

Chapter One

IT WASN'T THE first time Ryan McAlister woke up to find a woman slinking into his hotel room. Some of his teammates considered such a scenario one of the perks of being a professional athlete. Not Ryan. The novelty wore off the first time it had happened. He preferred the women he took to his room to be invited, thank you very much.

But this wasn't one of the many cookie-cutter hotels he spent half of every baseball season passing through. Instead, he was sprawled out in the middle of the king-sized mattress inside his suite at the famous Tide Me Over Inn. And he was one hundred percent positive he'd locked the door before collapsing into bed a scant six hours before.

He cracked one eye open, surveying the suite through the fringe of his lashes before quickly closing it again. *Damn*. It wasn't it a groupie sneaking into his room. Or a tryptophan induced nightmare, either. This was worse. His mother and sister were standing at the foot of his bed. One of them bearing coffee judging by the scent wafting through the air. This was exactly why he should have rented a condo over by the golf course instead of staying at his mother's B & B.

Maybe if he just feigned sleep, they would go away. It wouldn't be a lie. After spending all night helping decorate the inn, he was definitely whipped. His mom was a perfectionist and determined to make the B & B a showcase worthy of one of those cheesy Christmas movies. Not that he was surprised. The people of Chances Inlet, North Carolina approached the Christmas season with a gusto rivaling the Whos in Whoville. Ryan certainly was no Scrooge, but he thought all the hoopla surrounding Christmas was a bit over the top.

His stomach gave him away when it rumbled loudly. Naturally, his sister Kate pounced on the sound as if it was the starting gun to a sprint.

“Wakey, wakey, baby brother. We’ve brought coffee.”

“And antacids.” His mother tsked. “I noticed someone helped himself to a few pieces of pie before going to bed.”

“Goodness gracious, you’re still a thrasher,” Kate teased, tugging at the sheet tangled around his foot. “This bed looks like you’ve been tossed and turned aboard a ship all night.”

“He’s always been my wild child. So full of restless energy.” He was surprised to hear the smile in his mother’s voice. She hadn’t always been so fond of his “wild child” tendencies. Neither were the rest of the people in this town.

Ryan groaned. Never mind the condo. He should have done what he always did and bolted immediately after Thanksgiving dessert last night. But no. Some well-played guilt by his mother and his brothers’ impending double wedding made him foolishly agree to stay in his sleepy coastal hometown for the entire holiday season.

He was an idiot.

Not to mention a liar.

His family hadn’t been able to dictate his actions since he left for the minor leagues when he was eighteen. In reality, Ryan was just using the excuse of the holidays and the wedding to regroup. And hide out from the overzealous media.

Last week, one of the aforementioned groupies had ambushed him at his apartment, actually attempting a death-defying climb from his neighbor’s twenty-second floor balcony onto Ryan’s. In the middle of the night, no less. The stockbroker next door hadn’t liked being used by

what he thought was a sure thing. The dude wasn't shy about venting and naming names on social media. Just like that, the rest of the media was off to the races with the story.

It was exactly the kind of publicity the uptight owner of the New York Americas baseball team didn't like from his players. Since last year's ill-advised appearance in a certain sports magazine's annual issue featuring athletes in the buff, Ryan had been the subject of more than one incident involving nut-job women this past season—none of them instigated by him. But it was enough to put him at the top of the team's naughty list.

That, coupled with the broken hand he'd sustained trying to one-hand a line drive, were likely the reasons the team had just acquired a second basemen who was a hell of a lot more productive with a bat than Ryan. Sure, he had another year left on his contract. But that didn't mean his ass wouldn't be traded out of New York before spring training began, despite the fact not a team in the league was looking for a starting second baseman. In all likelihood, he'd be getting paid to spend his last year in the bigs collecting splinters on the bench.

Ryan knew how lucky he'd been to sustain a career in the major leagues for over a decade given his mediocre talent. Now he just needed to figure out what to do with his time once his playing days were over. Not that he was letting his overachieving family in on his early mid-life crisis. He was a grown ass man who could figure things out on his own.

