

Under  
His  
Tree

# Tempted By

DECEMBER

NICHOLE ROSE

**TEMPTED BY  
DECEMBER**

**AN AGE-GAP HOLIDAY ROMANCE**



NICHOLE ROSE



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# CONTENTS

Dedication

About the Book

1. Chapter One

2. Chapter Two

3. Chapter Three

4. Chapter Four

5. Chapter Five

6. Chapter Six

7. Chapter Seven

8. Chapter Eight

9. Chapter Nine

10. Chapter Ten

11. Chapter Eleven

12. Chapter Twelve

13. Chapter Thirteen

14. Chapter Fourteen

15. Chapter Fifteen

16. Chapter Sixteen

17. Epilogue

Author's Note

Under His Tree

Wanton

Nichole's Book Beauties

Instalove Book Club

Follow Nichole

More By Nichole Rose

About Nichole Rose



## DEDICATION

**T**o the men in my life who love me exactly as I am.

## ABOUT THE BOOK



**H**er Christmas wish? Rosy-red cheeks and the man of her dreams.

### **Alaric Parrish**

I've been tempted by Jillian Rhett since the moment I set eyes on her.

I want her curves wrapped in a bow and nothing else for Christmas.

But the skittish intern wants nothing to do with me.

Until she sees something she shouldn't have.

Now she's right where I want her... in my arms.

Loving every wicked thing I do to her.

If she thinks this is temporary, she's wrong.

I'm not ever letting her go again.

### **December Rhett**

All I want for Christmas is Alaric Parrish.

He's been the man of my dreams since I was a teenager.

But taking a job at his company was a terrible idea.

I'm not who he thinks I am...but I land in his bed anyway.

Now he says I belong to him, and I think he's right.

When we're together, he sets my soul on fire.

But when the magic ends and he finds out the truth...will he still want me?

# CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER



“**Y**ou did *what?*” I stare at my stepsister, Jillian, in bewilderment, convinced this is it. This is the time she’s gone too far and dragged me with her. I’m going to spend Christmas with a cellmate who makes beer from fermented apples in a bathroom stall and shivs people in the cafeteria for an extra bologna sandwich.

“I sent your photo and designs in with my application,” Jill says with a shrug, tossing her long blonde hair off her shoulders. “It’s your dream internship, not mine.”

“I thought that’s what you said.” I collapse onto the edge of my twin bed, my legs too weak to hold me up. My fingers land against my overheated cheeks as I gape at her, not even sure where to begin with this one.

Jillian has been getting me into trouble since the day we met. We’ve been inseparable since my mom went to work for her dad when I was seven. Our parents fell in love, and the rest is history. Mostly.

It’s complicated.

My mom died three years after they got married, leaving me behind. Jillian’s dad became my guardian. Jillian and I get along great, but her dad and me? Not so much. He loves me,

but I think he wishes I were more like Jillian and less like me. We're both curvy, though I think I'm more mousey than beautiful like Jillian. But that's not the problem. He's the freaking mayor. She's everything a politician's daughter should be. I'm not even remotely close.

She's vivacious and graceful and can make a friend out of anyone. I'm clumsy and awkward and never know what I'm going to say or do next. Maybe that wouldn't be a problem if her dad, Cory, wasn't a career politician, but he is...and I've inadvertently made it harder for him since I was a little girl.

I'm a freaking disaster. My mouth and awkwardness have thrown a wrench in the works more than once. Like the time I accidentally told a reporter that I thought he was doing a terrible job at addressing a lot of the issues facing the city. It wasn't what I meant to say! Or the time I spilled an entire plate of spaghetti Bolognese on the governor. Or the time I basically knocked Senator Howard down the steps, and someone caught a picture of his toupee flying off.

Naturally, when I asked Cory for help getting the internship at Daphne Parrish & Co, he blew me off. But when Jillian asked for help securing the same internship opportunity, he jumped to pull strings to get her in at the hottest plus-size fashion house in Los Angeles. He wants to make friends with Alaric and Blaze Parrish, not enemies, and he's afraid I'll screw everything up for him. Alaric and Blaze are billionaires who've taken the world by storm since they took over the company after their mother, Daphne, died five years ago. Cory

needs that kind of star power on his side if he wants to make a run for governor during the next election cycle.

All Jillian had to do was fill out the paperwork, and the internship was hers. Her dad will lose his mind when he finds out about this. And he will find out. He *always* finds out. He knows everything about everything.

“Call them and tell them there was a mix-up, and the wrong photo got attached to your application,” I demand.

“Too late,” Jillian sing-songs, dancing across our tiny one-bedroom apartment on her tiptoes. “I sort of sent it a week ago. You start tomorrow.”

I stare at her in horror. “I do not.”

“You do.” Her bright blue eyes meet mine in the mirror across the room. “You’re going to be me for winter break, December.”

I had a feeling she was going to say that.

“I’m going to throw up.”

“No, you aren’t.” She spins around to face me, her lips pursed in a look I know all too well. Jillian Rhett has made up her mind.

My dang soul quivers in terror.

“He isn’t taking something else from you just because you aren’t the perfect freaking mouthpiece for his stupid career,” she growls, her eyes flashing fire. “You’ve worked your butt

off for this internship. You earned it. If he won't pull strings to get you in the door, you'll go in as me."

"Jillian, it's a bad idea," I whisper, even though I adore her for trying. Her dad may not believe in me, but Jillian's faith hasn't ever wavered.

"It's not a bad idea. It's my Christmas present to you." She smirks, flashing her dimples in triumph. "You can't say no when it's a gift."

"Criminal impersonation isn't a gift, Jill," I say, laughing despite myself. Only she would think something this outrageous counts as a present.

"It is when it's what you've been dreaming about for years. You're dying to go to work for Alaric Parrish."

She's not wrong. I've been obsessed with him since I met him when I was seventeen. We met at a party Jillian's dad threw, though I doubt he remembers me. I was so anxious I'd say something wrong that I decided to avoid the risk and slipped outside. I found him in the garden, looking like a dark prince in a stylish tuxedo, his hair windswept, his black eyes devastating as he regarded me. He was so freaking beautiful to me, but he wasn't smiling, not like he always did in pictures. He seemed...sad. The kind of soul-deep sadness I was way too familiar with.

I made him laugh. I don't even remember what I said. It was ridiculous, I'm sure. But his laugh cut right through me. I felt hot in places I'd never felt hot before. And when he leaned in to kiss me on the cheek to thank me for making his night, I



think I gave him a tiny piece of my heart. A few days later, the news broke that his mom had cancer. She died less than a year later.

Come on,” Jillian pleads, pouting at me. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Jail, expulsion, a media scandal...a litany of possibilities run through my head.

“Don’t answer that.” Jill grimaces as if just realizing it was a dumb question. “Answer this one instead.” She holds up a finger, her nail perfectly manicured and sparkly pink. “What’s the *best* that could happen?”

“I don’t go to jail,” I mumble.

“Exactly.”

“You should never go into politics or motivational speaking. You suck at it.”

She rolls her eyes at me, flopping down on her bed on her back. That lasts for all of two seconds before she pops back up, curling one leg beneath her. “I’m serious, December. If none of your worst-case scenarios happen, at the end of winter break, you have three full weeks of working with Alaric Parrish under your belt. That’s *three weeks* to show him what you’re made of and prove that you deserve a spot at his company. Once he sees your designs, he won’t freaking care that you aren’t me.”

I hesitate, torn. She’s swaying me to the dark side, just like always. No matter how terrible her ideas are, she always

manages to sway me because she makes them sound so darn compelling. I'm a sucker, honestly.

"You really think I'm that good?"

"Uh, hello?" She bounds to her feet and does a pirouette so the asymmetrical hem of her red and white dress swishes around her legs. "You've been dressing me exclusively since we were sixteen! And everyone around here thinks I'm fashionable."

"You are fashionable." I smile.

"Yeah, because of your designs!"

I chew on my bottom lip, positive this will blow up in my face. But I want this. I want it so freaking bad. It's been six years, and I've never forgotten about Alaric or quit dreaming about him. He's still the only man who makes my heart race or my entire body clench with desire. I want to see him again, even if it's only to convince myself that I'm a long-forgotten memory to him.

"I'll do it," I say, squaring my shoulders.

Jillian squeals.

# CHAPTER TWO

## ALARIC



“**W**hat the fuck is this?” I growl, dropping an application on Ruby’s desk.

She glances up from her computer screen, fixating her wizened eyes on me over the wire rims of her bifocals. “It’s the application packet for our newest intern, Alaric,” she says, speaking as if I’m slow. “You told me to hire someone to help out through the holiday season. I hired Jillian Rhett.”

No, she didn’t hire Jillian Rhett. Because the raven-haired beauty with the big, guileless blue eyes staring up from the photo is December Rhett. I know because I met December six years ago. It was the same week Ma was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer.

My world felt like it was crashing to the ground, and this little ball of light stepped out of the darkness to offer me hope. She made me laugh when nothing else did, and then she sent flowers when Ma died less than a year later. I haven’t seen her since that night in the garden, but whenever I need a little light in my life, my mind inevitably drifts to her.

“When does she start?”

“She started this morning.” Ruby purses her lips and shakes her poufy gray head. “Honestly, Alaric. I sent everything in an

email, like you asked. If you'd clean out that nightmare of an inbox once in a while, you might be able to find things. I don't see how you accomplish anything."

Her diatribe makes me smile. Ruby went to work for Daphne Parrish & Co when my mom opened the doors two decades ago. She still forgets that I'm not the same impish little boy who used to run through the building raising hell. Forget reminding her that I own a fifty percent stake. She doesn't give a shit. As far as she's concerned, age trumps all that nonsense. She's as likely to tell me to do something myself as she is to do it for me.

But she'll always have a place here. She's family. My older brother Blaze and I treat everyone here the same way. We may run one of the most prestigious fashion lines in the world, but the people who come to work here are the most valuable assets we've got. They're what make this company what it is.

"And the girl in the photo is the one who started this morning? You're certain of that?"

"Yes. I met her in the lobby myself. Sweet girl." Ruby smiles, a grandmotherly, affectionate smile. She likes her. "She's very quiet."

"Can you send her to my office, please?"

"Why?" Ruby gives me the side-eye, suspicion glittering in the blue depths. "If this is because she's the mayor's daughter...."

"Fuck the mayor," I growl.

“Alaric James!” Ruby chides, though I don’t miss the way her lips twitch. She doesn’t like the pompous prick either. He’s a career politician. Every move he makes is to protect his precious image and curry favor with his base. He has no opinions that aren’t filtered through his party and what’s likely to win him an election. I have no patience for men with no spine.

“I’ll play nice,” I grit out, snatching December’s—or Jillian’s—file from Ruby’s desk. The designs inside are exceptional, whichever of the sisters created them. “Just send her to my office, Ruby.”

“Fine, but I’m telling your brother that you’re causing problems with the mayor again!”

“I haven’t caused any!” I call over my shoulder, leaving the *yet* part of the statement unsaid. I may very well cause a few if he sent December in here posing as her sister to try to convince us to endorse his ridiculous bid for governor. Hell will freeze over before I throw my name behind him.

I stomp into my office, tossing the file down on my desk. Instead of sitting, I pace to the windows to stare out. Los Angeles looks like a kid’s playset far below. People move like ants, bundled up as if it’s below freezing even though winter in the city rarely dips below the 60s. Fluffy white clouds hang suspended overhead, blotting out the weak winter sun.

Christmas decorations line the street, hung from light posts to bring a little cheer to the city. It was always Ma’s favorite time of year. She went all out for Christmas. Even when we

could barely afford it, she never let us go without. Blaze and I do our best to keep that spirit alive, especially here in the offices. Every year, we throw a giant Christmas party for the staff and their families. Everyone gets bonuses and gifts. We donate millions to charities.

It never feels like quite enough to fill the void and capture the spirit. This time of year, I feel lonely in a way that's not as easy to ignore as it is every other day of the year. I ache for something I'm not sure how to define or explain. This year, that chasm feels bigger than ever. Quite simply, something is missing.

The moment I saw December Rhett staring up at me from that photo, I realized what's been missing. Or *who*. The raven-haired beauty who comforts me when I need it most.

I've never let myself think of her as anything more than a light in the dark before today. God, I'm not a complete fucking cretin. But she's always been with me in some way. Remembering her laughter soothes me. Remembering her smile eases the restlessness in my soul. I can't fucking explain it, so I never tried.

I never thought I'd see her again, either...not until I opened that folder and saw her photo staring up at me. She's grown up. Hell, she's grown into an absolute beauty. Her sky-blue eyes and porcelain skin make her seem angelic. But those curves were made for sin.

Why is she pretending to be her sister?

It's a mystery I'd very much like to solve.

I turn from the windows, striding back to my desk to thumb through her application again. None of the information inside matches anything I know about her. Her name, her birthday... it's all wrong. The only part of her that's real is the photo.

The intercom connecting me to Ruby's desk buzzes.

"Is she on the way?" I demand, stabbing the talkback button.

"No. She's busy with HR. It'll be at least an hour before she can get up here."

"Dammit."

"Don't you curse at me, Alaric James Parrish," Ruby says, outrage in her voice. "You'll be answering your own damn phones today."

"Shit. Sorry." I grimace, shoving a hand through my hair. I need to calm the fuck down before Ruby kicks my ass and then sends Blaze to do the same thing. "Just send her up when she's done." I pause. "And why don't you order lunch from that Thai place you like today? My treat."

"Well, now you're being reasonable," Ruby sniffs, making me smile. "Have a good morning, dear."

I release the intercom button, staring blankly at the wall. And then I mutter a curse and slip out of my office to go talk to Blaze. If December is pretending to be Jillian, I don't want him firing her before I have a chance to find out why.

"We have a fox in the henhouse," I announce, stomping into his office.



“Who the fuck is messing with our designers?” Blaze asks, his brows pulling down into a severe scowl as he lifts his dark head from his computer. With the bank of windows at his back, a wall of clouds frame him as if he’s Zeus resting high up on Mt. Olympus. “If he’s sexually harassing them, get his sorry ass out of here, Alaric.”

“What? Who said anything about anyone being sexually harassed?” I throw myself into a chair across from his desk, convinced he’s hearing shit.

“You did.”

“I did not. I said we have a fox in the henhouse.”

“Which means there’s a predator on the loose amongst prey,” Blaze says.

“Okay, so clearly that doesn’t mean what I thought it meant,” I mutter, scrubbing a hand across my chin. I just thought it meant there was something unusual going on, like the fox was in there making friends or some shit. Clearly I’ve never lived on a farm.

My older brother sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t even want to know what you thought it meant.”

Well, damn. He’s a grumpy bastard today. Not that I’m surprised. He has been ever since our new model, Georgia Dillard, came to work for us. He’s in love with her, which would be funny to watch if he weren’t so fucking irritable about it. He needs to handle his business and claim her

already, but he's being stubborn about it. Sooner or later, he's going to snap.

