

**Holly Day and the Influencer**

(Holly Day #2)

by

Gail Vallance Barrington

Holly looked over the rim of her budget latte at Malcolm, her lovely blue eyes wide with astonishment. “He said what?”

Malcolm took a sip of his coffee. He was stalling. He knew he was wading into deep waters. “He said no one needs a ditzy blonde these days. He’s already hired some other guy.”

Holly rolled her eyes and blew her bangs off her forehead. She fingered the tiny diamond winking at her throat.

“Robart, the smug bastard. I only rescued him from disaster last week.” As director of the cooking show she so briefly starred in, he called all the shots.

*If I’m going to make it in Hollywood, I need to be more strategic.*

“Okay, Malcolm. Tell me what the boys are up to.”

The boys were all those handsy chefs she’d worked with during her short climb up the ladder of Kitchen Assistant. In each of the shows she’d worked on, most of the chefs were egotistical, arrogant, misogynistic, and stoned.

Malcolm was her only confidant in this heartless city. After gazing at the ruin of a soufflé they’d produced together in cooking class, they became fast friends. He was a novice food writer, always on the hunt for a good story, hoovering up information wherever he could find it. He often hung out with the chefs after work to get the latest scoop.

“What’s the one thing these guys want the most?”

“Fame, fortune, fawning fans on social media,” mused Malcolm.

“That’s the easy stuff. What else do they want?”

“You mean like cookbooks, movie contracts, TV shows?”

“Yeah. How do they get famous enough to do that?”

“One word. Influencers.”

“Who?” A faint line appeared between her perfect brows. This whole influencer thing had passed her by. Maybe it hadn’t happened in the Midwest.

He listed the world’s top ten food influencers, pulling the information out of the arcane filing cabinet in his head.

She looked at him. “How do you even know this?”

“Just doing my job,” he said modestly. He crossed his scrawny legs, admiring his vintage oxfords. Then he launched into a sound bite on food influencers, their blogs, brands, followers, impact on food trends, and huge incomes.

“So how do we meet them?”

Malcolm laughed. “If I knew that, Babe, my career would be golden. You think Gordon Ramsay wants to meet the likes of us?”

“Oh.” She thought for a moment. “We could start a bit smaller, I guess. Who’s a famous influencer around here?”

“Scarlett Brown.”

“Well, let’s start with her.”

Scarlett was the daughter of a famous restaurateur. She grew up in the food industry and no one could call her ditzy. Two degrees in food science, an apprenticeship under a well-known chef, and now a local legend. But Holly discovered she didn’t have that influencer aura she’d expected. No stilettos and pouting lips. Instead, she looked plain, broad, and short. She also had a killer smile that was full of mischief.

“She has great people skills,” said Malcolm.

“You’ve met her?”

“I heard her speak at an L.A. Times event last year. She’s very down to earth. You’d never know that she’s a millionaire.”

Holly’s hopes plummeted. Her famous grandmother’s money had gone to support a foundation for homeless horses. She was on her own.

He grinned. “And she’s having a news conference next week to announce her new book. I can get tickets.”

“Now I know why I like you.” Holly squeezed his arm.

At the news conference, she drank in the buzz. Lights, cameras, milling journalists, pulsing crowds, this was the life for her. After Scarlett finished speaking, Holly wormed her way to the front of the room. In the skirmish, an elbow rammed her back, propelling her into Scarlett’s arms. Rearing back in surprise, Scarlett punched her in the jaw. Holly stumbled to her knees, pain ricocheting through her head. She heard a series of clicks.

*Oh no. Cameras!*

She crouched in horror, arms shielding her head, as her plans deflated like sad, wrinkled balloons. Her sparkle fled. At the same time, though, the blow washed away her resentment, her anger with everyone who disparaged her talent. She felt lighter somehow.

Still disoriented, she rubbed her cheek and, looking up at Scarlett, blurted, “You owe me. Can we have coffee?”

Scarlett broke into a loud guffaw. “Well, that’s one way to get my attention. Okay, let’s do it. I’ll have my assistant contact you.” A young woman in tall boots took Holly’s information.

The video went viral. ‘Influencer Punches Starlet.’ There was even a clip from Holly’s Christmas show.

The journalist whose elbow propelled her into fame was struggling with his camera bag when his arm flew back. He apologized. His network apologized. Scarlett’s public relations manager apologized. They all offered money. Holly refused.

“I earn my own money,” she said.

She scurried to work shrouded in a large scarf, while the swelling on her face bloomed purple and green, and later, yellow. By the time she sat down with Scarlett, the bruises were gone. Scarlett stared at Holly, her eyebrows raised. Holly sensed her impatience. She drew in her breath.

*Make it good. This is your only chance.*

“It’s because of my famous grandmother,” she began.

Scarlett looked blank.

So, Holly gave her a brief history and described her destiny to become a star.

“Good luck,” said Scarlett. “Hollywood echoes with the sound of failed starlets trudging the other way. You’ll never make it here as an actor. Everything’s international now.”

Holly slumped in dismay.

“The food industry is a better choice. Look at me. I have tons of followers on TikTok, a national food column, a couple of cookbooks. But even though my father is famous, I still work hard to get attention.” She thought for a moment. “Maybe you could start a blog. You need a hook, though, something special that people want.”

“Whatever that is,” sighed Holly.

“What are you talking about? Nostalgia is in. There’s got to be a connection somewhere.”

Holly played with her necklace, her eyes thoughtful as Scarlett tapped on her phone. “Let’s take a quick photo. Then I’ve got to go.” Her camera crew trooped in and took a few shots of the new best friends. Holly sparkled for the cameras. They sparkled back.

As she left, Scarlett called over her shoulder, “Keep in touch. I want to know what happens.”

“You do?”

“Sure, why not. I was in your shoes once.”