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AND 2019 RITA® AWARD WINNER

Minx MALONE

"I am officially in love with
The Alexander family."

--Smitten by Reading



All I
Want

ALL I WANT

M. MALONE

ALL I WANT

Kaylee Wilhelm isn't asking for much. All she wants is to make a good life for her infant daughter and for Elliott Alexander to finally notice she exists. Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to like her much, so she spends her days working and her evenings with her disapproving parents.

Elliott's finally in the position to come home for good. He's built his private security firm into one of the best in the country and he's miles away from the past he'd rather forget. But home means bittersweet memories and the only woman who makes him feel things he isn't ready for.

When Kay's car skids out of control on a snowy evening, she's forced to reach out to the only man she trusts to save her. Eli's a protector, so she knows he'll come for her, but this time Kay is hoping for a little bit more. It's time to put it all on the line and ask for what she really wants.

A chance.

This is a companion to the full-length novel ALL I NEED IS YOU.

Elliott Alexander considered himself a pretty good sport. He wasn't overly sensitive and could take a joke as well as the next guy. But he was on the verge of knocking his younger brother upside the head if he didn't *shut up*.

"So, you opened the door and she was just standing there?" Nick glanced at him, a twinkle in his eye. "She wasn't peering in the windows like a stalker, was she?"

Their friend Matt Simmons was telling them about his final week at Eli's house last summer while he was in physical therapy. Now he was happily coupled up with his therapist, Penny, and living in New Haven again.

Matt shrugged and Penny laughed along with them. "All I know is I'd been doing some yard work and cleaning because I didn't want to leave the place a mess. On my way out, I opened the door and there she was, standing on the porch. Judging by the way she was dressed, it wasn't me she was expecting to open the door."

Eli gritted his teeth as their howls of laughter continued. His youngest brother, Jackson, clamped a hand on his shoulder in

solidarity. Either that or he was trying to hold him back so he wouldn't strangle one of them.

"How did we get on this topic again?" Eli shot Matt a disgruntled look, but his friend didn't seem daunted at all. He'd lost his intimidation factor it seemed because they were all having a hell of a time making fun of him.

"Wait, *by the way she was dressed?* What exactly was she wearing? Or *not wearing?*" Nick added.

His sister-in-law, Raina, walked up and pinched Nick's arm hard enough to make his brother jump. "What did you just say?"

Eli watched in amusement as Nick's whole demeanor changed. His normally smooth younger brother turned into a total wuss when his gorgeous wife was around. Raina had a successful career as a model and he could see why. She was far too thin for his taste, but her light brown skin and wild curly hair gave her an exotic look. Best of all, she was something of a ballbuster. It was always a joy to watch her handle his brother.

Nick held up his hands. "Oh, hey, baby. Matt was telling us about his last week staying in Eli's house and all the women knocking on the door."

He had hoped Raina would corral his brother's antics, but that hope died when her eyes lit up. "Eli? I never knew you were such a ladies' man," she teased.

Elliott squashed the urge to growl. Half of his brother's fun in teasing him was watching him get more and more pissed off. "First of all, it was one woman. *One*. Second of all, I have no idea who he's even talking about."

Matt covered his laugh by taking a sip of the beer he held. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean to rat you out, but I couldn't keep that to myself. She looked pretty devastated when I opened the door. I guess I wasn't up to her standards."

The group dissolved into laughter again. Eli was the darkest

skinned of all his brothers and, to his chagrin, the shortest. With his brown hair and tanned skin, Matt was about as far from Eli's looks as you could get.

"I don't even need to ask what she looked like. Let me guess, petite and curvy?" Nick smirked at Matt's nod. "There's never been a busty woman near Eli that was safe. That's been his type since high school. He had a crush on Janet Reed in the ninth grade because she developed a set of double Ds over the summer."

Even Eli had to smile at that one. He could still remember how obsessed he'd been that school year. His poor teenage hormones hadn't stood a chance against Janet's suddenly full figure.

"Okay, I think we've had enough fun at my expense. And I really don't think you want me to start sharing some of my high school memories of *you*."

Nick immediately stopped laughing. Raina looked at him with interest. "Oh really? Maybe I do need to hear this."

"Is that the baby crying? I'd better go check." Nick sauntered off, leaving his wife shaking her head as she followed.

Eli walked over to the window and shoved the curtains to the side. A profusion of snowflakes turned the landscape into an endless wall of white. Snowstorms were the norm at his house in Northern Virginia but not in New Haven. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been home while it was snowing.

"She's just fine where she is. Go on now!"

Eli turned at the sound of his mother's voice. His earlier annoyance vanished as he watched Nick try unsuccessfully to take his baby girl back from their mother, Julia. Eli could have told him that wasn't going to happen. Their mother was beyond excited about having a granddaughter, and she was probably going to have a grip on the baby all night. Finally Nick settled

for pulling his wife into his arms instead. He nuzzled her neck and whispered something that made her smile. Eli looked over to where Jackson was similarly cozied up with his wife, Ridley.

It was a good thing to see his little brothers so settled and happy. He'd left New Haven years ago, sure he'd never return to live there again. But time had a way of putting things into perspective. A way of distilling life to what was important and what was window dressing. He was tired of casual encounters and empty nights. Strangely enough, he wanted everything he'd always had growing up. Family, friends, and the certainty that they weren't going anywhere.

When he finally came out of his thoughts, he was startled to see his mother, Julia, standing right in front of him. Instinctively he stood straighter. His mom had a way of looking at him as if she'd caught him doing something he shouldn't have been even when he was doing nothing at all.

"Mom. Are you okay?"

She smiled up at him and ran a hand affectionately over his bald head. "I just want to spend a little time with my handsome son. Now, what's this I hear about a girlfriend at your house? Why don't you ever bring anyone home to meet me?"

His brother Bennett was walking up behind his mother, his mouth open as if he was about to say something. When he heard her words, he clamped his lips shut and backed away slowly, sending Eli a sympathetic look.

"Welcome home," he mouthed before turning around and going the other direction.

Eli grunted and took another swig of his beer. "Yeah, yeah. No place like it."

And despite knowing that he was in for at least an hour of well-intentioned prying from his mother, he meant every word.

KAYLEE WILHELM WATCHED as her mom held her granddaughter in the crook of her arm and bounced her on her hip. Her mom made kissy-faces and talked in a singsong voice as she danced the baby back and forth.

The two of them formed quite a picture silhouetted against the darkening sky. Kay loved watching them like this when her mom didn't know she was looking. It was the only time she saw glimpses of how her mom used to be.

Before she'd disappointed her.

She shook off the dark thoughts and went back to what she'd been doing, folding the purple baby blanket she held into a neat square. It went into the diaper bag along with Hope's favorite plastic unicorn teething ring. She'd forgotten it the last time they visited and Hope had cried for hours without it that night.

"Are you getting ready to head out, baby girl?" Her father, Leeland Wilhelm, handed her a stack of baby wipes that she'd left on the coffee table.

"Yeah, I need to go over some things tonight. I have to practice the new songs Jackson sent me. We're supposed to record them right after the New Year."

Her father's face fell and she immediately wished she hadn't brought it up. He hated that she'd quit her job to pursue a singing career. Especially since she was singing "the devil's music" now.

"It's the holidays, pumpkin. You should be here for Christmas. I don't like thinking of you in that apartment all alone."

"I'm not alone." She glanced over to Hope. When she caught sight of her, the baby gurgled and tried to throw her little body sideways out of her grandmother's arms.

“You know what I meant.” He handed her the diaper bag and followed as she walked over to her mom.

“Okay, Mom, we need to get going. I heard the snow is going to get worse tonight so I need to be home before then.”

“You should just stay here. The ham is almost done and you can help me make the bread for dinner tomorrow.”

Kay suppressed a sigh. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning, Mom. I just have some stuff that I need to do at home.”

Her mom clutched Hope closer. “You can always leave Hope here. It’s foolish to drag her out in this weather when you don’t have to. She has everything she needs here, anyway.”

Kay gritted her teeth. Her mom had been doing this more and more lately, leaving not-so-subtle hints that Hope would be better off staying with them full time. Her mom thought she was helping out, but all Kaylee heard was *your daughter is better off without you* or *you’re not a good mother*. Whenever she said anything about it, her mom brushed off her concerns as Kaylee being too sensitive.

“We’re going home now. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Kay leaned over and gathered Hope in her arms, settling her on her hip. It was hard not to be rude sometimes, but she’d learned the hard way that she needed to be forceful with her mom or they’d be going back and forth all evening.

“I don’t see what the rush is—”

“Just let the girl be, Henrietta. They’ll be back tomorrow.”

Kay sent her father a grateful look. He wasn’t happy with some of the choices she’d made in the last year, but at least he tried to help her out.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow morning.” She kissed her mother on the cheek and then stood still so her father could kiss her forehead.

“Don’t forget her blankie,” her mom said. She followed

directly behind them, wringing her hands as Kaylee walked to the door.

“I’ve got it, Mom.”

“And what about her teething ring? You forgot it last time, you know.”

“Yes, I know. It’s in the diaper bag.”

Kay tried to block out the rest of her mom’s warnings as she pulled the diaper bag higher on her shoulder. If she responded, it would just prolong the lecture. It was easier to let her mom get it all out of her system while she did the hard work of wrestling Hope into her fluffy winter coat and fastening her in her car seat. Finally, she stood and lifted the car seat with her right hand. It no longer felt like it weighed a ton since she was so used to lugging it around.

Her parents stood in the doorway, watching as she carefully navigated the walk from the front door to where her car was parked in their driveway. She leaned into the back seat of her sedan, her back protesting the whole way, to latch the car seat into its base. When she was done, she waved gaily at her parents before getting into the driver’s seat and securing her own seat belt. At the sight of them standing in the doorway, a small pang of guilt made her hesitate, her hand pausing on the key in the ignition.

It was Christmas Eve.

It was the holidays and she was leaving her parents alone so she could practice. Yes, they were a little overbearing at times but they were still her parents.

Then she thought of what was sure to happen if she stayed. Her mother would start in on her usual lecture about everything Kaylee was doing wrong, from her career choices to her parenting. They’d end up having another argument and then

they'd all sit in tense silence for the rest of the night. Good intentions or not, she just couldn't take it.

Not tonight.

"I'll be back tomorrow," she muttered, not sure who she was trying to reassure. It was her daughter's first Christmas. She had every right to want it to be filled with happy memories.

