

# One Big Happy Family



#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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MALLERY

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“This engaging character study by Mallery is sure to please her many fans as well as readers of similar authors such as Nancy Thayer and Debbie Macomber.”

—*Library Journal* on *The Stepsisters*

# One Big Happy Family

*Susan Mallery*



CANARY STREET PRESS

For Kathy—you and those you love are the absolute definition of “one big happy family!”

So this is for you, Ed and James. Kay, Bob, Patty, Steve and George. And, of course, in loving memory of your beloved father.

May your holidays always be warm and loving. Merry Christmas to you and yours.

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# 1

“But you’re a woman.”

“Does that matter?”

“I don’t know. Do you know how to tow cars?”

Julie Parker did her best not to roll her eyes. At her age, it was a much less charming look. But still.

“Your car is fine,” she said, trying for patience, but failing to hit the mark and landing on snark instead. “You ran out of gas on the 405 freeway. If we should be questioning someone’s ability to exist in the world, we should probably start with you.”

“Hey!” The young twentysomething finally looked up from her phone and frowned. “You have attitude.”

“I do, and a busy schedule. Do you want help or not? It’s twenty bucks for the gas and seventy-five for the service visit.”

“Ninety-five dollars for a few gallons of gas? That’s robbery.”

“It’s also the price you were quoted when you called the company.”

Cars and trucks sped by on the busy freeway. It was a cold, rainy December afternoon, and Julie had a date with her very handsome boyfriend in a few hours. The last thing she wanted to do was waste time arguing with someone younger than either of her adult children.

The young woman shook her head. “I’m not paying that.”

“Fine by me.”

Julie started back to her tow truck, gas can in hand. The woman hurried after her.

“Wait. I’ll do it. So ninety-five dollars?”

“Yes. Tax is included in the price.” She fished her credit card reader from her overalls. “You pay, I pour.”

The woman gave her the stink eye, then reluctantly pushed a credit card into the machine. Less than five minutes later, Julie had her money, and the unhappy motorist had enough gas to get her on her way.

“Is this your car?” Julie asked, telling herself to walk away but unable to do so.

“It’s my boyfriend’s. He said I could drive it.”



Julie pointed to the instrument panel. "You probably always know how much gas is in your own car. It's something we keep track of without thinking. But when you get into someone else's car, check the gauge. When the weather's like this, you can wait a long time for a tow truck, and the side of the freeway is a dangerous place."

"Oh." The other woman looked at the rushing traffic, then slid into the driver's seat. "Thanks.

I'll keep that in mind."

"Have a nice day," Julie called as the twentysomething pulled away, sending gravel up in a spray.

She made her way to her truck, telling herself she'd gotten her good deed for the day out of the way early, so that was something. Thirty minutes after that, she pulled into the tow yard, driving under the big Parker Towing sign her grandfather had installed nearly fifty years ago. She parked the small tow truck she'd used for the call, then ran through the pelting rain to the safety of the main office, where Mariah Carey's version of "Santa Baby" played over the speakers. She hung the keys on the pegboard in the locking cabinet and put the credit card reader on the docking station where it would automatically download and tally the transaction.

Huxley, the office manager slash driver whisperer slash mother hen, looked at her over his reading glasses.

"Why do you do that? Why do you take a call like that? I go to lunch, and when I come back, you've taken one of the trucks and gone out to face God knows what in this kind of weather. I don't like to worry. When I worry, I get hives, and then I have to go see the doctor and that costs our insurance company money. Do you want the premiums to go up? I don't think so. But you do this. Every six months or so you think it's twenty-five years ago and you're still driving a damned tow truck. You're the boss. You've been the boss for a long time. It'd be really nice if you remembered it."

"I was delivering gas, not doing a repo. I was fine. Besides, it's fun to take one of the trucks out every now and then. I want to keep my hand in. The men need to respect me, and for that I need to prove my skills."

"A chicken could drag gas out to some fool who forgot to fill up his car. What skills are you going on about?"

She laughed. "I had a good time. I'm allowed. Leave me alone."

"I can feel those hives popping out all over my body," he said as she started for her office.

"And Axel's waiting to talk to you. He has today's list."

Julie's good mood instantly faded. She walked purposefully toward her office, not breaking stride as she crossed the threshold and headed for her desk. She ignored the tall, fit man standing by the window, a folder in his hands. As she took her seat, she allowed her gaze to linger on the baseball bat leaning casually against the corner.

