



gingerbread  
*house of lies*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**SHYLA COLT**

# GINGERBREAD HOUSE OF LIES

COLORADO CHRISTMAS



SHYLA COLT

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, duplicated, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Editing: Royalty Writes

Proof: C.S.

Cover By: Love the Cover

©Text Copyright 2022 Shyla Colt

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect With Me](#)

[Colorado Christmas Series](#)

# CHAPTER 1



*D*ec

*I'm late. I'm late.* Like the white rabbit from Wonderland, I know the Queen won't appreciate my tardiness. Quickening my steps, I use every inch of my five foot nine inches to lengthen my stride. The speed carries me closer to the Sinclair Union terminal. The historical building that's one of the crown jewels of our city.

Even the afternoon sun rays dancing through the orange, yellow and crimson leaves of the large oaks lining Main Street urge me on. Beth Oliver isn't a woman one keeps waiting.

I curse the afternoon traffic and my habit of getting lost in the design. This wasn't how I wanted to start our meeting. The muscles in my neck tighten as the woman I long to please comes into view.

Impeccably dressed in a pair of designer denim, a long-sleeved red t-shirt, and a coordinating red black and white plaid vest, my mother is holiday chic. The rich color contrasts beautifully with her golden-brown skin. Which she knows. Mom's drilled the importance of playing up our strengths into the minds of all her daughters.

She pulled her long black hair into a crown around her head, showing off her elegant neck and slender, oval-shaped face. At nearly fifty, her face still holds the plumpness of youth with more smoothness than wrinkles, thanks to the creams, sunblock, and a healthy lifestyle she swears by.

I SHARE HER SLENDER FRAME, high cheekbones, and upturned nose. I inherited her thick coiled curls, though no one would ever catch her without them perfectly pressed and polished. The brown, copper, and red hue is from my father's side of the family.

Mom's make-up is light and flawless, giving her a glow while hiding imperfections. I reach her and push the stray curls escaping my hastily formed bun out of my face.

"December." She sighs. "You are in a state." A sad smile lines her thin pink lips. "My youngest babe, born in the last month of the year, still has yet to bloom." I'm painfully reminded of my bare face and rumpled appearance.

"Sorry mom, I got caught up with decorations."

Her deep-set dark brown eyes mirror the disappointment dripping from her tongue. My stomach plunges. I brace myself for her censure and tilt my chin, refusing to yield to her criticism.

"I've been preparing for the event since five this morning."

"I know how consuming an undertaking like the Gingerbread House Contest can be. I admire your work ethic, but you must schedule time to take proper care of yourself." She frowns. "Besides, you never know who you'll run into." Her cat-shaped eyes inspect me.

I refuse to shrink as she takes in my worn blue jean overalls and my burnt yellow long-sleeved t-shirt with the pattern of fall leaves traveling down the sleeves.

I shrug. "I dressed for comfort and function, knowing I'd be working with power tools and paint. It was practical."

"What am I going to do with you, hmmm?"

*Love me as I am.* I'm my father's daughter. I understand working with my hands and doing things with passion and integrity. My mother's throwback to the southern belle attitude and ways have always felt alien to me.

"I thought we could swing by the ice cream parlor. You know their son, Aubrey, the lawyer, is in town for the

holidays.”

“How nice for them.” I ignore her hints. “Let me show you the space and what I plan to do with it,” I suggest.

“Of course.” Mom smiles politely, but the tension around her mouth gives her away.

She gestures for me to proceed her inside.

I open the door and step inside the old train station, marveling at the high ceilings with rounded arches. The art déco metal work and swirling designs make me feel like I’ve stepped back in time.

“We’ll have the main area for the gingerbread houses, but we’ll set vendor tables up on the outside perimeters and an area dedicated to photos a local photographer will take. I wanted to keep things local.”

“Yes, that was the main point of your pitch. Clever. It had people lining up to contribute to the grand prize. We all know tourism is our bread and butter.”

“I want to give people more reasons to come to Sinclair during the holidays. If this goes well, it could open the door for similar events throughout the year.”

“Nice job, thinking ahead.” I preen under her praise. I inherited her love for organization. We share the ability to see things on a larger scale. It’s always kept us two steps ahead and Oliver’s knick-knacks and Christmas Tree Farm thriving.

“I try.” I shrug, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep from fidgeting. Twenty-seven years old, and I still feel like a small child waiting to be scolded.

“No. You’re doing it.” My heart swells. “But only in one area of your life.”

Mom undoes her kind words in the next breath. Mom didn’t come to listen to my vision. This was her chance to give another lecture.

“I know you wanted to focus on your studies, but you’re four years out of college and not getting any younger.”



“I know. You like to remind me often.”

Mom gives a weak laugh. “Not that you listen. Life waits for no one. We think we have all the time in the world, and then we blink and realize how much time has passed us by. I want to see you happy and fulfilled.”

“I am.” I insist.

“All you talk about is work. You’ve yet to bring home a date for Sunday dinner or holidays. I’m worried about you. Look at how happy Gloria and Angel are. Don’t you want a family like your sisters?”

Mom’s tongue is a wicked blade, slicing at the mental armor encasing me.

“I do. I’m seeing someone.” The words flow out like a mudslide, uncontrollable and destructive.

“Oh.” Her eyes widen. Her face transforms as she beams. “You are?”

“Yes.” I force a smile as the ground beneath me becomes quicksand, and I begin to sink.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Mom clasps her hands together as if it has answered her prayers.

“I didn’t want to disappoint anyone if it didn’t work out.” *Because he doesn’t really exist, and I’ve just put myself up a creek without a paddle.*

“Tell me about him.” The excitement in her voice pierces my heart. I scan the area, looking for anything to help me build the impromptu lie as I rack my brain for a scapegoat.

I spot my best friend walking toward me with the posters he picked up from the printer. A hank of his dark hair falls over his forehead and into his dark brown eyes. I smile at his confident stride as people step out of his way to let him pass.

With his chiseled jaw and enormous frame, he takes up space. A lightbulb goes off in my head. The youngest of his siblings, he knows better than anyone what it’s like being in my shoes.

“Emanuele.” I rush toward him. He grins, opening his arms for a hug. Leaning in, whisper in his ear, “Please go along with this.” I press my lips against his. They’re soft and yield to mine.

Eyes wide, he tilts his head and moans slightly as electricity flows between us. Fire ignites, and my belly tightens as I see the man I’ve known since we were in the cradle in a forbidden light.

His brown eyes darken to a whiskey tone, and the masculine coffee and bourbon scent I associate with him intoxicates me. Our heads tilt. His tongue sweeps across the seam of my mouth, and the world around us falls out of view. Shivering, I drown in the sensations unexpectedly unleashed by my farce.

My mother’s cry pierces the haze that fell over me. We pull apart, breathing hard, and find her beside us.

“Manny! You’ve been dating Manny! Oh, this is a Christmas-miracle come early.”

Understanding flashes in his gaze, and he tucks me into his body.

“Surprise!” His husky voice makes my toes curl in my combat boots.

Mom squeezes his arm. “Your mom is going to be ecstatic. Maria and I talked about how we’d like to see the two of you settle down with someone. This could not be more perfect.”

Shame fills me. E’s locked into this farce now, too. His hand caresses my side. If he’s attempting to calm me, the warmth seeping through my clothing from his large hand has the opposite effect. Has he always been so built?

Heat engulfs me. I want to pull away as tingles break out over my skin. I can’t think this about the boy I used to bathe with. He’s my best friend, roommate, and the one I trust above everyone else. He has to stay in the don’t even think about it box because failure would mean the ruin of my oldest constant.

“How long has this been going on?” Mom asks.

“Hmm. It’s hard to pinpoint exact dates. It just... happened.” E flashes his charming smile.

I snicker, and he pinches me lightly, making me squirm. “It hit us out of the blue.”

“That’s an understatement,” E mutters.

“I can’t believe you kept this to yourselves. Wait. Are—is this why you moved in together after college?” Mom whispers, salivating for more information.

“No. It’s recent,” E insists.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. They always say your significant other should be your best friend.” The approval pouring off her is intoxicating, and I’m an addict needing a fix. She gives this to me sparingly; I often jump through hoops to receive it.

Mom laughs. “We’re fools for not seeing it sooner. You know your mother, and I always wondered what would happen if the two of you found love together, but we gave up hope years ago.” She chuckles. “You hid it so well.”

Mom places a hand on her hips and studies us like a puzzle. “I can see it in the eyes now that I’m looking.”

“Hmm.” I give her an empty smile.

“Don’t be embarrassed, December.” She mimes misreading my signals.

“I won’t say a word. This is your news to deliver.” She zips her lips. All but glowing, Mom gives me a full-blown smile. “Now, I believe you were here to give me a tour.” Her one-eighty is breathtaking.

All I had to do to gain her favor was be the person she wanted me to be. It’s a bittersweet victory with no true winner. Eventually, our ruse will be over, and she’ll be back to badgering, comparing, and cajoling.

“You should see her work, Mrs. Oliver. She’s put her soul into this event, and it shows. I was bringing you the latest fliers she designed.” E waves the stack of papers in his hand. “She wanted you to be the first to see them.”

Mom accepts the pile and gasps. “You did this, Dec?”

I nod. We modeled the gingerbread house after our two-story white farmhouse home with pale blue shutters, and we made the cookies look like our family.

“The detail is superb.” Mom shakes her head.

“Thank you.”

When I double majored in business marketing and graphic design, my parents were supportive but confused. I have always wanted to create a full-service experience. I know the running of the Christmas Tree farm and the shops will go to Gloria and Angel.