She grinned at Hope in the rearview mirror before backing out carefully. "Time to go home, baby girl."

"WHO ARE YOU TEXTING? I'm starting to get a little jealous." Penny poked Matt in the ribs, though it was obvious she was just joking by the way she snuggled up against Matt's back and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"I'm not texting." Matt covered the hand she'd rested against his belly with one of his.

Elliott believed in love; it was hard to be a part of his family and not believe in fate, but he'd been a little skeptical that it could happen to guys like him. Rough, blunt guys who didn't have a Hollywood-perfect face and a lot of smooth lines.

But Matt was a rugged, ex-military man. Eli had a lot more in common with him than he did his brothers. If love could happen for him, then maybe there really was hope for the rest of them.

"Kaylee missed her check-in. She was supposed to e-mail when she arrived at her parents' house. The GPS on her car places her there but I didn't get a confirmation from her."

Eli snapped to attention. "Is she okay? Does she need anything?"

"She's on her way home now. It's just not like her to miss a check-in. She knows if she doesn't keep us updated, she'll go

back to having a constant shadow. As much as we've enjoyed hanging with her these past months, I think she was glad to get back to normal."

More than anything, she was probably happy to get some time away from Eli. He sighed. There were a lot of things he regretted about his summer and the way he'd treated Kay was at the top of the list. It wasn't her fault she rubbed him the wrong way, but there was just *something* about her.

He gritted his teeth. There was something about her all right. She was the epitome of his "type" except for one small detail.

The fact that she was frickin' jailbait.

When he'd been protecting her, fate had taken every opportunity to test his control, from her never-ending collection of snug sweaters to his sister-in-law Ridley *accidentally* booking them into the same hotel room on a trip. He'd offered her the bed that night and camped out on a small cot the harried concierge had brought them. But it had been a special brand of torture lying there all night, listening to the rustle of sheets as she moved. Imagining the fabric sliding over her skin.

Torture.

And enough to make him want to give his libido a scalding-hot bath. She wasn't actually underage, but from his perspective, she might as well be. He was disgusted with himself for even thinking about her that way. She was just a kid and he was now officially a dirty old man. There was easily a decade between their ages. And even if they could get past the age difference, how could she accept his past? He sighed and pushed the idea out of his head.

"I'm just glad we caught the bastard sending those threatening letters," Eli grumbled.

Over the past summer, they'd been working around the

clock trying to uncover the identity of the person sending Kaylee threatening letters. She'd had a near-constant security detail, which had been a challenge for her and for him. Elliott had finally traced the paper used in one of the envelopes to a local store and had been able to find the guy who'd bought it, an old classmate of Kay's.

His motive appeared to have been simple jealousy. When he'd seen how well she was doing as part of the new pop group, Divine, he'd asked her for a loan and she'd turned him down. So he'd decided to send her the letters as payback.

At least that was the story they assumed was true. The guy had claimed that he had no idea what was in the letters he was mailing. That someone had left him money in exchange for sending them.

Which was ridiculous.

Either way, Eli had spent quite a bit of time guarding Kaylee over the summer. Time when he'd had to constantly remind himself that he was thirty years old and she was barely out of her teens. That she was sweet and softhearted and he was more like a surly bear.

Most importantly that, despite having a baby, she was sheltered and innocent when it came to male-female interactions. He was... *not*.

He almost choked on his drink as he imagined her reaction to the things in his room at home. He kept a fully kitted closet with everything from blindfolds and bindings to clamps and floggers. He would never bring her there, of course. As soon as she walked in and saw the mirrors over the bed she'd probably faint.

They'd spent most of their time at Kaylee's apartment. Her *tiny* apartment. Then when Matt had come to work for him, he'd assigned Matt to her security detail because he trusted him.

Also because you can't deal with being that close to her all the time.

Eli realized that Matt and Penny were both watching him closely so purposely made his voice casual when he asked, "Is she coming over later?"

His attempt at nonchalance didn't appear to have worked because Matt gave him a knowing look. "No, she's not coming. Yes, I invited her. I even offered to pick her up. I think she was planning to spend the evening with her family."

"Good. That's good." Eli ignored Penny's smile and turned gratefully when he heard someone calling his name. He didn't even mind when he saw his mother waving him over. He'd rather deal with more of her pointed questions about his love life than think about all the reasons he needed to stay away from Kaylee Wilhelm.

It only took Kay a few minutes to drive to the new apartment complex she'd moved into six months ago. It was always a thrill to drive up and realize she lived here. It wasn't the flashiest or most expensive place, but it was *hers*.

One of the only things she'd accomplished completely on her own.

The temperature felt like it had dropped another ten degrees in the time it had taken her to drive home. Kay shivered and pulled the zipper of her coat all the way up to the top of her throat. She covered Hope with another baby blanket to keep her warm and out of the wind and hustled into the building, walking up the two flights of stairs as fast as she could. Her fingers struggled to turn the key in the lock, they were so cold.

"What I wouldn't give for a hot bath right now." She finally got the door open and then dropped the diaper bag as soon as she made it inside. Hope jumped at the loud sound.

"I'm sorry. Mommy's not doing such a good job today, huh?"

She uncovered her daughter and tickled her chubby little belly as she unfastened the buckles holding her into the car seat.

Once she was free, Hope kicked and squirmed happily. She cooed nonsense words as they walked down the hall to her bedroom. Kay grabbed the bright blue bouncy chair sitting next to her bed and pulled it into the bathroom.

“I need you to be a good girl so I can shower. Hmm? Can you do that for Mama?”

Hope gurgled and gnawed on the end of her fist while watching Kay with her big bright eyes. With her perfectly smooth brown skin and curly pigtails, she looked like a little doll. Kay blew gently on the baby’s face until she let out a belly laugh. Her heart flipped over the way it did every time. The sound of her daughter’s laughter still had the power to stun her. It was the most beautiful sound in the world.

After carefully strapping Hope into the bouncy seat and giving her the plastic unicorn to bite on, Kay stripped quickly and stepped into the shower. Experience had taught her that she had about three minutes before Hope got antsy.

She soaped her body quickly and then scrubbed her hands over her face. At the sound of the first soft whimper, Kay stuck her head around the shower curtain and blew a loud kiss. Hope grinned and swung her legs vigorously, bouncing herself up and down in the seat.

After rinsing off, Kay grabbed her towel and wrapped it around her body, shivering slightly as the cool air hit her skin.

“Oh, my sweet baby girl. I remember the days when I could take a bubble bath for an hour and had time to do my hair and makeup. Now I consider it a good day if I remember to brush my teeth and put on matching shoes.”

Kay smiled down at the baby as she corralled her long black hair and twisted it into a low ponytail. Hope smiled back, then grimaced. A few seconds later, Kay knew it was time for a diaper change.

“You just had to wait until after I showered, huh?” She laughed softly as Hope just continued to regard her with a sour look.

Kay changed into a soft, nubby pink sweater and jeans and pulled on thick socks. Then she went back up front to retrieve the diaper bag.

“Okay, let’s get you clean and then you can play with your blocks.” Kay strapped Hope on the changing table in her room and then reached underneath for the wipes and a clean diaper. When her hand hit empty space, she remembered that she’d put the last of everything in the diaper bag. She’d been planning to go to the store before the snow started. But she had enough to last them through the night.

She grabbed the diaper bag and pulled out the box of wipes. Then a change of clothes. A board book. She started pulling things out frantically. Hope’s favorite blankie. A pacifier.

“I *couldn’t* have left all the diapers at Mom’s house.” She let out a soft groan when she got to the bottom of the diaper bag.

Kay sat on the floor right where she stood and let her head fall forward into her hands. Her heart raced as the stress of the last few weeks finally caught up with her.

She’d never claimed to be a superwoman. Doing it all wasn’t a statement of girl power but of necessity. She could take care of Hope, record another album, and work full time because she hadn’t seen any other choices. Sure, she could have given up on recording and it would make her life a lot easier in the short run. No more late-night sessions or appearances. She could spend more time with her family and actually get some sleep for once.

Even though it would make her life easier right now, she couldn’t do it. It would mean turning her back on an amazing opportunity. It would mean giving up on her dreams. If she

didn't reach for her dreams, what kind of role model would she be for her child? Her own mother had given up on her career as a singer when she got pregnant with Kaylee. She was determined not to make that same mistake.

There were times when her mom looked like she was a million miles away that Kay knew she was thinking about the old days. Her mom thought she was selfish not to give it all up for Hope, but she couldn't. Did that make her a bad mom?

Maybe Hope is better off with them.

After a long, wretched moment, Kay shook her head. There had been many days she'd wondered what her mother would be like if she'd kept her career. If she'd be kinder. Happier. If she'd have a little more love in her heart for her daughter instead of criticism. Kay was determined that Hope would never have to think about that.

"Hope has the most important thing. A mother who loves her. She's happy." It was the only thing Kay cared about, giving her baby girl a happy childhood. Hope would never have a reason to question if she was loved or if she was a disappointment to her mom.

Kay brushed her hair back from her face and stood. She had a decision to make. Go back to her parents' house and pick up the diapers or go to the store and buy more. Her parents were closer and she wouldn't have to stand in line.

But at the store you won't get a lecture, she thought.

Quickly, Kay retrieved the spare diaper she always kept tucked in the inner pocket of her handbag. It had seemed like overkill to place an extra one there, but she was glad she'd done it now. A few minutes later, she had the baby cleaned up and redressed.

Hope squirmed under her hand, desperate to escape the changing table and get down to the floor to play.

“Okay, little miss. I guess we need to run to the store. Let’s go!”

ELI PUT his beer down on the table next to the window. His mom stood next to him, looking out at the worsening storm. Every so often, she’d glance down at the watch on her wrist and then go back to frowning at the glass.

“What’s wrong, Mom? Are we expecting someone else?” Eli looked out the window, but he couldn’t see much beyond the flurry of snowflakes and the crystalline patterns the ice formed on the pane.

“I overheard Matt talking about Kaylee. He said she had to go back out, but then she never called to let him know she got back home safely.”

Eli waved Matt over. When Matt joined them he asked “Did Kay call yet?”

Matt shook his head slowly. “Not yet. She’s still not at home according to this, but she’s not answering her phone.” He showed Eli the blip moving on his cell phone screen. “She shouldn’t be out in this storm. I don’t know what the hell she’s doing. It shouldn’t have taken her this long to run to the store.” He spoke lightly, but there was a thread of worry underneath.