From the time she was eight until she was thirteen, her father had insisted on weekly batting practice at the cages up by the park. After all those sessions, she had a hell of a swing, and she wasn't afraid to connect with a ball or anything else that needed hitting.

Not that she went around beating people with a baseball bat, but it had been a deterrent on more than one call, and keeping it nearby in certain situations gave her a sense of security. The world was a better place, at least from her perspective, when she knew she could handle whatever came at her. She never asked for help—instead, she took care of the problem herself.

She drew in a breath, then raised her head and looked at the man watching her. "Axel." He moved toward her desk and set down the folder. "I have five for tonight."

"Five's a lot."

She glanced at the papers. Sure enough, there were five cars the bank wanted back. They were all high-end, late models with appropriately high repo fees.

After taking 25 percent off the top to cover expenses, including the lookout car, the company and repo guy split the fee fifty-fifty. It was dangerous work for not much reward and a part of the business she'd never understood. But repo guys lived on adrenaline, and she supposed someone had to go out and take back that which had not been paid for.

She closed the folder and pushed it toward him. "Try not to get shot."

Axel flashed her a smile. "Me getting shot would solve a lot of your problems."

“Why would you say that? You’re my repo guy. I have no interest in finding another one.”

“You’re still mad at me. Any chance you could see your way past that?”

*Mad* didn’t come close to describing what she was feeling, she thought grimly, taking in his handsome face and dark eyes. He was the kind of man women noticed. A little dangerous, a little sexy, a lot of trouble.

“How long did you go out with my daughter?”

His smile faded and he took a step back. “About two years.”

“How many times did she foolishly let you back in her life so you could break her heart yet again?”

His eyes became unreadable. “Three.”

“My count is four, but I’m not sure that matters. I’ll see my way past what you did to her when

I’m good and ready. I’m thinking about thirty years, give or take.”

He hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” she snapped. “Don’t apologize to me. I only hate you by association. And if you really care about her, then stop screwing with her life. Leave her alone.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try harder.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“I’m pretty sure your heart isn’t the body part creating all the trouble.”

He looked at her. “You want me to quit?”

Some days she did, mostly when she was holding Dana as her daughter cried because Axel had once again dumped her. Because he’d been right—when it came to him, Dana’s heart did want what it wanted and, unfortunately, that was him. But on the rest of the days, she liked having Axel around. He was dependable, he understood the business and he had a habit of taking new hires under his wing, so to speak, and teaching them the tricks of the trade.

“You’re good at what you do,” Julie said reluctantly, staring out the window. “Stay away from her and we’ll be fine.”

“You’re a good mom.”

Words that should have pleased her but instead sent a quiver of guilt trickling through her.

While she usually fell firmly in the “good mother” category, lately she’d been keeping secrets.

Well, one secret. One big, tall, boyfriend-size secret.

At some point she was going to have to come clean about him, just not today, she thought. It was three weeks until Christmas. Her kids had plans that didn’t include her, Heath—the boyfriend, though she didn’t say that word aloud—didn’t have *his* kids for the holidays, so the two of them were going to hole up at her place and enjoy a little one-on-one time with nowhere else to be. She honestly couldn’t wait.

She carefully put the happy image out of her head, then returned her attention to Axel.

“Go get the cars,” she told him. “The weather’s going to get worse. Remember that and don’t try any fancy moves. Those big trucks you’re driving belong to me.”

The smile returned. “Yes, ma’am.”

He took the paperwork and left. When Julie was sure he was out of earshot, she murmured, “And don’t get dead.” Because while she was pissed as hell at Axel, she wasn’t heartless. Besides, except for when he crapped on her daughter, he was a good guy and secretly she liked him. Well, at least when it came to Parker Towing.

As for Dana and her devotion to the man, well, her daughter was an adult. At some point she was going to have to figure out how to move on. Because that was how life worked. You tried something, and if it didn’t go well, you moved on. Julie’s father had taught her that, along with how to swing a bat, and she’d learned both lessons very, very well.

\* \* \*

“They’re a little thick and chewy for a cookie,” Peggy murmured doubtfully.

“It’s a brownie,” Fred told her. “Not a cookie. A brownie.”

“I don’t care if it’s popcorn—it’s too chewy.” Peggy looked up at Blair. “Are there nuts? You know I can’t have nuts.”