Marketing and organizing events around town will let me carve out an identity. I deserve to have a space just for me in Sinclair, Colorado. I wanted to be more than a worker bee for the Oliver family.

“Let me show you what I saw for the setup.” Stepping away from E, I open my satchel and pull out my pad. Flipping it open, I bring up the specs I’ve worked out. Eager to lose myself in my labor of love, I guide them both around the empty terminal. I can feel his gaze on me with every step I take. Like a coward, I refuse to meet his gaze, afraid of what I might see. He has every right to be furious or disgusted. I swallow down the bile threatening to creep up my throat.

What if he truly sees me like a sister? *That kiss didn’t feel forced.* Emanuele has always been off-limits. Never have I truly allowed myself to see him like others did. I’m not blind. I know he’s handsome with his olive skin, soulful, large brown eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes, and a strong jaw.

He towers over me at six-foot-two with broad shoulders and a lean frame formed from running and hefting around heavy bags and boxes at the Perez Nursery. I’ve removed the friend glasses, which has me falling down a rabbit hole of lust. My best friend is sexy as hell, and my body is responding accordingly to the revelation. *What have I gotten myself into?*

I meet his gaze, and E winks. The familiar action makes my tummy flip. Mind racing, I try to decipher the message. Is

he amused or just as into the pleasure our lip lock created? *Could he have felt it, too? No.* Those thoughts lead to insanity. I won't allow myself to go any further.

\*\*\*

**E**

One kiss just shifted my world on its axis. I haven't been able to stop staring at December since she put her full lips on mine and pressed her curves against me. 'Like a sister' hasn't been the appropriate description for her since we hit puberty.

The words off *limits*, *precious*, and *out of my league* come to mind. Dec has woven a tangled web around us. Our families are close. Hell, our mothers dreamed about our wedding long before we were born. Our moms have been best friends since high school; having December and me together is a dream come true for them. Explaining why this didn't pan out after things run their course will be painful. *Is that what you want?*

I smother the voice in my head quickly. December isn't just some woman; she's my best friend. Was I just convenient, or is she sending me a message? I study her face, trying to pick up on clues as we move around the old train station.

This is her moment, and I refuse to ruin it. She worked her ass off to land this space, put on the event, and impress her mother. I hate the damage her mother unknowingly does with her antiquated beliefs.

The world is changing, and the older generation is lagging behind. As the youngest, with a different trajectory than her elder sisters, Dec gets the brunt of her mother's disapproval. I feel her pain there. The only son in a Latino family that's insanely devoted, I get a lot of the same flack. I can't stop watching her mouth form shapes.

I've never been so turned on by one kiss. It was like Dec had a direct line to my dick. I discretely adjust my hard-on and try to collect myself. She felt right tucked against me, and the quiet moans she made weren't for show.

Neither was my response to her. Where do we go from here? It's always been a question in my mind, what would

happen if we were together? I could explore the answer now—no harm, no foul. It's all pretend in her mind. Does it matter if it means more to me?

“What do you think, E?” she asks.

“Huh?” I blink, refocusing my attention on her.

“About handing out a couple of raffle tickets as they enter the event for free. And then allowing them to purchase more if they want?”

“I think that's a good plan. All the local businesses are excited about putting together their contributions to the gifts. It's a good way to bring in new traffic.”

“Maybe even let them sell the tickets in their shops that weekend.” Her mother suggests.

She smiles, and her dark brown eyes crinkle. I admire the slash of white that stands out against her burgundy-painted lips.

Her heart-shaped face is seared into my memories next to the spray of freckles that travel across the bridge of her upturned nose. I adore the slightly curved *elf ears* I've teased her about her entire life. Have I been fooling myself about my feelings where December is concerned?

“That's it in a nutshell,” Dec summarizes. “I'm focused on making things as personalized as possible. I wanted props that we could use repeatedly to create a timeless feeling.” Her face lights up as she speaks, and I can't help but smile.

“The building will help with that too,” her mother adds. “You did an excellent job bringing this together. I'm impressed.” Her mother nods her approval. “I can't wait to attend.”

They hug. “Now I have to get to the shop. I'm expecting some new inventory for which I want to create a display.”

Mrs. Oliver walks over to me and collects her own hug. “You've always been family, Manny. Maybe you'll make it more official soon?”

I smile. “You never know.”

I step back and watch her walk away. Head full, I brace myself for the conversation we need to have. When her mother walks away, I glance down at my guilty-looking bestie.

“You want to tell me why you pulled me into your gingerbread house of lies, Dec?” Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, I pull her to me, and she relaxes.

“I’m sorry.” She bites her lower lip. “Mom was going on about how she was worried about ending up alone, comparing me to Gloria and Angel.” Her nose wrinkles. “The next thing I know, I’m telling her I’m dating.”

I shake my head. “You can’t keep letting her wind you up.” I guide her past the front desk of the welcome center and out of the building,

“You know that’s easier to say than to do.” She points a finger at me.

“Yeah. I know.” I nod, thinking of my mother. “A warning would’ve been nice, though.”

“What do we do?” She tugs at a loose curl, brow furrowed.

“Now you ask me?” I lift an eyebrow, and she scowls. I laugh and give her a squeeze. “We ride it out. I’m not going to out you. It’s not like I’m seeing anyone.”

“Me either. That was part of the problem,” she grumbles.

“It’ll be nice to have a holiday where we aren’t being harassed about our single status.”

“See. I did us a favor.”

I scoff. “Is that what you were doing? I thought it was lying and avoiding.”

“Takes one to know one. What do we tell everyone?”

“Oh. You want to include me in the planning finally?”

“Emanuele, come on.”

I smirk. “That we were testing things out and didn’t want to rock boats if things didn’t pan out.”

“And how long have we been an us?”

“A little over six months. It gives us enough time to be settled in, come out and yet, still be new.”

“Do you think we can do it? Make people believe we’re together?” I pause in the alcove of trees.

I place a finger under her chin and tilt her face up. “Do you think that’s going to be a problem?” I challenge her.

“I don’t know,” she whispers.

“I think you do.” I bend down, giving her time to pull away. “Couples touch.” I pause, letting my breath caress her lips. “Kiss. And they’re comfortable doing it.” I brush my lips against hers, and the energy crackles between us. “Think we can manage that?”

Our eyes lock, and we exist, breathing the same air.

“Yes.”

“I think so, too,” I whisper.

“I don’t want to lose us in this.” Her lower lip trembles.

“We won’t.” *What if we found more?*

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” I kiss her forehead. “I think it’s time to lay a little groundwork. Being seen together.”

“We’re always together.”

“Not like this.” I twine our fingers and pull her back onto the main sidewalk. I lift our hands and kiss her hand. “You know I do nothing half-assed.” I’m not sure if I’m lying to her or myself. We’ve unlocked something I’m not willing to relinquish my hold on.

“Of course, we have our roles to play.” She smiles up at me, fixing an adoring expression on her face. “Let operation Christmas Romance begin.”

She swings our hands.

“What are you doing?” I ask, amused.

“Setting the stage.”



“For a horror movie?”

“A small-town romance, you jackass,” she hisses.

“Is that right?” I smirk. “What should I do then?” I bat my eyelashes. “This.”

She snickers. “Knock it off.”

“All you have to do is be you, Dec. That’s plenty to fall in love with.”

She stumbles, and I pull her to me, placing a steadying hand on her lower back.

“You okay?”

“Oh, my God! You guys are together now?” The familiar voice hits me like ice water.

“Showtime,” I whisper, helping her stand as we turn to face my older sister, Brenda. So much for easing into things.

“You caught us.”

“Not like you were trying to hide it very well.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe you kept this from us.” Brenda looks between the two of us.

“Wanted to make sure it would stick before we got the families involved.”

Brenda laughs. “Are you kidding me? Everyone’s been waiting for this to happen since high school. The way you look at each other has always spoken volumes.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

Brenda grins like a Jack-o’-lantern leftover from the Halloween season. “All that matters is that you’ve finally figured it out.” She frowns. “Crap.”

“What’s wrong?” December asks.

“I lost the bet,” Brenda says. “We had a pretty steep pool going.”

“Glad my life is a game to you,” I say dryly.

“You know Dec is the only woman out there good enough for my baby bro.” She winks, and I roll my eyes.

“No respect.” I shake my head.

“Oh, there’s plenty of respect. I just happen to be older and wiser, so I know best.”

“You really think that, too.” I resist rolling my eyes. No one can get under my skin or make me forget I’m almost thirty, like my siblings.

“I’m certain of it. You know you’re screwed, right? Because I’m not the only one who saw you. I was having lunch with mom. She stayed behind to pay the bill.”

“Emanuele Jose Perez! You have some serious explaining to do.” My mother’s dark brown eyes flash with irritation and a bit of hurt.

“It’s my fault, Mrs. Perez.” Dec steps in front of me slightly. “I didn’t want to tell you until we settled in. I was worried about hurting our families if we decided we were better off as friends.”

“Sweet girl. The two of you were always meant to be.” My mom cups her face. “Nice job putting her feelings and wants first, Manny. You’ll be happier doing this.”

“I noticed,” I say sarcastically, thinking of the misery that was the doghouse for my father.

“You learned from your father. He’s a smart man.” My dad was tough, but we all knew who ran the family with an iron fist.

“As much as we’d love to stay and chat. I have to get Dec back to change in time for the tree lighting ceremony tonight.” Kissing mom on the cheek, I hug my sister and whisk December away before they can give her the third degree.

“Coward,” Dec whispers.

“And here I thought I was your rescuer.”

“You’re only prolonging the inevitable.”