Matt had been guarding Kay for months, and they’d become friends. He knew her usual habits, where she went and when. If he was worried, then there was reason to be.

Eli pulled up the GPS application on his own phone. It was useful at times to keep tabs on lower-risk clients, although technically he should have taken Kay’s tracking ID out of his system since he wasn’t guarding her anymore. He pulled up her identi-

fication number. A second later, there was a small red blip on his screen. She was definitely not home.

“Maybe she stopped somewhere else?”

“But then why wouldn’t she answer her phone? What if something happened?” Julia twisted her hands, the fine bones showing prominently beneath the skin. “I hate the thought of her and that sweet baby out there in the cold somewhere.”

His mom considered everyone in their town extended family, but she’d taken an immediate liking to Kaylee and her little girl.

By now the rest of the family had gathered closer. Everyone seemed to pick up on Julia’s agitation. Raina hugged her daughter closer, rubbing the baby’s back to calm her whimpers.

“I’m not getting a good feeling about this. She’s usually really good about checking in and letting me know where she’s going.” Matt glanced down at his phone again. “I don’t want to call her parents and alarm them, but this storm is getting worse by the hour.”

A second later, the room was plunged into darkness. Julia let out a small gasp and grabbed Eli’s arm.

“What was that?” someone whispered.

Eli’s heart slowed slightly. “The power’s gone out. Just hold on, everyone, the generators will kick in any minute now.”

As if on cue, the lights came back on and there was a gentle hum as all the electronics in the room powered back on and reset themselves. His parents had done an extensive upgrade, which included generators, to the main house years ago, but he doubted if Kaylee’s apartment building was similarly equipped. Even if she got home safely from the storm, she’d be stuck in the dark with the baby. In the cold.

Alone.

“I have to go.” He disentangled himself from his mother’s

arm and grabbed his coat from the hall closet. After zipping it up all the way, he grabbed insulated gloves and pulled on a knit cap to cover his recently shaved head. There were several thick blankets on the top shelf of the closet, so he grabbed those, too. Just in case.

“Where are you going?” His mother appeared at his elbow, her brown eyes filled with worry. Everyone else crowded behind her.

“Are you going out in the storm? It’s coming down pretty hard,” Jackson added.

“You guys are forgetting something.” He pointed at the slightly dimmed lights. “Not everyone has generators the way we do. The rest of the city is under a blackout. Even if Kay’s at home safe, she won’t have any power. And if something has happened and she’s out there alone, it could be a while before anyone else comes along.”

Julia pulled him into a quick hug. “Be careful out there.” She tugged the ends of the hat down over his ears. He smiled at the familiar gesture. She’d done the same thing when sending him out to school in the winter as a kid.

“You know I will be.” He hated to leave her looking so worried. “Don’t worry. I put chains on my tires this morning. I’ll be fine.” He kissed her on the brow and pulled the front door open.

The blast of frigid air that hit him in the face only strengthened his resolve to check on Kaylee. What if something had happened? It was below freezing already, and since most Virginians weren’t used to this kind of weather, it was unlikely she’d be prepared for the cold if she’d gotten stalled somewhere. The image of Kay out there somewhere alone and cold without any emergency supplies quickened his step.

Luckily he'd been one of the last to arrive, so his truck was parked at the end of his parents' driveway.

Eli loved his truck. It was hardly a flashy sports car, but it was dependable and built for a man his size. Flashy wasn't his style and it wouldn't have suited him anyway. He wasn't classically handsome like his younger brothers. He looked more like a guard dog, and considering his line of work, that was more than fine with him.

Guard dogs were protectors. If there was even a chance Kay was in trouble, a protector was exactly what she needed.

GOING out to get diapers should have been a fifteen-minute journey. Of course, getting her daughter into her coat and car seat had easily eaten up five of those minutes from the start.

Kay watched with mounting impatience as the woman in front of her loaded the checkout conveyer belt with what looked like half the store. All she wanted was to buy her diapers and get back to her car before Hope started crying again. Now it was just her luck that she'd gotten stuck in line behind someone stocking up for the apocalypse.

People are so ridiculous, she thought.

The shelves in the store had been swept clean of all the staple items such as bread, eggs, and milk. She'd figured she could run in and out since she only needed one thing, but instead she'd had to fight to get down the aisles since there were so many people in the store.

After she finally got through the line, she tucked the package of diapers into her huge purse with one hand and picked up Hope's car seat with the other. The outside of the store was just

as chaotic as the inside. The parking lot was packed and there were abandoned shopping carts everywhere.

She looked up at the sky in trepidation after she'd hooked Hope's car seat back into the base. It was so much worse than when she'd left the apartment. It would have been smarter to just ask her dad to bring the diapers than risk getting stuck out in this storm.

Finally she was able to pull out of the crowded parking lot and back onto the main road. There was a long line of cars waiting to get to the light, so at the last minute she turned the opposite direction and headed for one of the back roads that would lead her to her apartment building.

Maybe she should have taken Matt up on his invitation to come with him to the Alexanders'. His four-wheel-drive SUV would have navigated the icy streets better. Then she could have seen Eli.

That's the last thing you need.

Although, she probably should have accepted the ride. She patted the steering wheel of her used sedan. It got her from place to place, but it was temperamental and no match for icy, wet conditions. At the moment though, it was all she could afford.

Jackson had told her the real money in music came from owning the rights to the music itself. Most artists who weren't songwriters made their money from touring and appearances. When he'd first signed her as part of the singing group Divine, she'd wanted to tell him she wrote songs, but she'd been too shy to show him anything she'd written.

Not that it mattered since Divine had never really caught on. They only had moderate success, so Jackson had disbanded the group and offered her a solo contract. She'd finally worked up the nerve to mention her songwriting and he'd offered to take a

look at her work. Sadly, even though she'd promised to send him something, she still hadn't followed through.

Instead she was scrimping and saving, trying to make the advance money he'd given her last a bit longer.

Her thoughts were jerked back to the present when she turned the corner onto a side street, and for a moment, it felt like the car was weightless.

"Oh my god!"

As the car slid across a patch of black ice, Kay instinctively jerked the steering wheel to the left. The sudden motion sent them sailing straight toward the side of the road. The car fishtailed and then hit the ditch with a terrifying screech of metal, which was then followed by absolute silence.

Kay had never known that quiet could be so horrifying. Then the sound of her breathing became loud in her own ears and she struggled to turn her head.

"Hope?"

It was quiet, but then she heard a soft giggle. Kay let out a relieved breath. If her daughter was giggling then she hadn't been hurt. Actually, she wasn't even hurt. She held up her hands in front of her face and gave her head a little shake. It must have been the front end of her car on the passenger side that had made contact. With what, she was a little scared to find out.

She sat up and reached for her seat belt. The car shifted and swayed. Her stomach lurched. "Whoa! What was that?"

Her windows were too foggy for her to see much but it had felt like she'd run into something. Had she hit the ditch on the side of the road?

"Mommy's gotten us into some trouble this time, baby girl."

Her handbag was on the seat next to her, gaping open. When her eyes lit on her cell phone, she leaned forward to grab it.

A horrible creaking groan from the front of the car halted

her in her tracks. The car tipped forward slightly and Kay grabbed the steering wheel. "Okay, I won't be doing that again."

It felt like she was on the edge of the ditch. If she moved around too much there was the chance they'd slide in completely. She glanced back at Hope who gave her a gummy grin, exposing the two tiny teeth on the bottom row.

She couldn't take any risks that they'd slide into the ditch because they'd land on Hope's side of the car. She could be pinned or even crushed.

A hysterical sob bubbled up from her throat. She clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from making a sound. It wouldn't help anything for Hope to pick up on her distress. Right now the baby didn't seem to realize anything was wrong.

Kay pulled a hairpin out of her bun and straightened it. Leaning carefully, she poked the bottom button on her phone. There were two beeps and then she said, "Call Elliott."

"I do not understand," the automated voice responded.

Kay hung her head. Her movement must have shifted the car again because there was another creak and she sucked in a terrified breath. If she couldn't get the phone to work, she'd have to reach for it. If she reached for it, the car could tip over.

She took a deep breath, poked the button with the hair pin again, and then yelled, "*Call Elliott!*"

ELI PEERED THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD, scanning the side of the road and looking for Kay's car. There weren't that many people out driving since the local news had predicted that the storm would bring a heavy snowfall. Most New Haven residents were probably tucked into their homes safe and sound.

It had occurred to him that perhaps the GPS tracker on her

car was malfunctioning. He'd had an image of her at home, completely unaware that they thought she was missing. So he'd driven by her apartment building. Her car wasn't in the parking lot.

She was somewhere out in the storm.

He couldn't even imagine what had possessed Kay to go out in this kind of weather. She was a practical, down-to-earth kind of girl. There must have been a good reason for her to drive in this weather, especially when she was supposed to be spending the holidays with her parents.

His cell phone rang, vibrating through the puffy layers of his coat. At the next available opportunity, he pulled over. The previous day's snow had hardened overnight to form nearly invisible patches of ice on the roads. He'd passed several accidents already. It was hard enough to drive carefully in all this mess, he wasn't going to attempt to do it while on the phone.

A car whizzed by, sending a spray of snow and ice onto the side of his truck. If people didn't slow down and drive more carefully, there would be even more accidents.

When he pulled out his cell phone, his heartbeat quickened when he saw Kay's picture on the screen.

"Kay, where are you?" He answered without preamble.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" Her voice sounded small. There were several shuffling sounds then he didn't hear anything else.

"Kay! What's happening?"

It was quiet, then he heard, "Eli, can you hear me?" A second later, she gasped and said, "Oh my god!"

"Kay, where are you?" he yelled. His hands clenched around his phone. If she was in trouble, he had to find out where she was. What if he couldn't get to her in time?

"I'm on Magnolia Avenue. I'm in a ditch. I'm not sure how far I was before we started sliding."

“Okay, Kay, I need you to listen to me. Are you hurt? What about the baby?”

The moments she was silent were some of the longest of Eli’s life. He was on the verge of yelling into the phone again when she finally answered with “We’re both okay. I don’t think she knows anything happened.”

Relief surged through Eli. His eyes drifted closed as he realized just how close to insane he’d been worrying about her. A girl that he hadn’t seen in months should not affect him so strongly. But that was a thought for him to examine at another time.

After he’d gotten her to safety.

He straightened up and put his truck back in gear. Magnolia Avenue was just two streets over and didn’t usually see a lot of traffic. Hopefully he could get over to her in five minutes or less. God help anyone who got in his way.