I hope I'm around to see it when it happens. She's been doing everything in her power to get him there. It's obvious she's in love with him too. They dance around each other like they're doing the fucking Nutcracker.

"We have a stage player in our midst."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Blaze asks. "And stop speaking in riddles."

"I was speaking in idioms."

"Don't do that either," he mutters, leaning back in his executive chair with his arms crossed. He pins me with a hard stare. "Some of us actually have work to do."

"I work," I protest, smirking at him from the opposite side of his desk. He loves to give me shit about not doing anything around here, and I love to pretend I don't do shit around here, but we both know this place would fall the fuck apart without me.

Blaze isn't good with people. He handles the business shit. I keep our people happy and schmooze with the best of them. I know every employee by name. I know who is in the building and who is taking time off. I know who works better under pressure and who needs stress kept to a minimum. Every deal we've signed, I've helped cultivate.

"Work more, annoy me less," he grumbles.

“Uh, fuck no. It’s the holiday season.” I plant my foot on the edge of his desk, earning a dirty glare from him. “The only hard work I’m doing is making sure the Christmas party is handled, and you aren’t working everyone to death on this fucking campaign.”

“I’m not working them to death.”

He’s not. Blaze may not be good with people, but he’s a hell of a boss. Everyone is happy here. Everyone loves him. Designers and hopefuls flock to fill open positions on the rare occasion someone leaves. But it’s my God-given right to keep him humble.

“Why are you even in my office?” he asks, going right back to the original subject.

“I told you that we have a problem.”

“Absolutely none of the shit you said had the words ‘we have a problem’ in it,” he says.

“Actually, I don’t think it is a problem. It’s more of a mystery.”

“Is your mystery going to cause me problems?” Blaze asks, his dark eyes narrowed.

“Doubtful.” Possibly. But what Blaze doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I’ll fill him in on the important shit later. Preferably after he’s happily coupled up with Georgia Dillard and in a better mood.

“Is anyone fucking with any of our designers?”

“No.”

“Then it sounds like a you problem, Alaric. I’ve got enough shit to deal with right now.”

“Fine,” I say, trying not to give away the fact that he just gave me exactly what I came here wanting. “But the new intern, Jillian, is the mayor’s daughter. You have to play nice.”

“Shit,” he mutters, his face falling. He doesn’t like the mayor either. “When does she start?”

“She started this morning.”

“Does she have any experience?”

“Nope.” I climb to my feet. “So no scaring her off.”

“What does she have to do with your mystery?”

“Don’t know yet.”

Blaze sighs and then shakes his head. “You know what? If it keeps you out of my office, I don’t even care. Go Scooby Doo the shit out of it.”

# CHAPTER THREE

## DECEMBER



“Um, hi, Ms. Goines,” I say to Ruby Goines, stumbling off the elevator into Alaric Parrish’s posh outer office. Like the rest of the building, elegant red and black Christmas decorations adorn the space, with a gorgeous, matching tree set up near the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Los Angeles. “I got a message that Mr. Parrish wanted to see me.”

“Call me Ruby, dear,” Ms. Goines— I mean, Ruby—says with a kind smile that crinkles her eyes at the corners. “He’s waiting for you in his office. And don’t mind him if he’s crabby. He’s harmless. He’s just been out of sorts all morning.”

“Oh.” I glance at the heavy oak door she points at and then hesitate. “Um, why?”

“Who knows with him? The man is a menace.”

“Oh.”

She must see something on my face because she laughs quietly. “He’s harmless, dear. He’s just a pain in my behind. He’s always up to something, and I never know what until Blaze is in a tizzy because Alaric is driving him crazy. Honestly, the man spends more time finding ways to annoy his brother than he does working.”

I bring my fingers to my lips to hide a smile. She talks about them like they’re little boys instead of grown men in charge of a multi-billion-dollar company. It’s cute.

“Go on in. He’s waiting for you.”

Crap.

My smile fades as another wave of anxiety races through me. I’ve thought about nothing but this moment since yesterday, and I still have no idea how to handle it. Honestly, I expected to be found out before I ever made it through the doors this morning. But no one sounded the alarm. So far, they all believe I’m my sister.

Will Alaric? If he already suspects me, I’m screwed.

“Thank you.” I give Ruby a tight smile and scurry toward Alaric’s door, my kitten heels tapping against the porcelain tile.

“Enter,” he growls, his deep voice muffled.

I inhale a breath and push open the door. Like the anterior office, his inner sanctum is lavishly appointed, with a wall of windows overlooking the city below. He's standing beside his desk, six foot four in a thousand-dollar suit. Every inch of him is dark, from his hair to his eyes to the black fabric encasing his brawny body.

My gaze tangles with his, and every ounce of breath in my lungs rushes out in a strangled exhale. He's angry. Furious even. It roils in his onyx eyes like storm clouds.

"Come in and close the door." His familiar voice rolls over me in a tidal wave, puckering my nipples. It's so deep. So decadent. Like smooth caramel. Only there's a bite to it that wasn't there six years ago. *Anger.*

I stumble over my own feet in my haste to obey and quickly shut the door. And then I stand there, my hands at my sides, desperately trying not to fidget or blurt any of the thoughts running through my mind in a dizzying parade.

He's changed. And yet he's exactly the same beautiful man I've been dreaming about for far longer than I should have been.

"You're the new intern."

"Y-yes," I whisper.

"What's your name?"

I don't want to lie to him...but I do it anyway. "Jillian."

Something flares in his eyes. "Have we met before?"

“Maybe.” I lick my lips, skirting the razor’s edge between the truth and an outright lie. “I meet a lot of people through my father.”

“Ah, yes. The mayor.” A flash of scorn dances through his expression before he schools it. “If you’re here to try to convince us to endorse his bid for governor, the answer is no.”

“I’m not.”

He cocks his head to the side, waiting to hear me out.

“I’m sure that’s what he wants, but I’m here for me.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeat.

“Why are you here?”

“I...” I hesitate, which seems to annoy him. “I’ve dreamed about working here for years.” *I’ve dreamed about you since I met you.* “I just want one chance to show you what I’m made of.”

“Mmm.” He leans against the edge of his desk, studying me intently. “Are you certain we haven’t met before?”

“I...I don’t think so?”

“Perhaps at a party?”

“I don’t go to many parties,” I mumble, glancing at my feet.

“Really?” A triumphant smile curves his lips as if I’ve slipped up and said something wrong. “I’d think the mayor would have you out being seen all over town.”



My stomach sinks into my shoes.

Crap. He knows. He's toying with me, trying to get me to confess that I'm not Jillian. Is that why he's angry? Because he knows I'm lying?

"I'm in school," I say, doggedly sticking to my cover.

He pushes away from the desk, striding toward me. Every step he takes sends my heart rate ratcheting up a notch. It thumps against my ribcage like a battering ram.

"You're a terrible liar, Ms. Rhett," he murmurs, stopping so close I smell his cologne swirling around me. I feel the heat coming off him. His eyes aren't completely black. Tiny flecks of gold dot the irises like little veins in solid rock.

"I'm not l-lying." I'm not even convincing to myself, certainly not to this man.

"Not about everything," he agrees. "You are in school. I think you have dreamed about working here. You don't want me to endorse your father. But you do remember me." He places one finger beneath my chin, tipping my head back. "Isn't that right, December?"

Oh, no. This is worse than bad. It's a freaking Christmas disaster. I haven't even been here three full hours, and I'm already busted.

Note to self: Never listen to Jillian's idiotic ideas ever again.

"I'm not...."

“Lie to me again, and you’ll pay for it bent over my knee with your perfect ass in the air,” he growls.

“I...”

One dark brow shoots upward. He means it. And God help me, the thought of his rough palm against my ass is intriguing in ways I never considered before right this moment. But I think I want this man to spank me. I *want* him to punish me.

“Tell me the truth, sweet angel.”

“Please,” I whimper, not sure if I’m pleading with him to spank me or if I’m pleading for him to release me from his spell. I can’t think, and I desperately need to think. There’s too much at stake here, like my entire freaking future.

“Tell me,” he croons the command, pulling me deeper under his spell. “What’s your name?”

“J-Jillian.”

Darkness flares in his eyes. His hand slips down, encircling my throat. He pulls me closer to him, dragging me right up against his body.

“Little liar,” he whispers then, brushing his lips across mine in a featherlight kiss I feel reverberating in my soul like the strike of a gong. I think he feels it too. He groans like a man pushed to the edge, his chest shuddering against mine. “When I figure out why you’re lying, you won’t be able to sit down for a week, December.”

He releases me, taking a step back.

I stare at him in wide-eyed shock for a long, silent moment, and then I do the only thing I know to do. I flee.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## ALARIC



I fucked up. I learn that lesson acutely over the next four days. December avoids me at every turn. If I enter the design studio, she scurries out. If she's in the lounge, she quickly vanishes out of another exit.

I think she even hides out in the bathroom to avoid me. It'd be cute if it weren't infuriating. And it's not even the biggest problem—though it's driving me up the fucking wall.

The biggest issue is the fact that she's scared of her own shadow and a complete disaster as an intern. I'm pretty sure that's my fault. She's hiding behind her sister's name for a reason, and I tried to force her to confess. I didn't offer her any assurance that her secret is safe with me or that she wouldn't be tossed out of here on her ass.

I have it on good authority that I'm an idiot. But I have a plan to fix it, starting with the Christmas party tonight. She's going with me. She just doesn't know it yet.

“Do you ever actually work?” Blaze asks, stomping into my office with a garment bag in his hands and a scowl on his face.

“Nope.” I catch the stress ball I was throwing at the ceiling before launching it into the air again. I haven't gotten a fucking thing done because I've been obsessing about

December. “You won’t let me see the pictures of Georgia, so I’m on strike.”

Blaze growls a wordless warning. He’s been staring at the new photos of her since they landed on his desk, but he won’t let anyone else see them. I’m guessing that means she looks great, and he’s mad as hell about it.

“Jealous bastard.” I flash him a shit-eating grin, my gaze sliding toward the suit in his hands. “What the fuck is that?”

“Georgia sent it. Apparently, she thinks I’m playing Santa at the party tonight.”

“You’re serious?” I sit forward in my chair so fast my legs fall off the desk, thumping against the floor. The ball lands beside my chair with a soft thud as a crack of laughter escapes my lips. “Oh, this is fucking great! I was planning to skip out early, but now I’m definitely staying for the whole shit show.”

“I’m not playing Santa,” Blaze growls.

“Yeah, you are.” I grin, amused for the first time in four damn days. “As soon as she smiles at you, you’re going to cave like a sandcastle, bro. I can’t wait to see this shit.”

“I’m not playing Santa.”

I only laugh harder. We both know he’s playing Santa tonight. He can’t tell Georgia no. He’s completely incapable of it.

“I hate you,” he mutters.

I laugh again, pounding on my desk.

He turns and storms out, muttering under his breath.

I chuckle again and then pull up the cameras to figure out where the hell December is in the building. To my surprise, I find her right outside my office doors, talking to Ruby. I watch her like a fucking creep for a long moment, my dick lengthening in my pants. She looks beautiful in her black slacks and frilly red top, her hair in two buns on top of her head. She isn't a scared little lamb as she chats with Ruby. She's the same sweet angel I've never been able to forget. Only she's *more*. So fucking much more.

I know she remembers me. It drives me crazy that she won't admit it. Especially after what happened in my office the other morning. She felt what was between us. I know she did.

I shove my chair back and hop up, striding across my office.

"I've dreamed about coming to work here for the last six years," December says softly, her back to me. "I never thought I'd get the opportunity. Now, I'm messing it all up."

"Nonsense, dear," Ruby says, patting her hand. "You may have had a rough start, but that's not the end of the world. You're doing great with the designers, and you've still got plenty of time to win Blaze over to your side."

"I nearly took his finger off with his boots," December whispers, mortified.

"He has too many fingers anyway," I say.

December stiffens, spinning to face me. Her big blue eyes and pink-stained cheeks bowl me over. Goddamn, she's

ravishing. Has she really been dreaming about coming to work here for six years? Because of me? In this unguarded moment, I see the truth painted across her gorgeous face and know that's exactly why. She's here because of me. She never forgot me either.

So why is she running? Why is she hiding behind her sister's name?

"Alaric James," Ruby chides. "Don't tease the poor girl. She's had a rough morning."

"I heard," I say, crossing the outer office toward the two of them, my gaze locked on December. The pulse in her throat jumps before speeding away from her. "Is my brother giving you trouble, angel?"

"No, of course not," she hurries to assure me. Her blush deepens to a rosy red. "I, um, I accidentally hit him with his boots when I tried to hand them to him." She swallows hard. "He makes me nervous."

"Blaze does that to people," Ruby says dryly. "It's that scowl. The man never smiles."

"He's already forgotten about it."

"He has?" December asks hopefully.

"Yep," I say, fairly sure I'm not lying to her. All he's thinking about right now is Georgia. We could drive a fucking herd of elephants through the lobby, and he wouldn't give a shit at the moment. "He's got other things on his mind."

"Oh." December exhales a tiny, relieved breath.



“Speaking of other things,” Ruby says. “The caterer will be ready in fifteen minutes. You need to go down to meet them. I refuse to do it this year, Alaric. I gained five pounds sampling all of the hors d’oeuvres last year.”

I glance at her to see a knowing gleam in her eye as she looks between me and December. Ruby Goines is a genius, and I don’t pay her nearly enough.

“De...Jillian can help me,” I say, catching myself at the last minute.

“Oh, I can’t do that,” December disagrees, eyes wide. “I’m supposed to be helping set up Santa’s workshop.”

“We have an entire team of interior decorators to oversee that,” I say. “But there’s only one of me and about a thousand different hors d’oeuvres. You’re helping me sample them, angel.”

December looks to Ruby for help.

“He’s the boss,” Ruby says with a shrug. “My life is far less difficult when I don’t argue with him.”

December gulps.



“**Y**ou’ve been avoiding me, sweet December,” I growl as soon as we’re alone in the elevator. I back her up

against the chrome wall, planting one hand over her head to block her in. “I don’t like it.”

“Back up,” she whispers.

“I like it right here.” That’s a lie. I love it right here, with her sweet curves pressed to my frame, her warmth searing into me. Fucking hell, touching her feels a little like touching heaven.

“Back up, Alaric.”

“Why?” I skim my nose down her temple, breathing her in. “Fuck, you smell good.”

She exhales a sob, her entire body shuddering.

“Give me one straight answer. Just one, and I’ll back up.”

“W-which answer?”

“Do you remember me?”

She hesitates as floors tick by one by one, the elevator slowly descending toward the kitchens. And then a shuddering exhale leaves her lips. “I never forgot you,” she whispers.

