

KISSED BY YOU excerpt

By Sophia Knightly

Chapter One

Dr. Alex Cortes hated Christmas Eve. Bleakness coiled around his heart like insidious smoke as he took a swig of Scotch and stared at the leaping flames in the living room fireplace. Thank God he could retreat to his small beach house on Barefoot Beach during this time. It kept him balanced and far away from the high expectations everyone placed on Christmas—the parties, the decorating and shopping for presents.

In spite of his friends' efforts to include him in their family celebrations, he just didn't feel like joining in. Five years ago today his parents had unexpectedly died, and every Christmas Eve since, he relived the tragedy. The staggering disbelief followed by profound sorrow of knowing he would never see them again. He wondered if he'd ever be able to fill the desolate emptiness their passing had left in his life...and the unfinished business with his mother.

He lived in the moment and didn't take anything for granted because everything could change in the blink of an eye. He knew that only too well.

Life was frail and unpredictable, like the stillborn baby he had held in his hands this morning. After caring for Adriana Chapman for years as she suffered one miscarriage after another, he had hoped he'd be delivering her healthy baby on Christmas Eve. She

had taken excellent care of herself during her high-risk pregnancy, eating healthy, doing yoga, meditating and resting as much as possible. Then one misstep and she'd fallen down the stairs from her deck to the backyard. A freak accident that ultimately killed her baby.

In all his years as an obstetrician, he'd learned to disconnect emotionally from his patients, but today he hadn't been able to. Adriana's anguished sobs at losing her baby girl had knocked the wind from his lungs and left him feeling sick and hollow inside. Because of her age and the serious complications during delivery, most likely it would be her last pregnancy.

Alex's hand tightened around the glass. He hated when accidents happened that were completely out of his control. Rare accidents like the private plane crash that took his parents' lives because of an engine failure.

He knocked back the rest of his drink and drew in a harsh breath. How long was it going to take for numbness to set in? He got up and stood before the large bay window overlooking the choppy, gray Gulf of Mexico. He longed for a stunning, multi-colored sunset, like so many he'd seen on the water since buying this getaway in Southwest Florida. But there'd been no sunset tonight to lighten his gloomy mood. Only grim, murky darkness to match how he felt inside.

The rain was coming down harder now and the palm tree fronds were flapping in the wind. The temperature had dipped to the forties, a rarity in southwest Florida. A sudden crack of lightning made the lights flicker and a boom of thunder practically rattled the windows.

He crossed to the front of his house where he'd seen the flash of lightning. A white car drew his attention as it pattered along in front of his house and came to a stop. He wasn't expecting anyone and was in no mood for company.

Go away. All he wanted was to drink his Scotch—alone.

The car remained in front of his house, and seconds later, a woman got out with a jacket slung over her head. It was getting dark out and with the stormy weather he couldn't see her face, but it was definitely a female sprinting on high heels toward his house.

With a muttered oath, he set his Scotch down on the coffee table and headed for the door, annoyed as hell that the first day of his vacation had been interrupted. So much for privacy.

He jerked open the door just as lightning struck. The young woman let out a high-pitched scream and lurched forward.

“What the he—” Alex's words were muffled as she landed against his chest, and he caught her in his arms. He kicked the door shut just before losing his balance, and they toppled to the ground, landing with a thud on the hardwood floor.

In disbelief, he got his bearings as he stared into bewitching, long-lashed sapphire eyes in a stunned face partially hidden by the jacket. His hands closed around her small waist and held her firmly so she wouldn't slide off and he could get a better look at her.

With a shaky hand, she pushed the jacket from her head, revealing a tumble of long, blond waves around the face of an angel. *Sweet Jesus, what a beauty.*

“Oh gosh, I'm so sorry.” She wiggled against him and his body reacted instantly. “Are you hurt? Am I too heavy?”

“A little girl like you? Hardly,” he said with a wry shake of his head.

She frowned. “I’m *hardly* a little girl.”

He had to laugh. She looked so indignant. “I know. I meant that figuratively. You don’t weigh much.”

“Oh.” That seemed to mollify her. “Do you think we were struck by lightning? It sure feels like I’ve been zapped. I’m a little dizzy.”