“I’m not that far from you, so I should be there in a few minutes. I’m on my way. Just hold on.”

The next five minutes were the longest of her life.

Kay sat completely still and focused on her breathing. In. Out. In. Out. If she thought about things for too long, she'd start to freak out. She was trapped in her car with her daughter. On the edge of a ditch.

"Eli, I hope you're almost here."

Kay chanced a look into the back seat. Hope was staring out the window, two fingers in her mouth. She let out a breath. Everything was going to be fine. Eli would get them out.

It was completely irrational, but she always felt like nothing too bad could ever happen when Eli was near. He was strong and confident. Without a word, he could walk into a room and take charge of it. Just talking to him on the phone had made her feel better. All she had to do was follow his instructions and he'd get her out of this mess. Kay put a hand to her lips, not surprised to find that she was smiling.

I am so ridiculous.

She was stuck in her car on the edge of a ditch, but she was smiling because it meant she'd get to see Eli. There was really

no reason for her to be happy. It wasn't as if Eli was going to be happy to see her.

Her smile faded.

He didn't like her much. She'd always thought it was the case but nothing had pushed the point home like their bungled overnight trip to D.C. last summer. Her friend Mara had wanted Eli to spy on her brother's new girlfriend, and Kay had somehow been roped into helping out. She rolled her eyes thinking of the crazy group of girls she was now lucky enough to call her friends. Mara had been friends with the Alexanders for years, and along with Eli's sister-in-law, Ridley Alexander, she'd come up with a surefire plan to force Eli into helping them. Ridley had booked a singing gig for Kay in D.C. so that Eli would have to follow her up there.

Things might have actually been okay if she hadn't trusted Ridley to make all the arrangements, too. Kay wouldn't have planned her gig so late, too late for them to drive back home. She certainly would have *never* booked them into the same hotel room.

They'd both been shocked to see that the room was not only tiny but didn't even have the usual two queen beds. The look on Eli's face would have been comical if his look of disgust had been directed anywhere but at her. He'd been *horrified* at the idea of sleeping anywhere near her. After the initial shock wore off, he'd been a perfect gentleman. He'd offered her the bed and then called the front desk to request a cot, but it was too late. She'd already seen his first reaction.

What had been only slightly obvious before was plain as day when they'd gotten to that hotel room. Elliott Alexander didn't like her.

She could have gladly lived her whole life never knowing that.

There was a loud rumble of an engine behind her and Kay's heart leaped. Eli was here.

She could see him in her rearview mirror. He circled the back of her car and then got back in his truck. Where was he going?

He drove his truck directly across the road from her. Then he got out again. She couldn't see what he was doing from her side mirror, but it looked like he was examining her tires. Kay rolled down her window as he approached the driver's side door.

"Looks like you really got yourself into a jam this time." His lips lifted at the corners. Not much of a smile, but about as close as Eli ever came to one. She couldn't say why but she immediately burst into tears.

"Aw hell, I didn't mean to make you cry." Eli looked alarmed at her outburst.

Kay shook her head. "It's not that. I'm just really glad to see you. Thanks for coming to get me."

"Anytime. Let's get you out of here." He reached for her door handle.

"No! Wait. You have to get Hope first. The car is really unsteady and keeps tilting. Get her out first."

He immediately nodded. "Okay, I will. Hold on tight. I had some old cables in my truck so I attached them to your bumper to hold you still. Even so, it's probably a good idea not to move. I don't want to test how strong those cables are unless we have to."

Eli opened the back door and climbed carefully into the back seat. There was another loud creak from the front end of the car and Kay tensed. She glanced into the back seat to see Eli examining Hope's car seat like it was an alien device. She

suppressed a nervous giggle. He was a single guy. To him it probably was.

“There’s a metal hook that latches into the top. Release that first.” She waited while he did it.” Now you have to push the big red button on the top to release her car seat from the base.”

He nodded and then pushed the button. Once he was able to lift the seat up, he moved backward slowly, then carried the baby across the street to his truck. He jogged back and unhooked the base from the backseat and set it in the street.

“Now it’s your turn. Grab my hand.”

She placed her palm in his. His fingers gripped and held tight. “Now lean forward and grab your stuff off the seat. I’m holding you so it’s okay to move forward a little.”

Kay wasn’t so sure about that, but she nodded anyway. She took a deep breath and leaned forward to grab her handbag. The car creaked a little, so she quickly leaned back, clutching her bag to her chest.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you,” Eli added.

Kay looked at the front of the car worriedly.

“I need you to trust me, angel. I’m not going to let you fall.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m pretty strong.” His lips lifted again in that maddening half smile.

His words gave her the courage to swing her legs out of the car and stand up.

“See, that wasn’t so scary.”

Kay let out a small breath. She was trembling so hard that he just picked her up and carried her toward his truck. “Eli! I’m too heavy for you to carry.” Her face flamed as she imagined him pulling a muscle or getting a hernia from hefting her around.

Eli grunted. “Hardly. I think I can handle carrying a girl. Do I really look that wimpy to you?”

Kay giggled. He looked so affronted that she’d even

suggested that he wasn't strong enough. But she was just trying to save his back the trouble. She wasn't exactly a small girl. Not like the girls he was probably used to.

"I'm sure you can carry anything, but you shouldn't have to. I'm fine. I can walk."

He set her down. "Okay, as long as you don't start crying again. I don't think there's a man alive who knows what to do with a crying woman."

Just then a horrible screeching sound pierced the air. Eli grabbed her and turned them away, shielding her with his body. Kay's ears were ringing but she still registered the firm muscles pressed up against her backside. Heat swept to her face.

She looked up from the cradle of his protective hold. Their faces were so close together. She'd never dreamed a man would put himself physically between her and harm. Even if he was just doing his job, it was more than anybody else had ever done for her.

"I'm sorry about your car."

Kay looked back and gasped. The cables holding her car had snapped. Now her sedan was completely in the ditch, tilted drunkenly on its side. This time when Eli picked her up, she didn't protest.

As he carried her away, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight of her totaled car.

ELI PULLED UP TO HIS PARENTS' house and turned off his truck. He'd already called his mom so she knew to expect them. He just wasn't sure what to expect from *himself*.

He hadn't asked Kay's opinion about what to do or even entertained the idea of taking her to her parents' house. His

brain had been taken over by some dominant instinct to protect her. That meant he wanted her where he could keep an eye on her.

Kay took her seat belt off and turned to face him. He braced himself. She had every right to yell at him. They didn't even get along. He certainly had no right to make decisions for her.

"Eli, thank you for coming to get us. I honestly wasn't sure what I was going to do." She leaned over and squeezed his arm.

He looked down at her hand in surprise. She quickly took it back. "Sorry. Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks."

After a few moments of awkward silence, he could only respond with "You're welcome."

Kay pushed open her door and hopped down. There was a muffled curse as she half slid, then fell. He pushed open his own door and rushed around the truck to help her.

"Be careful. It's pretty high."

"Yeah, and I'm vertically challenged. I know." She shrugged and pulled open the back door. "Can you get her down? I don't want to take a chance that I might fall while holding the car seat. It's pretty hard to carry as it is."

Eli reached up into the truck and unhooked the car seat from its base. When she caught sight of him, Hope's eyes lit up and she let out a rousing squeal. Eli laughed, unable to help himself. When was the last time anyone was that happy to see him? He tickled her under the chin and lifted her down.

It was still startling to see how much Hope had grown. He was used to thinking of her as "the baby." But now she was so much bigger, with round cheeks and laughing eyes. Her skin was the same warm shade as her mother's, and her short, silky black hair had transformed into a wild curly mass.

He'd always found it fascinating how quickly babies

changed. How they looked at birth was usually nowhere close to how they looked just a few months later.

Just as they reached the steps, the front door flew open and his mother rushed out. Eli immediately felt bad. His mom must have been really worried the whole time he was gone. He opened his arms as she approached, but his mom bypassed him completely and enfolded Kaylee into a hug.

“You poor thing! We were so worried.”

Kaylee looked just as shocked as he did, but she allowed his mom to fuss over her.

Eli just shook his head. “Gee, thanks for the concern, Mom.”

Julia just sent him a chastising look. “Oh, hush. I knew you were perfectly fine. Now come in out of the cold.”

As they bustled into the house, his mom shut the door behind them, cutting off the whistling sound of the wind. Julia took Kay’s coat and then pulled her into another hug. After a moment, Kay melted into the embrace and let out a soft sigh. The sound hit Eli right in the center of his chest. It sounded like she’d had the weight of the world on her shoulders and just gotten out from under it.

He’d made the right decision to bring her here. If you needed comfort, there was nowhere else in the world better than his parents’ house to get it.

“Now, let’s get you settled.”

“Thank you. I’m really sorry to barge in on you this way,” Kay said.

“Oh, honey, you’re not barging. You needed help. Everybody needs a little help sometimes,” Julia replied.

Eli set Hope’s baby carrier down gently. “Mom, can you get the baby settled while I show Kay to her room?”

Just as he expected, his mother’s eyes went bright with happiness at the sight of the baby.

“Of course I can. I can take care of this little angel.” She knelt next to the baby and tickled her belly while undoing the car-seat restraints.

Eli grabbed Kay’s hand and pulled her down the hall that led to the bedrooms. He stopped at the first one on the left and pushed the door open. A light was already on next to the bed, casting a soft glow over everything. His mother had probably started tidying the room as soon as he called.

Kay sat on the edge of the bed gingerly. “This is your room?”

Eli shrugged. “It used to be. We all come home for Christmas and stay in our old rooms. It’s nice for us all to be together again.”

Kay picked at a small corner of the blanket. “Sounds nice. Having everyone together like that.”

“Since Bennett lives in a converted barn out back, Mom offers his old room to guests. Mara’s boyfriend surprised her with a trip to New York for Christmas so Matt and Penny are using his room this year. They’re planning to head to Penny’s parents before the New Year. According to Matt visiting his parents as well would have been more family time than he can handle. Last year, my mom’s friend Miss Doris stayed over because her husband was in the hospital during the holidays. Mom didn’t want her coming home to her empty house after visiting him each day.”

“Your mom is wonderful.” Kay crossed her arms, pulling the sleeves of her sweater down.

“Are you cold? I can get you another blanket.” Eli moved to the closet and pulled down one of the spare comforters his mom kept on the top shelf.

