



# The Naughty List (Men of Copper Mountain #6)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** He's grumpy, she's sunshine, and this Christmas, opposites aren't just attracting—they're igniting

When Ivy, a spirited school teacher and Christmas enthusiast, rolls into the snowy mountain town of Copper Mountain, she's determined to spread holiday cheer with her "Naughty or Nice" contest for the locals. But her festive mission hits a snag when she crosses paths with Cole, the town's brooding mechanic who has little patience for Christmas spirit—or for Ivy's relentless cheer.

After a messy first meeting in his garage, Ivy decides that Cole, with his scowling gaze and refusal to embrace the season, is the perfect candidate for her Naughty List. From holiday dares and mistletoe mishaps to tangling up in Christmas lights, Ivy's holiday challenge slowly chips away at Cole's gruff exterior, bringing out a side of him he thought he'd long buried.

But as Ivy works her magic on his hardened heart, Cole begins to realize he's not just warming up to Christmas—he's falling for the one woman who's brought a spark back into his life. And with every stolen kiss and heated embrace, Ivy finds herself wondering if the man she's determined to 'fix' might just be the one she's been searching for all along.

This Christmas, Ivy and Cole are about to discover that sometimes the best gifts can't be wrapped up in a bow...

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

## Chapter One

I vy

The icy air nips at my cheeks as I step out of my car, wrapping my arms around myself. It's quiet up here, the soft crunch of my boots on the snow-covered gravel the only sound against the backdrop of pines dusted with fresh snowfall. The grungy sign outside the garage reads "Cole's Repairs," painted in faded red that almost blends into the brick.

The garage itself is uninviting, but I'm desperate. My car, filled to the brim with garlands, Santa hats, and reindeer antlers, sits awkwardly in front of the garage, steam puffing out from under the hood. Not exactly the festive entry I had in mind for this trip.

I make my way toward the open bay door, peeking inside. It's dim, the scent of motor oil and grease heavy in the air, but I spot him instantly—broad shoulders hunched over a motorcycle, his hands working confidently at some piece of machinery. Even from here, I can see the tightness in his jaw, the focus etched across his face.

"Um... hello?" My voice bounces off the metal walls, interrupting the almost reverent silence of his workspace.

He doesn't look up right away, but when he does, he takes his time, his gaze dragging up from my boots, over my sweater covered in tiny Christmas lights, and stopping at my red wool hat with its ridiculous pom-pom.

“You lost, Mrs. Claus?” His voice is a low rumble, steady and unimpressed.

I raise an eyebrow, refusing to be put off. “Actually, I was on my way up the mountain to find the perfect tree for my classroom. But it seems my car had other plans.”

His eyes flick to the festive chaos spilling out of my backseat, then back to me. “Looks like you’re hauling half of Santa’s workshop in there. You sure it’s not you who overloaded the poor thing?”

I narrow my eyes. “For your information, Mr. Grinch, I was doing Copper Mountain a favor, spreading some Christmas cheer.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, almost a smile. “Didn’t realize Copper Mountain needed saving. Or that I needed holiday cheer shoved in my face.”

“Everyone could use a little cheer,” I counter, folding my arms. “Especially you.”

“Oh, really?” He lets out a dry chuckle, his eyes sharp, assessing. “You think you can tell what I need, just by looking at me?”

The intensity in his gaze throws me off balance, but I plant my feet. “Let’s just say you look like someone who’d end up on the Naughty List.”

His laugh this time is full, rough, and it sends a jolt of heat straight through me. “Naughty List, huh?” He takes a step forward, closing the distance between us. “Careful, Mrs. Claus. You don’t wanna know what happens to those who try to put me on that list.”

I try to steady my breathing, even as he invades my space, the scent of motor oil and cedar filling my senses. “Well, someone has to keep you in check.”

“Good luck with that,” he mutters, his eyes grazing over me with an intensity that makes me feel exposed. “So, what am I supposed to do with this mess of yours?” He gestures toward my car, a hint of humor in his otherwise gruff expression.

I lift my chin, refusing to let him rattle me. “If you could look under the hood, that would be a start. I’m on a bit of a mission here, and I’m not letting a grumpy mechanic stop me.”

He smirks, one dark eyebrow arching. “Oh, is that right? A ‘mission,’ huh? Lemme guess—finding that perfect tree to ‘wow’ your little audience of six-year-olds?”

I meet his gaze head-on. “It’s actually third graders. And yes, I want the perfect tree. Why shouldn’t they have something festive and beautiful to look at?”

His eyes drop to my lips, lingering there a moment before he says, “I can think of plenty of beautiful things to look at.”

Heat floods my cheeks, but I keep my voice steady. “Well, I’m glad you agree.”

He grunts, unimpressed, then moves around me toward the car, his arm brushing against mine. His touch, rough and unintentional, leaves a trail of tingling awareness in its wake. He lifts the hood, peering inside, his strong hands working with practiced ease as he pokes around.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that Christmas spirit doesn’t come from how many shiny things you can pack into a car?” His voice is muffled as he bends under the hood.

“And didn’t anyone ever tell you that a little holiday cheer never killed anyone?” I shoot back, leaning against the car.

He straightens, his face suddenly inches from mine, his eyes narrowing in challenge. “You really think you can change people just by tossing a few garlands around?”

I hold my ground. “I think people sometimes need a reminder that there’s good in the world. That maybe, if they opened their hearts a little, they might find it, too.”

His gaze hardens, and for a moment, I think I’ve pushed too far. But then, he lets out a slow, amused breath, the air fogging between us. “Well, you’re in the wrong garage, babe. I’m not the type that needs saving.”

“Maybe not,” I admit, meeting his stare. “But I’d say you’re definitely the type who needs a little holiday spirit.”

He shakes his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Keep dreaming, Mrs. Claus.”

I roll my eyes. “And for the record, it’s Ivy. Not Mrs. Claus. You think every woman in a red hat’s on some mission to change your life?”

He chuckles, low and gritty. “No, but it’s a hell of an image.” He leans closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Especially when she’s got a mouth like yours. Full of sass.”

The air grows heavy between us, his words lingering, taunting. My pulse quickens, a spark flaring in my chest. I glance down, taking in his broad shoulders, the way his flannel shirt stretches over his chest. I can feel his gaze as if it’s brushing over my skin, and the thought alone sends a thrill racing through me.

“So... are you gonna fix my car, or just stand there looking pretty?” I challenge, hoping the sass in my voice covers the racing of my heart.

“Pretty?” He raises an eyebrow, stepping even closer until there’s barely a sliver of

space between us. “You think I’m pretty, huh?”

I swallow, my cheeks heating. “I didn’t say that.”

“Sure you did.” His grin is cocky, unfiltered. “But let me guess—Christmas cheer means denying whatever you really want to say?”

“I think you’re the one assuming a lot of things here,” I counter, my voice a little shaky. “Maybe I’m just being polite.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that sends another spark of heat down my spine. “Well, let me tell you, polite or not, I’m not about to roll over just because some Christmas-crazy woman batted her eyes at me.”

My breath catches, and I struggle to find a comeback that doesn’t betray the growing tension in my stomach. “Good thing I wasn’t planning on batting anything, then.”