I close my eyes, reveling in her answer. She remembers me. Maybe she shouldn’t. Hell, I don’t know anymore. Until four days ago, I never thought of her like this, but now I can’t unthink it. I want her. If that makes me wrong, fuck it. I’ll be wrong. We never forgot each other for a reason. That means something.

“Am I the reason you came to work here, angel?”

“You said one answer.”

“I lied,” I growl. “Give me one more.”

She bites her lip, staring up at me with those pretty eyes clouded with worry. “Yes. I mean, sort of. I mean, maybe?” She huffs out a breath. “I wanted to see you again. But I also want to work here. Can you please back up now? I can’t *think* when you’re this close.”

“What’s your name, angel?”

Her shoulders go back, her chin coming up in a stubborn display that makes my dick throb for relief. “I already answered your questions, Alaric.”

I want to gnash my teeth in frustration. I want to bend her over and spank her until she’s sobbing for relief. I want to promise her the world in exchange for her secrets. I hardly know which I want more. But I do none of those things.

“You’re attending the Christmas party as my date tonight.”

“I am not!” she gasps.

“You are,” I growl, nipping at her ear. “You’re arriving on my arm, and you’ll be leaving on my arm. It’s the only way I’ll go.”

“I...I can’t go.” She shakes her head. “I have things. Stuff. Lots of stuff. My ste...my dad!”

“Fuck your father, December. He isn’t invited.”

Her eyes shoot to mine. It might be my imagination, but she seems relieved. “He isn’t going to be here?”

“No. The party is for employees and their families. Unless you invite him, he isn’t invited.”

“Oh.” She relaxes slightly, leaning into me.

“Come with me,” I murmur, nuzzling her neck. Christ, she’s irresistible. “Just one date.”

“I have conditions.”

“Name them.” I’ll give her whatever she wants if it gets her to agree.

“I don’t want to be photographed, and I don’t want to talk to anyone important,” she says quickly. “And I’m *not* going home with you.”

“Deal,” I agree before she can change her mind.

She eyes me suspiciously, but the elevator slides to a stop before she can argue.

“Come on.” I reluctantly peel myself off her delectable body. “Let’s go sample the hors d’oeuvres.”

# CHAPTER FIVE

DECEMBER



“**W**hy fashion?”

“Curvy girls deserve nice clothes that make them feel confident too,” I say. “Most designer brands ignore the fact that the average woman isn’t a size two. My sister and I are both curvy, but finding our sizes in stores is impossible. So I started designing most of our clothes myself.”

“You made this?” His gaze rakes down my body, taking in my outfit.

“I did.”

“Damn, angel,” he murmurs, clearly impressed. “You’re good.”

“I want to be better.”

“And you think we can help you get there?”

“It’s kind of what you’re known for.” I smile. “Designers come here to work with and learn from the best.”

Alaric grins wistfully. “Ma was the best. Blaze and I are just the stewards overseeing her dream.”

“She’d be proud of you,” I whisper, drifting along the row of desserts the caterer set out for us to sample. There are so many different kinds of chocolate and fudge. Just looking at

all of them makes my teeth ache. “You and your brother should be proud too. You’ve done an amazing job.”

“Thank you,” he says, clearing his throat roughly. “I hope you’re right.”

I never met his mom, but I’m sure I am. Her company has flourished under their care, and everyone here loves them. Even though Blaze is a little bit grumpy, everyone speaks highly of him. They’re happy here.

“Where do you want to start?”

“Start?” My lips pull down into a frown.

He nods at the table, making me groan. We’ve been sampling hors d’oeuvres for an hour already!

“No way. I’ve already eaten way too much.”

His eyes heat. “I like watching you eat. It’s a rather erotic experience.”

I roll my eyes, my cheeks heating.

He strolls toward the table, his gaze sweeping across the treats. “Peanut butter fudge.”

“What?”

“That’s what you were eating in the garden that night,” he says quietly, selecting a small square. “Peanut butter fudge.”

“You remember that?”

“I remember everything.” He turns toward me, his eyes locked on mine. “I never forgot either. You were the light in the dark.”

I swallow hard.

He takes a step toward me.

“Seriously, Alaric, I can’t eat that,” I protest, backing away as he advances on me with a sexy smirk on his face and the square of peanut butter fudge between his thumb and forefinger.

“Just one bite, sweet girl,” he says, trapping me up against a prep station. “You know you want it.”

I groan, my stomach turning somersaults as my eyes tangle with his. I get sucked into a maelstrom of onyx and gold. My lips part, accepting the small bite of fudge.

“Fuck,” he growls, pressing me deeper into the table as my lips close around his fingers and I moan.

The fudge melts on my tongue, but it’s his taste that wrecks me. It’s him that addicts me. I don’t know why I do it, but I scrape my teeth along the pad of his thumb, caught in a net of lust that only tangles tighter the more I fight against it.

“Delicious,” I whisper, swallowing the fudge.

Alaric growls, a deep, rumbling sound I feel in my bones. His mouth slants down on mine, his kiss hot and hungry. He kisses me like he’s starving, one hand wrapped around my throat to keep me close. An onslaught of sensations rip through me, stunning my senses.

My lips part beneath his. He takes the invitation, sweeping his tongue into my mouth to steal my soul. I give it to him willingly, clinging to his shoulders as he annihilates any



chance I had of resisting him. He's so commanding, so confident as he knocks my world out of orbit and sets it to spinning.

I whine in protest when he breaks the kiss, breathing hard.

"Keep teasing me," he rasps, his eyes hot and wild. "And you'll be getting that spanking tonight, temptress."

I want that so damn badly.

Why am I fighting so hard to keep my secret when he already knows the truth? I don't know. At first, I was afraid he would find out the truth and tell Cory or fire me. But it's been four days. Despite the fact that I've been a disaster of an employee for the last four days because I've been too anxious to focus, he hasn't fired me. And he hasn't called Cory either. He's playing along.

That means something. So does the heat surging between us.

"Alaric, I..."

"What do you think?"

I jump as the caterer, a short battle-axe of a woman with her hair in a net and a starched white uniform, bustles into the room.

Alaric holds my gaze for a moment before slowly releasing me. "Everything is fantastic," he says. "The peanut butter fudge is particularly delicious."

My womb clenches.

I'm in so much trouble with this man.



“I brought you a dress,” Jillian hisses, peeking out of the driver’s side window of her BMW.

I bite my lip, trying not to laugh at her. She’s wearing an oversized hat, sunglasses, and a scarf. The only part of her face that’s visible is her nose. She looks exactly like she’s trying to avoid notice.

I hurry across the parking garage to her, grateful beyond words for her anyway. By the time Alaric and I made it back upstairs, the entire design floor was in chaos. Blaze convinced Georgia, one of the models, to play an elf at the party, leaving the design team a matter of hours to put together a costume worthy of a fashion house of this caliber.

It took all afternoon to finish it, and we still have to fit her. There’s no way I’m going to have time to run back home to get ready before the party. So I’m getting ready here. It’s not ideal, but it’s the price of fashion.

Luckily, this place has everything you could possibly need to get ready on the fly. Except for my dress. There’s no way I trust myself to wear one of the dresses in the closet here. Knowing my luck, I’d destroy it in five minutes.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I say, taking the garment bag as Jillian shoves it out the window toward me. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me by telling me every single detail when you get home.” She giggles. “I’m not sure if I’m happy for you or insane with jealousy right now. I hope you have a great time while I’m eating Ramen in our tiny apartment.”

“You love Ramen, and our apartment,” I remind her.

“Semantics.”

I laugh quietly, glancing over my shoulder at the building. “I better get back in there.”

“Go. Shoo,” she says. “And don’t worry about anything, December. Dad has some boring business dinner tonight. He doesn’t have a clue that you’re the one interning in my place.”

“Alaric does,” I whisper.

Jillian scrapes her glasses down her face, staring at me in wide-eyed shock. “He knows?”

“He figured it out on day one,” I admit. I haven’t told her because I didn’t want her to worry, but we’re a little past that now. “But, um, I don’t think he’s going to tell anyone.”

“Oh my gosh!” she squeals, and then quickly slaps a hand over her mouth. “You’re going to the party with him, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

She squeaks wordlessly, dancing in her seat. “I am so waiting up for you tonight. And you are so telling me every

detail!”

“Deal,” I say, smiling.

# CHAPTER SIX

## ALARIC



“Jesus,” I breathe, staring in awe as December steps out of the changing rooms with a sweet smile. I cross to her in three steps, my fucking heart in my throat. “You look ravishing, angel.”

She looks like a Goddess. Her hair hangs in soft waves around her face. Her eye makeup is dark and smoky. The top of her black dress shimmers under the lights. It dips between her breasts, showing a hint of cleavage that’s going to drive me crazy all night. The A-line bottom ends at mid-thigh, leaving her long legs on display.

Every motherfucker at the party will wish they were me. Too bad for all of them. This sweet angel is mine. I decided that four days ago. Spending the morning with her today only confirmed it. She’s mine.

All I want for Christmas is her under my tree, wrapped in a bow and nothing else.

“Thank you.” Her blush deepens, spreading down her chest. “Um, this is *not* the dress I asked my sister to bring. I think it’s too short.”

It’s definitely too short to be worn anywhere except my bedroom, but I’ll be damned if I tell her she looks anything

less than perfect.

“It’s perfect. You’re perfect.” I take her hand, helping her do a spin as my dick imprints itself against my zipper. Fuck me. It’s going to be a long night. “Every man out there will envy me, sweet December.”

“Alaric.”

“I brought you something.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know.” I grin, reaching into my pocket to retrieve the small blue jewelry box I sent Ruby to pick up this afternoon. “Turn around.”

December eyes me curiously before slowly obeying my command. The metal teeth of my zipper dig into my cock, leaving impressions. Goddamn. I want to bury my face between her cheeks and stay there permanently. Her round ass is a work of art.

Instead, I slip the silver angel pendant from the box and brush her hair to the side. Her scent wafts toward me, clouding my mind with lust. I grit my teeth, press a kiss to the side of her neck, and quickly place the necklace around her delicate throat before clasping it.

“Alaric,” she gasps, lifting the tiny silver and diamond angel to look at it. “It’s beautiful.”

“Now you have a guardian angel, too, sweet girl,” I murmur.

She turns those guileless eyes on me. Jesus, I've never wanted to drown as badly as I want to drown in her eyes. "Your mom?"

"You." I smile, reaching out to touch her cheek. I can't help it. I want to touch this girl every minute of the day. "For six years, you've been my light, December. Thinking about you comforted me."

"Alaric," she whispers, her expression softening.

"It's true. Maybe it shouldn't be, but it is."

A sweet smile lights her up until she glows brighter than the Christmas star. "I don't have a gift for you."

"You're going to the party with me. That's gift enough."

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, her gaze darting over my shoulder as if to ensure we're alone. "Maybe I do have one thing," she whispers, her gaze coming back to me.

"Yeah?" I grin, amused by how fucking cute she is, like a little girl with her hand in the cookie jar. I guess she doesn't realize that I make the fucking rules around here. No one will say a word about the two of us. Perhaps they should. I'm the boss. She's an intern. There's a blatant power imbalance. I don't fucking know. That's a discussion for another day. But she's mine, and I'm claiming her.

She places one hand on my chest and the other on my shoulder, rising on her toes. I hook an arm around her waist, anchoring her to me. Her lips touch mine in a featherlight kiss.



It's not nearly enough for me. Not when I want every piece of this girl. So I take more like the greedy bastard I am.

My tongue flicks out, touching her bottom lip. She tastes like sugar.

I groan, pulling her closer.

She doesn't tell me no. Her small hand slides up my chest, wrapping around my shoulder. A soft moan whispers from her lips.

That sounds—so fucking sweet, so fucking innocent—breaks me. I spear my hand into her hair and drink from her lips like she's oxygen. Electricity surges between us, catching and consuming us both.

“Alaric,” she gasps, clawing at my shoulders. “Please.”

I lift her in my arms, spinning to pin her against the wall. She sobs in frustration, trying to pull her hands from mine when I clasp them over her head.

“Nu-uh,” I mutter, bending my head to kiss along her cleavage. With her arms up, the tops of her breasts spill out, pale and perfect. I nip her skin, making her cry out. “You're right where I want you, sweet December.”

“Oh, God.”

I bite her nipple through her dress, skimming my free hand down her body. I need to know how wet she is for me right now. I may lose my goddamn mind if I don't know in two seconds.

“Has anyone ever touched my cunt before, December?”

“I...I...”

I bite her nipple again, harder this time. A tiny punishment for not answering. A tiny reward for making me crazy.

“No one!” she cries.

“Ah, fuck.” I rock my hips into hers, letting her feel how hard she makes me as I bring my mouth to her ear. “No one has touched what belongs to you, either, angel.”

I’ve been waiting. Half the time, I wasn’t even sure what I was waiting for. But I waited anyway.

“Alaric,” she moans.

I drag her dress up her hips, exposing her panties to the room. Of course they have little Christmas trees on them. Of course they do. Somehow, that’s even sexier to me than any lingerie. The wet spot is obvious. My sweet angel is drenched.

I shove my hand into her panties, growling as I feel her bare cunt and her slick juices against my fingers.

She nearly catapults out of my arms.

“You’re soaked for me.”

“Yes,” she sobs, her head moving restlessly against the wall. “Please, Alaric. Please make it better.”

“Poor little December,” I croon, parting her folds with my thumb. “Do you need to come?”

“Y-yes.”

“Then come,” I growl. “But you do it with your eyes on me and my name on your lips.”

Her gaze flies to mine, her eyes so dilated with lust they’re little more than a sea of blue-rimmed black.

I press my thumb to her hard clit, staring at her. Memorizing her. I want this moment burned into my brain.

“Alaric,” she moans.

I grind my thumb against her clit, watching her unravel. She falls quickly, too needy to hold it off. Fuck. How long has she been dreaming about this? Longer than she should have been, I think.

A decadent moan rolls across the room, setting my blood on fire as her expression melts to pure bliss. She trembles in my arms, melting into a pool of liquid sex.

Fuck me. She’s exactly what I would have asked for for Christmas had I thought to ask for anything. I’m asking now. I want this temptress in my bed and in my life, permanently.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

DECEMBER



“Oh, wow,” I whisper, coming to a dead stop as Alaric leads me off the elevator. The showroom at Daphne Parrish & Co has been transformed into a winter wonderland. Large snowflakes dangle from the ceiling on invisible wire, sparkling in the lights. One entire side of the room is now Santa’s workshop. Blaze sits on an opulent throne with Georgia standing beside him. They’re the most fashionable Santa and elf I’ve ever seen.

A massive Christmas tree shoots toward the ceiling in the center of the room, the sheer size of it overwhelming. Gorgeous red and black ornaments with the Daphne Parrish & Co logo on them glitter from the branches between twinkling lights and fluffy tinsel. The fresh scent of pine fills the room, making it truly feel like Christmas, perhaps for the first time all year.