“No nuts,” Blair said cheerfully. “Just organic ingredients and a lot less sugar.”

“That’s why it’s so chewy.” Peggy shook her head. “I hate to be blunt, dear, but it’s a no from me.”

“I like it.” Fred swiped another brownie from the holiday-patterned plate. “You put in prunes, didn’t you? It’s your tell. You know what they say about prunes and old people is a myth.”

“It’s not a myth.” Cordella smiled at Blair. “I love prunes.”

“The first cookies weren’t chewy at all,” Peggy murmured. “I liked those better.”

“Now, those were cookies.” Fred grinned at Blair. “I like them both.”

“Thanks for the feedback.” Blair rose from the table and collected the sheets the residents had filled out. “I’m determined to get in a better selection of low-sugar desserts. We can’t keep relying on fruit, gelatin and whatever we can buy from our supplier. Would anyone be interested

in a cooking class? Maybe we could all bake a couple of days a week.” Fred stared at her blankly. “I don’t know how to bake.”

“You could learn.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, Blair. My wife baked for me for fifty-two years. I’m too old to learn something that complicated now. Besides, my dance card’s pretty full these days. But you ask the ladies if they’re interested.”

With that, he rose, picked up his cane and scurried as quickly as his bad leg would let him. Blair grinned.

“So that was a no?”

“I bake,” Cordella offered. “Although my days are pretty full, too.” She patted Blair’s hand. “I’m afraid you’re on your own, my dear. But the cookies were delicious. You should talk to the kitchen staff about adding those to the menu. They’ll be a hit.”

Cordella smiled, then rose and waited while Peggy carefully backed her motorized scooter out of the room. Just before they left, Peggy paused.

“If I don’t see you before the holiday, Merry Christmas, my dear. We all love that you try.” Blair waved at her, then began to clean up the plates and napkins from the dessert sampling. Today’s tasting was her third with the new batch of cookies and brownies, and at each of her gettogethers the comments had been the same. Everyone loved the cookies, but the brownies were less popular. Still, a 50 percent success rate was great considering she was doing her best to develop healthy, tasty desserts for her residents.

She dropped off the last of the samples in the staff break room, then started toward her office. Through the big windows in the hallway she could see it was still raining. It was barely three and already getting dark, typical of Seattle in December. She had two more weekly menus she wanted to review before her four o'clock meeting with the head chef. As the gerontologist nutritionist for the retirement community, what everyone did or didn't eat was her responsibility. While the holiday menus had already been approved, she wanted to go over snack options for the various parties the residents would be attending.

She'd almost reached her office when one of the receptionists texted on her cell phone.

There's a really handsome guy with a tow truck out front. Any interest or should I let the single ladies know he's up for grabs?

Blair grinned as she texted back a quick, No way. Nick's mine and you know it.

She was still smiling as she entered the large, open foyer of the main building. Her husband

was leaning against the reception desk, talking to one of the volunteers.

As always, the sight of him made her heart beat just a little bit faster. Nick was tall and strong, with an easy smile and an even more easygoing personality. That was one of the things that had first drawn her to him—he was rarely rattled. While she lived by schedules, regimens and precision, he rolled with the punches. She admired that about him and wished her various gastrointestinal ailments allowed her to do the same.

"In my next life," she murmured. In her next life she would be normal and be able to eat whatever she wanted without worrying about how her system would react. In her next life she wouldn't know the location of every "safe" bathroom between work and home or home and the grocery store. Her activities wouldn't be defined by whether or not she was going to have a "good" day or if she would be suffering. There would be no pills taken at precise times in an effort to keep things calm "down there."

As she approached, he chuckled at something the volunteer said. As always, he wore jeans and steel-toed boots. A waterproof vest was zipped up over a warm

plaid shirt. Nick didn't believe in wearing jackets—they got in the way of his work. Nor did he seem to react to the damp cold that came along with the Seattle winter.

He looked up and saw her. Instantly his expression softened and his eyes filled with affection.

“Hey, you.”

She hurried toward him. He pulled her close and hugged her, but gave her only the lightest of kisses. They were at her work, after all.

“What brings you to our neighborhood?” she asked, leading him to one of the conversation areas by the window. At this time of day, there weren't many residents around, so it was easy to find a quiet space. They sat on one of the sofas and faced each other.

“I had a lockout and car to tow to the dealership not too far from here. When I was done with those, I thought I'd swing by and say hi.”