He felt zapped too, but for different reasons. He was painfully aware of soft feminine curves pressed against him and a floral scent so enticing he wanted to bury his face in her soft neck. *Delicious.*

She wriggled in his hold. “I should get up.”

“Not yet. Stop wiggling,” he grunted. “Don’t get up until you’ve taken a few deep breaths.” Ha, he should talk. He could barely catch his breath at the pleasure of having such a sweet surprise sprawled on top of him.

Wide-eyed, she nodded and laid her head on his shoulder, breathing deeply as she nestled against him like a kitten. His body stirred and he fought the temptation to stroke or pat her slender back. If anyone needed a hug, it was this girl who hadn’t hesitated to snuggle up to him the moment he told her to stay put.

After a few seconds, she drew in a shaky sigh and attempted to get up again. This time he released her and she scrambled up from the floor with his help.

Standing before him on stilettos, she only reached his chin, and he had to bend his head to peer at her.

“What’s wrong? Do you still feel dizzy? Are you sick?” Alex assessed her with the eyes of a seasoned physician. She didn’t look sick, just rattled; but upon closer

inspection, he noticed her eyes were bloodshot with mascara smudged underneath. Her softly rounded cheeks were deep pink and her breath was coming out in short gasps.

Had she been crying? Or drinking? She didn't seem drunk, but she didn't look steady on her feet either. Maybe she was still spooked by the lightning.

"Not sick and no longer dizzy. Though it felt like someone was throwing golf balls at me when I ran here." She waved at the window. "Is that hail?" She clutched her head. "Probably. With the kind of day I've had, I wouldn't be surprised if a tornado blew my car into the Gulf."

His mouth twitched. "That bad?"

"Yeah, that bad." She shivered and hugged herself. "Old Bertha decided to die on me."

She looked so sad, he wondered if she was a relative. "Who's Bertha?"

"My car. I tried calling for service, but no one wants to come out on Christmas Eve, especially for an old Packard." She sucked in quivery breaths, drawing attention to her round, pebbled breasts beneath a slinky hot pink cocktail dress.

His gaze shot up from temptation and he caught her raised eyebrow look as she folded her arms over her chest.

"Who *are* you?" he asked, bemused. His voice sounded unintentionally gruff as he tried to shake the haze of lust. The sizzle between them was so intense it felt as if lightning really had zapped them.

She held out a slim hand. "Georgiana Kincaid."

His hand closed over her outstretched one, enjoying the softness of her skin.

"Georgiana, I'm—"

“I know. You’re Dr. Alex Cortes, the obstetrician.” She shook his hand and then lifted her large tote bag from the floor.

“You know who I am?” Was this some kind of a set up? “Did Marcos or Gabriela send you here?” He wouldn’t be surprised if they had. Ever since his partner and closest friend, Dr. Marcos Calderon, had married the feisty social worker, Gabriela Morales, they were both determined to end Alex’s bachelorhood.

Georgiana’s tawny eyebrows furrowed. “Who are Marcos and Gabriela?”

He waved a hand. “Never mind. Then it was Marisol.” Yes, it had to be that mischief-maker. Marcos’s little sister, Marisol, had involved him in an elaborate ruse to make Marcos jealous last year and that had ultimately led Marcos to marrying Gabriela. Marisol was in town and he wouldn’t put it past her to concoct a scheme to set him up with a date for the Christmas party tomorrow at Marcos’s place.

She stared at him, puzzled. “Marisol? I don’t know her either.”

He stared back, trying to figure out her motives. “Then why are you here?”

She flung her long hair over her shoulder and shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? My car stalled out in front of your house and I saw a light inside.” She took a deep breath and blew it out in exasperation when he remained skeptical. “Look, I’ve had a horrible day, and I’m not here for any other reason than to use your phone.” She made a face. “I hate to bother you on Christmas Eve, but my phone battery just died too. Do you mind if I make a few calls?”

Did he mind? “Not at all. Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

He lifted the wet jacket from the floor. “I’ll hang your jacket up to dry.”

She stiffened and recoiled, waving it away. “It’s not mine. Please get rid of it.”

