

THE MOST

Wonderful

a novel

CRIME
OF THE *Year*

New York Times Bestselling Author

*OF The Blonde
Identity*

ALLY CARTER

THE MOST
Wonderful
CRIME
OF THE *Year*
a novel

ALLY CARTER



AVON

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Dedication

If anyone has ever tried to gaslight you into thinking you're the problem, congratulations! This book is for you.

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Prologue

Excerpt from the Official Police Interrogation of Margaret Chase and Ethan Wyatt

December 25

MS. CHASE: Well, of course I have his blood on my hands.

MR. WYATT: It was just a scratch.

MS. CHASE: I obviously didn't try to kill him.

MR. WYATT: Maggie's more of a lover than a—

MS. CHASE: If I'd tried to kill him, he'd be dead.

MR. WYATT: She's such a good person. [*Mr. Wyatt pats his heart.*]
Right here.

MS. CHASE: Of course, I'm not offended that you'd accuse me of murder. I'm offended you'd think I'd be bad at it.

MR. WYATT: It's a point of professional pride. Ha! Wait. That was a joke. Can you please write down that I was—

MS. CHASE: You should have separated us, you know? We shouldn't be together for this. Not that we're together! Oh no! We are not a *we*. He is *he* and I am *me* and we are not . . .

MR. WYATT: We're colleagues.

MS. CHASE: I prefer nemesis. Nemesis is a far better word.

MR. WYATT: It's a big market, and we appeal to different— Have I mentioned they're making one of my books into a movie?

MS. CHASE: I'm sorry, but are we seriously still sitting here, doing nothing? Am I really wearing this ridiculous sweater, answering these ridiculous questions when she's . . .

INSPECTOR PATEL: Why don't you start at the beginning?

MR. WYATT: I . . . uh . . . I don't understand the question.

INSPECTOR PATEL: When did it start?

MR. WYATT: Oh. It started—

MS. CHASE: In the elevator.

Chapter One

One Week Earlier

It wasn't until the elevator doors were sliding open that Maggie realized she was about to come face-to-face with her three least favorite things in the world:

Christmas. A party. And Ethan Freaking Wyatt.

For a moment, she just stood there, the cacophony of carols and chatter fading to a low hum as she stared through the open doors at the smug look on his smug face—at his trademark leather jacket and the strand of twinkle lights wrapped around his neck like a scarf. There was a Santa hat on his head and, of course, a copy of *Silent Knight* (“Now a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller!”) in his hands. The fact that it was just a cardboard cutout and not the man himself should have softened the blow for Maggie, but it was all she could do not to punch him in his cardboard teeth.

At the very least she should have reached for the button and made the elevator doors close faster—and maybe she would have if a voice hadn't cried out, “Oh my gosh. You're here!” Which was when Maggie knew she'd made a terrible mistake.

She should have slipped away when she'd had the chance, down in the elevator. Through the lobby. Then out onto the cold and crowded streets of Midtown Manhattan seven days before Christmas. She should have gotten out of there—and she would have—if Cardboard Ethan hadn't distracted her. But now it was too late and two tiny but deceptively viselike hands were dragging her off the elevator and into the big open lobby of Killhaven Books.

“Shellie bet me five dollars that you'd show, and here you are!” Deborah had to raise her voice to be heard over all the small talk and laughter because, oh yeah. There was a party going on. *A Christmas party*. And

Maggie had waltzed right into the middle of it. A tree was blinking and music was playing and the room was swirling. Just a little.

“Maggie?” Deborah’s voice was closer. Softer.

“You know, it’s a miracle there aren’t more murders at Christmas.”

“Oh, here we go,” Deborah mumbled, but Maggie never took her eyes off Cardboard Ethan.

“Think about it. People who hate each other crammed together in hot rooms with too much alcohol. Scissors and strangulation devices lying around.”

“Strangulation devices?”

“You know . . . Lights. Tinsel. I bet you could do some real damage with garland.” In spite of everything, Maggie felt herself perk up at the possibilities. “Even mistletoe is poisonous.”

“To dogs,” Deborah said.

“In large enough quantities, *everyone’s* a dog,” Maggie pointed out as she slowly turned to face the woman beside her.

Deborah Klein was five-foot-one inches of power. Gray hair. Chanel suit. And eyes that had seen it all during her forty-nine-year rise from the mail room to the most feared woman in publishing.

“I say all this because *I* am going to murder *you*.”