“Good. We still have a back story to create.” *And I need more time to figure out how I’ll separate fact from fiction.*

*Three hours later*

I CAN’T KEEP my eyes off Dec’s form-fitting red sweater dress with knee-high black boots. Her hair is down and tumbles around her shoulders like a coppery cloud in perfect spirals.

My fingers itch to hold her and familiarize myself with every dip and valley. We’re downtown for the official tree lighting ceremony, and I can barely keep things PG.

“You ready to deliver your pitch for the farm?” I glance over at the microphone set up by the large tree donated by her family and take a step away to put distance between us.

“Are you kidding me? I can do this in my sleep by now. Share.” She makes a gimmie gesture to the cup of cider we spiked with rum from my flask. I hand over the warm cup, and she takes a long pull.

“Careful. I wouldn’t want you to slur.” I take the Styrofoam cylinder back.

“You know I’m not a lightweight.” She pokes my chest.

“I do,” I wind one of her curls around my finger, pull it down, and release it. “I love how bouncy your hair is when you wear it in spirals.”

“I know you do. I, however, hate how long it takes to tame them.”

“I never mind helping you on wash day.” Bending down, I nuzzle the area beneath her ear.

She shivers, and I offer her another sip of cider.

“Oh. Is this a thing now?” The sultry voice sends ice through my veins. I straighten and find my ex, Jennifer, approaching us.

The petite woman is clad in all white with a full face of make-up and perfectly styled stick straight hair. With her

angular face and posh style, Jen couldn't be more different from the woman beside me.

I always saw her as an unattainable woman I somehow lucked into dating. Now she just seems fake and slightly vapid.

"Yes." Dec snuggles into my side. "I don't know what we waited so long for."

Jen blinks rapidly, and I smirk.

*Direct hit.* The break-up was a bad one. I thought Jen would be my wife, but she had never been as fully invested. It was an act of rebellion against her parents.

Jen always knew she planned on leaving me for wealthier pastors. Unfortunately, I hadn't been able to see that.

"Why indeed," Jennifer drawls, crossing her arms, clearly unamused.

"December," Mayor Black waves her over.

"Time for me to go to work, darling." Rising on her tiptoes, she whispers in my ear.

"Don't let her get to you. She's not worth it." Kissing my cheek, she steps away, and I watch her walk, hips swaying.

"I always thought something was going on between you two. Was this going on when we dated?" She crosses her arm over her designer bubble vest with a popular logo.

"What?" My brow wrinkles. "I would never have done that."

"Please." She tosses her hair over her shoulder. "There wasn't room for me when she was always number one in your life."

"She's my best friend. You were my girlfriend. There was never a comparison." I laugh. "And we can see who's still around."

"You can't still believe that, even now."

“I know that.” I stare her down. She looks away, and I feel a surge of triumph. I’m done avoiding her and rehashing what could’ve been. I’m ready to move on.

“And yet here you are together and looking happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

“I never understood your obsession with her. Even after all this time, you’re still bringing her up as a bone of contention, knowing you were never fully in the relationship.”

“You’re still not listening—”

“No. Because that’s not my job anymore. Thank you, Jen, for showing me what love isn’t. I think we both ended up exactly where we were meant to be. Marriage to you would’ve been hell for us both. I couldn’t see it then, but it’s all too clear now.”

Open-mouthed, she huffs before she spins on her heels.

“Nice talking to you, too.” I stand taller, lighter for closing an old chapter. The men in my family love hard, and she’d been my first serious romance. A year out, my vision is a lot clearer.

“It’s our honor to bring you the tree lighting every year. Because of that, we’re offering fifteen percent off every tree purchased today.”

I love the pride she has in her family’s business. Seeing her hits differently now that I have a claim on her. Even if it’s only temporary. *It doesn’t have to be.* 3-2-1. The countdown pulls me from my musing as the crowd cheers, and Dec flips a switch, turning on the light.

Bathed in the glow of the soft white bulbs, she’s an angel come to life. The veil has lifted, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to place it back over my eyes. She walks toward me, and my heart swells with pride. I want this, and I’m willing to fight to get it.

## CHAPTER 2



Dec

*Never forget, he doesn't really belong to you.* Paralyzed, I feign normalness as I sit beside E on the gray couch. Self-preservation is a life raft I'm clinging to as I struggle in the sea of emotions our lies have unleashed. Stepping into our new status has been as easy as breathing, which terrifies me. I have to hold back or lose myself in the con.

"We need to talk." E's voice drags me from my thoughts.

"About?" I stare at the television, not ready to meet his intense gaze. He's always had a way of seeing through me.

"Whatever has you so tense? You've been quiet and distant for the past day. That's not like you." He touches my arm. "Look at me."

I turn to face him on the couch. "I'm not."

"Every time I touch you, you pull away." His voice softens. "It's noticeable."

I exhale. "I hadn't realized."

"What's going on, Dec. We don't do secrets?" The worry flooding his large brown eyes guts me.

"I just feel like eyes are always on us. Everyone is speculating on details of our romance or oohing and aahing. I guess it's giving me performance anxiety."

E hums. “I can see how it’s off-putting.” He takes my hand, holding it between his. “But none of them matter. It’s just us.”

*That’s the problem.* I squirm in my seat, moving away from E. “I know that.” I tuck a curl behind my ear.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I reply defensively.

He leans in, and I jerk away, tumbling off the couch with a squawk. “Ow.”

“Yeah, I can tell you’re not nervous at all,” he says dryly.

“Okay. Maybe I’m a little rattled.” I sit up, and he offers me his hand, pulling me up and onto the couch.

“We just need practice.”

“Practice?” I wrinkle my nose.

“Being intimate.”

“I don’t know if that’s—”

He pulls me onto his lap, and my words dry up like water in the desert. Engulfed by his warmth, strength, and earthy smell, my brain momentarily goes offline. He runs a hand down my arm, and I shudder.

“We’re not used to being this close.” He runs the top of his nose up and down my neck. “It’s understandable.”

“What are we doing?” I whisper breathlessly.

“Getting cozy.” He places a large hand over my waist, and I lean back into him, arching slightly.

“It’s not so bad, is it?”

“N-no.” My voice quakes.

“All we’re doing is expressing our affection in a new way.” The bulge in his pants grows beneath me.

My core grows damp in response. I’m affecting E like this.

“You can touch me too, December.” His voice is deeper and husky. His lips brush against my neck, and I groan.

“Would you like that?” he nips the skin on my neck.  
“Touching me?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“Do it.” As he has our entire lives, he eggs me on. Never one to back down, I turn sideways in his lap. Meeting his low-lidded gaze, I press my trembling hand on his chest. His pecs contract, and his nostrils flare as he inhales sharply.

I explore his hard planes with my fingertips. Leaning in, I inhale his scent, hovering over his pulse point. My lips brush against the spot, feeling the rapid beating of his heart. I taste his salty skin with my tongue, and he moans. The sound rumbles through his large frame. I circle my hips as his insistent bulge continues to grow.

E grunts. “Tease.”

I throw my leg over his body, bracketing his rigid frame. “I thought we were learning each other,” I whisper coyly.

His large hands cup my cheeks, and he rocks up into me. “I can feel your heat through your tights right now, Dec. You like what we’re doing.”

*Cocky.* “And I can feel how much you’re enjoying this.”

“I’m not trying to hide it.” His thick length presses against me, and I groan. My eyes flutter closed as I arch my back and grind against him. “There it is. Show me how good this feels.”

“So good.” Slow and unhurried, I undulate against him, enjoying the drag against my aching quim. Clit swelling and pussy dripping, I quickly forget my worries about blurred lines.

“Are you wet right now, Dec?” Pushing me down with his hands, he thrusts up. The pace increases, and my pussy throbs.

“Yes.” I whimper.

“Can you come like this?”

“I think so.”

“I want to watch you come apart, Dec. I want to see those parts that you’ve hidden all this time.”



I dig my nails into his shoulders as his raspy voice washes over me.

“No secrets.”

“No secrets,” I breathe the words out. A cry of pleasure follows as we increase our pace, dry-humping like horny teens. “Please, E.”

“I’ll always give you what you need,” he croons.

The pleasure builds in my belly as my chest tightens, and my walls tighten. “I’m close.” The words are a whine as I move with him, straining to reach the release, dancing just beyond my reach.

“Come apart for me, December. Let me see how pretty you look, coating my cock with your come.”

The dirty words tip the scale. I jerk, tumbling headlong into an intense orgasm that rips a guttural cry from between my lips. Convulsing in his lap, I flood my panties and sink deeper into the gray area between friends and something more.

Holding me close, he whispers praise into my ears. “You look so pretty when you come December. Thank you for showing me.” Placing gentle kisses on my forehead and cheeks, he rubs my back as I float in the blissful aftereffects.

His cock flexes under me.

“What about you?” I whisper as I slowly swim to the surface of awareness.

“This wasn’t for me.” He cups the side of my face and rubs his thumb over my lip.

I suck the digit into my mouth.

E hisses. “Dec.”

I twirl my tongue around his thumb, sucking him deeper as I mimic a blow job. I meet his gaze, hypnotized by the desire I see smoldering in the depths of his chocolate pools. Rolling my hips, I coax a moan from his full, dark pink lips. I release his thumb with a pop and lean back.

“I want to see you too, E.” I tighten my grip around his hips. “Let me see your hidden side.”

“Dec.” his gravelly growl makes my belly flip.

“Show me,” I whisper.

He grasps my hips, fingers digging into my skin hard enough to leave bruises. The thought of his marks on my skin excites me.

“Do you like being in control, Manny?”

“I don’t think you’re ready for what I like, Dec.”

His words reignite the fire in my gut.