His eyes darken, and he takes another step forward, his voice dropping. “Careful, Ivy. Keep looking at me like that, and you’ll find yourself right on that Naughty List with me.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “I thought you didn’t believe in that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I don’t.” He leans in, his gaze locking with mine. “But I can make an exception. Especially for someone who thinks they can play me.”

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. The way he’s looking at me, the intensity in his eyes, it’s like he can see right through every witty retort, every attempt at indifference. My breath catches, and his gaze dips to my lips.

For a brief, electric moment, I think he might kiss me. I think I might let him.

But then he straightens, a smug grin flashing across his face. “Tell you what, Mrs. Claus. I’ll get your car running again. But you’re gonna owe me.”

I raise an eyebrow, fighting to keep my voice steady. “Owe you? For doing your job?”

“Consider it a Christmas favor,” he says, his gaze lingering on me in a way that feels almost predatory. “And don’t worry, I know exactly how I’ll collect.”

The implication is clear, and my heart pounds as I fight to keep my composure. “Fine. I’ll owe you. But don’t think for a second that you’re getting off my Naughty List.”

He chuckles, turning back to the car. “Babe, I live on that list. You’re just catching up.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Two

#### Cole

The clang of tools hitting the floor echoes in the garage, snapping my focus from under the hood of Ivy's car. I mutter a curse under my breath, lifting my head to see her standing by my ancient radio, one hand on the dial, the other over her mouth in feigned innocence.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you not to touch a mechanic's stuff, especially when he's working on your car?" I ask, wiping my hands on a rag, trying to keep my tone steady even as my patience wears thin.

She grins, all bright-eyed and unapologetic. "I just wanted to see if this old thing worked. It looks like it's been here since the Stone Age."

"Yeah, well, it does," I say, crossing my arms. "Or it did. Now I'm not so sure."

She laughs, a light, unbothered sound that fills the room like a bell. I hate that the sound goes straight to my cock. "Well, Cole, maybe a little Christmas music wouldn't hurt. You look like you could use some holiday cheer."

"Last thing I need is jingle bells in my ear while I'm trying to work." I lean back under the hood, hoping she takes the hint, but she's still hovering, practically buzzing with excitement.

"Suit yourself, Mr. Grinch." Her voice is practically dripping with amusement.



I don't dignify that with an answer, focusing on reconnecting a loose wire in her engine, when suddenly the radio crackles to life, blasting a high-pitched rendition of "Jingle Bell Rock." My hands jerk in surprise, sending a wrench tumbling to the floor. I hear her stifling a giggle behind me, and when I turn, she's covering her mouth, her eyes wide and filled with mischief.

"Oh, sorry," she says, not sounding the least bit sorry.

I pick up the wrench, shaking my head, trying not to notice the way her cheeks have a bit of a holiday flush to them, like she just stepped out of some Christmas card. Damn she's sweet. I imagine she's got a boyfriend back in town, some loser that probably takes her on fancy dates and says sweet things to her. I know I'm not the kind of guy for her, she's full of sugar and spice and I'm the opposite of everything nice. "Car should be good to go. And if you don't quit messing with things, you'll be on my Naughty List."

She laughs, the sound bright and reckless. "Funny you say that, because you're already on mine. Even before my car decided to give up on life."

I cock an eyebrow, leaning against the car, crossing my arms. "Oh, am I?"

"Yup," she says, popping the "p" as she steps closer. "You're the only person in town who doesn't seem to get in the spirit—Copper Mountain's real life Grinch. So, I took it upon myself to add a little Christmas cheer in here."

I glance over her shoulder, noticing a few garlands and sparkly ornaments dangling from my tool rack, even a tiny stocking hanging from the handle of my toolbox. She's decorated my garage. My damn garage. I run a hand over my jaw, torn between amusement and disbelief.

"You actually went and decorated my garage?" I shake my head, unable to hide the

smile that threatens to break free. “You’re something else, Ivy.”

She shrugs, adjusting a little red Santa hat perched on her head. “I couldn’t help it. It just seemed like you needed it. And look how festive it looks now! All thanks to me.”

I shake my head, caught between irritation and something I can’t quite name. “You think you can just waltz in here and sprinkle some Christmas glitter on everything, and suddenly I’m supposed to be full of holiday cheer?”

“Hey, I’m only doing my civic duty,” she says with a smirk. “Bringing a little joy to the people of Copper Mountain.”

“You think you’re bringing joy?” I step closer, tilting my head down to meet her gaze. “Or maybe you’re just a little too full of yourself.”

Her cheeks redden, but she holds her ground, matching my intensity. “Maybe. But at least I’m not a complete Scrooge about it.”

The words are barely out of her mouth before I close the distance between us, gripping her by the waist and pulling her to me. Her breath catches, but she doesn’t pull away. In fact, she tilts her chin up, daring me with that sparkle still in her eyes.

“You know, you talk an awful lot for someone who’s trespassing in my space,” I murmur, my voice low as I lean closer.

“Maybe you need someone who talks a lot.” Her voice is a soft challenge, her gaze locked on mine. “Might balance out all that brooding.”

I can feel her warmth, her energy crackling between us, and suddenly, I’m done with the banter. I lower my mouth to hers, claiming her lips in a kiss that’s meant to shut her up, to steal that breath she keeps throwing my way. She gasps against my mouth,

and I take full advantage, deepening the kiss, my hands gripping her waist, pulling her flush against me.

She tastes like peppermint and sweetness, and I'm lost in it, in her. Her fingers clutch at the front of my shirt, holding on as if she's as caught off guard by this as I am. But neither of us pulls back. I feel her melt into me, her resolve faltering as my lips move against hers, teasing, coaxing. Her hands slide up to my shoulders, fingers tangling in my hair, and a soft moan escapes her throat, a sound that shoots straight through me.

When I finally pull back, she's staring up at me, her chest heaving, eyes wide and dazed. "I... that was... wow."

I let out a low chuckle, watching her try to find her footing. "Don't tell me you weren't expecting that."

She swallows, shaking her head. "Best kiss of my life, and I didn't see it coming."

"Well, Mrs. Claus," I murmur, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. "I thought you'd be prepared for anything."

She blinks up at me, still breathless, and I realize I'm not quite ready to let her go. My hand lingers on her cheek, and she leans into it for just a moment before pulling away, her cheeks flushed.

"I, uh... should probably get going," she says, her voice a bit unsteady. "Can't have the kids thinking Mrs. Claus got herself in trouble up on Copper Mountain."

I smirk, stepping back, letting her regain her composure. "Guess I'll see you around then. Naughty List and all."

She bites her lip, and I catch the flicker of hesitation, the tiniest hint that maybe, just

maybe, she's reconsidering. But then she gives a quick nod and turns, practically tripping over her own feet in her hurry to get to the door.

I watch her go, the image of her in that Santa hat burned into my mind, and I know for damn sure this isn't the last I'll be seeing of Ivy.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Three

I vy

I shove open the door to the Copper Country Cafe the next morning, and the smell of fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls hits me like a warm hug. This place has become my sanctuary since moving to Copper Mountain last year. Its worn wooden floors, red vinyl booths, and Betty's no-nonsense smile all make it feel like home. But today, it feels like my mission field.

I'm just getting cozy in my usual booth by the window when Cole steps in, his presence filling the room before he's even taken a seat. I can practically feel his reluctance radiating off him as he takes in the festive decor I helped Betty put up last week—garlands twisted along the countertops, strings of fairy lights around the windows, a big ol' Santa smiling down from above the coffee machine. His gaze is skeptical, almost annoyed, as if each Christmas decoration is some personal offense.