“No, that’s not it. I just need to feed the baby.” Their eyes met and she dropped her gaze to her lap. Kay looked faintly uncom-

fortable. Probably because they were in his small room alone together.

Eli took a step back to give her some space.

“Mom can do that. I’m pretty sure she’s got plenty of baby food here for Jada.” His mother was probably planning on feeding the baby and putting her to bed. It was a good thing his younger brothers were happily married and willing to provide their mother with grandchildren. Eli was willing to do just about anything for his mother, but grandchildren was one thing he couldn’t give her.

He dropped the extra comforters on the end of the bed.

“You don’t want to deprive her of baby time, do you? She has to share baby Jada with the other women. Ridley and Raina have been hogging her apparently. They need another baby out there before they start fighting.”

“It’s not that. It’s just—” Sheturned slightly red at the top of her cheekbones. “I need to feed her. You know...” She pantomimed holding the baby to her breast.

“Oh! Right.” Eli backed up so fast he almost tripped. “Uh... I’ll go get her.”

He couldn’t meet her eyes as he left to find his mom. The thought of Kay holding the baby to her breast did something funny to his insides. His protective instincts were always in overdrive around her anyway, but the image of her feeding her baby made him feel like he needed to stand guard and protect her while she was so vulnerable.

Since he was clearly going insane already, it was best if he left to see about getting a tow truck out to pull her car from the ditch. Emotions weren’t his area of expertise, but practical matters—those he could handle.

KAY SMOOTHED her daughter's wild curls back from her forehead. A few minutes after Eli left, Julia appeared carrying Hope. She'd nursed the baby for half an hour and then changed her diaper. The house had been quiet when she'd arrived, but she'd heard an explosion of activity in the last ten minutes.

There was music and the sound of pots and pans clattering. They'd come so late and probably interrupted the family dinner. At the very least, she could offer to help Mrs. Alexander clean up.

When she opened the door, she was shocked to see Eli leaning against the wall outside.

"Eli? I didn't know you were out here waiting."

"I just got here a few minutes ago."

He didn't say anything else, just turned to walk down the hall. Kay followed, cuddling Hope higher on her hip. They walked through the kitchen and into the dining room. The table was set with delicate wineglasses and beautiful white plates trimmed in gold. Julia stood at the head of the table, carving a turkey that looked big enough to feed a village.

"Are you hungry, honey? I saved you a place right next to Eli." Julia looked up from her carving and smiled brightly at them.

Kay's mouth fell open. "I thought you would have already eaten dinner. It's so late."

"Oh, sweetheart, I held dinner when Eli went out to look for you."

Now she just felt completely self-conscious as everyone turned to look at them. "Oh no, I ruined your Christmas dinner. I'm so sorry—"

"Nonsense!" Julia interrupted. "You didn't ruin anything. We're all here now and ready to enjoy a nice dinner with family and friends. None of us could have thought about eating if we

didn't know you were safe." She walked around the table and handed the carving tools to her husband. "Now, you two sit down. I'll just take this little angel so you can eat."

Kay watched, befuddled, as Julia plucked the baby from her arms and sat down with Hope in her lap. Eli nudged her gently toward the left side of the table. There were only two seats left. She sank down gratefully, Eli next to her.

Dinner was a raucous affair with eleven adults and four children all taking up space in the dining room. Mark and Julia sat at opposite ends of the main table. Jackson, Ridley, and Bennett sat on one side while Eli, Kay, Matt, and Penny sat on the other. She was sitting so close to Eli that their thighs brushed every time she moved.

Jackson and Ridley's two kids were seated at a smaller table. Nick and Raina sat with them, cutting up their meat and trying to keep them from knocking over their cups.

The babies were passed around until they ended up on someone's lap. Everyone talked at the same time, and Kay could barely keep up with who was saying what. Dishes were passed across the table and there were second and even third helpings dished out. When Eli saw her eyeing the mashed-potato bowl, he picked it up and put a huge serving on her plate.

"I'm sure I don't need that much," Kay lamented. At home, she'd get an earful from her mother if she ate this much, but she couldn't help it. Everything was so delicious and she needed comfort food after the day she'd had.

Eli gave her an appraising look. "Eat. You've got to be starving. Isn't nursing a baby hard work? Raina's always telling us how she's still got to eat for two since she's nursing Jada."

"Well, I don't look like Raina," she mumbled. Eli's sister-in-law was a bona fide supermodel and stick thin. She could prob-

ably eat everything on this table and still fit her whole body in one of Kay's pant legs.

"I'm glad you don't. Now eat."

Eli's voice was commanding and Kay shoveled a mouthful of potatoes into her mouth automatically, all while her mind raced over his words.

He was glad she didn't look like Raina? What the hell did he mean by that?

Kay looked up to see Eli still watching her. His dark, intense gaze didn't leave hers until she swallowed and took another bite. Kay shivered when he finally turned away. On her other side, Eli's father asked her a question about her upcoming album. She tried to focus on the conversation, but for the rest of the meal, her mind was on that one sentence.

I'm glad you don't.

Kaylee had always secretly wondered how Elliott's mother had dealt with four children. There were days when she was completely overwhelmed taking care of Hope and she didn't even have any other children to worry about. But as she stood back and watched Mrs. Alexander turn down the bed and set up the spare playpen she kept for her granddaughter, she suddenly understood how she'd done it.

Julia Alexander was obviously a superhero.

"Thank you so much for setting this all up. I wasn't sure where I was going to put Hope tonight."

Julia waved away her thanks with an amiable smile. "It's nothing, sweetie. I always keep an extra playpen here just in case Nick forgets to bring one for Jada. It's just a simple model. No bells and whistles, but it gets the job done." She moved around the room, snapping her wrists briskly to open the clean sheets she carried under her arm.

"Oh, you don't have to do that." By the time Kay got the words out, Julia had already spread the clean fitted sheet on the bed and was shaking out the flat sheet.

“Wow. You’ve got everything set up and it would’ve probably taken me twice as long to get things right.”

Julia patted her on the arm. “Years of experience, dear. Now, let me know if you need anything else. Or if you need any help with the baby.” She tickled Hope under the chin and the baby let out a gurgle of delight. “I really don’t mind rocking her if she wakes up in the middle of the night.”

Kay smiled at the hopeful tone in Julia’s voice. Eli had warned her that his mom had baby fever and that she’d probably offer to help out with Hope. What he didn’t understand was that she didn’t mind at all. It had been ages since she’d slept soundly. She was more than happy to take any help she could get.

“I would love that.”

Julia’s face brightened and she squeezed Kay’s arm gently. “Excellent. Well, once she’s asleep come on out to the family room. It was an Alexander tradition when the boys were growing up to take a peek into our stockings on Christmas Eve. Since my boys are still *boys*”—she rolled her eyes affectionately—“they still do it to this day.”

Kay grinned at the image of Elliott as a little boy taking a peek at his Christmas gifts. “That sounds like fun. I’ll just rock Hope for a while and then I’ll be out. She usually goes to sleep pretty quickly if I sing to her.”

“Sounds good. I’ll wait a few minutes before I put the hot cocoa on.”

After Julia left, Kay bounced Hope on her hip gently, humming softly under her breath. Hope fidgeted for a while, then rested her head on Kay’s shoulder. As Kay sang the familiar words of her favorite church hymn, the baby let out a wide yawn. When Kay looked down at her, she was fast asleep.

She continued walking and singing softly until she was sure

Hope wouldn't wake up, then placed her carefully in the playpen. The plastic unicorn was already in there, so she placed it near the baby's clenched fist and then covered her with her blankie. Kay backed out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

"Is she asleep?"

Kay jumped and then let out a breath when she noticed Eli waiting for her in the darkened hallway. "You scared me. Yes, she just nodded off. She's had a long day."

Eli walked closer, coming out of the shadows. "So have you."

"Yeah, it's not every day I crash into a ditch. Thank God for that."

He grunted and took her arm gently. "That's why you need to sit down."

His words were gruff, but a small rush of pleasure made Kay shiver. Even when he seemed so remote and cold, he was still looking out for her well-being. Taking care of her.

"Your mom said something about hot cocoa?"

"There'll be plenty of that along with cider, eggnog, espresso, cookies, cakes, brownies, you name it. In case you hadn't figured this out yet, the Alexanders love a good party. Food is a big part of that."

They entered the family room, and Kay took a seat on the edge of the room. Julia brought them steaming mugs of cocoa filled to the brim with fluffy marshmallows. Plates of cookies were passed around, and after trying valiantly to ignore the delicious smell, Kay gave up on having willpower and took one. Warm chocolate melted on her tongue and she finally began to relax.

It was so surreal to watch Jackson and Nick fighting over the candy dish and to have a supermodel sitting on the couch talking about an acting role she'd been offered. This time last

year she'd been pregnant and terrified, wondering how in the world she was going to take care of a baby by herself. Her own mother hadn't even been speaking to her at the time. Their dinner had been a tense, silent affair.

If things had gone to plan, this year wouldn't have been much better. She'd be shivering in her cold, empty apartment, worried about how to keep her daughter warm. Instead, Hope was safe and happy while she was sitting next to her secret crush and drinking cocoa. They were both safely tucked away in the warm interior of the Alexanders' living room, surrounded by happiness.

Everything was perfect.

"COME ON, everyone. It's time to peek in the stockings." Julia herded all her children and grandchildren closer to the tree. Across the fireplace mantel, six stockings hung in a row, each one lovingly hand-knit by their Grandma Alexander, Mark's mother.

Ridley took a seat on the couch. Jackson sat next to her as Chris and Jase made a beeline for the Christmas tree. At Mark's suggestion, they'd started allowing the kids to open one present on Christmas Eve while the adults looked in their stockings. They usually hid candy and treats for the kids amongst the boughs of the Christmas tree as well.

It was a lovely tradition, one that Ridley looked forward to continuing for years to come.

"Hey, Mom, why don't you go first?" Jackson called out. He squeezed her hand and winked at her. He seemed just as anxious for her mother-in-law to find their surprise as she was.

"I would love to." Julia unhooked the stocking labeled

“MOM” and rooted around in the bottom. The first thing she pulled out was a slim jewelry case. She turned to Mark, who was reclining in his favorite comfy leather chair near the fireplace.

“Mark, you didn’t?” She popped open the case and let out a small sigh. “Would you look at that?” Her eyes were bright as she lifted the delicate bracelet out of the box.

“You always wanted one of those charm bracelets when we first got married,” Mark grumbled. He looked abashed at all the attention.

