

Chapter One

The rain sounded a lot like sleet as it tap-tap-tapped against the window. Elinor “Elle” McAlister looked up from her computer monitor, craning her neck to stare down eighteen stories to the streets of Manhattan. Umbrellas of all different colors navigated the sidewalks, bobbing and weaving around one another like the blobs on the screen of a first-generation video game.

“Ugh,” her coworker Suni groaned from the other side of their shared cubicle wall. “The airport is already a zoo during Thanksgiving week. This weather will make everything ten times worse tonight.”

Elle stood, stretching her back as she grinned down at her friend. “And now you know why I’m staying put in the city.”

Suni leaned back in her chair. “I still think you’re crazy.” She shook her head. “I’d have the worst case of FOMO if I didn’t get to enjoy my mom’s mac and cheese for Thanksgiving dinner. Don’t get me wrong, the forced family fun drives me crazy. But that’s what makes it Thanksgiving, right? No way would I voluntarily miss it. Especially if I had your family.”

Especially if I had your family.

If Elle had a dollar for every time she heard that line, she’d be wearing those Stella McCartney boots she’d been eyeing at Bergdorf’s last month. Not that she disagreed with Suni. Family was everything. And holidays spent together at her mother’s famous B & B were iconic. Elle adored each member of her big, boisterous brood. She couldn’t imagine not having them in her life.

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If only they weren't so . . . *impressive*.

Elle, the baby of the McAlister clan, lived in the shadows of her four older siblings. She'd dubbed them the Fab Four: a professional baseball player, a newly minted United States Congressman, a world-renowned architect, and an award-winning doctor. Even her new stepsister was living her best life as a successful bookstore owner. Not only that, but they'd all coupled up with equally fantastic partners and were busily producing beautiful nieces and nephews for Elle to dote on.

And then there is me.

At twenty-seven, she was still searching for her life's passion. At one point, she believed it might be dancing. Or the law. Except three more years of school didn't sound all that appealing, so she leaned into her writing skills. When a career as a freelance journalist didn't pan out—an editor told her she needed more real-world experience—she thought she'd find the answers serving in the Peace Corps.

Instead, she'd returned just as unfocused—and a bit more insecure—as when she left. While the Fab Four had set goals for themselves practically before they left their cribs, Elle was still trying to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up.

Thanks to a Peace Corps connection and a few well-received freelance articles she wrote years before, she landed a job at the prestigious international magazine *Vantage*. Unfortunately, she was expected to pay her dues before she got to do any serious writing. Most days, her work consisted of mundane administrative tasks for the managing editor of the lifestyles division.

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Luckily, Elle's editor was no Miranda Priestly from *The Devil Wears Prada*. She offered Elle tons of opportunities to prove herself as a journalist. And true to her McAlister genes, she gave each assignment everything she had.

Still, after nearly eighteen months, the only "articles" she'd written were online—mostly paragraphs and teasers on social media posts used for clickbait to get readers to jump over to the actual article written by a "real" journalist. She was proud of the fact that her "teasers" scored clicks twice as high as the other editorial assistants. Yet it wasn't as if her name appeared on an actual print byline. And Elle desperately needed more cred to put her on par with her famous siblings.

Ironically, she seemed to be the only one in her family who minded that she was "underproducing." And that irked her the most. It was as if none of them expected anything more from the runt of the litter.

Well, she would show them she was just as enterprising as they were. An opening for a lifestyles columnist was coming up at the first of the year. Elle had every intention of winning it. Who said her passion couldn't be in journalism after all?

"Although, I guess it's all a matter of perspective," Suni continued. "It's not like you're headed to sunny L.A. with me. Aside from the dinner, you're stuck in a boring small town for the rest of the week. Maybe your famous family is just as annoying as mine. Under those circumstances, I'd probably skip spending Thanksgiving with them, too."

Suni had it all wrong. Chances Inlet was the only place Elle ever wanted to be for any holiday. And her family wasn't the reason she was currently avoiding her hometown. Nope. That excuse belonged to the six feet of muscled, blond-haired, blue-eyed deputy sheriff

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who once held the title of Elle's most trusted friend. The guy she'd made a fool of herself over. Her skin grew warm just thinking about it.

Her editor, Madelaine Harper, popped her head into the cubicle. "Got a minute, Elle?"

Anything to end this train of thought.

"Of course." Elle grabbed her tablet and followed the other woman into the hallway. But instead of heading back to Madelaine's office, she steered Elle toward the glass conference room down the hall. The very same conference room where Helen Keneally, the magazine's publisher, sat at the table idly drumming her fingers.

"Um?" Elle stopped short.

Madelaine gently pressed her hand to Elle's back. "We're meeting with her."

Elle stifled a groan. She'd been avoiding the woman for months now. Ever since Elle had dumped her boyfriend of three years—who also happened to be Helen's grandson—right before Christmas last year. It wasn't a secret that she'd gotten her position at the magazine through her connection to Jeremy. But she was good at her job, dammit. And she didn't deserve to lose it just because the woman's grandson was a philandering pig.

The older woman surprised her with a warm smile. "Elinor, dear, you're looking well." She gestured for Elle to take a seat.