Taken aback by her strange reaction, Alex said, “You want me to get rid of it?”

“I do.” Her chin lifted and jutted belligerently as she pointed to the fireplace.

“Throw it in there. Burn it. I don’t ever want to see that jacket again,” she said, her tone vehement.

“Why do you hate it so much?” He held up the leather bomber jacket and inspected the buttery soft brown leather. “Not too shabby.”

Her upper lip curled, and he couldn’t help thinking she had the most kissable pout he’d ever encountered.

“Yeah, I thought so too...until today,” she said glumly.

She stood before him, all sleek curves in the form fitting cocktail dress with her hands on her hips. His gaze roved those slim, dangerous curves down to her silver stilettos. Who wore a skimpy dress and high heels in stormy weather? Either she was on her way to a holiday party, or Blondie was as ditzy as they came.

His eyes bored into hers, wondering how she’d known who he was. “Have we met before today?” he asked, though he sincerely doubted it. He would have remembered dazzling eyes as blue as the Mediterranean Sea.

She pursed her lips, distracting him from his question. Wasn’t it enough that her eyes were hypnotic? His gaze riveted to her lush, rosy lips—the kind of lips he would love to suck into his mouth, first the top curved one, then the full lower one.

She cleared her throat sharply, drawing his attention. “We haven’t actually met. I was there when you delivered my friend, Laura Galley’s baby last summer.” Her face softened when she mentioned the baby.

An image of Laura's earnest face came to mind. Damn, he would have never figured Laura for a matchmaker, but why not? Most attached women he knew made it their business to set him up with one of their friends, family or co-workers. There was no escaping a married woman on a mission to marry off single men to her friends.

"So Laura sent you here," he surmised. "How did she know where I live? Nobody knows about my beach hideaway. Especially not my patients."

"You don't have to worry about your privacy. Nobody sent me. It was purely coincidence I ended up here." Her eyes narrowed at his skeptical look. "Well, it was," she insisted with a lift of her chin. "I was driving around aimlessly and then my car stalled out." She shifted from one foot to the other and smoothed the sides of her dress, distracting him again with her delectable silhouette of nipped in waist and goddess hips.

"Why were you driving around aimlessly on Christmas Eve?" he said, striving to free himself from the sexual stupor she wove.

"It's a long story." She sighed and shook her head. "I'll fill you in on it, but first may I use your restroom?" Limpid blue eyes peered into his with urgency. The questions would have to wait—and he had plenty of them.

Suddenly, his quiet, self-reflective mood turned to curiosity. Who was this wayward angel who'd landed on his doorstep, all tousled hair, sparkling eyes and tempting curves? Beneath her fiery show of bravado over the guy's jacket, he had detected desperation.

"Where is it? The bathroom," she prompted, when he didn't answer.

Alex rubbed his chin, wishing she didn't intrigue him so much. He was pretty sure her visit wouldn't be short, and for some reason he didn't mind. "Use the bathroom in my

bedroom. It's bigger than the guest bathroom and has clean towels. First door on the left, down the hall."

A dimple appeared in her right cheek, disarming him on the spot. She had high round cheekbones and a firm little chin that appeared obstinate when thrust forward. Yet her overall expression was fresh and natural. She had the most captivating, guileless smile he'd ever seen.

She lowered her lids and peeked at him impishly. "Thanks. That's very kind of you." Wide, blue eyes sparkled like crystals from beneath her lush lashes.

"You'll find the towels—" Alex's voice came out hoarse and he cleared his throat before continuing. "In the cabinet beneath the sink."

He hadn't finished speaking when she turned on those impossibly high heels, giving him a heart-stopping view as she scampered away on golden, toned legs with high inset calves.

Alex swallowed hard at the hot desire surging through him like a rampant river. He didn't know quite what to make of little Georgiana Kincaid, but she was eye candy for sure, and more than a little entertaining.

With a wry smile, he shook his head and watched her sweet little ass sway to a rhythmic beat as she made her way into his bedroom.