I bounce down on his lap, and he moans. “No. Secrets.” I chant the two words in time with my movements. His jaw tenses, and I watch the man I’ve known all my life morph before my eyes. His hand comes down on my ass cheek twice and two more times on the opposite side. Holding me in place, his eyes are molten fire as he grips my chin.

“Stubborn. You had to push it, and now you’ll learn.”

“E?” I whisper.

“You want to know this side of me? Get on your knees and open that pretty little mouth of yours. I want to fill it with something to keep that sassy mouth quiet.” The words send a thrill through me. I scramble to my knees before him, eager to please and see him in his element. He smirks, and I groan.

“Do you enjoy giving me control?”

I nod, unable to speak as embarrassment heats my cheeks and shock silences my mouth. I’ve never responded to anyone like this before.

“Because you know I’ll never do anything to hurt you, don’t you?”

“I trust you.”

“I wanted to take things slowly, but you’ve always gotten your way with me, haven’t you?” He chuckles. “Open your mouth.” I part my lips, and he slips two fingers inside. “Suck.”

As my arousal builds, I suckle, pressing my thighs together. “I never knew how much I needed to see you on your knees for me.”

I whimper as his words go straight to my clit.

“You like it when I dirty talk. Filthy girl.”

I close my eyes as I grow wetter and hollow my cheeks, sucking harder.

“Look at what you’re doing to me,” he growls.

I open my eyes and watch him palm the bulge straining against his jeans. He strokes up. My mouth waters at the dick print he’s highlighted. His dick matches the rest of him.

“You still want to make me come, December?”

I nod my head.

He removes his fingers and makes quick work of his belt. The clink of the metal belt buckle and the whisper of cloth as he pulls out his veiny member make my heart jump.

Nine inches of thick muscle with a vein running down the right side, his cock drips. I wrap my hand around his base and pump up, admiring his swollen, red mushroom-shaped head. Unable to resist, I swallow him down, meeting his half-mast stare.

His dick twitches, and I hum as I take him to the back of my throat.

He hisses, burying a hand in my hair. “Look at those lips stretched around me.” He guides me at a steady pace. I stroke him as he thrusts into my mouth. I love the feel of the soft carpet beneath me and the fire in my belly from his gaze.

Needy sounds spill from his lip, and I gather them to me like precious gems. I’ll cherish this open vulnerability. I’ve never felt this connected to another man. As he snaps his hips and uses my mouth, I feel his pleasure as my own.

“That’s it. Take all of me.” He groans. Flush-faced, he grits his teeth as muscles pulse in his neck. I hum, and he grunts.

“I’m going to give you exactly what you’re looking for.”

*Oh, holy night, the stars are brightly shining.* I vaguely recognize the sound of carolers approaching.

“Shit. It’s my family.” He hisses.

I cup his ass, keeping him in place.

“You still want me to finish? Naughty little December.” He pants as his rhythm grows frantic. Driving into my throat once, twice, he explodes, releasing a warm stream that makes me choke as I struggle to take him all down.

Breathing hard, we ignore the knocking on the door as we catch our breath. E kisses me sweetly.

“Thank you. Get cleaned up so we can pretend we weren’t just doing this,” E whispers.

I snicker, and he brushes his thumb over the corner of my mouth. “Missed some.” He pushes in the escaped liquid, and I swallow it as he helps me to my feet. The knocking becomes more insistent, and he yanks up his pants, fumbling with his buckle.

“Coming.”

I rush to the bathroom, giggling as he tries to get himself together and deal with his family. How will I look them in the eyes after having him jammed down my throat? I look at myself in the mirror. How do I tell him I want to do this again and again? Gripping the sink, I take in the dewy glow of my face and the joy in my eyes. How could I ever contain this and return to how we were? I close my eyes. Have I let my childish desire to gain my mother’s approval ruin us?

\*\*\*

I glance at the rest of the family cheerily serenading the elderly patients in the common room of Maple Crest retirement home.

Gathered in rows of folding chairs and along the perimeter of the room in wheelchairs and scooters, the enjoyment on their face makes me smile.

“You want to tell me what’s actually going on?” My cousin’s voice comes from just behind me.

“What are you talking about?”

Bryan shakes his head. “There’s no way you could keep this under wraps for six months. Not from me, at least.”

“We explained why—”

“Don’t insult me like that, bro.” Bryan’s brow dips.

I exhale, weighing my options.

“Last I knew, you didn’t have those feelings for her. At least that’s what you’ve sworn to me for years. How long have you been lying?”

“It’s not like that.” I shake my head.

“No? Explain it then.” Bryan crosses his arms over his chest.

I glance around. I could use Bryan’s advice about the mess I’m in. “Alright. But not here.”

“You know, we always help serve them hot cocoa. Let’s volunteer in the kitchen.”

Catching Dec’s eyes, I gesture toward the kitchen, and she nods before continuing her conversation with a curly white-haired woman knitting what looks to be a blanket. I smile at the nurse at the information center as we move toward the kitchen. Knocking, I stick my head in.

“Hey, Mrs. Anna. We’re here to get the cocoa set up.” I tell the head cook we’ve been working with for years.

The plump woman’s gray hair is smoothed down and pulled back into a low-hanging ponytail. She waves us in with a kind smile. She perched her round silver spectacles on her small nose. With round cheeks and jovial disposition, she’s always reminded me of Mrs. Claus. Not that I’d ever say that out loud.

“Excellent! The residents always look forward to this.” She grins. “The hot chocolate is in the crock pot, ready to go along with the whipped cream in the fridge. You boys know where the mugs are. Place them on the trays, and we’ll start delivering them in five minutes or so.”

“It’ll be ready.” She slips back out of the kitchen, and we head to the cupboard to remove the white mugs.

“Alright, start talking.” Bryan isn’t giving me a chance to weasel out of an explanation.

“I never admitted my feelings for Dec because I didn’t allow myself to dwell on them. We both know how romance can ruin a friendship. It was easier to stay in the safe space of friends. I was okay with remaining that way until she pulled me into her fantasy.”

“Wait. Is this a kinky thing?” He wags his eyebrows up and down.

“Stop.” I elbow him, and he chuckles as we finish filling the second tray with mugs.

“What? I wasn’t kink-shaming. I was simply enquiring.” We move the silver trays toward the black crockpots.

“No, she told her mother she was dating someone, and then I walked in, and she kissed me.”

“And how was that?” Bryan asks carefully.

“Like being electrocuted and having glasses placed on so you can finally see clearly. It all just clicked into place with that one gesture.”

“Does she know this?”

“No. she thinks we’re trying to convince everyone else. I mean, the chemistry is undeniable.” I shake my head. “But she doesn’t know it’s driven by emotions.”

“You should tell her.”

“She has enough on her plate between the Gingerbread House Contest and the usual business of the season. I don’t want to add to it.”

“That’s thoughtful. It’s also bull crap.”

“What?” I scowl at him.

He shrugs. “You’re afraid of what she’ll actually say.”

“I’d be a fool not to be.” Taking the lid off the Crockpot, I carefully ladle the sweet nectar into the mugs.

“This is your chance to put all your cards on the table and see where you both stand. You two, together, doesn’t feel artificial to me.”

“That’s the point of the ruse, Bry.” Bitterness tinges my words.

“I think you’re both in denial. The fake relationship angle gives you the freedom to act on things you’ve both ignored over the years.”

“And you’re suddenly a relationship sage now? Why?”

“I’m more of an Emanuele and December expert. We’ve been friends for too long for me not to have picked up on things. I think the way this came about is less than ideal, but it’s given you a unique opportunity. The real question is what you plan to do with that.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“What’s making it hard?” Bryan asks.

“Anything I do, she’s going to think is false.”

“Make it clear it’s more than that.”

“How?”

“You’re smart. I think you can figure out a way. Besides, it’s making her addicted to it. The reveal can come after she’s hosted her event.”

I open my mouth and close it, unable to dispute his logic. Moving past me, he opens the fridge and grabs two cans of whip cream. He hands me one. “There’s no holding the line. It’s already blurred as shit. Use this time to figure out what’s truly in your head and heart, and show her. Treat this as if you’re playing for keeps. Because you are.”

“I don’t want to lose her.”

“What if you could keep her forever at your side, in your bed, sharing your life and creating a family?”

The imagery his words invoke fills me with contentment and happiness. Denying it any longer would be ridiculous. Bowing my head, I continue topping the mugs as I mull over his words. There's no reward without risk, and Dec is worth it.

"Don't get used to me saying this, but you're right."

"Finally, someone in this family recognizes my genius."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"So, you're going for it?" Bryan raises an eyebrow.

"I can't let go of what we've uncovered. It's like living on land and suddenly realizing there's gold, and you're suddenly rich."

"That's very poetic of you."

"I can't wait until someone knocks you on your ass, Bryan."

"Hah. That'll be the day. I'm a confirmed bachelor and loving it. You can keep all that." He makes a circle with his finger. "Over there."

"Oh no. I'm using my Christmas wish on you. Christmas spirit, if you're listening, send Bryan his perfect match."

"Why would you curse me like that primo?" Bryan says, making me laugh.

Mrs. Anna opens the door, and we finish the trays as I formulate a plan. I'll make it so good, she won't be able to think about returning to the way we used to be.

Twenty minutes later, we're leaving the center hand in hand and waving to my folks.

"What are you doing?" She stops at the corner and looks to the left. "Home is that way."

"I know. But we're not headed home."

"We aren't?" Her eyes widen.

"No. I have other plans for you."

Her eyes darken, and I look away before she can tempt me into taking her home and showing her physically what she



does to me.

She clears her throat. “Where are we going?”

“That’s not how surprises work, Dec.”