“It’s so beautiful,” I whisper to Alaric.

He turns that sexy smile on me, his eyes light with satisfaction as if he’s the one who found release upstairs. I know he didn’t, though. We had to wait fifteen minutes before we could come down because he was still hard.

“Ma always loved a good Christmas party,” he says, placing his hand on my back. “She went all out every year. We made sure to keep the tradition alive.”

“Everyone loves it,” I say, placing my hand over his as something flickers through his expression, some concern I can’t quite read but understand on instinct. He wants to honor her memory and do right by their employees. He’s a good man. He genuinely cares for the people who work here. “They’ve been excited about it all day.”

“Have they?” He smiles, his dark eyes crinkling as he nods toward Blaze. “Perhaps that’s what they’ve been excited to see. It’s not every day you get the Grinch in a Santa suit.”

“Blaze is a grinch?”

“Nah.” Alaric winks at me. “But he’s wild about Georgia, and her contract ends a few days after Christmas. It’s pissing him off.”

“Oh.” My gaze drifts toward the two of them. They move around each other like magnets. Blaze never really takes his eyes off the curvy blonde, not even when he’s talking to one of the children in line to meet Santa. And Georgia stares at him unabashedly whenever he isn’t looking, and sometimes even when he is. If he’s wild about her, I think the feeling is mutual.

“Tell me, sweet December,” Alaric says, leading me through the crowd as a Mariah Carey song floats from the speakers. “What do you want for Christmas?”

“Are you playing Santa now?” I ask, smiling up at him.

“Only for you.” He pauses to say hello to two of the designers— Sariah and Claudia. I don’t know Claudia very well, but I really like Sariah. She’s the youngest designer here. She’s also feisty and a lot of fun.

If they’re surprised to see us together, they don’t comment on it. Sariah just winks at me when Alaric isn’t looking. I think she knows he’s part of the reason I decided to intern here. I’ve been asking her questions about him for the last four days straight.

I ponder his question as they make small talk, not sure how to answer it when the one thing I want is him. I’m falling in love with him. I think maybe I’ve always been a little bit in love with him, but it’s bigger than that now. I can feel myself slipping further down the path the more time I spend with him.

“Will you be here tomorrow, Jillian?”

Alaric nudges me.

I turn a frown on him, only to realize that Sariah and Claudia are both watching me, obviously waiting for me to say something.

Crap. *Jillian*. I’m supposed to be Jillian.

“Tomorrow?” I squeak, literally squeak. I clear my throat and try again, my cheeks burning. “I’m sorry. What about tomorrow?”

“Clean up,” Sariah says with a little pout. “Alaric and Blaze take all the fun out of celebrating and make us come in to clean up.”

“We do not,” Alaric protests, turning those onyx eyes on me. “They volunteer to clean up, and we pay overtime for it. Plus, we help too.”

“Uh, no. You bring lunch and complain until Blaze sends you on an imaginary errand to get you out of his hair.” Sariah laughs. “And then he complains because you aren’t here to help.”

Alaric smirks, nodding at his brother. “Don’t think he’ll be putting in an appearance tomorrow.”

“It’s about time,” Claudia sighs dramatically, making Sariah laugh.

“Oh. Olive is here.” Sariah waves at me and Alaric and then she and Claudia disappear into the crowd, leaving us alone.

“You don’t have to help out,” Alaric murmurs, steering me deeper into the room. “You’re here to learn, not clean.”

“I can do both.”

He smirks again, slipping an arm around my waist. His fingertips trail across my hip bone, sending a frisson of heat through me. “I’m not sure how I feel about you in this dress, sweet December.” His lips brush my earlobe. “Every man here is looking at what belongs to me.”

I moan softly, twisting my fingers all up in his suit jacket.

“It’d look a helluva lot better on my bedroom floor.”

“Alaric,” I whisper, my knees trembling. How does he make me feel so much so quickly? He sets my head to spinning like



a top. It's disorienting, but I don't hate it. I think I might like it a little bit too much.

I think I might like him a little too much. I have to tell him the truth, every embarrassing bit of it. It's the right thing to do. I should have come clean already. Actually, I never should have pretended to be Jillian in the first place.

But I don't care what Cory thinks about me anymore. I don't care if I'll only ever be a hassle to him. Lying to Alaric and everyone here to avoid pissing him off just isn't worth it anymore.

“Alaric, I...”

“You never told me what you want for Christmas,” he says at the same time.

“You.” It's the truth. All I want for Christmas is him. And maybe the spanking he promised me that first day. The thought of this man punishing me makes me ache to know what it feels like.

“Come home with me,” he whispers in my ear. “I'll endorse your father if that's what it takes to get you in my bed. I'll give you whatever you want. Just come home with me, angel.”

I freeze, barely even breathing as my heart clenches. Is that what he thinks of me? That I need to be bribed into his bed? That I'm only here because I want something from him?

“Let me go,” I whisper.

“December, what...?”

“Let me go,” I growl, jerking away from him. My heart pounds against my ribcage, tears welling in my eyes as I lift my gaze to his.

“December, angel.” His eyes widen in distress as he takes a step toward me.

I throw up a hand, halting him. “I didn’t do any of this for an endorsement, Alaric. I’m not with you tonight because I want something from you. I’m here because of *you*.”

He reaches for me, but I take a step back. And then another and another. His eyes narrow, a soft growl rumbling from his lips. “Don’t run from me, angel.”

“I’m going home. Alone.”

“I will spank you,” he growls.

I’m pretty sure the couple walking a few feet away hears him because they both turn to look in our direction.

I don’t heed his warning though. I turn and plunge headlong into the crowd. He curses and charges after me, but for once in my life, fate is smiling down on me.

A photographer materializes from the crowd, calling his name. I risk a glance over my shoulder to see the photographer stopping in front of him. He stands completely still, hellfire burning in his eyes as he stares after me.

I shiver, ripping my gaze from his. And for the second time since I started here, I flee.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ALARIC



I rap my knuckles against December's apartment door hard enough to rattle the giant Christmas wreath wishing all and sundry a Merry Christmas. A family of happy snowmen wave from the living room window, with others peeking over the lip of the kitchen window.

Even the welcome mat is shaped like a snowman. My angel loves snow...the one thing we never get in Los Angeles. I file that information away for later. After I fix what I fucked up tonight.

Christ, I'm an idiot. Of *course* she thought I was trying to bribe her into my bed. That's exactly how it sounded...as if I thought I could get her there by agreeing to endorse her stepfather. As if that's why I thought she came to work for me.

It's not what I think. I don't know why she's pretending to be her sister, but I know it isn't at her stepfather's request. She can't be bought. She isn't for sale. And she hasn't asked for a damn thing except for a chance.

But I find myself desperate to spoil her. I want to give her everything her heart desires and make all of her dreams come true. That's why I said what I said. Because I'm goddamn

crazy about her, and I'll do anything, give her anything, just to make her smile.

I don't ever want her looking at some other man like she looked at me tonight. I won't ever let some other fucker know how perfect she sounds when she's coming apart at the seams. She's my angel. I'll move heaven and earth to keep her. I want to know what she's running from so I can make her mine.

But that's not what I said. I fucked it all up. I made it sound like I was trying to bribe her.

Movement behind the door captures my attention. I spin to face it, waiting impatiently for her to open it so I can explain. Shit. She has to let me explain.

The door creaks open.

A curvy blonde pokes her head out. "Oh," she says, her face falling into a dark scowl when she sets eyes on me. "It's you."

"You must be Jillian."

She eyes me warily.

I sigh. "You must be her sister then."

"Yes." She crosses her arms, pulling her fuzzy pink robe tight around her shoulders. "And she doesn't want to see you right now."

"I need to talk to her."

Jillian snorts. "I think you've said enough for one night."

I shove a hand through my hair and curse. There's no way she's letting me in to see her sister tonight. I'm guessing

December told her exactly what I said, and she's not thrilled with me either.

"For the record," I say quietly, "I didn't mean it the way it came out."

Jillian looks me over, chewing on her bottom lip just like December does. They may not be sisters by blood, but I think they've been close for so long that they've picked up the same nervous habits. "How did you mean it?"

"I meant I'd give her the world if she'd let me. I'd protect her from whatever has her pretending to be you. She deserves whatever her perfect heart desires." I sigh, leaning against the side of the building. "But she looked like a goddess, and I had my hands on her. It came out wrong."

"You're in love with her," Jillian whispers.

I think a part of me has always belonged to her. Even before I knew what it meant or understood why she always soothed me, a piece of my heart was hers. Is it so strange to believe the rest of me followed? With her, I'm not Alaric Parrish, billionaire. I'm just a man.

She's seen me at my lowest and offered me hope. She joined me in the dark and brought my grieving mind peace. Even now, she brings me peace. There's magic in the air again because of her. It feels like Christmas again because of her. I finally feel like I have a purpose. It's her. It's always been her.

But I don't tell her sister any of that. The first person who deserves to hear those words from my lips is December, my

angel and my temptress.

“She asked my dad to recommend her for the internship,” Jillian blurts. “He said no.”

“What?”

“That’s why she’s pretending to be me. It’s not because she wants anything from you. It’s because it was the only way for her to live her dream.”

I stare at her for a long moment, trying to process. “He told December no, but he wrote a recommendation for you?”

“Yes.” Jillian peeks over her shoulder into the darkened apartment before stepping outside and closing the door.

“Does this happen often?”

“If you mean does he treat her differently, then yes,” Jillian whispers.

Son of a bitch.

“Why?” I growl.

“Because his career is more important than his family.” Jillian shrugs. “Because his dreams matter more to him than hers. I don’t know. December can be clumsy and awkward, and she leads with her heart. She says what she feels, even if it’s not the party line. I guess he’s afraid she’ll ruin his precious campaign.”

Cold fury crawls up my spine. That motherfucker treats her poorly because she doesn’t toe the line? Because she’s clumsy? Fuck, I love how clumsy and awkward she is. She’s

the worst intern we've ever had, hands down. But she doesn't give up, no matter how much shit she drops or spills.

Grace doesn't make a designer. Skill does. She has that in spades. And she's eager to learn. She's sweet and patient and willing to do whatever she's asked. She soaks up every experience like a sponge, eager for it.

How much more confident would she be if she had someone in her corner who believed in her? If she hadn't spent her entire life with her own stepfather ashamed of her for being who she is?

Hell will freeze over before Cory Rhett gets an endorsement from me or our company. The only thing he's getting from me is my shoe permanently lodged in his ass and my fist in his face.

"Tell December that I'll see her tomorrow," I say to Jillian, already making plans.

She reaches out, placing her hand on my arm. "What are you going to do?" She fidgets nervously. "I mean, I know it's not my business, but she's my sister. The way he treats her isn't right."

"No, it isn't," I agree quietly. "And it won't be happening anymore. I'll make sure of that."

Tears well in Jillian's eyes, her shoulders slumping as if a great weight just lifted from them. "Thank you," she whispers, clearing her throat. "For the record, it was my idea for her to pose as me."



I kind of figured as much. I'm guessing there isn't much this girl wouldn't do for the people she loves. She's fierce and fiercely loyal to those who deserve it.

I start down the sidewalk and then pause, glancing over my shoulder at her. "Out of curiosity, were the sketches you included with the application yours or hers?"

"They're hers," Jillian says. "They're all hers."

# CHAPTER NINE

DECEMBER



“Alaric stopped by last night,” Jillian says, eyeing me over the rim of her coffee mug. “I told him that you didn’t want to see him.”

“I don’t,” I lie, carefully avoiding her gaze. The truth is, I feel like a jerk for running out. If he thinks the worst about me, can I really blame him?

I’m the one lying. I’m the one pretending to be someone I’m not. If he thinks I’m using him for something, it’s my own stupid fault for not telling him the truth sooner. But I didn’t think about it that way last night. At least not until I was at home in my bed, staring up at the ceiling and missing his sexy smirk.

“You should talk to him, December.”

I look at Jillian this time. “What happened to ‘forget about the big jerk?’” I demand. “That’s what you said last night.”

“That’s before I met the big jerk.” She grimaces, somehow managing to look guilty and amused at the same time. “He likes you, December. Like *crawl through a blizzard in his underwear* likes you. Don’t let that slip through your fingers because you’re afraid.”

“Who said I’m afraid? I’m not afraid.”

“Liar,” Jillian says. “We both know that’s why you really ran last night. You’re in love with him and you’re terrified he doesn’t feel the same.”

“What if he doesn’t?” I whisper, staring into my coffee like it holds the answers to the universe.

“What if he does?” she retorts.

I glance up at her again.

“You’ll never know if you never stop running.”

She’s right, dang it. I am in love with him. And when he said what he did, it hurt because I thought he couldn’t possibly think that if he felt the same way about me. So I ran. I’m good at running. It’s easier to protect my heart if I never risk it.

But if I never risk it, I’ll spend the rest of my life dreaming about him...just like I’ve spent the last six years dreaming about him. I never forgot him for a reason. And he never forgot me either.

Maybe the truth is embarrassing, but I owe it to myself to tell it anyway. Which means I have to talk to him. I have to see him.

Gulp.



show up for clean-up duty at noon with my heart in my throat and anxiety coursing through my veins instead of blood. In the light of day, the decorations transforming the showroom into an opulent winter wonderland seem just as magical as they did last night. At least until I find out that Alaric isn't coming.

He's skipping out on clean-up for the first time that anyone can remember. So is Blaze. Everyone looks to me for answers, but I keep my head down, pretending I don't see their questioning looks and curious stares.

Eventually, they give up on getting anything out of me, turn the music up, and let me clean in peace. Not that I find much of that. He's avoiding me.

Is it too late for me to fix what I messed up last night?

My heart aches at the thought.

It takes five hours to return the showroom to its former glory. By the time we're finished, the only thing left is the massive tree.

Alaric never puts in an appearance.

"Oh, shoot!" Sariah cries as everyone else is stacking boxes. "Someone needs to run by the warehouse to make sure the truck left room for everything."

"Seriously?" Claudia scowls, pushing her hair back from her forehead. "I'm sure it's fine. Besides, my feet already hurt."

“That’s because you wore ballet flats,” Troy from accounting mutters, hoisting a box over his head. “You need to invest in sneakers.”

“They’ll pry my shoes out of my cold, dead hands,” Claudia snaps. “I am not wearing sneakers.”

“I’ll go,” I say.

Everyone turns to look at me.

“I’ll go,” I repeat. “Just tell me what I need to do.”

Sariah shoots me a grateful smile. “I knew I loved you for a reason. You just need to make sure the delivery truck left room for the boxes. They were dropping off fabric today, but the warehouse is packed right now.”

“Oh my God.” Claudia rolls her eyes. “It’s fine. Just leave the boxes and let the movers figure it out.”

“I’ll go. It’s not a problem.” I’m ready to get out of here anyway. The longer I’m here, the more time I have to think about the fact that Alaric didn’t show up today.