Chapter Two

Georgiana shut the bathroom door and sucked in deep breaths. *Calm down, calm down*. Her heart was racing out of control. My God, Dr. Alex Cortes was drop-dead gorgeous. When he wasn't frowning, that is. The grim look on his face when he had answered the door had sent a chill up her spine, but when he saw she needed help, he warmed up to her.

She must have interrupted a casual evening from the looks of his clothes. The faded jeans and light blue sweater did his athletic build more justice than the scrubs she'd seen him in at the hospital...and he'd looked pretty hot then. Was he expecting another visitor, besides herself?

When she'd landed on top of him, all she could think of was his chest and shoulders felt like marble beneath her. A shiver ran through her remembering the feel of his large hands on either side of her waist, holding her firmly against him. He'd told her to stop wiggling, but she couldn't help it. The mere contact with all that hardness had sent her into a tailspin and when he finally let her up, she'd had a hard time finding her balance. She had wobbled before him on jelly legs, not able to think straight, let alone breathe. When she'd told him she felt dizzy, she hadn't been lying.

Was this some crazy twist of fate? She had somehow landed in front of his house and had no idea why fate would bring her here. Last summer, Dr. Cortes had taken her breath away the first time she'd laid eyes on him after he'd delivered Amy, Laura's baby. She would never forget his glowing smile or those beaming dark eyes as he'd announced that both mom and baby were doing well. She had put the attraction quickly out of her mind because she'd been dating Bill. But now that she'd been up close and personal with Dr. Cortes, the attraction blindsided her.

Talk about lousy timing to meet him. She was reeling from the big fight and breakup earlier with her boyfriend Bill, after a year long, bumpy relationship that had caused her more pain than happiness.

She should have listened to Piper. Her best friend hadn't liked Bill from the get-go because she'd pegged him as selfish and aloof. Bill might have been a bit aloof, but he had also been exciting, a world traveler who was cultured and interesting. There was a reason Georgiana was thirty-three and wasn't married. Her artist's soul couldn't tolerate being smothered and controlled. Bill had given her the freedom she needed and that had lured her into thinking he was the one.

Over the past month, Bill had hinted many times at a surprise during the holidays, not telling her when it would happen to build the suspense. He seemed to sense she was pulling away, and the truth was she had been trying to convince herself to stay only because he had good qualities that made up for his inattentiveness. She had hoped that he would propose today and had mistakenly thought it would ignite their fading romance.

A flash of anger made her grit her teeth. He had proposed all right, but he had also whipped out a pre-nuptial agreement so unfair and so one-sided that she'd ripped it into shreds and flung it back at him.

Her eyes welled up at the memory, but not because she still loved Bill and wanted him back. She realized she had never really loved him when she walked out of his house with her head held high and so much bottled-up anger she wanted to spit nails at him.

When she'd gotten in her car, a flood of tears had burst forth and she cried like an abandoned orphan. It wasn't that he'd presented her with the pre-nup, which went with his mega-wealthy persona; it was what the pre-nup specified that galled her.

The elderly people who made up her clients in her concierge service often said that time was a priceless commodity. And before her Grandma Emmy died, she made Georgiana promise she wouldn't waste time on the wrong man.

Unfortunately, she had wasted precious time trying to make things work with Bill, time she would never regain. He had duped her big time. A fresh batch of hot tears stung her eyes and she forced them back. *No more tears.* She'd cried enough ugly tears.

Every special thing she'd planned for them today had been ruined. The champagne dinner, the beautiful dress that she'd bought in an exclusive consignment shop, the designer leather jacket she'd spent months saving for to surprise him with on Christmas morning. *All of it for nothing.* It was too depressing—and jarring—to realize that after the break-up and angry tears, she actually felt more relieved than pained.

A knock on the door followed by Alex's deep voice startled her, and she quickly blinked back the moisture pooled in her eyes.

“Georgiana, would you like to borrow a sweater? I usually don’t run the heater, but if you’re cold…” His voice trailed off.

“No, thanks. I have a change of clothes in my bag. I’ll be out in a minute,” she called out. “Oh, and don’t run the heater on my account. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

For the first time, she noticed her surroundings. The bathroom was large, almost as big as her bedroom in her small apartment, but it was meticulous and organized. No clutter on the marble countertops and no clutter in the cabinets either. Alex had mentioned it was his beach house, but the man was neat to a fault.