“Not even a hint?” She prods me with her finger.

I laugh. “The town is tiny. You’ll see first-hand soon enough.” I click my tongue. “Always so impatient.”

“You already know this Emanuele.”

“Someone should teach you how to wait.” I lick my lips as images of her begging me to let her find her release dance in my head.

She purses her plump pout. “Please. I haven’t met a man capable of doing that yet.”

“Oh, I think you have.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “E?”

“Waiting can be fun too, when it’s something worthwhile.” I run my thumb over the top of her hand. “You haven’t met your match before now. For the right man, I think you could wait nicely.”

She swallows hard. “That’s an interesting theory.”

“Theories are meant to be tested.” I pull her closer and admire the bright red cape with white faux fur trim. As I finger the soft downy material, I brush her curves with my knuckles.

“Is that so?” she teases.

“That’s how we learn and grow. Sometimes we don’t realize things could be done differently. Better.” I place a hand on her hip.

“Those are deep thoughts,” she whispers breathlessly.

“The holidays bring them out in the best of us, don’t they?” A car drives by, highlighting the sign beside us.

“Oh, my God! You’re taking me to Ice Castle.” She turns to me as we pause at the end of the street. Her lips turn down at the corner. “You don’t like ice skating.”

“No, but you do.” I trail my finger down her face.

She throws her arms around my waist, hugging me close, and I smooth the wild curls back from her face. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Dec.” I kiss her temple. “I know it doesn’t feel like the Christmas season until you get out on the ice, and you’ve been so busy lately you haven’t yet.”

“You noticed that?” she asks, voice muffled by my shirt.

“I notice a lot of things.” I squeeze her neck, massaging away the tightness. “Let’s get you some skates, Michelle Kwan.”

“Rude, but I’ll allow it since you’re taking me skating.” Stepping away, she tugs on my hand, urging me toward the small rink they erect yearly in the center of town.

Her bright smile is a beacon in the night, and I can’t do anything but bask in her radiance. It’s been months since I’ve seen her like this. Shelving the previous conversation, I allow her to lead.

The cardboard cutouts of the *Ice Castle* are just as cheesy as ever but lovingly up kept. The king and his family evoke nostalgia as they smile up at us from their winter wonderland background.

The King’s royal outfit is a rich purple. While his wife’s a deep blue. The princess is wearing a bright red dress with fur cuffs.

“This has always reminded me of a game board come to life,” Dec says as we take our place in the back of the line for skate rentals.

“I remember. You used to make me play princess with you.”

“I let you be a prince.”

“More like forced me. I wanted to be a knight.”

She laughs. “I wanted us to match, so everyone understood we belonged together.”

The words feel profound in lieu of our situation. “Possessive, even at that young age?” I tug one of her curls, and she grins.

“No. Just smart enough to know I had something worth protecting.”

“You couldn’t lose me if you tried, December. You know that, right?”

“I never wanted to find out.” Opening my arms, I welcome her in. She rests her head on my chest, and I pull her close.

“You won’t.”

“Did I screw everything up for us?” She whispers.

“Why would you ask me that?”

She bites her bottom lip.

“Do you think you did?”

“I’m not sure. Things aren’t the same.” She lifts her head up. “You feel it too, right?”

“Does that have to be a bad thing? People grow, relationships evolve, and bonds deepen.”

“Is that what this is?”

“It could be—”

“Daddy, her’s a princess!” A tiny blonde dressed like one of the Disney characters approaches us. “Just like on the sign.”

“Cammie, don’t bother those nice people.” The dad whispers.

“But Daddy, look. Hers got a cape, and she’s so pretty.” The blonde—Cammie points, leaning her head back to stare at December. I grin down and wave. I can’t blame her for being taken by my girl dressed in caroling flare.

The flustered dad smiles bashfully. “I’m sorry about this.”

Grinning, Dec kneels. “I’m December. Who are you?”

“I’m Cammie. Are you a princess from the Ice Castle?” the little girl asks.

December looks around sneakily and nods. She holds a finger up to her lips. "I'll tell you a secret, though. Everyone is a princess when we come to skate here."

"We are?" Cammie whispers.

"Yes, so you get to be a princess, too."

"Daddy, did you hear her?"

"I did, Princess Cammie." Dec winks at him as he mouths, *thank you*.

"We should let the princess and her prince skate now, don't you think?"

"Uh huh," Cammie nods. "Bye-bye." Waving, she places her hand in her father's and toddles off.

"And you said I *made* you be a prince. Clearly, you just have a royal air about you." She stands, and we both laugh. The moment's lost, but the conversation is far from finished.

## CHAPTER 3



December

I can't stop the giggle from escaping from my lips as E brushes his lips across mine.

"You're the cutest elf I've ever seen."

"Stop it." I push at his chest playfully.

"What? Just passing along my thoughts before I have to hide until the grand reveal." I smooth down the material on the front of his Santa Suit.

"You better sell the holy jolly tonight, Scrooge."

"What? Just because I hate donning the suit doesn't mean I can't play the role. This thing is itchy and hot."

"And the kids look at you like you hang the moon. You make their entire year."

"Way to pour it on thick, Santa's helper."

I move to pinch his side lightly and find fluff. "Nice to know the padding is good for something."

I like the feel of his hand wrapped around my hip, warming me through the green dress with the red Peter Pan collar. My red tights and green elf shoes with yellow bells on the ends set off my jagged hemline.

"It's kind of disturbing finding Santa hot."

"You think I'm hot?" he flashes me a dimpled smile.

I roll my eyes. "Don't let it go to your head."

“Santa, we’re ready for you in the back,” one of the organizers calls.

“Duty calls. Be good for Santa while I’m gone.”

I open my mouth to cut him down to size, and he silences me, stealing my snarky response. I melt against him, placing a hand on his chest. He pulls away, winking as I turn to watch him leave, slightly dazed, and stare into the fiery blue gaze of my other best friend.

My stomach plummeted, and I swallow.

Nora stalks forward with a stack of white boxes with the Shore’s bakery logo on the front and a narrowed gaze that tells me I’m in trouble.

“Back room.”

Hurrying ahead of her, I hold the door and allow her to enter. I’d put off talking to her about my scheme for selfish reasons, and it bit me in the ass. I hate finding myself on my bestie’s crap list.

Raised with three older brothers, the petite woman is vicious when she needs to be. She sets the boxes down gingerly and spins to face me. The bell on the tip of her green elf hat jingles as she places her hands on her hip.

With her large cornflower blue eyes and light blonde hair, she epitomizes a workshop elf. Her cheeks blush as she purses her bee-stung rose-colored lips. Her toe taps, making the white cotton ball on the tip of the curved red elf shoe shake.

I tug on one of my curls and rock back, ready for her to let me have it. Cookies with Santa is a yearly tradition. We pair with other local businesses to give the kids a chance to decorate a cookie to take home and meet the man in the red suit himself.

“You want to tell me what the hell is going on, December?”

I glance around the church’s kitchen to ensure we don’t have an audience.

“Shhh.” I put a finger to my lips. “Not so loud.”

“Imagine my shock when everyone’s asking me for the inside scoop on you and Emanuele, caught kissing all around town, and I have nothing to say.” A hurt expression crosses her face. “Because I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“It’s not like that.”

“What the hell did I just see then?” She barks.

Can I tell her the truth? “Me and E testing the waters.”

“Since when was that even a thought?” Her voice raises an octave. “I don’t understand. We don’t keep secrets like this.”

I bite my bottom lip. I can’t do this to Nora. “Okay. Promise not to tell anyone else if I tell you?”

I shift my weight from one side to the other.

“Promise. Now spill.”

“We’re fake dating.”

She blinks. “You’re what now?”

“Fake—”

She waves me off. “No, I heard you. It’s just ridiculous. Why in the hell would you do that?” She blows the strands of hair falling over her forehead out of her eyes.

“Because Mom cornered me, I ran my mouth, told her I was seeing someone, and panicked.”

“And that leads to your mouth on E’s how?” She rolls her hand rapidly, demanding more information.

“Well, since I told her we were dating, we have to act the part.”

“And E was the first person to come to your mind as a romantic interest because?”

“I don’t know.” I cover my face.

“Jesus.” She gently lowers my hands. “You have to stop seeking your family’s approval.”

“I know,” I whisper.

She sighs. “Do you? It’s okay to do things on your time schedule.” A sly look crossed her face, turning her into a playful fairy. “Though, what I saw earlier looked pretty damn real.”

“It’s to get us used to being intimate.” I refuse to think of how it made my lips tingle and my knees weaken.

“And how long do you plan to keep up this farce?”

“Six months to a year.”

“And then you both expect to walk away and have things will go back to normal?” She asks skeptically.

“Yes.”

“I nearly burst into flames just watching you. I thought he was going to drag you into a closet and give you a special present.” She winks.

“Nora.”

She grins proudly. “Just calling it how I see it.”

“He is an incredible kisser. I got carried away.”

“I bet he’s good at other things, too. You should find out.” Hearing the words I’ve been thinking spoken out loud by someone else panics me.

“Don’t make more out of this than there needs to be,” I warn her.

“Are you sure you’re not making enough of it?” She throws the words back at me like we’re playing a ping-pong game.

“That doesn’t even make sense.” I move past her to the boxes, unstacking them to keep my hands busy and her gaze off me.

“So, we’re pretending that this whole scenario won’t backfire?” She nods. “Alright then.”

“Why would it?” I ask against my better judgment.

“I’m not even going to dignify that with an answer.” Snorting, she moves across to the large silver trays on the



counter.

“I suppose you think you have a better suggestion?” I open a box and hand her the prepackaged sugar cookies shaped like bells and trees.