Claudia snorts and then shrugs like it’s my problem, not hers.

“You’ll need the door code,” Sariah says before giving it to me. Once I repeat it back, she gives me a grateful smile. “Thanks, Jill.”

I cringe at the sound of my sister’s name. It’s another reminder that Alaric isn’t the only one I’ve been lying to around here. They all believe I’m someone I’m not. Maybe

they've gotten to know the real me, but they still think I'm Jill. I doubt they're going to be thrilled when they find out the truth.

It was naive and shortsighted to think I could do this without anyone getting hurt. The thing about lies is that they're never entirely innocent. Someone always gets hurt.

I hate that I let myself believe any differently this time. It was selfish. And this is the one time of year when we're supposed to be the best versions of ourselves, not the worst. Lately, I think I've been the worst.

The warehouse is a thirty-minute drive from the office on a good day. Thanks to an accident, it takes me over an hour to get there. By the time I pull in, the entire block is dark and empty. There isn't another car in sight.

It's creepy as hell.

I linger in my car for several long moments before I finally work up the courage to go check the warehouse. Walking across the parking lot feels like walking the gallows. There's no one around, yet my imagination says there are eyes following my every move.

I end up sprinting the last several feet, only to lose my balance and trip over the sidewalk. I land on my knees with my shoulder against the door.

"Jeez," I mutter, hauling myself upright. My right knee burns and throbs faintly. I scraped it. Awesome.

Huffing a breath, I punch in the door code and let myself into the warehouse. The door swings closed behind me, plunging me into darkness.

I scramble for the light switch, breathing a sigh of relief as light floods the warehouse. Like Sariah said, it's packed. Bolts and boxes of fabric are stacked to the rafters in the temperature-controlled room. Clothing hangs on hooks from one end of the place to the other, ready to be shipped out to their boutiques and partners.

I wander around in a daze, peeking at the designs that won't even be in stores for weeks and months. I feel like Dorothy getting a glimpse behind the curtain, only the magic of Oz is even more wonderful than expected. The spring line is bold and fun, with sexy tops and gorgeous, flowing dresses that will make any curvy girl feel like a confident queen.

It's no wonder Daphne Parrish & Co is at the top of the game. They know how to dress curvy girls.

A row of cocktail dresses in the very back catches my eye. I practically float toward them, squeezing between boxes and shifting others out of the way. Halfway there, the alarm on the warehouse door sounds.

I stop, turning toward it. I'm not sure who or what I expect. Sariah. Maybe even Claudia or Troy. Certainly not a man dressed in all black with a mask over his face.

"Cut the fucking lights before someone sees us," he growls.



My blood runs cold as realization dawns. He isn't an employee, and he isn't here on business. I think he's robbing the place. And he brought help.

The lights cut off, plunging the warehouse into darkness.

I drop to my knees, my heart racing as pure terror fires through me. Holding my breath, I pray he didn't see me. Didn't hear me. I crawl deeper into the warehouse, moving slowly.

"Ignore the fabric boxes. We want the clothes. Get whatever you can carry and hurry the fuck up," the first man says.

"Man, your sister better not be lying about the resell value for this shit," someone else mutters.

"She's not," the first one says. "She knows her shit."

"She should. She's been working for these motherfuckers long enough." The second one laughs. "Think she has a clue that you swiped the code from her email?"

"Nah. She trusts me."

"What's up with the car in the parking lot?" a third voice says. "I thought you said this place would be empty."

I bite my lip, fighting back a terrified sob.

"It is empty, jackass. It's probably just someone who caught a ride. They had that fucking party yesterday. Probably drank too much," the first one says. "Grab some shit, and let's get the fuck out of here."

I wedge myself into the back corner, hiding behind a stack of boxes as they rob the place. Time stretches on and on, seemingly forever. I don't know how long they're inside. But eventually, they leave.

I stay right where I am, too afraid to move. Too afraid to breathe too deeply.

When I finally crawl from my hiding place, I don't go to the police. I run to the only person I know who makes me feel safe.

I run to Alaric.

# CHAPTER TEN

## ALARIC



I spend all goddamn day looking into Cory Rhett, searching for every dirty secret he has. It turns out...the man doesn't have many. For a politician, he's infuriatingly above board.

His wife died in childbirth. He married his housekeeper, December's mom, over a dozen years ago. She died in a car accident three years later. He was a prosecutor before he went into politics, one notoriously tough on crime.

It seems the only thing the asshole treats with no regard is his stepdaughter. And fuck him very much for that. I still want to smash my fist into his face for it, but my initial blaze of fury has turned into a smoldering rage.

He won't hurt her again. I'll be damned before I allow that to happen. Even if she never forgives me for the insult she thinks I paid her last night, I'll protect her. I'm mad as hell that I wasn't doing it long before now.

She's needed me for the last six years, and I didn't know. I should have. She'll never need me again. I'll be there every damn day, whether she wants me there or not. I don't think I could stay away if I tried.

It hasn't even been twenty-four hours and I spent half of the day stalking her on the security cameras. She seemed sad. All

day, she smiled in all the right places and laughed at all the right times, but her smile faded too quickly. Her laughter died too soon.

She left early.

It's taking all my patience not to say to hell with my plans and drive over to her place. But if I'm going to win her heart by Christmas, I've got shit to do. Like figure out how the fuck to make it snow in Los Angeles.

I drop my head back against my chair, staring up at the ceiling. Maybe I should just kidnap her to my house in Big Bear for the holiday. There's plenty of snow there.

The doorbell rings while I contemplate the merits of my plan.

"What the fuck?" I tip my head forward, glancing at the clock on my desk. It's after ten. Who the fuck is at my door?

*December.*

Christ, please let it be December.

I jump to my feet, practically jogging through the house to the front door. My damn heart catches in my throat when I see my angel through the frosted glass.

I practically rip the fucking door off the hinges trying to open it.

"December?"

Something is wrong. She's pale and shaking, the knee of her leggings torn.

Her big blue eyes meet mine, welling with tears. My heart cracks as she chokes on my name.

“H-hold me, p-p-please,” she whispers.

As if she even needs to ask.

I scoop her into my arms without a word, dragging her up against my chest. She burrows into me, clinging to my shirt like she’s never going to let me go. Her hands are like ice even though it’s not cold out.

“Jesus, December.” I kick the door closed and carry her straight through the living room and up the stairs to my bedroom. I barely pause long enough to hit the dimmer switch on the lights before stomping to the bed and placing her in it.

She fights me, refusing to let go.

“Easy, angel,” I croon. “Easy. I’m just going to start the fireplace and get a first aid kit.” I rain gentle kisses across her face, trying to soothe her. She reluctantly loosens her grip, letting me pry her frigid hands from my shirt.

I bundle the slate gray duvet cover around her to warm her up and quickly cross to the fireplace opposite my king-sized bed, lighting it with the touch of a button. The logs inside ignite with a soft whoosh of sound.

I hurry into the bathroom and grab the first aid kit from beneath the sink before returning to her. She’s right where I left her, still pale and trembling.

Tossing the kit on the bed, I pick her up before settling against the headboard with her draped over my lap.

“Who hurt you, December?” I ask, my fucking *soul* screaming for blood. If it was her stepfather, it’ll be the last goddamn thing he ever does. They won’t even find his body.

“I f-fell,” she says, her teeth chattering. “At the warehouse.”

“The warehouse?”

“You have to call the p-police.” She shivers, and a tear leaks from the corner of her eye. “I didn’t c-call. I came s-straight here.”

“From the warehouse? Why do you need the police, angel? What happened to you?” I ask, running my hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her up. Because I can’t stop touching her. Because I’m two seconds from losing my mind with worry.

“N-nothing happened t-to me. Oh, Alaric.” More tears spill down her porcelain cheeks. “I went to d-double check the warehouse for Sariah. Three m-men broke in while I was t-there. They s-stole s-so much.”

*Jesus Christ.*

I clutch her to me, my heart literally twisting in my chest. Three men robbed the warehouse with her inside. Anything could have happened to her. They could have hurt her. I could have lost her.

Fuck me. *I could have lost her tonight.*

“Tell me you’re okay,” I growl, laying her on the bed beside me and then crawling over her as if to protect her with my

body. I cup her cheeks in my shaking hands, pressing my forehead to hers. “Tell me they didn’t hurt you.”

“N-no.”

I roar in misery. I’m going to find them. I’m going to destroy them. I won’t rest until the bastards are gone.

“I mean, no, they didn’t h-hurt me,” December says, grasping my shirt. She tangles her hands up in it again, trying to pull me closer. “I hid until they left. They didn’t even know I was there. I’m not hurt. I’m here. I’m s-safe.”

“You are safe,” I growl, pressing my mouth to hers. “You’ll *always* be safe with me, angel.”

“I’m sorry I ran last night.” Her soft sigh of regret pricks at my heart. “I haven’t been fair to you.”

“I don’t give a shit about that.” I kiss away her tears. “You thought I was trying to bribe you into my bed. I don’t blame you for running.”

“That’s...not why I ran,” she whispers.

I pull back slightly to meet her gaze.

“I’m in love with you.” She squeezes her eyes closed, hiding them from me as if that’ll keep me from hearing what she just said. “I think I’ve been partially in love with you since the night we met six years ago.”

“Jesus,” I breathe, stunned. All this time, she’s felt this way?



“When you said that last night, I realized you probably didn’t feel the same way.” Her lips curve into a sad simile of a smile. “That’s why I ran. How could you love someone you don’t even know?”

“You think I don’t know you.”

Her lashes flutter before her eyes open. “How can you when I haven’t been honest with you? I’m not Jillian.”

I chuckle quietly. “I think we established that already, sweet December. You’re using your sister’s name.”

She nods, admitting it for the first time. “I could tell you that I didn’t want to lie to you, but the truth is...no one forced me to do it. I decided for me, Alaric. I...well, I guess I should do the dignified thing and tell you that I lied because I really want to work for your company. And that’s true. I *do* want to work for your company. But that’s not why I lied.” Her earnest eyes meet mine, rimmed in red but still the clearest blue. “I just wanted to work with you.”

“I know.”

“You do?” Her brows furrow, and then distress filters through them. “I didn’t do it for Cory.”

My temper flares at the sound of his name. “I know that too. But he’s the reason you had to use Jillian’s name, isn’t he?”

“I...”

“Don’t lie to me, angel. Not now.” I nip her throat. “You’ve been through hell. Don’t make me spank the truth from you.”

She moans quietly.

“Tell me, sweet December.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

I press my face to her throat, letting her confession quake through me. I steel myself against the hot rush of rage for her stepfather and fall into the warm wave of gratitude for her.

“Never again,” I vow against her skin. “He’ll never treat you that way again, December.”

“Okay,” she says.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

DECEMBER



The next two hours are a blur of police officers and robbery detectives. Blaze shows up at some point, and I repeat what happened to fifteen different people, all of whom ask me the same questions. When I suggest that they could get more done faster if they all listened the first couple of times instead of making me go through it fifteen different times, a steely-eyed detective gets cranky and hints that maybe we should go downtown to talk.

Alaric kicks everyone out after that, telling them that I've answered questions for long enough and I'm done for the night. When the detective objects, Blaze has to keep Alaric from going for his throat. They quickly decide they have enough information after that.

Given that the thieves had the code to the warehouse, and one of them got it from his sister's laptop, I don't think it'll be very hard to track them down anyway.

I call Jillian while Alaric walks Blaze out.

"Are you okay?" she cries as soon as she answers.

I texted her earlier to let her know what was going on, but we haven't had time to talk.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I promise, clutching the phone to my ear as I pace around Alaric’s living room. His house in the Hills is beautiful. Modern furniture and sleek glass overlook the twinkling lights of the city below. The Christmas tree in the corner is nearly as big as the one at the office, and every bit as gorgeous. “Um, I’m with Alaric.”

“Thank God,” she sighs. “I’ve been worried to death.”

“You didn’t tell your dad, did you?”

I’m sure he’ll know by morning, but I’d rather not deal with him right now. I don’t want a lecture about how bad this looks for him or about how foolish Jillian and I were to think we could swap places. I couldn’t exactly tell the police that I’m my sister, so there’s no way to keep him from finding out that I’ve been interning in Jillian’s spot. He’s going to be thrilled by that information.

Frankly, I don’t care anymore. I’ve spent half of my life trying to turn myself into someone he could be proud to call his stepdaughter, and it never worked. No matter how hard I tried, I always fell short. Family is so important to him...and yet I never seem to be family enough. I’m never good enough. So I’m not trying anymore.

Maybe I am clumsy. Maybe I’m awkward. Maybe I say things I shouldn’t or don’t always agree with him and whatever platform he’s running on. No one said I had to be perfect. Family is supposed to love you even when you aren’t. So for Christmas this year, I’m giving myself a gift. I’m giving

myself permission to stop seeking his approval. I don't need it and I don't want it anymore.

I just want to live my life.

"Of course not," Jillian says. "But you know he's going to find out."

"I know. I don't care anymore."

"Wow. I actually think you mean that."

"I do." I smile my first real smile all day. "I've decided to take a page from your playbook and give myself a gift for Christmas."

"Oh, is it expensive?" she asks, making me laugh.

"Nope. It didn't cost a thing."

"Lame," she sing-songs.

Alaric steps back inside, drawing my attention to him. He moves with grace as he locks the door and sets the alarm, the muscles in his broad back bunching beneath his t-shirt.

My stomach flutters, heat unfurling inside me as I watch him. He's so damn beautiful to me. And not once has he ever made me feel like less than. He's a literal billionaire, with more power and influence than Cory could ever dream about holding. Yet this man has always treated me as if I'm worthy exactly as I am. He was proud to have me on his arm last night.

"I lied," I whisper, swallowing hard. "I decided to give myself two presents for Christmas."

“If one of them isn’t Alaric Parrish, I’m hanging up on you,” my sister says.

He turns as if he knows we’re talking about him. Our eyes lock across the room. His are so warm, so full of concern and something deeper. Affection. Desire. Love? He didn’t say it back earlier, but I think maybe he feels the same hot rush of emotion that I do. I think he’s bound in the same net with me, connected to me in ways neither of us fully understands.

This man feels me in his soul, the same way I feel him in mine.

I cup my hand around the phone and whisper, “One of them is Alaric.”

“Yes!” Jillian shouts.

Alaric arches a brow, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I disconnect as Alaric strides across the living room toward me, still wearing that sexy smirk.

“Jillian?” he asks.

I nod, bending to set my phone on the coffee table.

He stops in front of me. “You told her you’d call her tomorrow.”

“I did,” I whisper, my heart beating so loud I’m sure he hears it.

“Does this mean you’re staying here tonight, angel?” His gaze runs across my face, full of hope.

“Well, that depends.”

“On what?” he growls.

“On whether your invitation from last night still stands.” I lick my lips, trying to work moisture back into my mouth.