"You really dragged me out here for hot chocolate?" His voice is low, that deep rumble that does weird things to my resolve.

"Yes, Cole," I say, flashing him a sweet smile, pushing my enthusiasm up to an eleven just to see him squirm. "You said I owed you for yesterday. You need a little holiday cheer anyway, and I'm here to make it happen."

He grunts, like my declaration of cheer is somehow a threat. "Holiday cheer. Right."

"Come on, you might surprise yourself," I tease, sliding into a booth and gesturing

for him to do the same. He pauses a beat, eyeing me like he's considering bailing on this whole thing, but after a moment, he sighs and sits across from me, folding his arms.

Betty bustles over, an eyebrow raised at the sight of us. "Well, Ivy, look at you, bringing in Copper Mountain's biggest Scrooge for some Christmas spirit. You must have magic up your sleeve."

Cole rolls his eyes but manages a small smile at Betty. "Yeah, yeah. Just bring me the strongest coffee you've got."

I nudge him under the table. "Uh-uh. Hot chocolate with marshmallows. We're here to channel holiday vibes, remember?"

He narrows his eyes at me, but there's a hint of amusement there. "Fine. But if this tastes like sugar syrup, I'm charging you double on your next oil change."

Betty snorts. "Coming right up, Ivy's treat."

She walks away with a grin, leaving us sitting across from each other, the air charged with something I can't quite put a name to. I search for something to break the silence, but he beats me to it.

"So, what's the story, Ivy? You got any family nearby?" His voice has a hint of curiosity that almost surprises me, like he's actually interested in my answer.

I shake my head. "Nope. Just me. My parents retired to Florida, and they're living it up in endless sunshine and golf carts. I send them pictures of snow to make them jealous, though." I smile, trying to picture them bundled up in ugly Christmas sweaters, something they abandoned the moment they found their beach house.

Cole chuckles, leaning back a bit. “So, you’re here in Copper Mountain all on your own. Guess that explains why you’re so eager to force Christmas cheer on unsuspecting townsfolk.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “I like to think of it as sharing, not forcing. Besides, maybe you should try sharing a little holiday cheer yourself, Mr. Bah Humbug.”

He smirks, leaning forward, resting his elbows on the table. “I’m plenty cheerful, Ivy. Just happens that my idea of cheer doesn’t involve strings of lights or giant inflatable Santas.”

“So, what does it involve?” I press, my gaze holding his. My attraction to this man surprises me—he’s at least a decade older than me and not my type at all. Not that I really have a type I guess, but my last boyfriend was a software engineer, and the one before that was...well, I guess there wasn’t one before that. I dated a few boys while I was getting my teaching degree, but none that I care to remember.

He hesitates, like he’s sizing me up, deciding how much to share. “Let’s just say my holidays aren’t filled with jingle bells and caroling. I spend Christmas with the Steeles. Knox and I grew up together. His family pretty much took me in after...well, after my mom left.”

His words hang between us, heavy and unexpected. I glance away, giving him a moment, trying not to push too hard. “That’s... I didn’t know.”

He shrugs, his voice gruff. “Not exactly dinner conversation, is it?”

Betty returns with two mugs of steaming hot chocolate, complete with marshmallows, whipped cream, a sprinkle of cinnamon, and a little candy cane sticking out one side. I stifle a laugh as she sets them down, knowing full well Cole’s trying to hide his scowl behind his mug.

“Go on, give it a try,” I say, watching him intently as he raises the cup to his mouth, takes a sip, and grimaces slightly. “It’s just chocolate, Cole. It won’t kill you.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he mutters, though there’s a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“So... the Steeles, they practically own this town. Nine brothers,” I continue, feeling him relax slightly. “They must be pretty important to you.”

He nods, his expression softening for a split second. “Yeah. They’re good people. And Betty’s pretty much my second mom, and Knox... well, he’s like a brother.” He pauses, looking away, his jaw tightening. “My mom left when I was ten. Haven’t seen her since.”

His words hit me harder than I expect, and I find myself reaching across the table, fingers brushing his hand before I even realize it. He glances down at our hands, surprised, but he doesn’t pull away.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

He shrugs, pulling his hand back, though not unkindly. “Don’t be. My dad was all I needed, even if he was gone a lot.”

I wait, sensing there’s more, but not wanting to push. His eyes flick back to me, as if debating whether to keep going. Finally, he continues, his voice low, almost resigned.

“He was a hunting guide. One of the best in the county. Loved the mountains more than anything. Had a massive heart attack while out on a trip, right in the middle of deer season.”

I take a breath, feeling the weight of his words, the rawness in his voice. “That must



have been... I can't even imagine."

He nods, his gaze distant. "I was in high school. One day he's there, next day he's not. Kinda throws things off balance, y'know?"

I nod, swallowing the tightness in my throat. "I'm glad you have the Steeles, though. Sounds like they were there for you."

"They were," he says, his voice softer now. "And Betty... she's been putting up with my grumpy ass since I was a kid. Even now, she'd probably try to ground me if she thought it'd do any good."

I chuckle, relieved to see a bit of lightness in his eyes. "Maybe you need grounding, Cole. A little reminder that Christmas isn't all bad."

"Oh, really?" His tone is laced with skepticism, but his gaze has softened, his guard down just a fraction. "And what would that reminder look like, exactly?"

I smile, leaning forward, feeling the playful tension rise between us. "Well, for starters, you could try enjoying that hot chocolate instead of glaring at it."

He lifts his mug, taking a long, deliberate sip, his eyes on mine the entire time. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," I reply, fighting a laugh. "But that's just step one. Step two might involve... I don't know, hanging a few lights, maybe helping out with the town's Christmas festival. Show Copper Mountain you're not as much of a Scrooge as everyone thinks."

He raises an eyebrow, a slow smile tugging at his lips. "You want me to hang lights?"

“It’s good for the soul,” I say with a shrug, pretending to be nonchalant, even though I can feel the heat building between us. “You could even wear a Santa hat if you’re feeling wild.”

He snorts, shaking his head, but his gaze lingers on mine, intense and unguarded. “You really think that’ll change me?”

“Maybe not change you,” I admit, feeling my cheeks heat up under his stare. “But it might show you something new.”

He watches me for a long moment, his expression unreadable, and then he leans forward, his voice dropping to a low murmur. “You know, Ivy, for someone who talks about Christmas spirit, you’re awfully stubborn about making people fall in line.”

My pulse quickens, but I hold his gaze, unflinching. “Maybe some people need a little push.”

His lips curve into a smile, one that’s slow and dangerous, and it does things to me I can’t quite explain. “Careful, Ivy. You keep pushing, and you might not like what you get.”

I feel a shiver run through me, but I lift my chin, refusing to let him see how much he affects me. “I think I can handle it.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” he says, his eyes darkening as they drift down to my lips, lingering there for a heartbeat longer than necessary. “But maybe you’re biting off more than you can chew.”

“Is that a challenge?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

His grin widens, and there's a spark of something wicked in his eyes. "Could be. You sure you're ready for it?"

I can feel the tension between us, thick and undeniable, and for a moment, the rest of the room fades away, leaving just the two of us locked in this battle of wills. I want to look away, to break the spell, but I can't. There's something about him that holds me, that makes me want to see just how far I can push.