“But we couldn’t afford it back then,” Julia whispered. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she walked over and draped herself across his lap. “It’s never too late. Thank you, honey.” She kissed him tenderly while her two grandsons made gagging noises.

“Ew, they’re kissing again,” Chris whispered. Laughter broke out as his loud whisper broke the silence.

“You’ll understand one day.” Nick pulled Chris into a hug. “I promise.”

“Okay, enough of that,” Jackson called out to his parents who were still snuggling. “What else have you got?”

“What more do I need?” Julia wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and then reached into the stocking again. She pulled out a small piece of blue fabric. Her brow furrowed as she stared at it. “It’s a baby’s hat. How did this get in my stocking?”

She glanced over at Nick and Raina who both looked just as puzzled as she did. Then she swung around to look at Jackson and Ridley.

“Oh! Oh! Does this mean what I think it means?” Julia jumped up and held out her arms to Ridley.

Ridley nodded shyly. Julia let out a whoop that startled both

of the babies. Jada let out a disgruntled cry until Nick picked her up and rocked her.

“It’s okay, baby girl. Grandma is just excited. And you’re getting another cousin.” He turned to Jackson and offered a hand. “Congratulations, little brother. I can’t wait to meet the newest addition.”

As Jackson accepted handshakes and backslapping from Matt, Eli, and Bennett, Ridley sat back down on the couch. She already could feel the changes in her body and she was only about four months along. Along with crying at everything from cute pictures of kittens on the Internet to Jase’s drawings, she was also exhausted all the time.

“We’re getting a baby?”

Ridley looked up when Chris sat on the couch next to her. He bit his lip as he glanced at her stomach. “Yes, we’re getting a baby. Do you remember when Auntie Raina carried baby Jada in her tummy?”

He nodded. “Jada kicked my hand when I touched Auntie Raina’s belly.”

“Yeah, she did.” She pulled him close and kissed the top of his tight curls. He sat quietly for a moment and Ridley didn’t push him. Chris liked to talk and ask questions, but she figured he needed time to process. They’d debated telling the kids first, but they’d been worried the boys would announce it as soon as they arrived.

Jase walked over to them. “RiRi, you’ve got a baby on your belly!”

The whole room laughed.

“Well, there’s a baby *in* my belly. But that’s close enough, sweetie.”

Jase looked offended that everyone was still chuckling at his

expense. Ridley pulled him onto her lap. He put his small hands on her cheeks.

“You’re going to be the mommy.” Since his own mother had died not long after he was born, Jase had long been fascinated by the concept of “mommies.” She was sure he’d have many questions over the next few months.

Chris looked up then. “If the baby is going to call you mommy, can we call you mommy, too? Our first mommy is in heaven now, so maybe she won’t mind.” He looked down at his sneakers and then back up at her. The hope in his eyes made her feel like a big fist was wrapped around her heart.

Ridley glanced up to see Jackson watching them with a soft, indulgent smile. Tears sprang to her eyes. “Of course you can. I would love that. I love you both so much.”

Chris grinned then. She realized that he’d been worried she’d say no. She held open her arms and hugged them both. After a few moments, Jase squirmed until she let him down.

“Okay. Bye, Mommy!” he chirped before running off. Chris jumped up to follow him. He turned at the last minute and whispered, “Bye, Mommy,” before rushing off after his little brother.

Tears slid down her cheeks as she raised her hand to wave after him. “Bye, my sweet baby.”

Jackson sat on the couch and pulled her into his lap. “Oh, to be as resilient as a four-year-old. Nothing fazes that kid.” He squeezed her gently. “Go ahead and cry. I almost cried myself.”

Ridley did just that, then buried her face in his shirt and smiled like a fool.

As Jackson laid a gentle hand on her still-flat stomach, Ridley whispered, “I never knew I could be this happy.”

He tilted his head to one side, regarding Ridley silently for a

moment. "You deserve to be happy. I'm going to do everything I can to keep you that way."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Ridley shrugged. It wasn't something she could really explain. Even though she hadn't been that close to her own mother prior to her death, she'd felt the loss keenly every year since. There were so many holidays tied to family traditions. She and Raina had gotten used to doing things on their own. Then she'd met Jackson and everything had changed. Now they were a part of this amazing family and they would never be on their own again.

"For loving me. That's all."

AS EVERYONE CROWDED AROUND RIDLEY, Eli edged closer to Kaylee. She sat on the floor near the door, obviously feeling a little left out.

She smiled slightly when Eli sat next to her. "Aren't you supposed to be right in the thick of things? You know, peeking into your stocking?"

He wasn't sure if she was kidding but just the mental image of him "peeking" into anything was a little too silly to be believed.

"Peeking is for little girls. If I wanted to know what was in there, I'd just dump the stuff out." He shot her a sardonic look. "Unless my mother was looking."

She laughed, just like he'd hoped she would. He didn't like how lonely and lost she'd looked sitting off to the side by herself.

"Besides, I already know what's in there. It's always a piece

of candy, a silly card that made my mom laugh in the store, and a new pair of gloves or a hat.” Even Eli could hear the affection in his voice. It was hard not to adore his mother when she so obviously adored each and every one of them.

“Sounds like you know your mom pretty well.”

“I do. She’s an amazing woman.” He fidgeted, the small box in his pocket getting heavier and heavier by the minute. Finally, he gave up on trying to think of a smooth way to give it to her and just dropped it in her lap. “This is for you.”

“You got me a gift?” Kay sat stunned, staring at the big bow on top of the box. Then she smiled, a genuine smile this time, her delight obvious in the way she attacked the wrapping paper.

He knew she hadn’t expected anything. It had become clear to him in the time he’d spent watching over her that she didn’t expect much from anyone. Far less than she deserved. It was foolish and a dangerous thing, but he just wanted her to know how much she deserved.

How valuable she was.

“It’s not much.” He was suddenly embarrassed that he’d purchased her something so personal. He’d been in the store trying to decide if he should get her a scarf or a sweater. He’d called Nick to ask for advice. Of course his brother the playboy had assumed the gift was for a girlfriend and had suggested jewelry.

Now when Kay was looking at him with her big, innocent brown eyes, it seemed inappropriate and a little pervy that he’d gotten her a necklace. What if her boyfriend had gotten her something similar?

That’s what he got for taking advice from Nick. He should have gotten her the stupid scarf.

“It’s beautiful, Eli.” She lifted it out of the box and held it up to the light.

“It’s a mother’s pendant. That’s Hope’s birthstone, isn’t it? I hope I got it right.”

“It’s a garnet, right? You got it right.” She looked so happy with the gift that Eli relaxed a little.

“I hope I’m not stepping on any toes.” When her brow furrowed quizzically, he added, “I’m hoping your boyfriend didn’t already get you one.”

“Boyfriend? If you’re talking about Craig, we broke up at the end of the summer.” She fumbled with the clasp of the necklace. “I hope I can get it on without breaking the clasp. Can you hook it?”

Eli just stared stupidly for a moment. His brain was still stuck on processing her words. He hadn’t liked the slimy, girly-voiced singer she’d been dating over the summer, but he would never wish for her to be hurt.

“Sorry to hear that,” he lied. She was still waiting for him to hook the clasp, so he moved closer and tried to focus on threading the minuscule loop onto the hook. Instead, he was so entranced with the curve of her neck and the fact that when she posed like that, holding her hair out of the way, it pushed her bottom and her chest out. It took him five tries before he managed to get the necklace fastened correctly.

Kay snorted. “I’m not sorry about it. Craig was too in love with himself to have much room for me to like him.”

Her description was so perfect that Eli smiled. She stared at him. “You’re smiling.”

“I am,” he replied.

“You have a really nice smile. You should do it more often.”

Chris ran up and shoved his latest superhero toy in front of Eli’s face. “Look what I got, Uncle Eli!”

He turned to his nephew and tried to show the appropriate amount of interest in the toy, but his attention was on the enig-

matic woman sitting next to him. She wasn't intimidated by him and definitely got under his skin in a way that no one had in years.

If anyone was capable of understanding what it was like to make a mistake, it was Kay. Maybe it was time to allow someone to see him—the good, the bad, and the shameful.

For the first time in a long time, Eli wondered if it was time to come home in more ways than one.

Kay woke Christmas morning to soft light coming through the blinds. Hope slept peacefully in the borrowed playpen, her bottom in the air as she clutched her blanket. Kaylee had been worried about how Hope would adjust to a new environment, but it looked like her daughter wasn't the one she needed to worry about.

Julia had been kind enough to offer her a pair of boy shorts with the tags still on that she'd purchased for herself just the previous week, a pair of pajamas, and a sweater to wear the next day. Kay had taken a shower the night before, so she stripped down to her new underwear and then dressed in the borrowed sweater and her jeans. She was really thankful for everything Julia had offered, but it was a little weird to be wearing Eli's mom's clothes.

Yeah, because that's totally sexy.

She cringed a little at the thought but shook it off. It wasn't much, but at least Eli hadn't looked at her the way he usually did, like he couldn't wait to get away. They'd had a lot of fun last night watching the kids playing with their toys, and she wasn't

going to let anything ruin her holiday spirit. Especially not insecurity about her figure. She got enough of that from her mother—she didn't need to add to it.

Next week she'd be sure to stop by the mall and buy Julia something really nice to say thank you. While she was there she'd pick up something for herself, too. It was time she started loving the body she was in. It might not be perfect but it was hers.

There was a soft knock at the door. She rushed to answer it before the sound woke up Hope.

Ridley stood in the hall and turned when Kay opened the door.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered. "I heard you moving around and I wanted to ask what you like for breakfast. I'm trying to surprise Julia by cooking for her. She usually gets up before everyone else and makes breakfast, but I wanted to do it this year."

Kay stepped out into the hall, pulling the door closed gently behind her. "Oh, I think you've surprised her already."

Ridley flushed with pleasure. "I surprised myself."

They walked down the hallway and into the wide, open, eat-in kitchen. Raina and Penny sat at the dining table drinking coffee.

"Good morning. And here I was thinking I was up early," Kay joked.

Raina moved over slightly so she could sit down. "This is my usual hour now that Jada has decided she really likes play time at three a.m. She always goes back to sleep a few hours later, but then I can't go back to sleep."

Kaylee winced. "Sorry. Hope went through that phase, too. I think she actually had her nights and days mixed up at one point."