“Because I decided what I want from you, Alaric.”

“Yeah?” His hand curves around my hip, pulling me closer.

“What’s that, temptress?”

“You,” I whisper. “I just want you.”

“Fuck.” Heat flares as bright as the sun in his eyes, scorching me as he yanks me closer. I topple into him, and his hands tangle in my hair, craning my head back.

“I’m already yours, December. I’ve just been waiting for you to realize it.” His mouth slants down on mine, claiming mine in a kiss that soothes all the jagged edges of my heart, stitching them back together.

I grasp his shoulders, trying to hold myself upright as my knees tremble beneath me, threatening to give out. Our tongues dance together, and reality spins away, taking everything but him with it.

“Alaric,” I whisper, trying to tell him how good he makes me feel. But I think he already knows.

He bends slightly, scooping me into his arms. Somehow, he manages to keep kissing me the whole time, as if he can’t stop



himself. There's so much power in him, so much need, and I've finally given him permission to unleash it on me.

He stumbles into the wall on the way up the stairs, growling against my lips as his hands slip beneath my shirt. I moan at the electric feel of his skin against mine, already dancing a knife's edge of need. He makes me feel so much. It's overwhelming and addicting at the same time.

"Yes," I whisper as he pins me to the wall halfway up the staircase to drag my shirt off over my head.

His hands close over my breasts, pushing them together. His dark eyes meet mine as he dips his head. His teeth close around my right nipple.

"Alaric!" I sob in ecstasy, caught in his wicked gaze. "Oh, God."

His lips curve into a smile that's pure sin. "Oh, angel." He tugs my bra down to expose my breasts. "One day soon, I'm going to put clamps on these perfect little things to see how wild I can drive you."

"Do it now," I whimper.

He pinches my left nipple, and I sob. "I'm not putting clamps on you tonight, December," he growls. "It's your first time."

"Please." I squirm beneath his touch, so turned on I don't care what he does to me. I want it. All of it.

He curses, rocking his hips into me. "You need to come, don't you, angel?"

“Yes!”

He peels me away from the wall and stumbles up the stairs. At least he tries. Near the top, I bite his neck, desperate to make him feel even a tenth of the ache currently ripping through me.

“Goddamn,” he roars, dropping to his knees right there. Somehow, he makes it up the last two steps before he lays me out on the plush rug.

His body veers away from mine for a moment and something clatters to the floor. Before I can open my eyes to find out what, he’s back, pressing his hard body to mine.

“Arms up,” he growls against my lips.

I obediently lift them over my head, my back arching when he dips his head to bite my nipple again. Two seconds later, he wraps a strand of Christmas tinsel around my wrists, loosely binding them with the pliable, festive plastic. He ties the loose end to the balcony.

“Maybe now you’ll behave.” He carefully checks to make sure he didn’t tie it too tightly. He didn’t. Once he’s satisfied, he gives me that sexy smirk, his eyes running over me. “Mm. It looks better on you than on the staircase, sweet December.”

“Alaric,” I groan.

“You bit me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Liar. You aren’t sorry yet, but you will be.” He kisses a trail down my body, using his lips, and teeth, and tongue to drive me wild. Just when I think he’s going to kiss any of the places I desperately need him to go, he moves away, tormenting me. Within minutes, my entire body aches with the need to come. Every kiss, every lick, every touch feeds the frenzy, driving me higher.

“I’m sorry,” I sob, breaking beneath him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Now, you mean it,” he murmurs against my skin, placing a sweet kiss to my belly. “Now, you get to come, angel.” He reaches for my leggings, slowly peeling them down. He takes my panties with them.

I lift my hips, eager to get them off.

“Careful, sweet December,” he croons when I wince. “Your knee is banged up.” He gently works them over my scraped knee and then presses his lips to the scratches he doctored earlier. They aren’t deep, but they burn.

I shiver beneath his touch.

“You feel me everywhere, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

His lips quirk into a smile. “I like knowing that. I want you to feel every touch, every moment.” He runs his hands up my thighs, parting them. “I intend to wreck you.”

“W-wreck me,” I whisper. “I want it, Alaric.”

“Fuck,” he groans, his gaze settling on the wet, needy flesh between my legs. He pushes his way between my thighs as if in a trance, unable to look away. “I want to eat it. Tell me I can eat it.”

“Yes,” I sob.”

He growls, lowering himself to the floor. His eyes hold mine in silent command as he flicks his tongue out and takes his first long lick of me. I shout his name, babbling it to the heavens as a bolt of pure decadence shoots through me.

He makes a sound I’ll never forget and clutches me to him. I thought he kissed me like he intended to get me addicted to him, but I was wrong. He eats me like I’m the last meal he’ll ever taste. He makes love to my pussy with his mouth, his eyes locked on me the whole time. I feel every lick, every touch, every moment.

I come on his tongue, screaming his name.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

ALARIC



I rip the tinsel off December's wrists, dragging her into my arms as she moans and trembles her way through her orgasm. Fucklust roars through me, threatening to consume me alive. I need in this girl now. Before I rip this goddamn mansion down around us.

"Hold on," I mutter, clutching her to my chest as I stumble to my feet.

We make it four feet down the hall before I feel her hands on my cock through my pants.

Fuck it. We'll make it to the bedroom later.

We fall into a heap on one of the thousand fucking chairs in this house. Her bra goes first, followed by my shirt. They land on the floor at our feet, the scattered remnants of our feast. And I do feast. Fuck, I gorge myself on her delectable body. On her perfect mouth.

I attack her lips again and again, drinking from her mouth like she's a thousand-dollar bottle of wine. She drinks from mine the same way, practically purring on my lap. Her hands run all over my chest and back, setting my fucking soul on fire.

“Never again,” I growl, lifting my hips to work on my jeans. “You’re never allowed to take your fucking hands off me again.”

“Deal,” she whispers. And then, ah, Jesus. Her mouth. That perfect mouth follows her hands, kissing a trail down my chest.

I practically sob when my goddamn button finally slips free, allowing me to yank my jeans down my hips. My cock springs free, so hard it hurts. Christ, I hurt for her. I taste her on my tongue. Feel the heat of her cunt against my thigh. She’s everywhere, and I’m dying the sweetest death.

“Alaric,” she whines, her eyes flashing to mine when I delve my hand into her hair, craning her head back.

“I need in you, angel.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have a condom.”

“I...I’m not on birth control.”

I smile...fucking smile as I lift her up my body to grind her on my cock.

“Good because I just decided what I want for Christmas.”

“W-what?”

“I want to breed you, December,” I whisper against her ear. “I’m putting my kid in you for Christmas.”

“Alaric,” she sobs, trembling in my arms.

“Be a good girl and make sure you take every drop, angel.” I nip her lobe, my balls throbbing at the thought of getting this girl pregnant with my kid. I want it. Hell, I want everything with her. The big, happy family. The fucking spoiled dog and asshole cat. Christmas traditions and stupid arguments over who gets to empty the dishwasher. She’s been mine for six years. We just didn’t know it then. We weren’t ready then. We are now.

I grip my shaft in one hand, bringing it to her entrance.

“Sink down on me slowly, angel,” I whisper. “It’s going to hurt.”

She bites her lip and nods, wiggling until she’s hovering over the head of my cock. She winces slightly when she places her knee on the chaise beside me, but quickly shifts her weight off of it and then nods again, letting me know she’s ready.

“Kiss me,” I breathe.

Her lips tangle with mine as she slowly sinks down on me. I get lost in her as she takes me to heaven right there in the hall, the city twinkling like stars in the distance. Her tight little hole resists me for a moment before the head of my cock pops in.

My eyes roll back in my head.

“Ah, God,” I groan, fighting not to come already.

She sinks a little lower, moaning.

I peel my eyes open, unwilling to miss a moment of this. I want to see every shift of emotion across her face. It shows everything. Every thought, everything she feels. She reads like



a book, one full of beauty. Her cheeks are flushed with desire, her eyes clouded with it.

She sinks lower, her cunt strangling my cock.

A little flicker of discomfort passes through her expression, wrinkling her brows, as her hymen tears around my cock.

“Breathe, angel,” I croon, reaching between us to strum her clit.

She gasps and sinks lower. The wrinkle between her brows vanishes, her mouth opening in a little “O” of pleasure. Her pupils dilate, her head falling back on her neck.

“You like that, huh?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“Then you’ll love it when I’m fucking you.” I lift my hips, sliding a little deeper.

She cries out in shock, clawing at my shoulders.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I chuckle, leaning forward to kiss the tip of her nose. She’s so fucking cute. Even when she has my dick hard enough to break off, she’s adorable. “Sit on my cock, December. All the way.”

She moans and sinks down, taking me all the way to the hilt.

I growl her name as her ass comes to rest against my hips.

“Fuck, good girl.” I press my forehead to hers, reeling at how good she feels. At how well she’s doing. At how perfect she is. “God, you’re perfect, sweet December.”

“You feel pretty perfect, too,” she moans.

“No.” I tip her chin up until her eyes meet mine. “I didn’t say you feel perfect. I said you *are* perfect. *You are perfect.*”

“Alaric,” she whispers.

“Your smile lights up the entire fucking world. I know because it lit mine.” I press my lips to hers. “Your laugh brought me comfort when nothing else did. I didn’t understand it then, but I get it now, angel. You’re a piece of me. You’re my heart.”

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it,” she pleads quietly.

“Look at me, sweet girl.”

Her watery eyes meet mine.

“I love you.”

She sobs my name.

I catch the sound with my lips against hers, holding her to my chest. I make love to her slowly, sweetly, showing her with my body exactly how perfectly we fit together. We move in unison, grinding against each other, driving each other higher. Her nails scrape down my back. My hand tangles in her hair.

When she’s on the edge, I slip my hand between our bodies again, pressing my thumb to her clit. “Ride me now, angel,” I growl, leaning back to watch her take her pleasure from me. “Make yourself come.”

“Alaric.”

“Do it,” I growl.

She jumps to obey, pressing her hands to my thighs to give herself leverage. Her tongue peeks from between her teeth as she lifts herself and drops back down, rolling her hips. Her tits bounce every time she lands against my thighs, a soft cry of ecstasy escaping her lips.

I watch in awe as she takes what she needs from me, moving like a goddess on my lap. She's not clumsy or awkward in this moment. She's a temptress, shining as bright as the sun. My thumb runs in circles around her clit as she rises and falls harder and then faster, racing toward the edge.

My name falls from her lips in a soft chant.

And when she shatters, I break with her. Her thighs lock around my hips, her head falling back on a sharp cry of bliss. Her cunt pulses around my cock, milking the cum from my balls. I grip her hips, pounding into her as I release into her again and again, draining my fucking soul into her.

She collapses against my chest in a sweaty, sated heap.

"I love you," I whisper, making sure she knows I meant every word. "I love you."

"Alaric," she breathes, her lips curving into a sweet smile against my throat.

Fuck. This is already the best Christmas I've ever had, and it's not even Christmas yet.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DECEMBER



“December? What in God’s name is going on?”

I cringe as soon as Cory’s deep voice booms down the line. It’s barely six in the morning. Way too early for him to already know what happened last night.

“Hi, Cory.” I pull the blanket tight around me as if that’ll protect me from whatever he has to say. I’m sure it won’t be good. He’s deeply disappointed. Do I know what I’ve done? Do I have any idea how this looks? Blah, blah, blah. I’ve heard it all before.

Alaric sits up in the bed beside me with a rumbling growl, coming wide awake. He whips his head in my direction, cold fury in his eyes. “Phone,” he growls, holding out his hand. “Now.”

I reluctantly hand it over, not entirely sure I’m ready to hear whatever he has to say to my stepdad. But, frankly, a little tired of fighting this battle on my own.

He reaches out to touch my cheek in silent reassurance before placing my phone to his ear. Judging by the way his eyes narrow, Cory is ranting. Alaric listens for a second, the muscle in his jaw ticking.

It doesn't take long before he interjects, his knuckles white around my phone.

"If you want to keep your teeth, I suggest you stop fucking shouting at my future wife," he growls, his face a thundercloud.

*Future wife?*

I gape at him. Oh, my goodness.

"This is Alaric Parrish," he snaps, climbing from the bed to pace like a caged lion. Even though the situation is serious, I can't help but ogle him. He's made of thick, corded muscle, golden skin, and clean lines. There isn't a single spot on him that isn't firm and unyielding. He's a man built for war, not boardrooms, yet no one wears a suit better. No one wears *nothing* better, either.

He doesn't try to cover himself as he paces. He doesn't seem vulnerable as he growls at my stepdad. He's calm and confident, as if he's perfectly at ease arguing with the freaking mayor while completely naked.

"The hell you will," he snaps. "She isn't going a goddamn place she doesn't want to go. Especially not with you!"

This is going well.

I sigh and climb from the bed.

"Maybe I should talk to him."

Alaric wraps one arm around my waist, pulling me up against his chest. "You don't have to talk to anyone you don't

want to talk to, angel. You damn sure don't have to let them berate you when you've done *nothing* wrong."

"I know," I whisper.

Alaric sighs. "If you want to see her, be at my office at nine," he says into the phone. "But I'm warning you right now. You raise your voice to her; you'll be leaving with your fucking teeth in your pocket." He taps the disconnect button and tosses my phone toward the bed.

"You just threatened the mayor."

"I don't give a shit," he mutters, pulling me back into his arms. "He shouldn't have yelled at you."

I bite my lip, peeking up at him. "Are you going to threaten everyone who yells at me?"

"No." He brushes his thumb along my bottom lip. "He gets a warning because he's your stepfather. If anyone else is stupid enough to yell at you, they do it at their own peril, angel. I won't give a warning. *No one* yells at you or treats you with anything less than respect if they want to keep breathing."

"So, you're going to slay dragons for me, huh?" I ask, smiling softly.

"Point me at them, sweet December," he whispers, claiming my mouth. "I'll slay any dragon that comes at you."

I melt into his embrace, awed that this man is mine.

He kisses me sweetly and then pulls back, his eyes dark. "Come on, let's go shower."



**B**y the time we shower, which is apparently a euphemism for having sex under the hot water, we barely have time to run across town to my apartment to get clean clothes for me.

I have to do my hair and makeup in the car on the way to the office to meet Cory. I settle on a simple braid and light makeup. Alaric growls that I don't need any of it, but he's a man. He'll never understand how powerful a good coat of mascara and a red lip can make a girl feel. Today, I need to feel powerful.

We arrive at the office with nine minutes to spare. Because it's Sunday, we're the only two in the building. Alaric has me text the access code to Cory, and then takes me up to his office. As soon as we step onto the elevator, he pounces.

"W-what are you doing?" I ask.

"What I wanted to do the last time we were in this elevator together," he growls, backing me up against the wall. He shoves his hand beneath my skirt, covering my mouth with his at the same time. "I want to hear your cries bouncing off the fucking walls, December."