“Instead of being stubborn, you could use this time to answer the what-ifs I know you’ve had from time to time.” Her crystalline gaze bores a hole straight into my soul.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“Why?” Nora doubles down, refusing to let the subject drop.

“Because it could blow up in our face, and leave a crater behind in my heart that I can never fill in.” I close my eyes and grip the edge of the counter.

“And you don’t think that means something?” She nudges my side.

“Drop it, please.” My voice quavers and my chest grows tight.

“Not when I believe you’re making a mistake you’ll regret later.”

“And what about you?” I slap my hands on the table.

“What about me?” Nora counters, stiffening.

I huff. “I’m not the only one carrying a flame for a friend.”

She gasps. “That’s a low blow.”

“If you can’t stand the heat.” I lift my chin.

“It’s different. Bryan is a playboy. The last thing he wants to do is settle down. He’s said so himself a million times.”

Her face grows pinched.

“That’s in reference to some other imaginary person, not you. His best friend.”

“Stop it. We’re talking about you, not me and Bryan,” her voice raises.

“Doesn’t feel good to be put on the spot, does it?”

“You fight dirty.”

“No. I’m proving a point.”

“And what if I told him how I felt?” She lifts her chin, and her eyes darken with determination.

“What?” I ask, shocked.

“He’s asked me for personal baking lessons. He wants to surprise his mom with a traditional dessert for Christmas. I could use that time to share my feelings.”

“Oh, my God. You’re serious.”

“I’ll do it if you promise you’ll give this a real chance. Maybe this Christmas, we can both be brave.” Hope shimmers in the depth of her eyes. After watching the two of them circle each other for years, I won’t put that out with my own negativity. This could be their chance at a real shot at happiness.

“How come I haven’t heard about these baking lessons until now?” I feel a pang of disappointment.

“You’ve been so busy I didn’t want to bother you, and honestly, it’s nothing. Bryan’s a fantastic cook but a chaotic baker, and that’s being nice. With cooking, you can improvise, taste test, and make our own rules. Baking is more disciplined.”

“Something our dear Bryan lacks sorely.”

She laughs. “You’re not wrong. We’re on our second lesson.”

“How bad has it been?” I whisper. I’ve heard of his stories in the kitchen during the holidays and smelled a few of Bryan’s failures.

She grimaces. “He turned sugar cookies into hockey pucks.”

“There are only a few weeks until Christmas.”

She winces. “I know. But I can’t watch Bry fall flat on his face when I know how much it means to him.”

“If you can’t get him together, no one can.”

Her shoulders slump. “That’s not the compliment you think it is.”

“You’re worried?” I’m surprised by how worked up she’s getting.

“It’s such a sweet sentiment, and he has nothing planned as a backup gift.”

“We both know Carmen would count his trying as the true gift.”

She smiles. “Yeah, but I want him to shock everyone.” The venom in her words is easy to hear.

“What’s going on, Nora?” I study her carefully. “You don’t seem like yourself.”

“Everyone sees him as the funny, party guy. Did you know his brothers bet him he couldn’t do this?” Her small hands ball into fists. “I want to prove them and himself wrong. He’s amazing, and I think he can do anything he puts his mind to.”

“Of course he can.” I run a hand down her arms.

“Sorry.” She smiles sheepishly. “I guess I have strong feelings about this.”

“To say the least.”

“So, we have a deal?” she chirps brightly.

“Yeah. We have a deal.” We seal the agreement with a hug. I can’t help but notice her smile is a wider, and her entire mood is lighter. I can keep an open mind and let myself consider new things in exchange for her joy. *Because you’re doing this for her, huh?* I silence my negative inner monologue.

“For the sake of good sportsmanship, I have to tell you something.” I pause dramatically.

“Oh?” Her brow dips as she studies me.

“E’s sister Amanda canceled because her daughter Hope is sick. Bryan is filling in with the flower truck.”

“He’s coming?” She squawks.

“Surprise. There’s no better time to get used to sharing your true feelings than the present.”

Her mouth drops open.

“The flowers are here.” Bryan’s voice drifts through the church, and I cackle. I’m not the only one forced to face uncomfortable truths.

\*\*\*

**E**

I open the front door of my condo, and a chilly blast enters with Bryan, who stomps his feet on the carpet. I’m shocked by the amount of white that’s coated the town in under an hour.

“Hope you two are prepared to put us up overnight because it’s getting bad out there.” He unwinds the scarf from around his neck.

“Oh, no.” Dec hops up and hurries over to the window. “Was there anyone coming in behind you?”

The light flurries have turned to heavy snowflakes falling swiftly.

“No. Nora isn’t here yet?” Bryan asks.

“No, and she should’ve left the bakery thirty minutes ago.”

“You know how it is at the bakery. Nora might’ve gotten caught doing something last minute.” I massage Dec’s shoulder.

“No. She knows better than to linger when a storm is due to hit.”

“Yes, she does.” Bryan re-wraps the scarf around his neck.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m going to drive the route to make sure she didn’t get stuck somewhere.”

“Then you’ll both be out there.”

“She has that tiny gas efficient non sturdy menace she drives. I’m not trusting it with her safety in this. The temperature dropped, and there were some pockets of ice. I’ll be fine.”

“Bryan—”

Dec grabs my arm. I look down at her, and she shakes her head. “Let him go.” She mouths.

“Keep us updated, okay?”

“I’ll be careful.” Turning, he walks out of the house and down the steps in a determined march. He makes it to the end of the drive when a small two-door sedan pulls up and into the four-car driveway.

The car cuts off, and the small blonde opens the door, climbing out with a duffle bag and gray hat with a pink pom on the top.

“Why are you so late? We were worried.” His voice carries over the wind.

“I had to deal with something at the shop—.”

“You know better.”

“Calm down, Bryan. I grew up in Colorado too. I know how to drive in snow and keep everything I need for an emergency in the car.”

“If you’d upgrade to something sturdier, we could all relax.” He takes the bag from her and waits as she locks up.

“What’s that about?” I whisper.

“I’m not sure yet.” Dec’s smile doesn’t match her nonchalant response.

“Are they,” I squint, taking in the way they step closer to one another, “dating?”

“No. Still just friends.”

“Are you sure?” I ask doubtfully as they continue up the walk toward us.

“Positive. Do you think Bryan and Nora should be more?” She leans against me.

“He’s different with her.” I want to see my cousin with someone who makes him happy. There’s nothing wrong with playing the field, but his conquests seem hollow lately.

We’re not getting any younger, and with everyone pairing up and settling down, he and I were the odd men out more often than not. Maybe he’s feeling lonely? I open the door to usher them inside. I watch, fascinated, as Bryan helps her out of her hat and coat.

Nora removes her gloves, and he tucks them into her hat before adding them to her coat sleeve. There’s a subtle intimacy about the procedure that leaves me wondering how much time they’ve spent together.

“I’m so glad you made it safe and sound.” Dec steps forward and sweeps Nora into a hug.

“I didn’t receive that same welcome,” Bryan teases.

Rolling her eyes, Dec steps away and hugs him. “You, too.”

“Let’s get you a cup of tea. We’ll bring you guys hot chocolate?” Dec, look at me.

“Sounds good,” I nod.

“With whipped cream, please. Nora, you know how I like it,” Bryan adds.

Nora nods and tucks her arm into Dec’s before they walk away from the entrance.

“You want to share with the class?” I ask the minute the women are out of earshot.

“No?” Bryan arches a brow.

“That was pretty touchy-feely.”

“Helping her out of her coat? You do the same for Dec all the time.” Bryan freezes. “Or do you have the corner on gentlemanly behavior?”

“That is not what I said.”

“No, but insinuated, wasn’t it?”

“You know me better than that, Bry. What the hell is going on?”

He closes his eyes. “Do you ever just feel stuck?”

“In what way?”

“Trapped by your past and people’s expectations.”

“I think we all feel that way occasionally. What happened?”

“Peter Pan decided he wanted to grow up and found the new future daunting.” He gives a self-depreciating chuckle. “Figures, doesn’t it?”

“You’ve always been light-hearted, but you’ve never been irresponsible or daft. Where is this coming from?”

“I want things I’m not worthy of, E.”

“According to who?” I ask, knowing exactly what or *who* he’s talking about.

“Anyone with common sense.”

“I don’t agree.”

He looks at me.

“Take it from a man who spent a long time not chasing his dreams. You feel that way for a reason, and from my view, it’s mutual.”

He opens his mouth to speak, and the lights flicker and go out. The girls scream. I glance down at the cranberry-glazed candles that flicker cheerily on the table and mantle above the fire, giving off enough ambient light to see.

“Fate might be on your side tonight.” I move to the tv stand and grab the portable generator we keep charged and ready to go during winter weather.

Unplugging the television from the power strip, I plug it into the generator. It turns on as the girls walk out of the kitchen with a flashlight.

“I have good news. Movie night is still on. The fire will be courtesy of Bryan. Dec and I will have to scramble a bit to get things settled while you pick a good movie, Nora.”

“Slumber party!” Dec calls.

“Someone’s excited,” Nora mutters.

“You love me, and you know it,” Dec kissed her cheek. “Be good, children. We’ll be back with the snacks and have a cozy night in as promised.” She winks, and I walk over to join her, guiding her into the kitchen.

Once we’re alone, I lift her onto the counter and step between her legs.

“E—” I silence her conversation with my mouth, wanting to show her with more than words how right this is between us. Humming, she returns my enthusiasm. Her doubts and concern fade as I run my hands over her body, massaging her thick thighs as she rocks against me. I pull back.

“Careful, or I’ll show you more than I meant to right here with our friends in the living room.”