"Maybe I am," I say softly.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Four

#### C ole

Two mornings after our hot chocolate date, I'm bent over an old Indian motorcycle when I hear the crunch of metal echo through the evergreens. I grunt, dropping a set of pliers on my workbench and then walking out of my shop and into the road. I squint, looking up and down the old mountain highway when I see it, a tiny puff of smoke rising out of the ditch.

"What the hell?" I climb into my truck and back out of the driveway, headed down the icy road to investigate. By the time I drive the half mile, I know exactly what I'm looking at. A familiar little red car is pinned against a tree.

"Dammit." I husk, crawling out of my truck and moving down the snowy bank. I throw the driver side door open and find Ivy. She has a small cut above her eyebrow but otherwise she looks safe.

She's bundled up in her ridiculous red coat and matching hat with that pom-pom bouncing around like it's got a mind of its own.

"You okay?" I grunt, helping her out of the front seat as steam barrels out from under her hood.

"I'm fine, I swerved to avoid a baby deer," she breathes, blinking as she tries to catch her bearings.

“Nice.” I pull a handkerchief from my pocket and swipe at the trail of blood at her temple. “Your head hurt?”

“No,” she hums, touching the cut at her eyebrow. “Did I hit the baby deer?”

“No, looks like you’re the only one that got hurt. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three.” Comes her quick reply.

“Good. I don’t think your car faired as well.” Her car sits, once again, just as dead as it was the last time she “accidentally” needed me. I almost smirk, almost call her out on the act. But there’s something about her standing there with that gleam in her eye that makes it impossible to resist the game.

“Looks like you’re gonna need a tow.” I inform her.

“No—it’ll be fine. She just needs a breather.” Ivy glances back at her smoking engine.

“Sure.” I say, dubious. “You drivin’ up the mountain to spread a little more cheer? Or did you just miss me?”

“Both.” She grins, undeterred. “You love it, Cole.”

I raise an eyebrow, playing along. “I don’t remember saying that.”

“Oh, it’s in there somewhere.” She gestures toward my chest, the same way she might wave her hand toward a random piece of scenery, like she knows every inch of me. “Deep down. Past all the gruff exterior and anti-Christmas nonsense.”

I chuckle, opening the passenger side door of my truck. “Get in. You’re not standing

out here trying to talk me into liking Christmas while we freeze.”

She climbs in, bringing a gust of peppermint with her, and buckles up, looking a little too smug as she settles into the seat. “Thanks for saving me again, Mr. Grinch.” Her eyes are sparkling with mischief. “I was on my way up here to deliver some goodies to you and try to convince you into helping me at the Christmas festival in town.” She presses her lips together, “Guess you’re coming with me now, Mrs. Frye is expecting me in ten minutes. You don’t mind driving me, right?”

I slide behind the wheel, trying to keep the corners of my mouth from pulling up. “Not sure I signed up for the part of your personal taxi service.”

“Oh, this isn’t a taxi,” she says smoothly. “It’s much more fun than that.”

“And how’s that?”

She bats her eyelashes, way too innocent. “We could make a little game out of this drive into town. A dare game.”

I glance over, eyebrow raised. “A dare game? With you?”

“Unless you’re scared,” she taunts, nudging my arm, her face alight with challenge.

“Scared?” I scoff, settling back in my seat. “Of what? Your childish dares?”

“Guess we’ll find out.” She smirks, looking out the window as if she’s suddenly uninterested in my reaction. It’s all part of her game, I know that, but damn if it doesn’t work.

“Fine. You’re on,” I say, leaning into her trap.

“Perfect,” she says, tapping her chin like she’s got a whole list of ideas ready to go. “First up—drink this.” She pulls a thermos out of her bag and hands it over. I unscrew the top, sniffing cautiously. The distinct scent of eggnog hits me, and I grimace.

“Really?”

“Oh, come on,” she says, exasperated. “It’s festive. Besides, it’s just eggnog, not some deadly poison.”

“Same difference,” I mutter, but I take a tentative sip. The thick sweetness coats my tongue, and I can’t help but cringe. She watches me, her eyes gleaming with barely-contained laughter.

“There you go!” She claps, the sound a little too loud in the confined space. “One down, a few more to go.”

I hand the thermos back, my jaw tight. “What’s next, then?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out.” She grins, tapping her fingers on the dashboard like she’s counting the minutes. “Now, point this old truck to town. I’ve got a date with Christmas spirit.”

I chuckle, doing just what she asked. As we drive through Copper Mountain, the snowy landscape giving way to the lights and sounds of the Christmas Festival, I can feel her excitement radiating off her. People in town are wrapped in scarves and coats, bustling around from booth to booth, and there’s this energy in the air that I can’t completely ignore. It’s like I’ve been dropped into some kind of holiday movie scene, and all I want to do is roll my eyes and get out of here. But with Ivy next to me, I don’t mind it nearly as much as I should.

She nudges me again as we park. “Time for dare number two.”

“And what’s that?”

She pulls a red Santa hat out of her bag and dangles it in front of my face like a piece of bait. “Put this on.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Nope. Santa hat or bust.” She’s relentless, her eyes challenging me, daring me to back out. And damn it if I don’t take the bait.

With a heavy sigh, I grab the hat and pull it over my head, feeling ridiculous. “Happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” she replies, and I don’t miss the way her eyes linger on me a second longer than they should. “You look adorable.”

“I don’t do adorable,” I grumble, adjusting the hat as it slides over my eyes.

“Today, you do.” She winks, then grabs my hand, pulling me toward the booths and lights without giving me a chance to protest.

We weave through the crowd, her energy infectious despite my best attempts to stay stoic. Kids are running around with candy canes, couples are holding hands, and everywhere I look, there’s tinsel, lights, and decorations. Ivy keeps tugging me along, stopping only when we reach a small stage area where a woman with a clipboard is waving her over.

“Oh, Ivy! Thank you so much for volunteering!” the woman says, her eyes darting to me, surprise crossing her face. “And who’s this? Our new Santa?”



I glare at Ivy. “Volunteering?”

She grins, looking like the cat that caught the canary. “Surprise. It’s the kids’ gift exchange, and we need someone to play Santa.”

“Absolutely not,” I say, shaking my head. “You never said anything about this.”

“Oh, but it’s perfect,” she insists, her hand on my arm, squeezing just enough to make it hard to pull away. “You’ve already got the hat. And look at these kids—they need someone to make their night.”

I glance at the kids, their hopeful faces turning toward us, and I feel a twist in my gut. Damn her and her Christmas spirit.

“I’m not doing this,” I mutter, but even as I say it, I know I’ve lost. There’s no way I’m backing out now, not with her looking at me like that and the kids practically chanting for Santa. “This is why you were comin’ up my mountain—to sweet talk me into your Santa job?”

“Mr. Frye came down with a cold and can’t do it—you’ve got a better beard for the job, anyway. I even brought a can of spray snow to give you that Santa-look.”

“No way,” I growl.

“Oh, come on, Cole.” She leans in, her voice dropping to a sultry whisper that only I can hear. “Do this, and I might consider putting you on my Nice List.”

My jaw clenches, every muscle in my body resisting her charm and failing. With a heavy sigh, I reach for the Santa coat the woman with the clipboard hands me and grumble, “You owe me for this.”

