CHAPTER THREE

IAN & HOLLY

Unscripted, Unstuck

"For the last time, NO!" Carter Reins snapped as he stomped through the television studio's newsroom, side-swiping desks and disrupting the handful of reporters typing away on their laptops. They rolled their eyes and returned to their work, as they witnessed similar rants from the Big Boss before.

As if still in his "terrible twos," Carter continued to repeat the word "no," almost in sing-song fashion. He should have already outgrown this behavior, given he was nearing retirement. Trailing behind Carter was a reporter half his age, Ian McConnell, whose flailing arms and sweat-stained collared shirt communicated his frustration. Like the classic Tom and Jerry cartoon, the duo were as much cat-and-mouse adversaries as they were codependent, love-hate pals.

"No, no, no, no, no, and no," huffed Carter. "Shall I sing it to the tune of 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town'? Will you hear me then?" He paused abruptly to take off his jumbo thick-rimmed glasses, an homage to Harry Caray who everyone knew was his favorite baseball sportscaster from his childhood. In the process of Carter's sudden halt, Ian nearly collided with

his boss's backside and stopped just short. Unfortunately, when Carter turned around to face him, Ian couldn't hop back fast enough to escape bumping into Carter's oversized belly.

"Carter, please just listen to the whole story before you shoot it down." Ian ran his fingers through his thinning hair. He thought it ironic that his five-o'clock shadow seemed always at the ready to emerge by noon, and he wished the same were true for what used to be his thick mane of mossy brown hair. For every bit of stubble that grew on his chin, he seemed to lose at least twenty hairs from up top. "Grass doesn't grow on busy streets" he tried to remind himself, not that it actually helped his balding. He was only 32, but he felt twice that age and, sometimes, even older. He thought that by now, his life would have gotten easier. The exact opposite was turning out to be true. And no matter how hard he tried to make things work the way he wanted them to, life had other ideas. Just like Carter did now.

Carter yanked on the bottom of his slightly rumpled shirt, pulling out a corner that was struggling to stay tucked into his waistband. He breathed heavily onto the lens of his spectacles until a layer of fog coated them. As he slowly wiped the glasses with his shirt, he let out an annoyed grunt. "Fine. Get to it. I'm listening…"

Ian knew he had just seconds to speak, so he inhaled deeply and began. "Christmas Miracles. Peace on Earth. Goodwill to Men. Carter, that's what it's supposed to be about. But shopping always brings out the worst in peop—"

"No. Now go away." Carter turned his back again to Ian and resumed marching toward his office.

Ian felt his shoulders sag as he lowered his head in momentary defeat, hearing the sound of his boss slamming his office door. The entire newsroom of staffers continued with their duties as if nothing had transpired; this battle between the two played out daily in some form or fashion.

"Damn it." Ian swore louder than he intended. For three years he'd been slaving away, covering the simplest stories at Chicago's WACK-TV: Little League, the Police Blotter, and Neighborhood Council meetings along with school lunch programs and promoting celebrities he'd never

even heard of, let alone admired. He did not become a journalistic reporter just to waste away doing this nonsense.

A voice suddenly piped up from behind. "For what it's worth, I think it's a great idea."

Ian turned around. All he could see was an unchaperoned video camera sitting on the desk from where the voice seemed to originate.

He looked around, puzzled. "Come again?" he said.

Slowly rising from underneath the table just behind the video camera, a bandana-covered head emerged. The bandana was covered in pink unicorns dancing atop a black background. Holly, the cherub-faced intern with blonde pigtail braids that made her look as if she still belonged in grammar school, rose to her feet. Lifting a power cord to eye level, she shook the snakelike coil as if it were alive.

"Power cord. We're gonna need it." She winked.

"What are you talking about?" Ian knew of Holly's bold reputation. Her childlike wonder and unwavering fearlessness were evenly matched with her creative storytelling and wicked technology skills. He knew without a doubt that this station—and probably many others—would offer her a job before even graduating from Columbia College where, he had heard, she was studying on a full-ride scholarship.

"Oh, Ian, trust me, I get what you want to do and why," she smirked. "I, too, would be bailing if I were stuck like you."

"Stuck? I'm not stuck."

"Huh, really? Well, okay. If you don't want to…"

"Want to what, exactly?" Ian was as annoyed as he was intrigued.

"Come on, now. We both know. You're sick of sticking to the script, sitting on the sidelines, proclaiming the 'good news' like you're some sort of trumpeting Gabriel. You want to do stories that get people riled. The ones where you gotta pick a side. The kind that go viral. You're sick of vanilla. You don't care who's nice. You want to expose the naughty people on Santa's list." She folded her arms, power cord still held in her hands. "Am I right?"

"Uh, not exactly," Ian shrugged, feeling a little sheepish.

"Oh, no? Okay." Holly flung the power cord over her shoulder and grabbed the video camera. "Never mind then."

Ian felt a spark ignite inside his chest. She was right—he *hated* vanilla—but he didn't want to admit it to her face. "No. Wait. Okay. Yes. Sort of."

"Well, which is it?"

Ian swallowed and nodded. "Yes," he said, not quite fully committed.

"Awesome." Holly fist-pumped the air. "So, what are we waiting for? It's Christmas Eve! One good old-fashioned last-minute shopping brawl at the mall is all we need. Hey, that's what we could call it—Brawl at the Mall."

"Great, Holly, except what about Carter?"

She smirked and quoted her favorite book's title, "*Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History.* That's MY motto, but, hey, if you gotta get Daddy's permission to chase a story…"

Ian's ire rose at Holly's words. "I don't need anybo—"

"Besides, once Carter sees the ratings it'll bring in, he'll be taking all the credit. You know it. And then you'll be able to write your own ticket. You'll finally get yourself out of community outreach stories and into hardcore news. Isn't that what you've always wanted?"

He slowly nodded. "What's in it for you?"

"I need it for my reel," Holly whispered. "It's the only way I'm gonna get noticed by anybody that really matters."

Ian looked toward Carter's closed office door. A beat later, he turned to Holly. "I'll drive."