His thumb presses against my clit as he thrusts two fingers inside me.

I shout his name, my hands flat against the wall.



“Yeah, just like that,” he breathes, his eyes locked on my face. He plays with me like I’m his favorite toy, touching me as if he knows all of my secrets. My cries fill the elevator as he lifts me higher, driving me toward an orgasm with ruthless precision.

“Alaric,” I groan. “Please.” He’s going to wreck me, minutes before we meet my stepdad.

“Come all over my fingers, December,” he growls. “I want to feel it.” His thumb grinds against my clit, his fingers curling up to stroke my g-spot. “Don’t fight me, sweet girl. Give me what I want.”

I do. God, I do. I shatter around his fingers, wailing his name as bright lights explode behind my eyelids in a whirling kaleidoscope of color. Reality spins away, leaving me floating in euphoria where it’s safe and warm and he’s the only thing that exists.

“Good girl,” he whispers, crooning to me through the haze. “Fuck, you make that look so good.” His lips run across my face, raining adoring kisses upon my skin as he holds me close.

“Alaric?” I mumble.

“Yeah, angel?”

“Can I spend Christmas with you?”

“You’re spending all your Christmases with me from now on, sweet December,” he says, pressing his lips to my temple.

“Okay.”

He scoops me up, carrying me through Ruby's office into his. I rest my head on his shoulder, enjoying the last few minutes of peace while they last. They don't last long. We barely make it through his office door when the elevator is recalled.

Cory is here.

My eyes spring open, anxiety shooting through me.

"Hey." Alaric places his hands on my cheeks, forcing me to look at him. "You're mine to protect now, angel. It doesn't matter what he says or what he thinks. He doesn't get to treat you like shit anymore. I won't allow it."

"You're going to slay dragons for me." My smile wobbles.

"You're going to slay this one yourself, angel." He bumps his forehead against mine, giving me a reassuring smile. "You can do it. And when you're done, I'm taking you away for Christmas." His hand slips between our bodies, splaying across my stomach. "You still owe me a gift."

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALARIC



Cory Rhett is a perfectly coiffed, urbane son of a bitch. Even at nine in the morning on a Sunday, he strolls in wearing a three-piece suit, looking camera ready.

“Parrish,” he says, his hard green eyes narrowing on the way I’m holding his stepdaughter. As if he has any say here. His expression softens incrementally when he looks December over. He feels some softer emotion for her, at least.

“Hi, Cory,” December whispers.

“December,” he says.

Silence stretches out between them for a moment, and then Cory curses under his breath.

“What happened, December?” he asks.

“Wrong question,” I growl. “What you should be asking her is if she’s okay.”

“Of course she’s okay. She’s right there,” he says, waving a hand in her direction.

She cowers into me, and I seriously rethink my decision not to smash my fist into his face.

“Yeah, she is right here, you ignorant dick,” I snap, placing a reassuring hand on her back. “And twelve hours ago, she

was hiding in a fucking warehouse, terrified out of her mind, while three men in masks robbed the place.”

He grimaces at the reminder, his lips compressing into a thin line. “She shouldn’t have been there. Jillian was supposed to be interning for you, not her.”

“Jillian only applied because you told me no,” she mumbles.

“What?”

She takes a breath and pulls away from me to face him. “I said Jillian only applied because you told me no,” she repeats. “She never had any intention of interning. She filled out the application because she knew you’d write a recommendation for her even though you wouldn’t write one for me.”

“Well, I....”

“It’s what you always do,” December says, holding his gaze. “This was my dream, not hers. So she made sure that I had a chance because you wouldn’t. Your dreams were always more important to you than mine.”

“That’s not true, December.”

“Yes, it is.” She gives him a sad smile. “You kept me when my mom died, and I’ll always appreciate you for that, but you’ve made it more than clear that I’m not your real daughter and that I’m not family. I’ve always been an embarrassment to you.”

“December.”

“I spent years trying to be good enough and to make you proud. But I’ve never felt like I was enough for you. I’ve always been too clumsy or too awkward or said all the wrong things. I’ve always felt like a burden you only kept around because you felt like you owed it to my mom.” She blows out a breath. “I’m not trying anymore, Cory. If I’m not good enough to be your daughter as I am, then I don’t want to be your daughter anymore.”

Fuck, she’s incredible. She says it calmly, with her head held high. Her voice doesn’t waver or shake. She doesn’t back down or flinch. She tells him exactly what she needs to say, exactly what she deserves to say, and I’m in awe of her for it. She has no idea how strong she is, or how brave. It’s easy to stand your ground when it’s someone who doesn’t matter. But when it’s someone you’ve always idolized, it’s a whole different ballgame. And she does idolize this man. She’s spent her whole life trying to measure up to his standards, to be good enough for him.

He’s a fucking idiot if he thinks he comes anywhere close to matching her. He’s not even in the same dimension, let alone on the same level. She’s been badgered and beaten down for years, but she still eclipses the sun. She *is* the spirit of Christmas, the compassion, the empathy, the endless capacity for love. Never once has she lashed out at him. Never once has she tried to hurt him. No matter what he’s thrown at her or how unkind he’s been, she’s always held onto her love for him. Even when he didn’t deserve it, she’s loved him.

“December, you don’t mean that,” Cory says.

“I do mean it,” she disagrees. “I’m tired of trying to be someone I’m not just to make you proud of me. It’s exhausting!”

“I’ve never wanted you to be someone you aren’t.”

“You have,” she whispers sadly. “All I ever do is embarrass you. You wouldn’t even write me a recommendation letter for my dream internship because you were afraid I’d do something to jeopardize your shot at an endorsement for governor.”

“Is that what you think?” he asks quietly.

“It’s what happened.” She shrugs.

He stands quietly for a moment, processing this. He isn’t the same urbane bastard who walked through the doors ten minutes ago. She rattled him. I see it in his eyes.

“I didn’t write you the recommendation letter because you aren’t meant to work for someone else, December. You have the skill to create your own line, not design for someone else,” he says, meeting my gaze. He expects me to hold her back. The fucker.

He’s right, though. She shouldn’t be designing for anyone else. Her name should be on her designs, not ours or anyone else’s.

“Despite what you think of me, I’ve never been less than proud to call you my daughter,” he continues, shifting his gaze to December. “Clearly, I’ve royally fucked that up because you don’t know that. That’s on me, kid. You don’t have to change a

goddamn thing about you to belong in this family.” He strides forward, stopping in front of December. “Your mom would be proud of you too, December.”

She sniffles.

“I’m going to fix it,” he murmurs and then presses a kiss to her forehead. He cuts his eyes in my direction, spearing me with a hard look. “Take care of my little girl, Parrish, or you’ll be the one carrying your teeth in your pocket.”

“I’ll always take care of her.”

He jerks his chin in a nod, glances at December again, and then strides from my office.



“Do you think he meant it?” December asks five minutes later, whirling to face me.

“I think we’ll have to wait and see, angel,” I say carefully. I don’t want to get her hopes up, but I don’t want to break her heart either. Surprisingly, I think he did mean what he said. But whether or not he follows through and actually commits to meaningful change or not? Well, that’s a different story. And I won’t allow him to continue hurting her. He’s done it for long enough.

Whether he intended to do it or not, he’s spent years convincing her that she isn’t good enough. His carelessness



hurt her deeply in ways I don't think he even understood until today. He's been too goddamn busy with his career to notice the daughters he's been slowly destroying. And it's not just December. He's been doing the same thing to Jillian, albeit in a different way.

She's had to watch her father slowly pick apart the one person she loves more than anyone. She's been treated one way while her best friend was treated another by the man sworn to protect them both. I can't imagine that's been any easier for her than it has been for December.

"You're right," December sighs.

"Come here."

She burrows into my arms, pressing her face to my chest. I hold her close, just enjoying the feel of her pressed to my heart where she belongs.

"I love you," I remind her.

"I love you too."

"I'm taking you somewhere for Christmas."

She tilts her head back to look up at me. "Where?"

"You'll see," I say, smiling. "We leave tomorrow afternoon."

"I can't leave tomorrow! I have to work."

"Angel, you're sleeping with the owner. You can do whatever the hell you want."

“Don’t say that,” she says, wrinkling her nose at me. “You make it sound bad.”

I smirk, pressing my lips to her ear. “When I get you home, I fully intend to show you how bad it is, December.”

“Alaric?”

December and I both turn toward the door to find Sariah standing in the doorway, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. Concern shoots through me.

“Sariah? What’s wrong?”

“I...I think my older brother and his friends broke into your warehouse last night,” she whispers, tears welling in her eyes. “They stole hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of clothing from you.”

“Oh, no,” December whispers.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DECEMBER



“Is Sariah okay?” I ask, jumping to my feet as soon as Alaric walks in the front door.

“Yeah,” he sighs, tossing his keys toward the credenza table. “She’s fine, angel.” He rakes a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “She told the detective everything. I doubt we’ll get any of the shit back that they stole, but it is what it is.”

I cross the living room to him, pushing my way into his arms. “I’m sorry.”

He presses his lips to my forehead. “She’s afraid we’re going to fire her.”

“Poor Sariah,” I whisper. I thought my family was screwed up, but I guess we all have our own crosses to bear and our own dysfunctional families. This time of year is supposed to bring out the best in people, but sometimes, it seems like it has the opposite effect.

“We aren’t firing her,” Alaric murmurs. “The thought never even crossed my mind.”

“Good. She’s an amazing designer.”

“Yeah, she is.” He runs his hand down my back to slip it under my shirt. “I’ve been thinking about something your

stepfather said this morning.”

I’ve been thinking about a lot of things he said this morning. I’m still not sure where to fit them or how I feel about them. But I think I’m...hopeful. Maybe that makes me naive. I don’t know. But I want to believe that he meant what he said. I want to believe that he’s proud of me and that I’m good enough for him exactly the way I am. Because I’m tired of trying to be something I’m not. All I want to be now is happy.

“I think we should start adding each individual designer’s name to the labels on their designs,” Alaric says.

I lift my head to look at him.

“Our line shouldn’t get credit for the work any of you do. You should.” He shrugs. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“They’ll love it.”

“They?”

“I’m not a designer, Alaric.”

“This is me offering you the job if you want it, angel,” he murmurs. “I’ve seen what you’re capable of. I don’t need two more weeks to decide. You may be a terrible intern, but you’re a goddamn brilliant designer.”

“What about Blaze?”

Alaric’s brows pull down. “What about him?”

“Um, shouldn’t he have a say?”

“He already did. He agrees. You’re a terrible intern.”

I elbow him in the ribs. “I think I’ll wait for a better offer.”

“You’re itching for that spanking I owe you, aren’t you?” he growls, his eyes flaring with heat. As soon as I get a little sassy, it’s like a switch flips. He gets bossy and pushes back. I love it so much.

“You’re all talk, no action so far, Alar–” I squeal as he scoops me up, tossing me over his shoulder.

His hand comes down on my right ass cheek in a hard smack.

I moan his name as the sting bleeds to pleasure.

He stomps across the living room with me, depositing me in a heap over the back of the couch. His hand tangles in my hair, craning my head back as he plasters his body to mine, pinning me against the sofa from behind.

“Let’s see how you like the action now, hmm?” he growls against my lips, taking my mouth in a hot kiss. I think he steals my soul as he yanks my skirt up over my hips and then drags my panties down, roughly kicking my legs apart.

His free hand runs down my ass before disappearing beneath my legs.

“Alaric!” I shout, rising on my toes.

“Soaked already.”

I am. Of course I am. I think I stay that way with him. Even though he’s already been inside me twice in the last twenty-four hours, I want him again just as desperately as I did the first time. More, perhaps.

He releases my hair, gently pressing on my shoulder to bend me further over the sofa. “Ass in the air, angel,” he growls.

As soon as I’m where he wants me, he brings his hand down against my left cheek in a stinging slap. I shout his name, bucking against the hand working between my legs. Oh, God. He’s going to ruin me.

“Count,” he says.

“O-one.”

“Louder, December.”

“One!”

He spans my left cheek.

“Two!” I sob, writhing in torment. It feels so good. Oh, God. I’m never going to behave again. I’ll spend every day finding ways to get him to keep doing this. I know I will.

The third smack makes me scream his name.

“Three,” I wail, riding his hand.

He flips me over onto the couch. I land on my back on the cushions, staring up at the ceiling.

“Spread your legs,” he growls, circling around to me.  
“Wider.”

I spread my legs as wide as I can.

His hand comes down on my sex.

I jerk in shock.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like it, angel,” he says, his eyes pools of obsidian desire. “I feel you getting wetter.”

He smacks my sex again. And then again.

I sob, clawing at his shoulders and arms.

He runs one hand down the crevice of my ass, pressing his thumb against my back entrance.

His hand comes down on my pussy as he presses his thumb into me.

I wail his name, coming so hard the entire room goes black. Blood rushes in my ears. I lose track of everything, lost in a maelstrom of intense pleasure.

“Good girl,” he croons to me through the dark. “Good girl, angel.”

“Alaric,” I sob, reaching for him with trembling arms. “More.”

“Ah, fuck,” he groans. The head of his cock presses against my hole.

We cry out together as he pushes his way inside me. My muscles twinge faintly in protest before the ache bleeds to pleasure. He impales me on him, groaning my name.

Only then do I realize he still has his thumb inside my ass. He pushes it in deeper before sliding it out, only to do the same thing again. My core clenches around him, shards of pleasure stabbing deep into my womb.



“Goddamn, angel,” he growls, rocking into me in shallow thrusts. “You’re so fucking tight.”

“I can’t...” I’m going to come again. Already, I feel it building to the breaking point, threatening to unravel me. He’s everywhere and it’s too much. “Alaric.”

“Come, sweet December,” he croons. “Cream all over my cock.”

I let go, falling into the orgasm. It drags me under, leaving me writhing in the sweetest torment.

Alaric groans, driving into me again and again before he shouts and follows me over. Thick ropes of sticky cum fill me, sending aftershocks pinging through my system. I peel my eyes open, watching him as attentively as he does me.

He’s fierce in his pleasure, a radiant prince.

He reaches for my hand, linking our fingers together. As we moan and tremble, coming down together, we’re connected in every way two people can be connected. And for the first time in six years, perhaps for the first time since my mom died, I know peace.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALARIC



“Wake up, angel,” I whisper, running my lips across December’s bare shoulder. “It’s Christmas.”

She moans, stirring in my arms.

I brush my hand down her side, marveling at how sweet she is. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to how smooth her skin is or how soft she feels beneath my palm. All I have to do is touch her, and I’m hard. Hell, that’s not true. All I have to do is look at her and I’m hard. The last few days have been the best of my life.

I brought her to Big Bear as planned. We’ve spent the last two days playing in the snow and then warming each other up afterward. It’s been perfect. For the first time since Ma died, there’s magic in the air. Christmas feels like something truly worth celebrating. The girl in my bed is worth celebrating.