Ivy beams, a satisfied smile on her face. I shrug the coat on, pull on the pair of giant red pants over my dark jeans, and then wait patiently as Ivy takes a spray can of white shit and covers my beard with it. When I take my place in front of the small crowd of kids, they stare up at me, wide-eyed and awestruck, and for a second, I almost forget how ridiculous I feel. Almost.

“Ho, ho, ho,” I manage, deadpan, but the kids don’t seem to care. They rush forward, holding out their lists and gifts, babbling about what they want for Christmas. Ivy watches from the sidelines, grinning like she’s orchestrated the greatest prank of all time.

By the time I’m done, I feel like I’ve run a marathon. The kids scatter, and I hand the hat and suit back to Mrs. Frye, who thanks me profusely before moving on to the next event. I turn to Ivy, crossing my arms.

“Happy now?”

She bites her lip, holding back laughter. “Very. You looked great up there, Cole. Really fit the part.”

“Glad my humiliation brought you so much joy.”

She steps closer, her eyes sparkling as she looks up at me. “You were a hit. I think you made those kids’ night.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re satisfied,” I mutter, but there’s a part of me that can’t be mad, not with her looking at me like that, all proud and amused.

“Maybe,” she murmurs, her voice softer now, her hand coming up to adjust the collar of my coat. Her fingers linger a little too long, her eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, the world around us fades, the laughter and music of the festival

disappearing until it's just her and me, standing there under the twinkling lights.

"You're something else, Ivy," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, and her eyes flicker, a blush rising in her cheeks.

"Good to know I keep you guessing," she replies, her voice a little breathless, and I can see the struggle in her eyes, the way she's trying to keep her composure.

"Guessing?" I let my hand slide up her arm, feeling her shiver under my touch. "I think you know exactly what you're doing."

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and I feel the tension snap, like a cord pulled too tight. Before I can second-guess it, I lean in, brushing my lips against hers, soft at first, testing, and then deeper as she melts into me, her hands coming up to grip my jacket.

The kiss is slow, deliberate, every movement a challenge, a dare, and she meets it head-on, her mouth warm and inviting, tasting faintly of peppermint. I feel her hands slide up, curling around my neck, pulling me closer, and I let myself get lost in her, in the softness of her lips, the warmth of her skin, the faint hint of her perfume that drives me wild.

When we finally pull back, she's breathless, her eyes wide and dazed, and I can't help but smirk. "Guess that's one way to get on the Nice List."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Five

I vy

The warmth of Cole's workshop is a relief after the biting chill outside, but as I step inside, my cheeks flushed from the cold—and maybe a little from the memory of our drive here—I can feel a different kind of heat creeping over me. Cole's presence lingers close behind as he shuts the door, trapping the warmth, the scent of wood smoke, and something else in the air between us.

"Careful there, Mrs. Claus," he murmurs, his voice a rough whisper, as I step forward, catching the sharp tug of something snagged in my hair. I stop, reaching up, my fingers brushing against a bit of greenery tangled around my curls. I twist, trying to see, but all I manage to do is create a bigger knot.

Cole chuckles, his gaze fixed on me, every inch of him screaming confidence.

"Hold still," he says, stepping in close, his broad shoulders blocking out the light as he reaches up, his fingers skimming the edge of my hair.

"It's just mistletoe," I manage, my voice embarrassingly shaky.

"Mistletoe, huh?" He gives me a look that's entirely too amused, his fingers working through the tangle as his gaze holds mine, unwavering and intense. "You know what that means, don't you?"

I try for a careless laugh, but it comes out as a faint breath. "I'm not falling for that

holiday cliché.”

He smirks, his hand slipping lower, fingertips grazing the sensitive skin just behind my ear. “Then why are you blushing, Ivy?”

I open my mouth to answer, but the words evaporate when he steps closer, his warmth folding over me, his hand tilting my chin up until I’m looking directly into his dark, smoldering gaze.

“Tell me to stop,” he says, his voice a low growl, yet his grip on my chin is gentle, as if he’s giving me an out. The problem is, I don’t want one. I feel the pull, the electric thread snapping tight between us, drawing me into his orbit until everything fades but the feel of him, the way his eyes linger on my lips, the way his chest rises and falls in sync with mine.

I shake my head, barely a whisper. “I’m not telling you to stop.”

His mouth curves into a dangerous smile, and then he closes the distance, his lips capturing mine with a slow, measured intensity. His kiss is anything but gentle; it’s deliberate, a claiming that leaves me breathless, his hand sliding down to the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

I feel myself melting into him, my fingers curling into the fabric of his jacket, pulling him closer, needing him like he’s the only thing keeping me standing. His lips move against mine with a sensual rhythm, every touch, every stroke sending sparks skittering down my spine.

When we finally pull back, we’re both breathing hard, his hand still tangled in my hair, his forehead resting against mine.

“Ivy...” he murmurs, his voice rough and thick with something I can’t quite name.

“Yeah?” I manage, my voice a whisper.

He brushes a strand of hair from my face, his gaze locked on me, searching. “It’s snowing out there. I had my buddy haul your car to my garage so I can check it out after your little off-road excursion, but...I don’t think you should risk driving back tonight.”

The logical side of me knows he’s right, that the road down Copper Mountain is treacherous even in the best of conditions, let alone with snow swirling like it is outside. But the part of me still buzzing from his kiss, still caught up in the weight of his hand on my hip, knows there’s more to this invitation than just the weather.

I swallow, nodding slowly. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

His mouth lifts in a small, satisfied smile, and he steps back, holding out a hand. “Come on, let’s get you settled.”

He leads me back out into the cold for a moment before guiding me to the cabin beside his workshop, a rugged place that’s as much a part of him as anything else. Inside, the warmth of the wood-burning stove fills the air, and he sets about lighting a few lamps, casting a cozy, flickering glow over the room. It’s small but sweet, and lacks a single Christmas decoration.

“Make yourself at home,” he says, shrugging off his coat and tossing it over a leather chair. I watch him, unable to look away, captivated by the unfiltered confidence in his movements, the ease with which he fills the space.

I slip off my coat, feeling my cheeks warm as he watches me, his gaze unapologetically bold, dark eyes sliding over me like he’s savoring every inch.

“You really are something else, you know that?” he murmurs, stepping closer, the

edge of his mouth tugging into a grin as he takes in the mess of Christmas decorations I'd managed to slip into my bag for the festival.

"What can I say? I like Christmas," I reply, a little too breathlessly, as he grabs a string of lights, arching an eyebrow.

"Mind if I join in on the holiday cheer?" he asks, his voice rough, laced with something that makes my pulse kick up a notch. He doesn't wait for my answer, taking the lights and winding them around the small tree standing by the window. I can't help but smile as he works, his expression almost soft in the glow of the string lights. I love seeing this side of him that no one else sees.

"You're getting the hang of this," I tease, handing him a few ornaments to hang.

He scoffs, but there's a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Don't get used to it, Mrs. Claus. This is a one-time deal."

"Oh, I'll believe that when I see it," I say, brushing a hand over his shoulder, feeling the solid heat of him under my palm. He glances down, his gaze flicking to my hand, then back to my face, a slow smile curving his lips.

"You keep looking at me like that, and we're going to end up on your Naughty List," he murmurs, his voice low and rough.

I feel my heart hammer in my chest, but I can't bring myself to look away. "Maybe that's exactly where I want to be."