She was relieved when Madelaine sat between them, providing Elle with moral support, not to mention a human buffer.

"Madelaine says you've been an extraordinary assistant, going above and beyond the duties you've been assigned," Helen said. "And it's been brought to my attention that

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your posts have been converting exceptionally well. You have a flair for crafting a hook that drags readers right in. Bravo, my dear.”

Publisher and editor exchanged a look before Helen spoke again.

“It’s also no secret from anyone who works with you that you’re a team player. Someone who is kind and encouraging to her coworkers and genuinely liked and respected by the staff.”

Elle had never been let go from a job before, but she was pretty sure outlining an employee’s attributes and contributions before laying the hammer down was a cruel way to go about it. She gripped the arms of her chair tightly.

“We have a rather delicate assignment that just so happens to require someone with your skillset,” Helen continued.

“My skill set?” Elle sat up a little taller. Perhaps she wasn’t getting the ax after all. And who know she actually had a “skill set?”

“Mm.” Helen nodded.

“Do you know who Everett West is?” Madelaine asked.

Everyone with access to a television knew who Everett West was. He’d been a globe-trotting war reporter for the past thirty-five years.

“He’s writing his memoir,” Elle responded. “We are serializing it in the magazine. The number of readers downloading the chapters has quadrupled over the past three months.”

Helen beamed at her. “Impressive. You know your stats about other aspects of the magazine besides your own.”

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“The serialization is meant to whet the appetite of readers in hopes of getting them to order the book when we release it in July,” Madelaine explained.

“The problem we have,” Helen added, “is that Everett hasn’t quite finished the manuscript despite signing a contract stipulating he would complete it by the first of this month.”

“Oh.” Elle looked between the women, still unsure what this had to do with her.

Helen shook her head. “Mm. Men aren’t always good at keeping their promises as I’m sure you are aware, Elinor.”

Whoa!

Was Helen apologizing for her worm of a grandson?

Madelaine leaned forward in her chair. “We need Everett to finish this book by the end of the year, or the magazine will run out of material to serialize.”

“And we won’t have any way to fulfill those preorders,” Elle added.

“Exactly!” Helen slapped her palm on the table.

Elle looked between the two women, trying to divine some sort of explanation as to why they were telling her this. “That’s a serious problem for the entire company.”

“Everett doesn’t seem to be able to focus on the manuscript here in New York.”

Madelaine sighed. “Too many distractions.”

“Too many cronies to go out drinking with, you mean,” Helen mumbled.

If Madelaine agreed with her boss’ sentiments, she was too professional to show it. “We need him to go someplace quiet, someplace with a lot slower pace and fewer diversions so he can buckle down and get the job done.”

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The man had reported from deep below the ocean inside a Polaris submarine, while rumbling along in a tank in Iraq, and even while embedded in the Afghan desert with special forces. Surely, he didn't need a convent to finish his memoir? He already knew the ending, after all.

"Do you need me to research some potential places?" Elle asked.

"No, no, dear girl." Helen waved a hand. "In fact, Jeremy gave me the most brilliant idea earlier this week when we met for dinner. He was reminiscing wistfully about the wonderful times he spent when you two visited your mother's inn in North Carolina."

Elle tried not to bristle. Why would Jeremy be "reminiscing wistfully" about the Tide Me Over Inn? He was only there twice. Now that she thought about it, both times he found something to complain about—from the inn to Chances Inlet. He'd found the whole town to be "provincial."

"My mother's inn? You want Mr. West to go there to finish his book?"

Both women nodded.

"Um, sure. I'm happy to check with her to see what openings she has. Christmas time is usually as popular as the summer months in Chances Inlet, though. I can research some backup inns just in case."

Please, Mom, don't let your inn be full.

"No need." Helen grinned. "I've already spoken with your mother. She's arranged a suite for Everett through the end of the year."

"Oh." Elle was surprised her mom hadn't said something to her. "That's great. Do you need me to make any other arrangements for him?"

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“Everything is all taken care of.” Helen stood. “You’ll both be flying out first thing tomorrow. Everett has less than five weeks to finish his damn book. I’m counting on you, Elinor, to see that he does. If it comes down to it, chain him to a chair. Stand over him twenty-four hours a day. Whatever it takes.” She gave Elle’s shoulder a gentle squeeze as she walked past. “I know you’re up to the task.”

The publisher was out of the room before Elle realized the impact of her words.

“Wait. What?” she whispered. “No, no, no.”

Madelaine sighed. “It may not sound like it, but this is an incredible opportunity for you. And at least you’ll get to spend the holidays at home. Your mother was ecstatic that you’d be home for Thanksgiving.”

Elle dropped her head to the table. Five weeks in Chances Inlet. It took a lot of stealth to avoid Hayden Lovell when she was home for a couple of days. But five weeks?

“I have every confidence you can pull this off,” Madelaine continued. “And when you do, the position as lifestyles columnist is all yours.”

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“Seriously, man? The Chipmunks?” Deputy Sheriff Hayden Lovell complained as he toweled off his face. “Last I checked, this was a gym, not a daycare.”