“Wake up, sweet December.”

“Mm,” she moans, pressing her face to my throat. “Did Santa come?”

I chuckle quietly. “Yeah, he did. Do you want to see what he brought you?”

“I already know what he brought me.”

“What’s that?”

“You,” she sighs.

Christ, I don’t know what I did to deserve her, but I’m going to keep doing it.

“And spankings.”

I press my lips to her crown, scowling. “Santa isn’t spanking you, December. I’m the only one who gets to touch that luscious ass.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Open your pretty eyes, and you can see what he brought you.”

December isn’t a morning person, especially when I’ve kept her up half the night making love to her, but she reluctantly rolls onto her back and peels her eyes open. She blinks when she notices the little blue box on her nightstand.

“Open it,” I whisper, pulling her up into a sitting position.

She reaches for the box with shaking hands and peels the bow off.

“Marry me,” I whisper in her ear when she flips the box open to reveal the three-carat diamond engagement ring nestled inside.

“Alaric,” she gasps, turning wide eyes on me.

“It’s what we both want for Christmas, angel.” I brush her hair back from her face, smiling. “I worked out a deal with Santa. I told him if he’d have his elves get this ring ready in

time for me to give it to you today, I'd spend the rest of my life making you happy. Santa came through, so now you have to say yes so I can uphold my end of the bargain."

"So, you bribed Santa, huh?"

"I did." I pluck the ring box from her hands to slip the ring out. It fits her finger perfectly. "I'm not even sorry about it, sweet December. Fuck." I press my lips to her shoulder, staring at the ring on her hand. "You look good wearing nothing but my ring."

She holds her hand up, scrutinizing it, and then she smiles over her shoulder at me. "Oh, I can think of one way to make it even better," she whispers, rising to her knees. The blankets fall from around her as she crawls into my lap.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Me naked, wearing your ring, pregnant with your baby," she says, looping her arms around my shoulders.

"Goddamn," I growl, my dick throbbing at the thought. I press my mouth to hers, tipping her over onto her back and following her down. "You're right. That'd definitely make it better."

"Then get busy, Mr. Parrish," she breathes, staring up at me with dark, hungry eyes. "Because I believe I asked for rosy-red cheeks for Christmas."

"Oh, you're getting them." I yank her leg up over my hip, capturing her nipple in my mouth. "You're definitely getting them."

“Then my answer is yes,” she moans. “I will marry you.”



“You look happy,” Blaze says, eyeing me over the rim of his beer later that night. He and Georgia came for dinner. So did Jillian.

“So do you,” I murmur, watching as the girls whisper back and forth on the couch. I have no idea what they’re talking about, and I’m not sure I want to know. But my girl is happy. She’s been walking on air all day long. It feels good as hell to know I helped put that look on her face.

Surprisingly, so did her stepfather.

He announced today that he isn’t going to be running for governor. He’s taking a step away from politics to focus on his family. No one expected the move, least of all his daughters. But I think they’re both hopeful that it means he’s committed to repairing the hurt he’s caused.

I invited him to dinner tonight, but he declined. He didn’t want to intrude. He knows how much work he still has to do to win back December’s trust. It’s a good sign. And if he fucks it up, well, I can always smash my fist into his face later. But I don’t think it’ll come to that. He almost lost December. Worse, he made her feel small and worthless. I saw the look on his

face when he left my office. That realization rattled him. He won't fuck up with her again.

"I'm marrying Georgia."

"Figured as much." I grin, nodding at December. "I'm marrying that one too."

"Good. Maybe she'll keep you out of my fucking office," Blaze mutters, smirking at me.

"Not likely. Annoying you is in my job description."

"Like hell it is."

"No, it is. I had Ruby write it in."

His smirk slips, a scowl overtaking his face. "You better be kidding."

"Nope."

"Ma should have swallowed you," he mutters, shaking his head in disgust.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you too."

He flips me the bird.

I chuckle and leave him to stew, strolling into the living room. "What are you three gossiping about?"

"Nothing," December squeaks, blushing bright red.

I narrow my eyes on her.

She hops up from the couch, bumping into the coffee table. Georgia's wine glass tumbles off the edge, spilling all over the rug.

“Oops,” December whispers.

“It’s just wine, angel,” I murmur, dragging her into my arms. I press my lips to her ear. “But you will be screaming my name later for lying to me.”

She moans quietly, pressing her face to my throat.

Blaze is right. I am happy. I got exactly what I wanted for Christmas. I got a future with her. For the rest of her life, I’ll fight to make her happy. I’ll slay her dragons. I’ll give her as many spankings as she wants. And I’ll love her every goddamn day. Exactly like I was put on this earth to do.

I’ve never been happier.



**EPILOGUE**

**DECEMBER**



## **F** ive Years Later

“I bought you a present,” Alaric says, rubbing my belly.

“Alaric,” I groan. “Stop buying me stuff. It isn’t Christmas yet.”

“Christmas is tomorrow, December.” He smirks, that same sinful smile that’s set my blood on fire for the last five years. “And you’re going to want this one,” he growls, slipping his hand between my legs. “It’s leather, and it rhymes with drop.”

I moan, squeezing my thighs together around his hand. He bought a new riding crop. Of course he did. The wicked man.

“Use it,” I whisper.

“You’re in labor, December.”

I peel my eyes open to glare at him. “Whose fault is that?”

“I’m guessing mine,” he says dryly, cupping my pussy in his palm and then reluctantly slipping his hand from between my legs.

“Yes. Yours!” I pout at him. “You’re the one obsessed with getting me pregnant.”

“I like getting you pregnant,” he growls, narrowing those dark eyes on me. “I like seeing you grow with my babies. I like raising babies with you. I love everything about our babies.”

My irritation dies a painless death. A tiny smile curves my lips. “You make it hard to be annoyed at being in labor on Christmas Eve.”

“My poor angel,” he croons, leaning over the bed to kiss my forehead. “Do I need to have a talk with our son?”

“Daughter.”

He growls at me.

“You already gave me two boys, Alaric. I’m having a girl this time.”

“No girls,” he says, eyes narrowed.

I roll mine at him. He’s completely irrational when it comes to having girls. Mostly because that’s what Blaze has, I think. It stresses him out to think about raising little girls in a world like ours.

But I’m not worried. With Alaric to watch over her, she’ll always be safe. I know because I am. He’s spent the last five years protecting me like his life depends on it. No one even looks at me sideways without answering to him.

I gave up trying to rein him in long ago. My husband is wildly overprotective. It’s just part of who he is and how he loves. And he loves me fiercely. There hasn’t been a single time when I’ve questioned or doubted that.

How could I when he shows me every single day how much I mean to him? He doesn't hold a single part of himself back, and he doesn't care what anyone thinks. If he wants to kiss me, he kisses me. If he wants me in his lap, he puts me in his lap.

No one at work even bats a lash anymore. They're used to how he is with me. Blaze is the same way with Georgia.

Alaric's idea of putting individual designers' names on labels was a smashing success. It led to several of us launching our very own lines within the company. The terms are incredibly generous, and we get to do what we love without dealing with the headache of trying to build our own companies.

A few designers have left over the years to pursue their own business ventures. Alaric and Blaze are always supportive when they make that choice. There's room for everyone at the table.

I'm happy where I am, working with the man of my dreams. Cory didn't understand that part of my dream five years ago, but he gets it now.

Things between the two of us have improved a lot. It took a long time for me to really believe that he meant what he said back then. I kept waiting for him to pull the rug out from underneath me, but he never did. He was genuinely remorseful that he ever made me feel like I wasn't good enough. I don't think he ever realized that's what he was doing. In his mind, he was trying to protect me from being the center of another

humiliating incident. He thought he was doing what was best for me, never realizing that he was the one hurting me.

We had a lot to heal. But we're in a good place now. He remarried three years ago. His new wife is young, but she's great. Jillian and I both adore her. He never ran for governor. I don't think he ever will. I'm not sure exactly what changed or why, but he lost the passion for it.

He swears it has nothing to do with me or Jillian, but I sometimes wonder. Whatever it was, he seems happier now. We're all happier now.

I'd be even happier if I could spend Christmas at home with my family.

"Please tell your daughter to stop being stubborn and be born soon," I tell Alaric. "I want to go home for Christmas."

"I know, angel." He runs his lips across my forehead and then leans down, pressing his head to my belly. "Sweet one, your mama says you have to come out now. She's ready to meet you."

The baby kicks and Alaric jumps back, startled.

His wide eyes meet mine. "Uh, I think the baby just told me to buzz off."

I cover my mouth to hide a laugh.

The next contraction hits.

It's going to be a long night.



“Merry Christmas, Mama,” a nurse says hours later, laying the baby on my chest. “Your baby girl is perfect.”

“Alaric,” I sob, staring in awe at the tiny baby squirming on my chest. She lets out a wail and then nuzzles her face against the side of my breast and settles down. “She’s so beautiful.”

“She is beautiful,” he rasps from beside me, clinging to my hand.

She has a head of dark hair and the cutest little nose. She’s so small, smaller than her brothers were. But she’s perfect. Tears slip down my cheeks, dripping into my hair as I run my free hand down her soft head.

“Hi, baby,” I say. “I’m your mama.”

“Fuck,” Alaric chokes.

I turn my face up to him, laughing and crying at the same time. His eyes are bright with moisture as he stares at me and our daughter. I’ve never felt his love as acutely as I do in this moment. It blazes from him, shining as bright as the sun.

“You’re perfect,” he whispers, leaning down to kiss me gently. “Both of you are absolutely perfect.”

I don’t doubt him. I never do.

“What are you going to name her?” the nurse asks.

“Noelle,” I whisper, glancing at Alaric.

He grins at me, running his hand across our daughter’s head. “December and Noelle, my angels.”

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



**If you enjoyed Tempted by December please consider leaving a review! I appreciate them so much!**

Want an exclusive steamy Christmas story from me? I'm sending Dear Santa to newsletter subscribers on December 20th! You can sign-up [here](#).

Next up from me is Wanton, a sweet and steamy Mafia romance!

You can also find Zane's Rebel coming soon from Loni Nichole!



# UNDER HIS TREE



This holiday season we're bringing you a steamy instalove collaboration hot enough to melt the North Pole. These hunky hotties are in for a great shock when each one finds Ms. Right in the most unexpected of places. *Under His Tree*.

Curl up in front of the fireplace as these Christmas beauties teach their men a few timely lessons in giving and receiving on their way to a steamy holiday-ever-after.

Tempted by December by Nichole Rose

Stalking Rose by Loni Ree

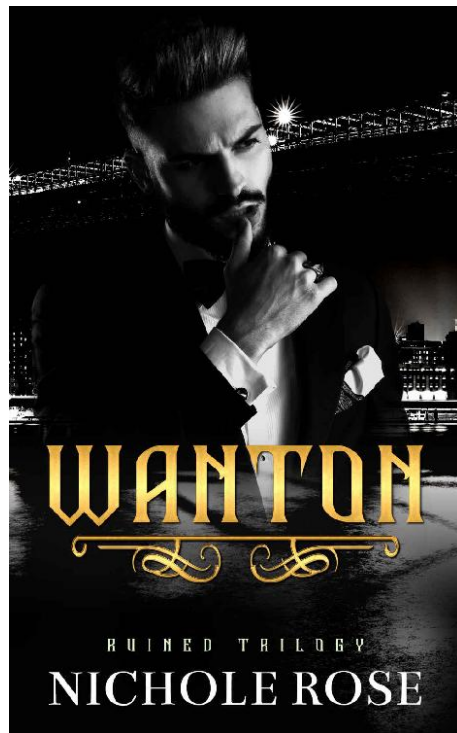
Unwrapping His Present by Tory Baker

Tangled in Ivy by Fern Fraser

Tied & Tangled by Mayra Statham

Candy Coated Curves by Kat Baxter

# WANTON



**Falling for the enemy wasn't part of Luca Valentino's plan. But one taste of his curvy captive will change everything for this mafia boss.**

**Callandria**

I've been taught to hate the Valentino family since I could walk.

I know they killed my grandfather.

But no one warned me that the real monster of the bunch was Luca Valentino.

They didn't tell me I'd find myself imprisoned in his bed, either.

Or that I'd be so reluctant to leave it.

But that's precisely what happened.

Little by little, he's slipping beneath my defenses and making me feel things I shouldn't.

But which side of him is real?

The wanton man who sets me ablaze...or the ruthless mobster who refuses to let me go?

## **Luca**

A life in hell was the sacrifice I made to keep my brothers alive.

There's nothing I won't do to see that job through.

Even if it means seducing the enemy.

But I never intended to fall for Callandria Genovese.

She was supposed to be a means to an end, nothing more.

Now, I've got more to lose than ever.

And the woman who holds the key to my future is in chains  
in my bedroom.

I need her trust. I want her heart.

One way or another, I will have both.

*If you like your OTT possessive older men morally gray and  
your curvy heroines strong, prepare to fall for Luca and  
Callandria in this extra steamy short mafia romance. As  
always, Nichole Rose books come complete with a guaranteed  
HEA. Safe read. No cliffhanger. Each book in the Ruined  
Trilogy features a different Valentino brother and can be read  
as a standalone story.*

*Wanton releases on December 27th! Pre-Order [here](#).*

# NICHOLE'S BOOK BEAUTIES



Want to connect with Nichole and other readers? We're building a girl gang! Join Nichole Rose's Book Beauties on Facebook for fun, games, and behind-the-scenes exclusives!

# INSTALOVE BOOK CLUB



## **The Instalove Book Club is now in session!**

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The Billionaire's Big Bold Wonder

**Playing for Keeps**

Cutie Pie

Ice Breaker

Ice Prince

Ice Giant (coming soon)

### **The Second Generation**

A Blushing Bride for Christmas

### **Love Bites**

Come Undone

Dripping Pearls

### **Silver Spoon MC**

The Surgeon

The Heir

The Lawyer

The Prodigy

The Bodyguard

### **Echoes of Forever**

His Christmas Miracle

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**The Ruined Trilogy.**

Physical Science

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Beach House Beauty

**Standalone Titles**

A Touch of Summer

Black Velvet

His Secret Obsession

Dirty Boy

Naughty Little Elf

Devil's Deceit

A Bride for the Beast (writing with Fern Fraser)

**Easy on Me**

Easy Ride

Easy Surrender

**One Night with You**

Falling Hard

Model Behavior

Learning Curve

Angel Kisses

**writing with Loni Ree as Loni Nichole**

Dillon's Heart

Razor's Flame

Ryker's Reward (coming soon)

Zane's Rebel (coming soon)

## ABOUT NICHOLE ROSE

Nichole Rose is a short romance author on the west coast. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to instalove and over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling in love into a one-size-fits-all box. When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and everything supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a proud mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies.

You can learn more about Nichole and her books at [authornicholrose.com](http://authornicholrose.com).