For a heartbeat, he just stares at me, the tension between us coiled so tight it's a wonder we're both still standing. Then, as if a switch has flipped, he pulls me to him, his mouth covering mine in a kiss that's all heat and hunger. His hands slide down my back, pulling me against him, and I can feel every inch of him, solid and

unyielding, as he deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, claiming, demanding.

I moan against him, my fingers digging into his shoulders as he presses me back, his hand sliding up to tangle in my hair, holding me exactly where he wants me. He kisses me like he's been holding back, like he's finally letting go, and I feel myself unraveling under his touch, my knees going weak as he drags his mouth down to my neck, his teeth grazing my skin.

"Cole," I breathe, barely able to get the word out.

He pulls back, his gaze dark and heavy with desire. "Ivy," he murmurs, his voice rough, almost a growl. "I've been doing my best to wait—to give you what you deserve all night long."

There's no hesitation, no second-guessing. I nod, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt, and he lifts me, carrying me to the bed, his hands steady and sure. He lays me down, his gaze raking over me as he pulls his shirt over his head, revealing the solid, chiseled lines of his chest, the strength in his arms. I feel my breath catch, my fingers reaching for him, needing him closer, needing everything.

He leans down, his mouth capturing mine in another searing kiss, his hands roaming over me, sliding under my sweater, his touch setting my skin alight. He pulls the sweater over my head, his eyes darkening as he takes me in, his hands trailing over my bare skin, leaving a path of fire in their wake.

"God, Ivy," he murmurs, his voice rough with desire. "You're perfect."

I don't have time to respond before his mouth is on me again, kissing, tasting, exploring, his hands pulling me closer as we move together, the world outside fading until there's nothing left but the feel of him, the heat of his skin against mine, the way



his name falls from my lips like a prayer.

When I'm with this man, the rest of the world slips away. Cole watches me, his gaze locked onto mine with a heat that could melt the snow outside his cabin window. He breathes out in that low, rough voice that sends shivers racing down my spine, "You're a fucking vision."

I can feel my grin stretch wide, my heart pounding as our hands find each other. We stand across from each other, fingers laced, and in this moment, it's like nothing and no one else exists. The world outside drifting by in a blur while I'm lost in the storm brewing between us. His eyes hold me captive, steady and intense, and all I can think about is him, the way he looks at me, like I'm his whole world.

My skin tingles, alive under his gaze, my body aching with a need I've never known. I want him to pull me close, to feel his fingers in my hair, his lips on mine. I want him to take me away, claim me under the moonlight. But he holds back, lets me savor every moment.

He pulls me against his chest then, his voice a possessive growl as he murmurs, "You're all mine tonight, Mrs. Claus."

His lips press against mine, claiming me in a way that feels like the beginning of forever.

Cole's hands are in my hair, his lips trailing down my neck, igniting a fire everywhere he touches.

"I can't wait to fill that pretty mouth—" he groans against my skin, his hands tracing the curve of my back as he whispers between kisses.

"Oh my God, Cole..." My breath comes fast, anticipation building as his fingers

graze the globes of my breasts beneath my lacy red bra.

“Babe...” His voice is low, a dangerous promise that sends a thrill straight through me. A gasp escapes me as his breath skims over my skin, his warm mouth igniting sparks along every nerve ending. His fingers work at the button and zipper of my jeans before he pushes them down my thighs. My body trembles, anticipation coiling tight as he pushes my panties aside, his fingers slipping against my heat.

His voice is a gruff murmur as he presses his lips to my inner thigh. “Babe—you’re soaking wet for me.” A growl falls from his lips. “You don’t know what that does to me.”

The raw need in his gaze, the way his touch owns me, sends a flood of desire rushing through me.

“I love how your hands feel on my skin,” I admit, my voice breaking as his thumb circles slowly against my swollen clit. “Just your breath on me makes me want to beg you to... do things. ”

He chuckles, low and rough, his lips pressing kisses up my thigh, stoking the fire hotter.

“What things, baby?” He pulls back just long enough to lock his eyes with mine, waiting for me to answer.

I barely recognize my own voice, breathless, needy. “I want your fingers... everywhere . I want your mouth...against me.”

A groan rumbles from him, his hands trailing up my waist before unhooking my bra, baring my skin to the chill air and his scorching gaze. His mouth finds my breast, tongue flicking over a tightened peak, making me shudder.

“Your tits are so beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice full of reverence. “So big and heavy, you make my mouth water.”

I arch into his touch, feeling my resolve slip away, surrendering to the pull of him, the way he’s making me come undone. “Cole...I need you.”

“Patience, Mrs. Claus.” His voice is smug, but there’s a hunger in his eyes that mirrors my own. “I want to savor this. Every second. Every inch of you.” He lifts his head, his fingers tracing over my pussy lips, spreading me open for him, driving me out of my mind.

“I’ve waited too damn long to make you mine,” he growls, his mouth descending between my legs, his tongue sweeping over my heat, and I nearly come apart at that first touch. I moan, unable to hold back, my hands tangling in his hair, pulling him closer as he feasts on my soaked slit, licking and tasting like I’m the sweetest thing he’s ever had.

His tongue moves in lazy, teasing strokes, taking his time, driving me wild with every pass.

“You taste like heaven,” he murmurs against me, his words sending a thrill through my body.

He doesn’t let up, mouth and hands working in tandem, coaxing me closer to the edge. I’m trembling, lost to him, to the way he makes me feel. “Cole... please...”

But he just grins, dark and wicked, before he takes one of the candy canes I brought from my bag and runs it over the tip of my nipple. I shudder as he trails it down my skin, over my hips, before teasing the bud of my clit. He grins, easing the the candy cane inside my pussy, fucking me with just the tip at first, before sinking the candy fully inside of me. I arch and moan, enjoying the way he plays and sucks at my skin

as if he's savoring every inch of me.

"You're definitely on the Naughty List now, gorgeous," he hums as his fingers slip inside me, curling just right, and I can't hold back anymore. My body clenches around him, a broken cry slipping from my lips as pleasure crashes over me, leaving me breathless.

Before I've even caught my breath, he's standing, lifting me in his arms, carrying me down the hallway. His voice is a low, possessive growl. "I want you in my bed for the rest of the night. And the next. And every night after that. I'll tie you to me until I have my fill of you if that's what it takes. Torturing me the way you have been these last few days, making me put on that Santa getup, consider this your punishment, sweetheart."

I cling to him, my heart pounding, feeling more loved, more wanted, than ever before. He licks and sucks at my soaked pussy, driving me wild, before he pushes his jeans down his thighs and reveals his hard dick to the open air. I gasp at the sight of it, my mouth watering, the urge to feel him at the back of my throat is strong.

His hands slide over my waist and he brings me to the edge of the bed, lining himself up to fill me.

"Oh, God, yesss..." I husk when he breaches my entrance slowly. I arch into him, desperate to feel more when he pauses and catches my gaze.

"Are you on birth control?" he grunts.

"No," I shake my head. "I've—I've never been with a man."

His eyes shudder closed and a soft grunt falls from his lips. "Damn, sweetheart, I wasn't expecting that. You're so sweet and beautiful and now you tell me you're

untouched..." he lands a trail of kisses along my neck, "I've never been with any other woman. You're the only one." He sucks at the flesh of my breast before murmuring, "Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes—I'm sure. I'm more than sure."