Xander Fisk, owner of the Ship’s Iron Gym, added more weights to the bar Hayden was using for chest presses. “It’s the most wonderful time of the year. What can I say? I like to keep my clients in the spirit by piping in the holiday tunes.”

Beside him, Simone laughed. “More like you like to remind everyone who works-out here that gym memberships make the perfect gift.”

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“You’ve uncovered my evil secret, Deputy Wills.” Xander winked at her. “Nothing gets past your work-wife, does it, Lovell?”

Hayden shook his head at them both. “All I’m saying is Christmas music has been playing twenty-four seven since Halloween.” He lowered himself back to the bench, wrapping his fingers around the weight bar. “It’s as if Thanksgiving has been totally obliterated from the calendar.”

“I haven’t forgotten about Thanksgiving.” Simone patted her flat belly. “Why do you think I’m in here working out for a second time today? I’m pregaming for my grandma’s sweet potato pie.”

“That explains it, because there’s no way you’re here for this guy’s scintillating company.” Xander gestured at Hayden. “What flew up his butt today to turn him into such a Grinch?”

“Nothing,” Hayden grumbled. “Could you concentrate on spotting me here, dude?”

Simone laughed again. “If having a gorgeous woman offer you thousands for a piece of furniture you built is nothing, then”—she shrugged—“nothing.”

Xander let out a whistle. “Dude, you sold the captain’s desk? Way to go. I told you that you’re a gifted woodworker. Mark my words, that side hustle of yours will make you rich and famous one day.”

Hayden gave up the pretense of lifting weights and sat up on the bench. “Allow me to repeat myself. It’s nothing. Just some decorator from New York who walked into my mom’s yarn shop, saw the desk, and decided she had to have it for a client, so she bought it. End of story.”

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“Some decorator from New York who was interested in more than just our guy’s desk, if you know what I mean.” Simone gave Xander a playful shoulder check. “You should have seen his mother. The tension between Deputy Dog here and the decorator was so thick that Mama Lovell was practically naming her future grandchildren.”

Hayden huffed as he stood. “You should really take up writing romance books, Simone. Your imagination is out there.”

“I know what I saw.” She flicked him with her towel. “You’re just too closed off to recognize the opportunities right in front of your face.” She nudged Xander again. “Livi—that’s the hot blonde’s name—is staying at the Tide Me Over Inn. Hayden is giving her a tour of his workshop this evening. Wink, wink.”

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Hayden shot a glare in the direction of his fellow deputy. “She has other clients who might be interested in some of my pieces, that’s all.”

Simone’s cackle rang out within the gym. “Honey, she’s the only one interested in your”—she made air quotes with her fingers—“pieces.”

Xander laughed.

“That’s it. I’m outta here.” Hayden pulled his earbuds from his pocket and stalked off toward the treadmills. He’d drown out his ridiculous friends and the overdone Christmas music with some Eric Church while getting in a few miles of cardio before his meeting. “Let me know when the sheriff comes by. We can head downstairs together.”

Hayden, Xander and several of the other veterans in town got together weekly to lend support to one another when the demons haunting them from their deployments raised their ugly heads. There was a shared camaraderie that few could relate to. Hayden

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counted himself lucky that, even in a town as small as Chances Inlet, he had a band of brothers when he needed them. Tonight, they were organizing the town's toy drive. He adjusted the wrap on the blade that served as his lower left leg before stepping onto the belt.

Xander followed him over to the treadmill. "The sheriff can't make it tonight. Apparently, *Livi* the Designer isn't the only important guest at the Tide Me Over."

Hayden rolled his eyes at the way his friend sing-songed the designer's name. He punched up the incline.

"Kind of weird, though. Everett West is the last person I expected visit a place like Chances Inlet."

That got Hayden's attention. "The war correspondent? Really? What's he doing here?"

"Rumor has it he is writing his autobiography."

"I thought he already wrote that. They're serializing it in *Vantage* magazine." He frowned. "He doesn't paint the military in a very good light."

Xander grimaced. "I know. Apparently he hasn't finished writing his tell-all. Word is he is staying at the inn through the end of the year. I really hope Elle keeps him on task. I'd rather he didn't get a chance to spread his sour grapes all over town. He's a Debbie Downer who couldn't care less about ruining everyone else's holiday."

Hayden stumbled ever so slightly. "Elle?"

The red-headed, whirling dervish with cloud-gray eyes he'd been trying to convince himself he could live without had come home for Thanksgiving after all?

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“Yep. Sheriff said she’s in charge of keeping him on task.”

Another stumble. “Elle will be in Chances Inlet through Christmas?”

“Could be through New Year’s if West doesn’t finish before then.” He moved off in the direction of his office. “I’ll come get you in twenty.”

Hayden barely heard.

Elle McAlister is in Chances Inlet. Right now. And for weeks to come.

He let out a long-suffering groan. Simone jumped on the treadmill next to him. He didn’t dare glance over at her, but he could feel her gaze boring into him. When he couldn’t stand it any longer, he looked her way. Her eyes were practically dancing out of their sockets.

“Ruh roh. The plot thickens,” she said before disappearing into the women’s locker room, a maniacal laugh trailing her.

Ruh roh was right.