She towel-dried her hair with one of his plush, dove gray towels and ran her fingers through the loose curls. She knew better than to take a brush or comb through her hair or it would end up looking like a fuzz ball.

She made quick work of cleaning her face with a make-up wipe from her tote bag until all the smeared mascara was off. After applying a bit of moisturizer to her face, she glided cherry flavored lip balm on her lips and puckered them. *This is for you, Dr. Cortes.* She suddenly grinned, surprised she could be so silly when Bill had just kicked her to the curb.

Straightening her shoulders, she remembered what her mother always told her. *It’s the hiccups in life that make you stronger, Georgie.* Yep, this was a major hiccup all right, but she much preferred the hiccups that came from champagne.

She made a face in the mirror. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get out there. Dreamy Dr. Cortes is at your disposal. She shook her head at her foolishness. *If only that*

were true. He had been polite and chivalrous, but a man as handsome and accomplished as he, surely had a woman in his life—and big plans for the evening.

With a sigh of resignation, she stepped out of her stilettos, which she'd worn for Bill, and changed into a violet cashmere sweater and her favorite jeans. Luckily, she'd grabbed her overnight tote before running out of the car, but all her other shoes were in the suitcase in the trunk. She would just have to go barefoot. No way was she putting the uncomfortable stilettos back on.

As she approached the living room, her bare feet padded across the gleaming hardwood floor to where Alex sat on the sofa with his elbows resting on his widespread knees. His broad shoulders were hunched forward as he gazed at the fire in the stone fireplace. When she got closer, she noticed a few threads of silver glinting in his thick, black hair.

Georgiana tapped his shoulder and smiled hesitantly when he turned to peer at her with glimmering, coal black eyes. A tingle spread through her, and she was suddenly embarrassed about her earlier behavior. Okay, she was more than embarrassed; she was totally mortified over the way she'd screamed and flung herself at him when the lightning struck, and then her outburst over the leather jacket. *Gosh*, he had to be thinking she was a real nutcase.

“Any chance I can use your phone, Dr. Cortes?” she inquired politely. “I need to make a few calls while I recharge my phone.” Her hands fiddled with the charger cable dangling from her cell phone.

“You can't do anything unless you call me Alex,” he teased.

She noted the sparkle in his eyes. “Okay, Alex.”

“That’s better.” His rich, deep voice laced with the slightest trace of a Latin accent made her shiver involuntarily.

She smiled to cover up her silly reaction. “I’m really sorry to barge in on your holiday. I’m sure you have plans for tonight, so I’ll leave as soon as I make those calls.” She didn’t want to be a nuisance and he was surely being a gentleman, something fewer and fewer men were these days.

“No worries. I’m not going anywhere tonight,” he said, surprising her. “I have a landline or you can use my cell.”

No plans? Why not? Looking around his cozy living room, she noticed no Christmas decorations—not even a Christmas card. From what she could see, she’d interrupted a quiet evening between him and a bottle of Scotch.

She pointed to the leather jacket folded neatly beside him. “Didn’t burn it, huh?”

Alex’s exotic eyes crinkled at the corners, drawing her attention to long, thick eyelashes. “I figured I’d give you the satisfaction.”

She tossed her head. “I changed my mind. I’ll give it to charity instead. I’m sure someone can use it in this chilly weather.”

“Good idea, but it’s supposed to warm up to eighty degrees tomorrow.”

“Eighty degrees?” She raised her widespread hands. “Small wonder I chose to live here when my grandma relocated from up north. As much as I love them, my parents couldn’t convince me to go back to New York. My grandmother was a beach lover, like me. She used to always say that Naples was paradise.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to beat this kind of weather in the winter.” He reached for the bottle of Scotch and poured two fingers in his cut crystal glass. “Want a drink?”

“Sure.” She never drank the hard stuff, but today was one day she needed it.

“If you don’t want Scotch, I’ve got wine, beer or orange juice. No soft drinks.”

“Scotch is fine.”

Alex poured her drink and handed her the glass. “*Salud*,” he said, raising his glass.