"Good—" his calloused thumb trails over my nipple, tweaking softly.

"I'll do my best to take it slow, but I've been thinking of making you mine every damn night since you walked in here with all of your Christmas cheer."

A grin slips over my lips followed by a needy moan when he pushes himself another inch inside of me. I gasp, prepared for the pain of him breaking past the barrier that will make me his forever, but it doesn't come. I only feel a swell of pleasure.

He groans, gripping my hips and inching himself deeper into me. I grasp at his shoulders, arching my hips, greedy for more of him. "I want you deeper, I want to feel you buried inside of me."

"Mm, damn, baby. I want that too," he grunts and then in one swift move seats himself fully inside of me. He growls softly, "Does that hurt?"

"No," I reassure him, clinging to his hard body as he thrusts slowly at first and then with more speed.

"God, precious, you're gonna steal all the cum from my balls. I can't wait any longer, I'm gonna fill your virgin womb with my babies."

"Yes—do it," I sing into the air.

"You want that? You want me to breed you, gorgeous?" He slows his thrusts, eyes

locking with mine. “Fuck, it would ruin me to see you pregnant with my babies.”

I groan with pleasure, his words spurring another orgasm.

“Damn, baby. Your sweet little virgin pussy fists me so tight, feels like I’m gonna lose myself inside of you.” He pumps quickly, his fingertips swirling at my clit and pulling another trembling orgasm from my body before his thighs stiffen and he grips my hips, forcing me to take all of his cum as he shoots off inside of me.

“Dammit—you’re ruining me, Mrs. Claus.” He grunts, then presses kisses along my neck as his pulsing dick stills. A moment later he’s slowly dragging his hard cock out of me and already I miss the feel of him buried deep.

He collapses at my side and pulls me closer to him, snuggling me against his hard body and growling into my hair. “Not done with you yet, babe, just give me a minute to recover.”

We spend the night tangled together, his hands and mouth worshiping me, my body responding to every touch, every whisper. Outside, the snow falls softly, blanketing the world in silence, but inside, there’s only us, only the fire between us, burning brighter than any Christmas lights.

By the time the first light of dawn slips through the window, I know I’m lost in him, and I never want to be found.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Six

Ivy

I can still feel the press of Cole's hands on my skin from last night as I step into the hardware store the following afternoon. It smells like sawdust and old wood polish, mixed with the faint hint of pine from the wreaths I helped hang over the entrance. I scan the aisles, basket in hand, already filled with nails, a hammer, and way too many Command strips. I'm on a mission—no, more like a crusade—to decorate my classroom until the kids walk in and feel like they're in the North Pole.

"Looking for something specific?" a deep voice drawls from behind me.

I turn and see two men watching me with open amusement. One has a mischievous glint in his eye that immediately reminds me of Cole, while the other has an easy, quiet confidence about him. I know instantly who they are; I've heard Cole talk about his best friend Knox and his brother Pope enough times that I'd recognize them anywhere. The Steele brothers are notorious bachelors around here, but according to Betty, Knox and Pope have recently gone off the market.

"Oh, no, just... Christmasifying everything," I say, grinning. "Although if I could get the owner of this place on board, it would make my life a lot easier."

They both laugh, a deep sound that echoes through the empty aisles.

"Good luck with that," the mischievous one says, shaking his head. "Jim's been on the Naughty List since I was in grade school."

“Well, I’ll just have to try harder.” I shoot him a challenging look, planting my hands on my hips. “Nothing’s impossible when it comes to Christmas spirit.”

The quieter one, who I’m guessing is Pope, chuckles. “You might actually be the only person in this town who believes that.” His eyes hover long moments on mine before he says, “You’re Ivy, right? Cole mentioned you.”

“He did?” I say, a thrill running through me.

“Sure did.” Pope grins. “You’ve got him all in a twist. He’s not used to a pretty girl shoving Christmas spirit down his throat.”

A blush climbs up my cheeks. “It’s about time someone made a believer out of him.”

“Hey, some of us are believers,” Knox says, nudging Pope with his elbow. “Took my Petal coming into my life to knock me into some holiday cheer, but it happened.”

I brighten at the mention of Petal. “Oh, Perry at the flower shop! She’s been so helpful with my arrangements for the classroom and the food pantry. I didn’t know you two were... together.”

Knox’s face softens, and I can see in his eyes a warmth that’s undeniable. “Yep, she’s my girl. Smartest thing I ever did was hold on to her. She’s got a way of reminding me what’s important, keeping me grounded.”

Pope smirks. “We all thought Knox was a lost cause until Petal came around.”

Knox rolls his eyes but shrugs, unbothered. “Probably was. A man needs someone to mirror back what he’s missing, show him how to love in ways he forgot.”

My smile fades slightly as his words sink in. My mind drifts, unbidden, to Cole, to



the glimpses of loneliness I've seen in his eyes, even when he's too proud to admit it. "You think maybe... your friend Cole could use that?"

Knox and Pope exchange a glance, and there's a silent understanding there that tells me they've had this conversation before.

"Oh, Cole's needed it for a while," Pope says, shaking his head. "He's lived up there on that mountain, keeping to himself, not letting anyone in. He's stubborn, but... I think you're getting through to him, Ivy. Might not admit it, but he's changed since you showed up."

"Yeah?" I say, feeling a warmth settle in my chest. "Because he seems pretty determined not to let me in."

Knox grins, folding his arms. "He'll break. Just needs a bit of help finding his way. He's been keeping himself locked up since his dad passed, even more since..."

He trails off, glancing at Pope as if he's said too much, but I lean forward, wanting to know more. "Since?"

Pope sighs, glancing at Knox. "Let's just say he's had a rough go. His dad was everything to him, and when he lost him... well, he's been keeping people at arm's length ever since. As for relationships? There was someone once, but it didn't end well. Now he's convinced he's better off alone."

I feel a pang in my chest, imagining the hurt he must carry, buried under that rough, unbreakable exterior. He may act tough, but I've seen hints of the man underneath, the part of him that softens when he's not busy being Copper Mountain's resident Grinch.

Knox gives me a sympathetic look. "If anyone's gonna crack that shell, Ivy, it sounds

like it's you."

My cheeks heat, and I laugh, trying to deflect. "Really? Sometimes I feel like I'm just annoying him."

They both chuckle, Knox giving me a knowing look. "Nah, it's more than that. Don't worry, he'll come around. Just don't let him scare you off first."

I grin. "Not a chance. I've got a lot more Christmas spirit up my sleeve."

Pope crosses his arms, his smile widening. "Then maybe you should join us on a triple date. You and Cole, me and Ruby, and Knox and Petal. Could be a good way to get him out of his cave for once."

My heart leaps at the thought. "I'd love that. Though convincing him might be a challenge."

Knox shrugs. "You'd be surprised what a woman like you can do when she puts her mind to it. Just... give him time. He's got a lot of ghosts he's wrestling with."

The gravity in his voice reminds me that while my mission to "Christmasify" Cole has felt lighthearted, it's clear there's much more to him than I first thought. And for some reason, that only makes me more determined to show him that he doesn't have to keep hiding.

"Thanks, guys," I say softly. "I think I needed to hear that."

Knox winks, giving my shoulder a light squeeze. "You're good for him, Ivy. Don't let him convince you otherwise."