He kept his eyes firmly closed. "Every square corner of this place is decorated. It's bad enough I had nightmares about live nutcrackers trying to follow me into the shower. What else could you possibly need from me this morning?"

There was silence on the other side of his eyelids. Never a good sign. When the women in his family were quiet—an occurrence as rare as a total eclipse—something was definitely up. He risked a glance from beneath his lashes. They were still there unfortunately.

“What?” he demanded.

“I’ve got thirty-five kids and their parents coming for breakfast with Santa in an hour.”

His mother wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know. She had been hosting the event on Black Friday for several years now. The breakfast was a fundraiser for the local children’s club. And since being written up in both *Coastal* and *Southern Living* magazines, tickets were harder to come by than a white Christmas on the North Carolina coast.

“Have fun with that.” He pulled the comforter over his head because he knew there was another shoe that was about to drop. And he so didn’t want to hear it.

“Actually, it’s not going to be much fun at all.” Kate did her best to sound pitiful before lowering the boom. “We don’t have a Santa.”

Oh, hell nah.

Ryan snapped the comforter back down to his waist. Heaving a disgruntled sigh, he sat up, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against the sleigh bed’s headboard. He studied the interlopers with a measured glare.

Both women wore identical forlorn expressions. Although, upon closer inspection, his sister was trying—and failing—to tame the diabolical glint in her eyes. He grabbed the coffee mug from Kate’s hand and took a fortifying swallow of dark roast. Knowing what was coming likely couldn’t be solved by writing a check with multiple zeroes, Ryan needed his wits about him. The moment stretched as he let the coffee do its thing.

“Don’t tell me. His sleigh broke down?”

His mother sighed. “No. He slipped on the wet grass playing golf yesterday and tore his Achilles.”

“They play golf at the North Pole?”

“Ryan!” Being the mother of five children, Patricia McAlister’s patience was legendary. Just not today, apparently.

“Okay, okay. The solution is easy. Have your new husband dress up as St. Nick. Just tell him to leave his gun at home. I’m pretty sure the parents would object to a Santa who’s packing.”

A few weeks earlier, his widowed mother eloped to Las Vegas and married the town’s sheriff, Lamar Hollister. Ryan’s siblings took the news with varying degrees of excitement. His two sisters sighing with romanticized glee. His two older brothers begrudgingly—the sheriff was five years younger than their mother, after all. Given Ryan’s complicated relationship with his family, he didn’t figure he had a say so in what his mother did with her life. The guy made her happy and that made Ryan happy. End of story.

“Lamar got called down to Calabash,” his mother replied. “They needed extra crowd control at the outlets this morning.”

“Then get Gavin to do it.” Ryan threw his brother under the bus. “He’s been looking for a reason to ham it up since his gig as the sexy contractor on that restoration show ended. And the moms have already gotten an eyeful of me in the altogether. But they will be thrilled to gaze at the next best thing, one of *Cosmo’s* bachelors of the month.”

He thought his mother might have let out a little growl. His au natural photo shoot was still a touchy subject.

“Or better yet, Miles can do it,” he continued. “The kids can’t vote yet, but their parents can.” His oldest brother had just been elected to represent their small town in the U. S. Congress.

“I’m sure either one would jump at the chance to play Santa,” Kate countered with no small amount of devilish satisfaction. “But they both have their oh-so-fun pre-wedding counseling session with Pastor Hermansen today.”

Unease began to slosh the coffee around in Ryan’s stomach. He’d run out of brothers. “Morgan?” he asked, referring to the inn’s handyman.

His mother shook her head. “Hunting.”

Ryan eyed his sister. “What about Alden?” he demanded. “Your husband’s a pediatrician. He loves kids.”

“No can do. He’s putting extra hours at the urgent care clinic so he can have more time off when the baby comes.” Kate patted her pregnant belly.