“Cheers,” she returned automatically, though a cheery toast was a bit of a stretch. The whisky burned her throat all the way down to her esophagus. “I hate to drink on an empty stomach. Have you eaten?”

“No. Are you hungry? I can order some food in.”

That brightened her mood. It didn’t sound like he was bothered by her impromptu arrival. “Surprisingly, I am hungry.” When she’d left Bill’s house the last thing on her mind had been food, but why let the wonderful spread she’d packed for them go to waste? “Do you like stone crabs?”

“Love them.”

“Good, me too. If you’ll help me bring in the cooler from my car, we can enjoy the feast I put together for someone who won’t be named.”

He smiled. “Give me your key. I’ll get it.”

She rummaged in her tote and located her keys. “I’ll go with you.”

He nixed her offer with a shake of his head. “There’s no sense in both of us getting wet.”

“Everything’s in the trunk. The cooler and a green tote bag that has the rest of the goodies...like dessert. I’ll hold an umbrella over you as you carry it in.”

“No. Stay here. I’ll go out alone.”

Stubborn and a bit bossy, but who was she to argue? “Suit yourself, Doc, if you don’t mind getting wet.” Her sassy tone drew a chuckle from him. She reached for the folded leather jacket and handed it to him along with her keys. “Here. Will you at least put the jacket on?”

“Sure.” Jiggling the keys in his hand, Alec shrugged into the jacket and headed for the door. When he returned toting everything, Georgiana was waiting at the entrance with a large towel.

Alex left his shoes on the welcome mat and set the cooler down before coming inside. He rubbed his hair briskly and then handed her the jacket. “Good thing you didn’t burn it.”

“It looks great on you. Do you want it?”

He gave her a baleful look that squelched the very idea. “What do you think?” he asked with a sardonic lift of his thick, dark brows.

She gave a half-shrug. “I guess not. Can’t say that I blame you. Most likely it would bring bad luck.”

“I don’t know about the bad luck, but I’m not interested in keeping another guy’s jacket,” he said bluntly.

She looked down. “Oh,” she said in a small voice.

“I didn’t mean it harshly,” he said, softening his tone. “But a little while ago you wanted me to burn it.”

“True,” she conceded. Lifting her gaze, she tried to gauge where he was coming from, but his expression was unreadable.

“I’m going to change into dry clothes and then set everything up on the coffee table.”

“We’re eating in the living room?”

“That’s the plan,” he said, white teeth gleaming against tanned skin. “Is that okay with you?”

It was more than okay, but she didn’t want to appear overeager. Georgiana gazed at the fireplace instead of his attentive eyes. “Sure. I love eating in unconventional places.”

Georgiana couldn’t believe the irony. She had envisioned a candlelight dinner at Bill’s house followed by him proposing to her. But instead, she’d left his house like a scalded cat, never wanting to see him again. And once she’d let the anguish pour out of her heart, she had experienced a startling jolt of freedom...and a stirring of hope.

Maybe someday she would get what she wanted most in life. But it wouldn’t be with Bill.

“I saw the suitcase in your trunk. Were you planning on traveling tonight?” Alex asked in a casual tone.

“No, I’m flying out tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

“New York. I’m going to spend Christmas with my parents and my two older brothers.”

“What time is your flight?”

“First thing in the morning,” she said, surprised when his face fell. “I need to check in for my flight as soon as I get someone out here to tow my car back to my apartment.”

“Okay.” He carried the cooler and the green tote bag into the kitchen and headed toward his bedroom. “When I finish changing, you can make your calls in my bedroom.”

“Thanks. That’s very considerate of you.”

He winked and her heart skipped a beat. “It’s the least I can do when you’ve brought me stone crabs. Before you came, I wasn’t in a very good mood. Now I’m looking forward to the evening.”

“Really?” At his nod, Georgiana stifled the urge to pinch herself. Alex was not only kind and considerate, but he was looking forward to spending the evening with her, Georgiana Kincaid, who had stormed out of Bill’s house an hour ago with no special plans on Christmas Eve.

Was Grandma Emmy looking out for her from above? she wondered, blowing her a secret kiss.