Her sharp intake of air is a challenge I almost want to take. Breathing hard, I place my forehead against her.

“You tempt me.”

“Is this practice?” she asks huskily.

“Does it need to be?” I whisper. Here in the dark, secrets are easier to share.

“I-I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Don’t do that.” I squeeze her quivering thighs.

“E.” The lights click on, exposing us, ending the anonymity, and sealing her lips shut.

“You can’t always hide from the light, December. We both know I’m a man who chases what he wants.” I tilt her face up. “Tell me you want me to stop.”

“I can’t.”

“Show me,” I demand.



Licking her lips, she scoots to the edge of the counter and runs her hands down my abdomen, making my muscles jump in response. Her hand slides into my gray sweatpants and beneath my boxers. I bite my bottom lip and let my head fall back as she grasps me and strokes.

“You start that, and you’ll have to finish it.”

“Good.” She latches on to my neck like a vampire, and I rock my hips into her hand. It’s fast and dirty as she pumps me, skimming the pad of her thumb over my leaking tip. It’s my every secret fantasy come true. “I want you to come for me, Emanuele. Show me how good I’m making you feel.”

Tightening her grip, she quickens the pace. I grit my teeth as I match her stroke for stroke. The base of my spine tingles, and my balls draw up tight.

“I’m going to.”

I grunt as she releases me and slips from the counter, hitting her knee. She pulls down my pants and takes me into her mouth, hollowing her cheeks. Captured between her soft lips in her hot wet mouth, I explode. Swallowing down every drop, she pulls back and tucks me away. I run a thumb over her lips.

“I don’t want to stop. That terrifies me, but I won’t pretend.”

“That’s my good girl.” I help her stand.

“Where are we headed—”

“You guys need help in there?” Nora calls.

“No. We’ll be out in a minute.” I call mentally cursing.

Dec looks away, and I wrap my arm around her neck. “Wherever we’re headed, it’s together.” I bite my tongue to hold back the words of devotion and forever. I’ve got one chance at this, and I plan on making it count.

## CHAPTER 4



December

“Why are you still in the same position I left you in three hours ago?”

I look up from the papers surrounding me on the black tv tray and frown at E. His tone is stern and serious. “What?”

A muscle ticks in his jaw, and he shuts the door. I jump as it slams, and he stalks toward me with a determined stride.

“Have you even moved once, December?” Halting beside me, his eyebrows kiss as waves of disapproval pour off him.

“No?”

“That’s it.” He shuts my laptop.

“What are you doing? I need to make sure everyone is on task.”

“No more.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I just did. Between work and this event, you’re burning the wick at both ends of the candle. You’re not eating or sleeping.” Shaking his head, he skims the dark circles forming under my eyelids. “I know how important this is to you. I’m here to help you anyway I can, and so is the rest of your family.”

“No. This is my event,” I mumble stubbornly. “I need to prove I can do this on my own. They still see me as the baby, and I’m sick of it.” The ire and strong pull to impress them

fuels me. A fresh burst of energy has me ready to tackle the lengthy checklist anew.

He grips my chin. “You are enough exactly as you are.”

I blink back the water as my eyes well. “You say that as my best friend.”

“Since when do I do anything I don’t want to, Dec?”

“You don’t.” My lower lip trembles.

“I will help you make the Gingerbread Contest go off without a hitch. But you can’t keep pouring from an empty cup. You’ll get sick or make a mistake you’ll never forgive yourself for. I won’t let that happen on my watch.”

I pull away from him. “You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“When you’re putting yourself and your dream in danger, I do. The people who love us most know when to step in and save us from ourselves.”

He trails the backs of his hand down my face. “Besides, you’re mine now.”

“I’m not a thing.”

“No. You’re a woman who asked me to be your man for the time being, and I take that seriously.”

His words are twisting my stomach into knots, and the idea of someone caring for me is an unexpected aphrodisiac. There are few people in my life I trust as much as the man leaning over me with fire in his eyes.

“Emanuele.”

“I’ve watched this go on for long enough. The rest of the night is mine.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Fighting is my default setting. As the youngest of three girls in a busy family, I’ve always had to work hard to be seen, heard, and valued. Letting go feels wrong.

“Stop overthinking.” He smooths his thumb down the center of my forehead, easing the flexed muscle. “Breathe.”

Eye fluttering shut, I inhale and exhale.

“That’s my girl. Keep breathing. I’ll be right back.”

Centering myself, I take a moment to reconnect and relax. I roll my neck and shoulders. The scent of pine assaults my nostrils as I hear his boots on the entryway. I turn to him and gasp at the large netted evergreen tree being wrestled inside.

“I come bearing gifts.”

“You got us a tree?” I rise from my seat on the couch.

“It’s tradition.” He grins as he props the tree against the wall. “And that’s not all.”

Shrugging the backpack off his shoulder, he opens it and presents a dark green Coleman Thermos.

“Nana’s hot chocolate.”

“Give me.” I shuffle across the floor in my elf shoe slippers, and he laughs, holding it high above my head.

“Only if you promise you’ll enjoy the rest of the evening. No more work.”

I scowl. “Blackmailer.”

“I’m not opposed to stacking the deck in my favor.” He shrugs and makes the canister dance.

My mouth waters at the thought of the rich, creamy chocolate goodness with hints of vanilla.

“Fine. No more work.” I reach for it, and he dodges, earning my growl.

“In thoughts or deed.”

“Agreed.”

He hands me the canister, and I grab it like Golem with the one ring. “Mine.”

He grins. “Of course. I had a fresh mug already.”

“Brat.” I unscrew the top, releasing the fragrant aroma of childhood. Triggered memories flood my mind as I breathe deep. Bringing the metal lid to my lips, I enjoy the drink as he hefts the six-foot tree inside to its place of honor, the alcove by the stairs.

“You did the heavy lifting, so I’ll get the decorations and the stand.” Draining the last of the drink, I twist the cap back on and set it on an end table.

Excitement gives my feet wings as I hurry to the back storage closet and dig out the hunter-green bins marked Christmas. I lacked the holiday spirit as I battled busy work shifts, travel arrangements for guests, and question answering.

This is exactly what I needed to, remember, why I love this season so much. The holidays have been a huge part of my life with my family running a Christmas Tree Farm. I lug the totes back to the main room with the stand on top.

He takes the bundle from me, and I smile.

“Thank you for this. It’s just what I needed.”

“I know you, Dec.”

“You do,” I agree.

He reaches into the pocket of his flannel. “This year, your parents sent me home with something extra.” I laugh at the tiny sprig of mistletoe.

He holds it over our heads.

“What are you doing? There’s no one to pretend for.” The protest is lame as I stare at his mouth.

“We’re here, and I think we owe ourselves to explore what’s between us.”

“Emanuele.” The words come out softer than I intended as the lump in my throat clogs with fear and want.

“Are we going to keep pretending we didn’t stumble onto something here?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“You do. You’re scared.” He swallows. “So am I.”

His vulnerability is my undoing. The dam I’d used to hold my emotions at bay cracks. “But you want this?”

“I *need* this. I don’t want to wonder what if. Do you?”

I shake my head as I fall under the spell cast by his expressive, espresso-colored eyes.

“You’ve always been my girl, December. Nothing will change that.” He nuzzles his nose against mine and skims my lips with his. I part them, seeking more.

“So eager for me, Dec.” He whispers the words against my mouth, and I whimper my agreement.

He’s awoken a hunger inside me I haven’t been able to slake on my own.

“Tell me.”

“I want this—you.” As I reach for him, I move my hand up to cup his face as I rise on my tiptoes. I nip his bottom lip and soothe the sting with my tongue. Groaning, he cups my ass with his free hand and pulls me close.

“Then that’s what you’re going to get.” He sweeps the seam of my lips, and I open eagerly.

His tongue slips inside to touch mine, and my body ignites. I wind my arms around his neck, tilting my head as I tease him. Our tongues slide together.

The mistletoe drops to the ground, forgotten, and he grips my ass and lifts me up. Encircling his waist with my legs. I gasp at the feel of him against me. Leaning back, I groan as he notches his bulge against my center.

Our mouths continue their intricate dance as I squirm, seeking friction to relieve the throbbing in my center. He tastes like hot chocolate, man, and I can’t get enough. I scrape my nails over his scalp, and he squeezes my cheeks and rocks against me. I lean back, desperate for air, as he trails his kisses down my neck, nipping the skin and sucking my pulse point.

“You taste so good, December. I won’t be satisfied until I sample every inch of you.” His tongue caresses my collarbone, and my walls clench.

Tonight, there’ll be no more barriers between us. The storm that’s been brewing between us is finally going to break.

He walks to the stairs, devouring my mouth every few feet. Miraculously, we reach the top of the stairwell, panting.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I rasp.

“Once you’re in my room, I’m not letting you go until we’re both satisfied.”

I accept his challenge. “Lead the way.”

The hunger carved on his face is a revelation. His long legs eat up the floor as he attempts to suck my soul from my body with his soft lips. I match his intensity, sucking his tongue into my mine as I try to press my body closer.

Sitting on the bed heavily, he pulls back to rip my t-shirt over my head. The cool air hits my heated flesh, and I cry out.

“Beautiful.” He trails his fingers over the swell of my breasts and down my sides. I squirm as he tickles his way across my ribs.

Popping my bra with deft fingers, he pulls it down my arms and flings it across the room. His eyes dilate, and I arch my back, presenting him with my swollen breasts. My brown nipples are distending and begging for his touch.

“Tell me what you want, and I might give it to you.”

“Touch me.” Is that my voice so desperate and breathy?