“Who? Me?” Deborah brought one tiny hand to her chest.

“Yes, you! *It’s just lunch, Maggie. You need to get out of the house, Maggie. We need to talk marketing, Maggie.*”

“One, I don’t sound like that.”

“You sound exactly like that.”

“And two—”

“This is a party, Deborah. There is a tree made out of paperbacks right over there. Half the marketing department is singing karaoke. And . . .” Maggie trailed off as she realized—“Lance VanZant is literally wearing a T-shirt that looks like a tuxedo.”

Deborah waved the words away. “Lance VanZant wrote one half-decent book nine years ago. No one cares about Lance VanZant.”

“What about him?” Maggie pointed to Cardboard Ethan and Deborah had the good taste to look guilty.

“I’m told it’s not exactly to scale.”

But then a thought occurred to Maggie. “Ooh. Can I have it when this is over? I’ve been wanting to learn how to throw knives.”

Deborah’s mouth was opening, slowly, like she couldn’t figure out what to say when a woman walked past, chiming, “Merry Christmas, Maggie!”

She was new and Maggie thought her name was Jen. It was probably Jen. Statistically speaking, one-third of the women who worked in publishing were named Jen, but Maggie wasn't thinking very clearly because the room was too loud after a year of constant silence. It was too crowded. And Maggie, who had never loved crowds or parties to begin with, felt her hands start shaking.

"Let's get you something to eat." Deborah had a hand on Maggie's elbow. She could feel it through her Joan Wilder coat, puffy and too hot in the crowded room. She'd always thought it was an excellent coat to disappear inside, but Deborah was still there, whispering near her ear. "I'm sorry. It's been a year and I thought . . . Stay five minutes. For me. I'm sorry I tricked you into coming, but there really is something we need to talk about."

Maggie was starting to waver. She'd already spent fifty bucks on train fare and taxis and lost a whole day of work, so it might not be that bad. After all, she didn't have to go *to* the party. She just had to walk *through* the party, and she could do that. She'd been walking every day for a year—for almost thirty years. She could make it to Deborah's corner office.

But then the elevator dinged. The doors slid open and a deep voice boomed, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" First, he spotted the cutout. "Well, who's this handsome fella?" Then he spotted her. "Hey! It's good to see you, Marcie!"

And Maggie started looking for some tinsel.

Chapter Two

Maggie hadn't always hated Christmas. There had been a time when she'd loved the lights and the presents and the trees. She knew all the words to at least thirty different Christmas carols and used to sing them in July. She had a sweatshirt with a reindeer on it that she always wore to school on the Monday after Thanksgiving. (Did the nose light up? Yes, yes it did. Did she wear it that way? Absolutely.)

Twelve-year-old Maggie had baked sugar cookies and organized Secret Santas and terrorized her mother with multipart questions like (1) *Why don't we have a big family?* and (2) *Why don't we spend Christmas with our big (fictional) family?* and (3) *Can this fictional gathering of this fictional family take place in a location that always has snow?*

But Maggie was an only child born late in life to only children. Maggie didn't even have grandparents, and it was almost always too warm for snow in Texas.

So the problem wasn't that Maggie hated Christmas; the problem was that Christmas hated Maggie. Every terrible thing that had ever happened to her had occurred with a backdrop of carols and lights, and, eventually, Maggie had no choice but to start taking it personally.

Her dog ran away when she was thirteen. When she was sixteen, their car caught fire and the next day all the presents disappeared out from under the tree. A week later, the car was running again and Maggie never asked a single question.

Her senior year of high school, they *did* have snow, but it knocked out power to half the state and Maggie spent the holiday huddled around the fireplace with her parents, hoping the water didn't freeze.

Of course, at the time, she didn't know that was the last Christmas they'd have together. She'd joked about how next year would be better—telling her

parents they had to wait until she was home from college to put up the tree and wrap the presents.

But twelve months later, her parents were gone and Maggie was alone and . . .

“I need to go.”

Deborah pushed her into a chair then moved to the other side of the desk. “You need to sit.”

“Look”—Maggie started to stand—“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I’m really not good at parties, so let’s catch up after the new year, okay? Let’s—”

“Sit. Down.” Deborah didn’t raise her voice. Deborah didn’t have to. When she was nothing but a nineteen-year-old intern, Deborah had pulled the greatest crime writer to ever live out of the slush pile, so when Deborah whispered, people listened. Even people who hated the smell of peppermint and eggnog and pine.