Penny looked between them uncertainly. “Now you guys are scaring me. I think I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Me, too.” Ridley pulled out a mixing bowl from beneath the counter. “I feel like I cheated a little bit since I got to be a mom without going through those rough early years. That’ll all be changing soon.”

Kay got up and stood behind Ridley as her friend pulled out pancake mix, eggs, and bacon. “What can I do to help?”

Ridley handed her the carton of eggs. “I’m putting you on scrambled-eggs duty. I would ask Raina, but the last time she made breakfast I think we were in high school.”

Raina didn’t seem offended by her sister’s statement at all. “Hey, I’m good at stuff. Just not things that are useful most of the time.”

“We all have our talents,” Ridley replied, then turned to Kaylee. “So, I noticed you seemed pretty cozy with my buff brother-in-law last night.”

Kay was in the middle of cracking an egg and missed slightly, dumping little pieces of shell into her egg yolks. With a sigh, she accepted the fork Ridley handed her and fished the pieces out.

“We weren’t cozy. He was just keeping me company so I wouldn’t be alone. That’s all.”

Penny and Raina exchanged glances over their coffee cups.

“What? He *was* keeping me company. There was a lot of family stuff going on and I didn’t want to get in the way. I’m an only child, so I have no idea how this stuff works.”

“We didn’t say anything,” Raina drawled. “But if I had said something it would be girl, are you sure you can *handle* Eli?”

“No, there’s no Eli and me. There’s certainly not going to be any handling.” Heat rushed to her cheeks as she realized how that sounded. “No handling of anything. Definitely not... *that*.”

The other girls snickered, and Ridley fanned herself with an oven mitt. "Are you sure? Because it looked like you two spent a lot more time talking than he would bother with if he was just being polite."

Kay shook her head frantically, trying to get her thoughts together. "If there's anything there, it's mostly on my side. Basically our whole relationship is me drooling after him and hoping he doesn't notice."

Penny got up and poured herself another cup of coffee. Then she took another look at Kay and poured her one, too. "You look like you could use this."

Kay took a big gulp. "He picked me up," she blurted after a moment.

"What?" Raina stood too and leaned against the counter next to Penny.

Kay flushed. "It's just, when he came to get me. I was a little shaky and he picked me up. Like it was nothing."

"Eli's a take-charge kind of guy," Penny pointed out. "He reminds me of Matt in that way. He doesn't wait for you to ask for help, he just figures out what you need and does it."

"Yeah, but it's more than that. You guys are twigs, so a guy picking you up is no big deal. But I'm a big girl. Most guys don't even attempt it. I'd be worried they'd either drop me or end up with a hernia. But he could actually lift me. Not that I should be surprised. He looks like he could lift me."

Raina snorted. "He looks like he could lift a car."

All four women sighed appreciatively. Kay remembered how the hard muscles under his shirt had felt when she'd been cuddled in his arms. Why had she told him to put her down? She should have enjoyed the experience while it lasted.

"You know, Kay, I really think you should be one of my birthing partners. Raina will be there of course but it makes

sense to have another mother there.” Ridley whistled innocently as she whisked the pancake batter.

“That’s good,” Penny interjected. “It’ll give her an excuse to be at the hospital with Eli.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I’m not family,” Kay mumbled.

Ridley put down the carton of milk she was holding. “We’re all connected in some way to that gorgeous, loud, wonderful family in there. So that makes us a family of sorts, too. And it’s the best one I’ve ever had.” Her voice wavered a little at the end.

Raina plunked her coffee cup down on the table suddenly and swiped under her eyes. “Ri, you have to stop with the waterworks. Ugh, I hate this having feelings crap. I can’t wait until I go back to my usual self. Then I can be a bitch unrepentantly.”

Ridley watched her sister with a knowing smile. “I’m afraid it’s permanent, sister dear.”

AFTER CHECKING ON HOPE, Kay scrambled the eggs without any further incident. Ridley made pancakes and the family drifted in slowly, everyone coming in and grabbing a plate whenever they woke up. Julia and Mark came in first and Ridley made them both sit at the table so she could bring them their food.

When Julia tried to get up to help, Ridley sent her a stern look. “It’s our turn to take care of you for a change.”

Kay checked on Hope again and found the baby sitting up and having an animated babble conversation with herself. When she saw Kaylee, she got to her feet.

“Mama. Hi, my Mama.” Hope danced on her toes happily and stretched her arms up toward Kaylee.

“Merry Christmas, baby girl.” Kay snuggled her daughter

closer. Hope wouldn't get her gifts until later since they were at the apartment, but she'd be getting something even better today. Breakfast with the Alexanders and then dinner with her grandparents. When she'd looked out the window earlier the roads hadn't been cleared yet, but she was sure they would be before long. Eli could drive her to her parents' house later so they'd still get to see them.

Hope would be surrounded by people who cherished her all day long. Kay couldn't think of a better way to spend the holiday.

She carried Hope to the bed and went through their usual morning ritual. After the baby was clean and dressed in the extra outfit Kay always kept in the diaper bag, they walked back to the kitchen.

"There's my other angel." Julia approached and this time Kay wasn't at all surprised when she suddenly found herself with empty arms. Hope didn't make a sound, just stuffed her fist in her mouth and allowed Julia to walk off with her.

Eli came in next and Kay stiffened. The other girls watched them closely. Kay felt like all the things they'd talked about that morning must be echoing around the kitchen and he'd somehow hear them.

"Morning. Did you sleep all right?" he grumbled.

She nodded. "Great. Hope did, too. Now she's getting spoiled some more."

He looked over to where his mom was lifting Hope in the air and blowing gentle kisses against her belly. "You've made my mom really happy, you know that?"

"She's made us really happy, too."

They ate breakfast together and then the family all gathered around the tree again. Kay watched the children shrieking as they tore wrapping paper off their gifts and tried to play with

everything simultaneously. Raina plopped Jada down on the floor next to Hope. The two babies regarded each other with curious eyes before breaking into their excited baby chatter.

Still a little hesitant to get in the middle of their family time, Kay leaned against the doorframe leading to the family room and watched the chaos. It was like something from a movie, the extremely photogenic family all gathered around the huge eight-foot tree that twinkled with a multitude of lights.

Eli stood next to her and watched the scene with amused eyes. Then he leaned closer to her so she could hear him over the din. "I'm going to drive you to your parents later today. I'm sure they won't appreciate us keeping you all to ourselves on Christmas."

"They'll be grateful to you. Just like I am. I'm so glad you were there yesterday."

Kay wanted to say so much more. Not just to thank him for helping her, but for being the kind of person she knew she could count on. There were fewer and fewer of those people in her life lately.

Eli shrugged off her thanks. "I'm glad I could help. Actually, I've decided to move back home after the New Year, so I'll be around if you get the sudden urge to fall into another ditch or something."

Kay was startled into letting out a little giggle. "You made a joke!"

His lips pulled up just slightly at the edges. "It happens. Occasionally."

She could hardly believe it. It had to be the holiday spirit because she'd never seen Eli like this. Her eyes drifted up and she saw the sprig of mistletoe hanging over the doorjamb. He followed her gaze and his smile disappeared. Then his eyes dropped to her mouth.

Everything inside her softened. She wasn't sure if it was wishful thinking or if the mistletoe was actually having some effect, but in that moment, she closed her eyes and made a wish. *Kiss me*. She wanted it more than her next breath.

A second later, there was the soft brush of skin on skin as his lips whispered against hers.

Her eyes popped open and she sucked in a desperate breath before his mouth settled on hers again. His lips were warm and soft and perfect. Instinct, or perhaps it was just pure shock, was the only thing that allowed her to kiss him back. Her hand trailed up the incredibly tight muscles in his chest and settled against his cheek. When he pulled her closer, she melted against him, boneless. If he hadn't held her so tightly, she probably would have melted into a puddle at his feet.

It was way too soon when he pulled back and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

"Merry Christmas, Kay."

Then he turned and left her clinging to the doorjamb for support.

ELI HAD ALMOST MADE it out of the house when he heard someone calling his name. Jackson stomped down the back steps, pulling his coat on over his sweater.

"Hey, hold up." Jackson nodded at the barn where Eli was headed. "Are you going to get more wood?"

"Yeah. I noticed we were getting low." His shoulders sagged. As long as it wasn't Kay, he could deal with it. It had taken all he had to leave her with just a kiss. But he would never want to embarrass her.

"I'm glad I caught you alone. I wanted to talk to you."

They fell into step walking toward the barn, the newly fallen snow crunching under their boots.

“About?” Eli prompted.

Jackson shrugged, but he looked so uncomfortable that Eli suddenly knew the answer. He wasn’t naive enough to think that no one in his family had noticed him kissing Kay under the mistletoe. In a family of busybodies, it was impossible to do anything without attracting attention.

“It’s about Kay, isn’t it?”

Jackson turned to him then. “This is going to sound weird, but I wanted to ask what your intentions are.”

Eli let out a guffaw. “My intentions? Who are you, her daddy?”

Jackson chuckled along with him. “I know it sounds strange, but she doesn’t have a lot of friends. Ridley and I have both grown really fond of her over the last year. She’s a nice girl. I just don’t want to see her get hurt. Even unintentionally. Or get pushed into anything she can’t handle.” Jackson narrowed his eyes.

Ahhh. That’s what this was really about. His brother was referring to Eli’s varied and experimental sexual background.

Eli wished he could tell his little brother not to worry, that he had absolutely zero interest in Kay and wouldn’t hurt her. But he’d done enough lying to his family. There were so many things they didn’t know about him. So many horrible things he’d done in his past. He couldn’t face it if they ever learned the truth about him.

Or if Kay did either.

She looked at him like he was her knight in shining armor. For one magical moment, he’d been selfish and taken what she offered. It had truly been selfish, too because he knew if she

ever found out the truth about him she wouldn't want him anywhere near her.

"Kay is a sweet girl and I like her a lot, but she's too young for me. I'm just sticking close to keep her safe." Eli almost choked over the words. But it was Christmas. It was time he thought about what was best for her. Best for them all.

"If anyone's a danger to her, it's you," Eli continued. "You guys spend a lot of time alone together. She looks up to you and that could easily turn into something else. She's been taken advantage of before. She needs to know someone will help her for the right reasons."

Jackson watched him for a long moment. "Oh hell, it's already too late."

"What are you talking about?"

"You already care about her," Jackson stated accusingly.

Eli stopped walking. "I told you, I'm just looking out for her. It's nothing."