He runs his hand down my back. “Here?”

“No.” I shimmy in his grasp. He slaps my ass, and I cry out, leaning into the sting he left behind.

“Be still, and ask for what you want.” Hands on my hips, he pins me in place.

There's something intimate and provocative about his commands.

"Touch my breasts."

He moves his hands to my breasts, palming them and massaging them. I moan, thrusting them further into his calloused fingertips. Swirls of pleasure flow through me as he teases me.

"Emanuele," I whine.

"What baby?" The four-letter word snatches the breath from my lungs and steals my resistance.

"Play with my nipples."

He rolls the pert buds between his fingers and I jerk in his lap. "So sensitive. I love all those needy little noises you make." He tugs, and I scream. "Just like that one." He chuckles darkly as he continues to work me up.

I tighten my grip on his hips, and he grins.

"You want to ask me for something, baby?"

"More."

He pinches harder. "More?"

"Your mouth. I need it on me. Please."

Leaning down, he sucks my breast into his mouth, and I stiffen as I tumble into a powerful orgasm that shakes my body like an earthquake. He lays me back on the bed, and I watch, dazed, as he sheds his clothes, revealing his muscled body and long, hard cock.

Crawling onto the bed, he frames my body with his powerful arms as he kisses me slowly, bringing me back to the moment. I suck his tongue into my mouth, and he groans.

"Back with me."

"Yes."

"Good, 'cause I have the promise to keep." He trails his kisses down my body, teasing the underside of my breasts and



circling my belly button. Sparks shoot through my body as I shudder beneath him.

“You’re wearing far too much.” Hooking his thumbs into my tights, he pulls them down my legs, removing my underwear with one firm tug. Adding the clothing to the pile on his floor, he moves between my legs and inhales.

“What a pretty pussy you have.” He trails his fingers over my neatly shaved quim. He parts my lips and teases my slit with the tip of his finger. I arch off the bed.

“I have to taste you, beautiful.” Diving forward like a swimmer, he licks a path upward, gathering my wetness.

His gratified moan has me grabbing the sheets. Going at me like a starved man, he licks, nips, and sucks at my labia, moving closer to my clit without touching it. There’s no time for shyness, as want hits me like a mac truck.

“I need you, E.”

Groaning, he pierces my core with his stiff tongue. I come off the bed. His large hand presses down on my stomach, and I thrash as he fills me, exploring every inch he can reach with his tongue as he circles my bundle of nerves with his thumb.

Desperate, I rock against him, fisting his hair as I hold on for the ride. Slurping and moaning against me, he pushes me to the edge and over. Shattering, I break apart with his name on my lips, and a new kind of love forms in my heart.

Residual tremors run through me as he pumps a long, thick finger inside me, extending my pleasure. He adds a second, and the wet sounds of him working my body fill the room.

“I need you to be ready to take me, baby.”

“I am.” I moan, tilting my hips to receive him even deeper.

“Not yet.” He curls his fingers, pressing into the front of my walls, and I jerk against him.

“Oh. E. I’m going to.” He removes his fingers, and I scream.

“Not yet. Next time you come, it will be on my dick.” He adds a third finger, and I feel the pinch and burn as I adjust.

“Can I come inside you like this, Dec? I know you still have your IUD. I’m clean.”

“Please,” I beg. “I’ve never had a man without a condom before. It feels right that my first time be with you.”

“I want to feel you with nothing between us,” he growls.

He pulls out his fingers, and I flex, moaning the loss of fullness. He pumps his length and moves between my legs, coating himself in my sticky heat as he taps my clit with his tip.

“Emanuele,” I whine.

“I love it when you say my name, baby. Open up and let me in.” I spread my legs, and he lines his dripping head to my core. He pushes inside, stretching me deliciously. I flex, tightening around him.

“So tight.” He grunts, pushing in and obliterating my tentative hold on control. More than remolding my walls, he’s reshaping my heart and soul as he joins us. He sinks to the hilt.

“Okay?” He rasps, kissing me.

“Yes.” I hiss. “So full.” I contract, and he groans.

Pulling out, he drives back in, giving me every inch. Our eyes lock as we move together, and he opens me up in new ways. I dig my nails into his skin and hook my ankles together to get him deeper.

We crest the wave together, and he coats my insides with his heat. A feeling of wholeness flowing through me. *How can I ever let this go?* Brain full, I cling to the blissful afterglow and the scent of his skin mingling with mine. Trapped beneath his body, I’m in heaven. I never want to leave.

Home. I have to find a way to tell him, even if it means I might lose him. I just have to keep it together long enough to finish what I started.

\*\*\*

## E

I walk through the building, clutching the lop-sided creation as I send up a prayer it'll hold together. This is my soul on a tray for her to accept or reject. There'll be no more interruptions or dodging uncomfortable questions.

Dec and I have become ships passing each other in a night as work picked up for us both, and she focused on her event. I've let it slide. I would never distract her from something this important to her, but that time has ended.

Photos have been taken, people have been schmoozed, and the winners were just announced. I want to see her moment of triumph before I turn her attention to us. I stand back on the crowd's edge as she takes the microphone.

"Without each of you, this event wouldn't have been a success. I want to thank the creators, attendees, and businesses who provided incredible raffle prizes. You all took a chance on a new event here in Noel, Colorado. Because you embraced it fully and expressed so much interest, I can safely say we will continue this next year." Applauses rend the air, and she grins as she lowers the mic, waiting for them to quiet.

"We have some delicious snacks provided by our local bakery, drinks, and crafts until nine tonight. How about another round of applause for this year's winners?" Clapping breaks out with whistles and shouts. "Enjoy the rest of the evening. We'll see you next year."

I slowly make my way toward her, allowing her time to chat, schmooze, and accept praise. My nerves fray.

"Oh, we should give E a turn," Nora says, clearing a path.

Her gaze focuses on me, and I see fear flicker across her face. "Oh, it's okay. We can talk later."

"No." I move forward until I stand directly in front of her. "No more avoidance."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, and my gut aches. I hesitate. Have I read all of this wrong and confused lust with love? Forging ahead, I offer her the house.

Blinking, she sniffles. “I don’t understand.”

“Look at it.”

Taking it from me with trembling hands, she gasps. “Pink shutters. Just like I always wanted.”

I nod. “And an oak tree with a tire swing.”

“Is that a picture window?” she asks, pointing at the questionable structure with a laugh.

“It was meant to be.”

“Why did you give this to me?”

“Because nothing short of a lifetime with you will be enough for me. I know how this started, but it’s become so much more to me. And I think it’s the same for you.”

“Yes,” she whispers, closing her eyes. “I thought maybe I was seeing what wasn’t there.”

“It’s been there for a long time. You’ve owned my heart my entire life.” I cup her face. “I’m asking you to keep it safe. In turn, I’ll do the same for you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, to what, baby? I like to hear the words.”

“All of it. I want this future with you.” She lifts the house. “You made me a house.”

“It’s only fair since you’re my home.”

“I love you, Emanuele.”

“And I love you.” Leaning in, I kiss her, careful not to crush the gingerbread home that marks the beginning of truth.

“This house has a special feature.” I hold the base for her. “The roof comes off. And there’s something special inside for you.”

Her hands shake as she takes hold of the roof and lifts it. “Emanuele.” Her voice shakes as she reveals the open blue velvet ring box holding the art déco diamond solitaire that belonged to my grandmother.

I drop down to one knee. Gasps and screams fill the air behind us. “You are the other half of my heart. I can’t fathom a life without you by my side. Will you create a home with me, built to last, and permanently join your life with mine in marriage?”

“Yes.”

I set the gingerbread house down, remove the ring from the case and take her hand. Our eyes lock as I slip the band on her finger. Cheers, applause, wolf-whistles wash over me, an intimidating wave of sound.

We’re encircled by our family talking all at once. Mom and Mrs. Oliver are hugging each other, as our siblings swear they knew this would happen one day. Their love and support are tangible and their presence makes the moment right. They’ve all been there for our highs and lows.

We’ve waited long enough to realize what we were looking for has always been right in front of us. The time to live our love in action has come. I kiss her hand, grateful that her little white lie has led us to a happy ending.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Shyla Colt is a chaos wrangler, chronic crafter, and imaginary friend collector. The mom of two and a wife road trips with her weird brood when she's not taking on a new hobby or bingeing on spooky podcasts and documentaries. She writes strong women with sass, plenty of nerdy tendencies, and the intriguing intense males who love them.

# CONNECT WITH ME

website: [www.shylacolt.net](http://www.shylacolt.net)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorshyla.colt>

Twitter: @shylacolt

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/shylacolt>

Fan group: <https://smarturl.it/ColtCrew>

Newsletter : <http://www.shylacolt.net/>

# COLORADO CHRISTMAS SERIES

Pack your bags and join us in Colorado for mountains of Christmas magic! It may be cold outside, but there's plenty of heat between the sheets of these holiday romances!

[Virgin Snow by Matilda Martel](#)

[Roman Holiday by Kylie Marcus](#)

[White Lie Christmas by Karla Doyle](#)

[A Wife For Christmas by Chloe Maine](#)

[Mountain Lane by Andie Fenichel](#)

[Gingerbread House of Lies by Shyla Colt](#)

[Bidding on Noelle by Ember Davis](#)

[Snow Candy Christmas by Silke Champion](#)

[Humbug Hang Up by Layne Daniels](#)

[Mistletoe Mountain Man by Poppy Parkes](#)

[Bunny Hill Betty by Kameron Claire](#)

[Up to Snow Good by Sammi Starlight](#)

[Carnal Holiday by Pinky Cockburn](#)

[Christmas Punch by Rose Bak](#)