“Hi.”

He chuckled. “Hi, back.” His gaze lingered on her face. “You look especially beautiful today.” “I feel good.”

“I like hearing that.”

She knew he meant the words—not just because if her tummy was calm it was a whole lot easier to have sex, but because he genuinely worried about her. While he didn't keep the detailed log she did, noting what she'd eaten and when she had her attacks, he could always sense when she started to feel bad. More than once, he'd been the one to quietly tell her where the closest restroom was before she'd had more than her first twinge indicating trouble.

He leaned forward and took one of her hands in his. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't.” She squeezed his fingers. “Nick, it's totally fine. I love you. We'll go to Hawaii in March, like you said.”

“I'm messing up everything.”

“You're not.”

“We had a plan.” His dark gaze locked with hers. “I want to go away with you, but...”

She took his other hand and squeezed them both. “Nicholas James Parker, you stop right now. It’s been a stressful year. We had our wedding planned, then two weeks before, you lost your father. No one expected that. We were all devastated. He’s your *dad*. You don’t get over that in a few months.”

They’d postponed the wedding until May, but hadn’t been able to get away on their honeymoon because of her work. They’d agreed they would spend Christmas in Hawaii—just the two of them. After a big family Thanksgiving, they’d thought they would be fine going away.

Only Nick was having second thoughts.

“I still miss him,” he said quietly.

“Of course you do. I lost my dad four years ago and I think of him all the time. This is big.

The spirit takes a long time to heal, and the emptiness never fully goes away.”

She swallowed against the protest she secretly wanted to voice. She loved Nick and would do what was best for him, but spending Christmas here? Ugh—it was going to be a nightmare.

“We had an old plan and now we have a new one,” she said cheerfully. “You’re going to talk to Dana tonight, and if she agrees, we’ll talk to your mom at dinner tomorrow and let her know we’ve changed our mind. We all want one big happy family Christmas up at the cabin. I’ll see if Uncle Paul wants to join us, because more is better. We’ll do the whole thing—the trees, the time in the snow, all the traditions. We’ll talk about your dad and when you were little and it will be sad and wonderful and you’ll feel so much better when we come home.”

“What about your mom?”

And there was the real reason Blair had been so happy they’d planned to go away. She released his hands and looked away. “I don’t want to talk about her.”

“She’s a problem.”

“She’s always a problem.”

“We could not tell her,” he began, his tone tentative.

She sucked in a breath. “I wish, but that’s not an option. She’s here. I have to deal.”



Blair's mother, Gwen, had recently made the stunning decision to move from Boise, where she'd always lived, to the Seattle area. She'd sold her house, packed up her belongings and had basically shown up with little warning. She was renting a little condo until she figured out where she wanted to live permanently. After years of being a comfortable five hundred miles away, she was now annoyingly close.

"Thanksgiving was easy," Blair admitted. "She flew back to Boise to spend the holiday with her friends. But she'll be here for Christmas. It was one thing to leave her while we went on our belated honeymoon. It's another to abandon her while we head off to the mountains with family.

She's going to have to come with us."

"You should talk to *my* mom."

"And say what? I love your mom and she loves me. No way I'm going to admit that I have issues with my own mother. She'll think I'm heartless or a freak."

Worse, *issues* didn't come close to describing the problem. Blair and her mother hadn't been close for decades. She had no idea what Gwen thought of her, but there were days when Blair knew her greatest shame was that she actively disliked and resented her own mother.

"I wish she'd stayed in Boise," Blair grumbled. "It was so much easier when we spoke every five or six months and we never saw each other. She doesn't know anyone here. She's having to start over with friends and doctors and everything else. She should have stayed where she knows people."

"She knows you."

"Ha ha. The less time I spend with her, the happier I am. She's going to ruin Christmas." "She's not."

"You wait. Two days in, you'll be apologizing for being wrong."

Still, there was no getting out of it. That was the real rub. She could complain and wish things were different, but she didn't have it in her to simply leave her mother alone over Christmas, no matter how much she didn't want to even be in the same room as her.

“At least Uncle Paul will be there,” Nick offered. “Everybody likes him.” He frowned. “Until the wedding, I hadn’t seen him and your mom together. They really don’t get along.”

“It’s more of a cool acceptance. He was my dad’s brother, not hers. I think he was fine with her until...you know. When everything changed.”