"You wouldn't say that if you could see your face when you talk about her." Jackson clapped Eli on the shoulder so hard it almost knocked the wind from him. "I take back everything I just said. Instead I'll say good luck."

Eli held open the door to the barn where his parents kept their stash of firewood. "I don't need luck. But I do need your help with something."

KAY LOOKED up anxiously when the back door opened. After Eli had left, she'd agonized over every little thing she'd done. Had she been too forward? Maybe she shouldn't have been so obvious, staring at the mistletoe. They'd just gotten on good footing, and maybe he'd felt obligated to kiss her.

He probably hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings.

She watched as Jackson stepped across the threshold. Then he closed the door behind him and headed straight for her. Her heart sank. Eli hadn't come back and Jackson had the carefully detached look she'd come to recognize as his *bad news* face.

"Hey there. Eli wanted me to tell you that something came up and he had to go. But I'll drive you to your parents' house later."

Kay nodded. "Of course. Thank you. I really appreciate it." She walked back to the hallway leading to the bedrooms, resisting the tears that burned behind her eyelids. She would never know how she managed it, but she kept it together until she got in the bedroom. As soon as she closed the door behind her, she let go and tears spilled over her cheeks.

It wasn't just that she was hurt and embarrassed. It was the fact that she'd really believed for that one shining moment that Eli felt the same way she did.

After a few more minutes feeling sorry for herself, Kay blew out a breath and wiped her eyes. As tempting as it was, she couldn't hide back here forever. Julia would wonder where she was, and it would put a damper on the atmosphere if they were all worried about her. They'd done more than enough of that for one holiday.

She opened the door to the hallway slowly. It was empty. Thank God. She didn't want anyone to see her with her eyes all red and puffy. She went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face, then returned to the family room.

The kids were still playing with their new toys, but the adults were trying to clean up. Mark walked around the room holding out a big black trash bag so they could all throw in the stray bits of wrapping paper.

Kay leaned down and scooped up some stray pieces near her

foot. When she turned around, Julia stood next to her, holding Hope. She passed the baby to Kay.

“You look like you could do with a few baby hugs to cheer you up.”

Kay figured everyone had probably figured out what had happened by now. They’d all seen Eli kiss her and then disappear a few minutes later. It had to be obvious that she’d chased him off from his own family celebration.

“You know, Eli found a stray dog when he was a boy,” Julia commented. “He loved that thing. None of the other boys paid it any attention, but Eli spent hours finding him a bed and feeding him from his hand. He was devastated when we found out the dog had heartworms.”

“Oh no. How terrible.” Kay had never had a pet, but she’d always loved dogs. She couldn’t imagine taking care of a pet only to learn that it wouldn’t make it.

“Well, it’s not incurable, but we couldn’t have afforded those kinds of medical bills for a dog. Eli found a wealthy older couple in the church willing to take him on and pay for his treatment. I always wondered how he convinced Margie Herman to do it. She’s hardly the charitable type.” Julia made a face.

Kay smiled. Apparently Julia didn’t like *everyone* in town.

“My point is, when people look at Eli, they see this big, strong tough guy. A warrior. They don’t see that big heart. He’s always been willing to sacrifice for those he cares about. He wants what’s best for whoever is under his protection.” She squeezed Kay closer and whispered, “Even if he thinks the best is someone or somewhere else.”

Mark called out for Julia, so she gave Kay one last soft smile and crossed the room to where her husband stood with the rest of the family.

Hope pointed at the tree, and Kay moved a little closer so she could stare, enraptured, at the twinkling lights. As she watched her daughter's awestruck expression, a little bit of the warmth she'd felt earlier returned, seeping through her.

Maybe his mother was right and he'd left because he thought he was protecting her. From what she didn't know, but didn't she owe it to herself to find out once and for all?

Hurt feelings aside, Eli had proven he wasn't unaffected. She hadn't imagined that kiss nor had she been the instigator. He'd kissed *her*. And she definitely hadn't imagined how he'd pulled her closer. Kaylee grinned as she started making a whole new list of New Year's resolutions.

Ridley had tried to help her get Eli alone once before but Kay hadn't taken advantage of that situation. She hadn't been *ready* to.

But now she was.

As she watched the lights twinkling on the tree, she allowed herself to feel the first stirrings of that magical, elusive emotion that her daughter was named for.

Hope.

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KAYLEE SHOVED THE books on her night table in the drawer. Her eyes swept over the rest of the room frantically.

Hopefully she hadn't left anything embarrassing lying around. She wasn't used to having guys at her apartment. Especially not men like Elliott.

Big, masculine men that she fantasized about every night.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she didn't have to look to know that he was standing in the doorway. Her apartment wasn't that big, but it suddenly seemed exponentially smaller with Eli sucking up all her oxygen.

"Tank finished his assessment before we got here. We're all clear." Eli stepped in and looked around. "Where do you normally keep the figurine?"

Kay pointed to the top of her dresser. Eli walked over and looked down at her collection. He touched one and the sight of his thick fingers stroking the delicate china shouldn't have seemed erotic at all. But the image of this big, strong man handling tiny breakables with such care struck her as incredibly tender. Would that be how he treated a woman in bed? Like she was delicate, precious?

Or would he push her hard, demand things she didn't know how to give? Warmth spread to her face just thinking about it.

Not that you'll ever find out.

"There's an empty space here. He didn't even bother to push the others closer together to conceal what he took."

Kay hated to even think of it. Someone had been in her apartment, touching her things. Had he been here while she was home alone? While she was with her daughter?

While they were sleeping?

She shivered and grabbed the duffel bag she kept underneath her bed. Her favorite nightshirt was on top of the comforter, so she shoved that in the bag. Then she pulled open the drawers in her nightstand and added a big handful of underwear and bras. She didn't even look at how much she was

taking, just grabbed blindly. Who cared, really, what she wore? All she cared about was getting out of here. Would she ever be able to relax in this room again without wondering if someone was watching?

She crossed to the dresser where Eli stood and yanked open the last drawer. In went several pairs of jeans, then she yanked open another drawer and added a big armful of sweaters.

“Kay, what are you doing?”

“Packing. I just want to get out of here.”

She struggled with the zipper on the bag, almost breaking a nail on the metal teeth. Her breath came in harsh pants until little black spots danced in front of her eyes.

“Kay, calm down. Just hold on.”

She struggled against his hold, but he held her securely in his grip, her back to his front. His arms wrapped around her, keeping her from moving but not holding her so tight as to cause pain. Eventually Kay stopped fighting and allowed her head to fall back against Eli’s chest.

“Hey, hey. It’s all right. Just calm down.” He rubbed her arms gently, soothing her.

Kay finally stopped wrestling with him and allowed him to hold her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was a foolish moment of weakness, but for just a second, she soaked up the comfort and warmth of being in his arms.

“We’re safe here. You’ve got a great security system. I already had Tank check it out and it hasn’t been tampered with. I don’t know how this guy got your figurine, but he didn’t break in to do it.”

Tears welled up, but she squeezed her eyes closed, swallowing back the sudden flood of emotion. There was no time for nonsense or feeling sorry for herself.

“Why would someone do this, Eli?”

“I don’t know, angel.” He spoke in a hush, the words flowing over her in a soft puff of breath.

His features tightened, and for the second time in recent memory, she allowed herself to soak up the masculine presence that was Elliott Alexander: the smooth dark skin, the high cheekbones, the long straight blade of his nose, and the sinfully full lips. It was a harsh face, not quite as elegantly hewn as his brothers’ faces, but one that she vastly preferred. It looked like safety.

It looked like strength.

“I’m okay now. I promise I won’t freak out on you again.” She stood reluctantly. As wonderful as it felt to be held in his arms, there was only so much she could take before she lost all sense of propriety and threw herself at him again. She already knew he wasn’t interested. When you kissed a guy and he responded by leaving town, that was plenty clear enough.

“It’s okay to be freaked out, Kay. As long as you know that I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Kay nodded and dropped the duffel bag on her bed. She didn’t have enough room to put him up in style, but at the very least she could rustle up some extra pillows and a blanket for him.

“I’m sorry I don’t have a guest room. Or an air mattress.”

Eli gave her one of his trademark *are you kidding* looks. “I’m not supposed to be on vacation, Kay. The couch is fine. Now, what about Hope?”

Kay gasped. Shame flooded her face. She’d told her mom that she’d pick up Hope by eight o’clock and she was already twenty minutes late. She pulled out her cell phone and hit the first speed dial.

Eli walked away to give her some privacy. Luckily, her father answered, so she was able to explain things with a minimum of

fuss. As expected, her parents were thrilled to keep Hope overnight.

When she turned, Eli was watching her with an inscrutable expression. Unsure what to make of his sudden change in demeanor, Kay pushed past him and pulled open the door to the linen closet in the hallway. Several towels fell out and hit her in the face.

“Don’t worry about that now.” Eli took the towels from her arms and shoved them in the closet. “We need to talk first.”

“About what?”

“Everything. Clearly I missed something when I was digging into your life last year. It’s time to rectify that.”

“But nothing has changed. I don’t do anything interesting. So what’s there to talk about?”

Eli stopped and nailed her with an intense look. “I need to know who you’ve been with since last summer.” He moved closer and Kay inhaled, immediately assaulted by his unique scent—warm and rich and disarming. She looked up at him, her senses swirling from the intoxicating blend of reactions that only Eli could cause.

“We need to talk about your lovers.”

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ALSO BY M. MALONE

- ROMANTIC COMEDY -

BEG ME : My cock a doodle doo is on strike. Yeah I know, I can't believe it either. But he'll only crow for one woman.

Spoiler Alert *she hates me*

ASK ME : Am I arrogant? Maybe. Do women still want me? Absolutely. Then I meet the one woman who isn't impressed.

WANT ME : No strings attached. Sounds good, right? Until I realize that if I'm not her boyfriend ... the position is open for someone else.

NEED ME : Love is a virus I've managed to avoid by doing the craziest sh*t. Guys usually run. Except for one who just *keeps* showing up. If I'm not careful, I just might get used to needing someone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Malone is a 2019 RITA® Award winner and a NYT & USA Today Bestselling author of completely inappropriate romantic comedy. She spends most days wearing Wonder Woman leggings and T-shirts that she's embarrassed for anyone to see while she plays with her imaginary friends.

She lives with her husband and their two sons in the picturesque mountains of Northern Virginia even though she is afraid of insects, birds, butterflies and other humans.

She also holds a Master's degree in Business from a prestigious college that would no doubt be scandalized at how she's using her expensive education.

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