“I have a surprise for you.” Deborah eased into her leather chair then tossed something onto the stack of manuscripts that rimmed her massive desk. It was just an envelope, square and the color of eggshells, but for some reason Maggie was almost afraid to touch it.

“Oh. I’m afraid I . . . uh . . . didn’t do cards this year.”

“You never do cards and neither do I. That’s not from me.”

The card was heavy in Maggie’s hand when she reached for it. The paper was smooth and soft and— Money. The envelope felt like money in every sense of the word. Her name was scrawled across the front in the most pristine handwriting she’d ever seen. *Ms. Margaret Chase*.

“Well. Open it,” Deborah dared, and Maggie turned the envelope over to break the wax seal on the back. The card inside was even softer.

You are cordially invited to—

“No.”

“You haven’t even read it!”

Maggie couldn’t help but whine, “You tricked me into coming to one party just so you could invite me to another one?”

Deborah’s laugh was almost maniacal. “Oh, that’s no invitation, sweet Charlie. That is your ticket to the chocolate factory.”

Maggie had known Deborah for almost nine years, but she’d never seen her look like she looked then: giddy and sly and almost ravenous. She imagined that’s how nineteen-year-old Deborah must have looked when she’d pulled Eleanor Ashley’s first manuscript from the pile on the mail room floor. Like a woman whose evil plan was just getting started.

“You’ve been invited to the home of your biggest fan for Christmas.”

“Deborah—”

“In England!” Deborah said with a flourish, as if that made everything better and not infinitely worse. “All expenses paid. Now before you tell me I’m crazy—”

“You’re crazy! Do I need to remind you that I write mysteries?”

“So?”

“So my fans like murder! And murderers! And—”

“Your last book was about a woman whose cat could smell poison.”

“Hey! *The Purrrrfect Crime* sold very well in Brazil,” Maggie said, but Deborah was determined. There was no teasing glint in her eye, no mischievous twinkle.

“I can personally vouch for this particular fan. And I’m telling you”—she lowered her voice—“you *want* to get on that plane. You are positively *dying* to get on that plane.”

Maggie ran a finger over the heavy paper. It really was a lovely card. “I don’t want to spend Christmas with strangers,” she admitted and Deborah’s eyes went soft.

“Then who are you spending Christmas with? Because you know I’m a heartless old crone but when I think of you rattling around that tiny apartment all by yourself . . .”

“I’m on deadline.” Maggie held the words like a shield.

“I’m your editor, and I just decided to move your deadline.”

“But I . . .”

“Have nothing planned for Christmas, do you?” Deborah glanced toward her open door. The sounds of the party were a low din in the distance, but she inched forward, arms on the desk. It was a posture that screamed *you didn’t hear this from me*. “Look, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but something is coming next year. Very big. Very hush-hush. And I think you’re the person for the job. But I need you to *get on that plane*.”

Maggie fingered the wax seal on the back of the envelope. “What kind of fan flies their favorite author to another country for the holidays?”

“The kind with money and good taste in books.”

“This can’t be safe.”

“It is.”

“This can’t be smart.”

“Oh.” Deborah laughed. “It is.”

“This can’t be—”

“Maggie. Dearest. Most prolific and professional writer I know, I say this with love. I say this with kindness. I say this in the truest spirit of holiday cheer: you need to get a life.”

Deborah had never steered her wrong—not once in nine years and dozens of books. Deborah believed in her. Deborah wanted the best for her. Deborah was the closest thing Maggie had to family, which was perhaps the only thing sadder than having no family at all. And all Maggie could do was look at her mentor who would never be her mother and draw a tired breath.

“Maybe. But that doesn’t mean I have to get a Christmas.”

“Okay.” Deborah sat back. “Then what does the next week and a half look like for you? Sitting around, thinking about your former husband and your former best friend unwrapping presents in your former house?”

Some might have thought the words were cruel, but Maggie recognized them for what they were: a challenge and a dare. That was her cue to start fighting, but all she could do was eke out a half smile and the words, “Presents they bought with my former money. Don’t forget that part.”

She eyed the envelope again, imagining snowy fields and garland-laden banisters, carol singers and horse-drawn sleighs because, evidently, to Maggie, English Christmases take place entirely in BBC adaptations. “No. I . . . I shouldn’t.”

“What you should do, Margaret, is trust me.”

What Maggie didn’t say was that she had no intention of trusting anyone ever again. Especially herself.