“Then *you* play Santa.” He gestured to her stomach in desperation. “You certainly have the build for it right now.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t have the facial hair,” she responded smugly.

“Wanna bet?”

Kate gasped as she rubbed her fingers along her chin.

“Enough! Both of you!” His mother shot them each a stern look before her face softened. “Ryan, I’m in a bind here. You know I wouldn’t ask if someone—*anyone*—else could do it. Please.”

The fact of the matter was, Ryan would do anything for his mother. So would the rest of her children. Thanks to a poor investment decision, he hadn’t had the cash available to help out when she needed money to save the inn last spring. But he could help her out now.

He sighed heavily. "Fine. I'll do it."

His mom leaned down and gave him a kiss. "That's my sweet boy. I'll make you some of your favorite cookies later."

Behind her, Kate pantomimed gagging.

"I pulled your father's old suit down from the attic. It's at the foot of your bed. Kate can help you get dressed." Mission accomplished, his mom was already out the door and on to the next thing on her never-ending to-do list.

"For crying out loud. I can dress myself!" Ryan called after her.

Snickering, Kate bent down and lifted the lid off the plastic tub that housed the Santa suit.

"I swear, Mom still treats you like you're five."

Truth. But then, so did everyone else in this town.

Ryan threw his feet over the side of the bed and took another gulp of coffee. "You're just jealous because I'm the favorite."

He wasn't. But it was typical of all the McAlister siblings to declare themselves as their mother's favorite.

"Puh-leaze," his sister scoffed. "As the first grandchild, my daughter currently owns that title. And the little king I'm carrying will be a very close second."

Ryan didn't doubt it.

"Oh, wow." She reverently pulled the heavy jacket from the box, the white fur lining the crimson velvet was faded a bit with age, but still fluffy. "I remember the first time Dad wore this. I was probably ten at the time. You couldn't have been more than a kindergartener and Elle was just a baby. I still wanted to believe so badly. Dad's laugh gave it away, though." She closed her

eyes. "But I wasn't disappointed. I thought it was so cool that our dad was Santa Claus. He had a way of making everything so special."

Donald McAlister did, at that. Their father always seemed larger than life. Invincible. There was nothing he couldn't do.

Except survive a heart attack.

It had been over three years since their father's sudden death. Three long years where Ryan constantly replayed his final words to his father. Words he regretted every day since.

"It still hurts sometimes, you know?" Kate whispered.

Didn't he though. Getting to his feet, he wrapped his arms around his sister. "Yeah," was all he could get around the boulder in his throat.

Kate's phone buzzed. She groaned when she read the message. "More drama. It seems they sent the wrong elf costume."

"As in they sent a dirty elf?" Maybe this day could be salvaged after all.

She slapped him on the chest. "Only you would go there." The diabolical look was back in her eyes, however. "Although Bernice might oblige."

Ryan shuddered. Bernice Reed was the town gossip, the longtime office manager for McAlister Construction and Engineering, and at least a decade older than his mother. Apparently, she was also Santa's elf.

"I should have gone back to New York," he murmured.

Kate leaned her head on his shoulder. "And miss all the holiday magic in Chances Inlet?" Her tone sobered. "Thanks for doing this, Ry. I've missed having my favorite brother around."

"Funny, I'm pretty sure you told Gavin he was your favorite just yesterday."

“Yeah, but that was only so he’d help hang the garland outside. With you, I actually mean it.”

He laughed because as the oldest McAlister sibling she was just as skilled at playing politics as their brother Miles. “Promises, promises. Go fix the elf situation. I can dress myself. I’ve been doing it for nearly thirty years.”

She’d almost made it out of the door before she turned back to him. “If something was wrong, you’d tell me, right?”

“Of course,” he lied.

Kate hesitated a long moment. “Okay. But speaking as a physician, you might want to talk to a professional about those dreams of showering with nutcrackers,” she teased.

He tossed a pillow in her direction. “Get. Out!”