the food arrived, Holly handed out the sandwiches, and they began to talk while they ate.

"Sally, may I call you by your first name?" Holly asked.

"Of course, Ms. Evans."

Holly smiled. "I asked you to come here today so that we could get to know one another informally over lunch and to ask you a few questions. We'll be meeting quite often in the near future, so I thought this was a good way to get acquainted. I know you met Mr. Blair before the holidays. Chris Winters and I will be handling your case together. Unfortunately, Mr. Winters is meeting with some of the other witnesses and can't join us today."

Sally's eyes widened. "But I thought they had all refused to cooperate."

"We're trying to change that. Hopefully, he will be successful in convincing them. A few of them are still with us, however."

"This is all such a mess. I know it's the right thing to do to report what's been going on, but I never thought it would get this ugly," Sally said. She took a bite of her pickle spear and looked nervously at Bruce.

"Have threats been made against you?" Holly asked.

"Mr. Hawthorne—Jack, he's the youngest brother—called and asked me to come back to work. He said we'd forget this whole thing ever happened. He would show me that they weren't

doing anything wrong. Even offered me a promotion with a huge raise."

"When did this happen?" Holly asked as she picked up a pen and started to take notes.

"Right before Christmas," the woman replied.

"And you obviously told him no," Holly remarked.

"I told him I had no desire to work for his company any longer. He then asked if I would reconsider the lawsuit. I hung up the phone."

"How did you discover that they were burning plastic?" Holly asked before taking a bite of her own sandwich and washing it down with soda.

"In my position, I had access to certain invoices. I kept seeing bills from the same company. When I researched them, I figured out what was going on. You see, I've always been very aware of environmental issues. It wasn't hard for me to put two and two together. And when you've worked with plastics for as many years as I have, you know the proper ways to dispose of it. I didn't okay the burning, and I don't know who did. It was obviously someone in the upper offices, as it is usually my job to take care of waste."

"And this led you to believe that this company was billing them for the burning of plastic, which causes chemicals and poisons to enter the air. What makes you think they are mob-related?"

"More research. I am not a dumb blonde, Ms. Evans. I know my stuff. I didn't make this all up to get money out of the Hawthorne boys. Believe me, I wish none of this was happening. My life is a living hell right now. I'm living off my savings."

"You didn't answer my question. It's okay, take your time. I'm on your side, remember?"

"You've heard of the Cantelli family? Well, upon investigating, we found that the owner of this disposal company is none other than Gino Cantelli. I hired a private investigator after the

police refused to take me seriously. Gino is a relative of Anthony Cantelli, the head of the family."

"But are we sure he is connected to the family businesses?"

"Whether he is or not, I would bet my ass Anthony has a hand in it, even if Gino isn't aware. These people are well known to some of us. Anthony Cantelli and Jim Hawthorne are friends, or associates, at least. Anthony has been around the plant and the offices many times. Now, as far as I know, Jim and Jack have no idea I've even mentioned the mob. I didn't say anything about that to the police, only to Mr. Blair when I retained the services of this law firm."

"Good."

"Like I said, I take this very seriously. I've been involved in saving the environment for several years, ever since my dad was diagnosed with Mesothelioma and later passed away."

"Were your employers aware of your interest in the environment?"

"Not that I know of, at least not until I filed this suit against the company."

Holly and Sally talked for a while longer and said their good-byes, with Sally promising to call if she thought of anything else.

When Holly relayed what she'd learned to Chris later, he said, "I was able to speak with two of the original witnesses. Let me fill you in tonight. Let's get you home so you can pack and get to my place. I'm not sleeping alone again tonight."

It had been a long day, and Holly was more than happy to comply.