But he’d always been supportive of Blair, and when she’d needed a place to go, he’d opened his home to her. She’d stayed with him through high school and then while getting her degree at the University of Washington. They’d been there for each other when she’d lost her father and he’d lost his only brother. He’d been the one to walk her down the aisle when she’d married Nick. *They* were family. Not her and her mother.

“We need to make it clear to Julie what she’s getting into,” she said. “I bring baggage and only half of it is fun.”

“You know Mom lives to fix things. She’ll take charge and everyone will end up doing exactly what she says.” He grinned. “She can be determined. Maybe by the end of the holidays, she’ll figure out how to get you and your mom to be friends.”

“Unlikely.” A word so much nicer than what Blair really wanted to say, which was “I don’t want to be friends with my mom. I want her to go live somewhere else so I never have to see her or deal with her again.”

And that made her a horrible person, but she was willing to live with the guilt. She worked on her karma in other areas of her life. She was a good friend and generous to charities, and she was an excellent listener. She just really, really didn’t like her mother.

She looked at her watch. “I need to get to a meeting and you have tow truck duties. You’re dropping by Dana’s before you come home?”

“Yeah, I’ll swing by her place when I finish my shift.”

They both stood. He touched her cheek. “We’ll figure this out.”

“We will and we’ll get through it.” She looked into his eyes. “You need the family time, Nick. It’s important. This is the first Christmas without your dad. We’ll honor that. Everything else can wait.”

“Why are you so good to me?”

“Because you’re actually the best man ever and I’m the lucky woman you married.”

He smiled. “We’ll argue about who’s luckier later. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Be safe.”

“Always.”

He walked toward the main exit. Blair allowed herself a second to watch him go. As always, a tiny knot of worry took up residence in her chest. Being a tow truck driver could be dangerous work. Some inattentive motorist could easily sideswipe him while he was working on a disabled car on one of the freeways. A drunk or drugged-out driver could pull a gun on him, which had happened and was the reason he kept a 9 mm semiautomatic gun locked in the glove box of his truck.

He was out in the elements, dealing with all kinds of people, going to dangerous neighborhoods at night. She’d never liked what he did, but given that it was a family business, she’d never expected him to find something else. Julie planned on her only son taking over Parker Towing, and it was always where Nick had seen himself. He wasn’t enthused about running things, but it had been his life plan.

Until recently, she thought as she hurried back to her office. Nick hadn’t made up his mind completely, but she knew he was leaning toward accepting Uncle Paul’s generous offer. And if that happened, Nick’s future would look very different. She could let go of the worry, and he could be excited about his job again.

The only problem was going to be telling Julie that there wasn’t going to be a third generation at Parker Towing, and neither of them wanted to be the one to break his mother’s heart. Or very possibly piss her off.

## 2

Dana Parker hadn't realized it was possible for her hands to cramp from curling ribbon, but it was. The stacks of donated *unwrapped* presents had been transformed into stacks of wrapped presents, each with a color-coded and numbered tag. G7-10 meant the gift was appropriate for a girl between seven and ten. When the wrapped gifts were distributed to the various local charities, the coded tags would be replaced by personalized ones.

In the interest of speed and efficiency, the volunteers had broken up into groups that either wrapped or added curly ribbon and the tags. Dana had joined the latter, something she now regretted. Paper cuts seemed easier to deal with than finger cramps.

"But it's for a good cause," she reminded herself. Because it was the season and she was all about good causes and helping others and staying busy, which was why she'd spent the previous weekend packing backpacks for schoolchildren who wouldn't get meals from school during the holidays and was this afternoon maiming herself in the name of curly ribbon.

Her phone buzzed in her jeans pocket. She pulled it out and glanced at the text from her mother.

I have lamps. They're fabulous. When will you be home?

Lamps? Her first instinct was to ask why, but her mom had better taste than her, so the lamps were likely to be perfect for her recently redone bedroom.

I finish here in about ten minutes, then I'm going home.

Good. I'll leave them by the front door. They're wrapped in plastic. They'll be fine. Love you.

Dana sent back heart emojis, then refocused on ribbon curling. She finished the last gift three minutes before four, then looked at the impressive pile of presents they'd all finished. They'd done good work here, and she was happy to have helped. It had been worth taking the time off work.

"We're going to make a lot of kids happy this Christmas," the woman at the next table said with a smile. "All this in three hours. Now I have to go home and