Chapter Three

Twelve Years Ago

It wasn't that Maggie's parents hadn't wanted a big family. It was more like they'd never really learned how to have one. They'd been older when Maggie was born, and sometimes she got the feeling they were like the staff of a restaurant, ready to close up and go home when she'd stumbled in five minutes before closing.

So it shouldn't have come as a surprise when, two weeks after moving into a dorm in upstate New York, Maggie's parents put their little Texas house on the market. They bought a condo in Florida and two matching golf carts that neither one of them knew how to drive, and that year, Maggie spent Thanksgiving eating dry turkey sandwiches and sleeping on an air mattress surrounded by unpacked boxes.

She was already back on campus when she got the call, alone in her dorm room when a stranger told her about the accident.

She was alone when she went back to Florida to pack up the condo and sell the golf carts and ship a half-dozen boxes to a storage unit not far from campus.

She was alone when the boy from the Office of Residential Life explained, "I'm sorry, but students aren't allowed to stay in the dorms over winter break."

Because Christmas was coming. Of course it was. Christmas was *always* coming, but Maggie couldn't go back to Florida; and she couldn't go back to Texas. And she probably couldn't stay in the storage unit where she'd placed her family photos, the good dishes, and seventy-seven novels by Eleanor Ashley.

“But I have to stay here,” she’d pleaded with the RA who was looking at her over the top of a giant box labeled *Garland and Shit*.

“You can’t,” the boy said, like maybe the university had admitted her by mistake. Like no one could be that stupid.

“No. They can’t kick me out just because it’s Christmas. I live here. This is where I live.”

“Look, I know it sucks and parents are the worst, but most people just go home.” He looked at her like the solution was both obvious and inevitable. “You should just go home.”

Then he turned, shifting the box like it held the weight of the world—like no college student had ever had to bear a greater burden—and Maggie felt her throat start to burn.

“But what if . . .” She’d never had to say the words out loud before. “What if you don’t have one?” Her voice cracked, and her eyes watered and maybe that’s why he didn’t quite get it as he glanced back over his shoulder.

“What?”

“My parents died and the golf carts were nonrefundable and I need the condo money for tuition.”

She’d said it all too quickly—like those were excuses that he had to hear all the time—and, suddenly, Ryan from Residential Life stopped looking at her like she was stupid and started looking at her like she was crazy. And also pitiful. Which was okay. At that moment, pity was almost all she had going for her.

“I can’t go home.” She ran a hand over her eyes like she could push the tears back in. When that didn’t work, she looked away. “I don’t have one.”

“Look, I’m really sorry. But . . .” His voice was lower, softer. Closer. “They turn down the heat and cut the lights. There’s no food. There’s *no heat*. It’s three weeks. You literally cannot stay here.”

He was right, of course. The heat was the deal-breaker, which meant she was going to have to dip into her meager savings and get a motel. Maybe an Airbnb. She could get a part-time job. Maybe go to the nearest airport and start impersonating long-lost relatives in the hope that someone might take pity on her and take her home. It was either that or—

“You could come home with me,” a voice said from behind her.

And that’s how she met Emily.

And that was the beginning of everything.

Even the end.

Chapter Four

Seven Days Before Christmas

Maggie was fine. Really. She was totally and completely—

Resigned. Yeah. That was more like it. She'd learned long ago that the firsts are always the hardest. The first birthday. The first round of holidays, cycling throughout the year. But the year was almost over, and her first Christmas was coming, so she might as well experience her first party, soldier through and get it out of the way.

Because Maggie wasn't fine—but she would be. As soon as her stomach stopped growling and her head stopped hurting and this last first was finally over.

So she piled a bunch of cheese cubes on a napkin and grabbed a sparkling water that was probably going to make her burp. She managed three whole minutes of small talk with two different Jens before Ethan Wyatt started a conga line.

“How's it going, Marcie?” he shouted as he congaed by, and Maggie started doing Party Math in her head.

If she hid for thirty minutes, then waved at three more people on her way to the elevator, maybe no one would notice if she spent the rest of the party hiding in an empty room, reading her Purse Book and eating her Napkin Cheese. It was a genius plan, really. She should have thought of it from the start.

But as she darted down a darkened hall, looking for an open door, Maggie felt her footsteps falter. She had to stop. And stare. Because, officially, the display might have been called the Wall of Fame, but according to Deborah, everyone at Killhaven just called it The Eleanors.