With one last smile, I leave the hardware store, feeling more resolved than ever. If

Cole's going to be stubborn, well, he hasn't met anyone as determined as I am. He may not be ready to believe in the magic of Christmas, but maybe, just maybe, he'll believe in me.

Later that evening, I find myself outside Cole's workshop, a bag of supplies in hand and a fresh dose of determination. As I push open the door, he looks up, his brow furrowing as he takes me in.

"You again," he smirks. "Addicted to my dick already, Mrs. Claus?"

"Me again," I giggle cheerfully, walking in and setting my bag on the counter.

He watches me, his arms folded over his chest, eyebrows raised. "What's with that shit-eating grin on your face?"

"Dropping off some supplies. Thought you could use a little extra Christmas cheer," I say, pulling out a string of lights and some ornaments.

He rolls his eyes but doesn't stop me as I start stringing the lights around the doorframe. "You really don't give up, do you?"

"Nope. I'm relentless," I say, shooting him a grin over my shoulder. "So, what're you doing tonight? I heard there's a Christmas movie marathon happening at the festival."

He smirks. "Not my thing."

"Shocker," I say dryly, finishing the lights and stepping back to admire my work. "You know, if you just tried to enjoy it, you might surprise yourself."

He gives me a look that's a mix of challenge and amusement. "And if I don't?"

I shrug, meeting his gaze. “Then maybe you’ll learn that you can still have a little fun.”

He snorts, shaking his head. “Fun. Sure. That’s what I need.”

I step closer, meeting his gaze head-on, feeling a spark of mischief. “Maybe I’m exactly what you need, Cole.”

His eyes darken, his expression unreadable. For a second, we just stare at each other, the air between us thick with unspoken tension. Then, with a slow smile, he reaches out, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“You really think so?” he murmurs, his voice low, his hand lingering just a little too long.

“I know so,” I whisper, my heart racing as he leans in, his gaze flicking to my mouth, his breath warm against my cheek.

“Ivy...” he says, his voice rough, almost hesitant.

“Yes?” I whisper, barely able to breathe.

He pauses, his gaze locked on mine, and I can see the struggle in his eyes, the part of him that wants to give in, to let go of whatever’s holding him back. But then he pulls away, his expression hardening.

“You stayin’ tonight?” he asks.

I swallow, shaking me head. “I can’t. But I’m not giving up on you, Cole.”

He doesn’t respond, his shoulders tense, and I know I’ve struck a nerve. But as I turn

to leave, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to him than he's letting on, that somewhere beneath that hard exterior, there's a man who wants to believe in something, even if he doesn't know how.

Outside, the snow is falling softly, covering Copper Mountain in a blanket of white. And as I walk away, I make a silent promise to myself: I'm going to show Cole that he doesn't have to spend Christmas alone, that he can still find joy, still find love, even if he's too stubborn to see it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:51 am*

### Chapter Seven

Ivy

I hang the last string of twinkling Christmas lights over the top of the bulletin board, my fingers sore from wrestling with the clips. My classroom is nearly ready for tomorrow, and each inch is covered in something festive—wreaths, garlands, and a stack of wrapped presents with each of my students' names written on them in gold marker. It's hard work, but it's worth it to see their faces light up tomorrow when they walk in. The last day of school before Christmas break is tomorrow and I have an entire day of festivities planned.

I take a step back to admire my work, only to bump into something solid. Cole's hand comes to rest on my shoulder, steadying me. I look up, catching the shadow of a grin tugging at his mouth.

"Thought you could use an extra set of hands tonight," he says with a smirk, holding up a tangled mess of Christmas lights and a box. "Brought you some candy canes and cheer."

I can't help but laugh, taking them from him and shaking them loose. "Hear to hang Christmas lights huh, Mr. Grinch?"

He narrows his eyes, unamused but still somehow amused. "In case you haven't noticed, I don't exactly have a lot of need for holiday decor up on the mountain."

"Well, it's high time you learned," I say, threading one end of the lights into his

hands. “Besides, what better place to start than a classroom full of eight-year-olds who are counting on Santa to show up?”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Santa, huh?”

“Yes, and you’re looking at him.” I hand him a red Santa hat, fighting the smile pulling at my lips. “The kids don’t need to know the real Santa got a little, uh... taller and gruffer this year.”

“Not again.” He pushes the hat back toward me, but I just smirk and cross my arms.

“Too late. I already promised them.” I fib. “Santa’s coming, and he’s got Cole written all over him.”

He groans, his fingers rubbing his temples like he’s developing a sudden headache. “You really don’t take no for an answer, do you?”

“Never.” I grab his arm, pulling him closer to the front of the room. “Now help me with these lights. We’ll make a Christmas elf out of you yet.”

He chuckles under his breath, letting me drag him across the room. He follows my lead, surprisingly compliant as I weave the lights along the windows, securing them with tiny hooks. His fingers brush mine as he hands me each clip, and with each accidental touch, the air between us thickens, a tension building that has nothing to do with the decorations.

I glance at him, catching the way his gaze lingers on me, the warmth there so at odds with his usual scowl.

“What?” I ask, fighting the heat rising in my cheeks.

“Nothing.” He looks away, shrugging. “Just... never seen someone put this much effort into a classroom before. You really care about them, huh?”

“Of course I do.” I smile, a soft warmth blooming in my chest. “Some of these kids don’t have much. And if I can give them just a little bit of magic, make them feel special for a day, that’s all that matters.”

His expression softens, just for a second, but then he shifts, glancing away like he’s uncomfortable. “Guess you’re the type to make everyone feel special.”

I roll my eyes, nudging him with my shoulder. “Oh, don’t go getting sentimental on me now, Cole. You’re supposed to be grumpy and reluctant, remember?”

He grins, that devilish smirk creeping back. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m still the same grumpy bastard.”

“Oh, I know.” I laugh, but my voice catches as he steps closer, the lights casting a warm glow over his face, his eyes darker than usual, intense as they sweep over me.

“You’ve got something here,” he murmurs, reaching up. His fingers brush my cheek, tangling in a strand of my hair that’s caught in the lights. The air between us feels charged, electric, each second stretched and tense as he slowly untangles my hair, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Thanks,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper, but I don’t move, can’t seem to pull away. He’s close, so close, and every instinct in me is screaming to close the gap, to kiss him, consequences be damned. I’ve been reliving that night in his cabin since it happened, my mind distracted with thoughts of his lips and his hands and his throbbing...

“You know, Ivy, you’re playing with fire.” He leans down, his lips brushing against



my ear.

“Am I?” I ask, the breath hitching in my chest.

He chuckles softly, the sound vibrating against my skin. “You tell me.”

And then, before I can respond, he steps back, his hands still holding the lights that somehow twisted around us. In one quick movement, he pulls, and suddenly, we’re tangled together, laughter bubbling up as we try to untangle ourselves.

“You’re terrible at this,” I tease, but the words falter as he leans in, his face mere inches from mine, his hand tightening around the lights between us.

“Maybe I just like being close to you,” he murmurs, his voice rough, that playful glint in his eyes shifting to something darker, something that makes my pulse race. “I think it’s time for a repeat of the other night. Only reason I let you go in the first place is because you needed to be here for them—” he gestures to the rows of tiny desks surrounding us.

I swallow, my resolve crumbling under his gaze. “Cole...”

“Yeah?” he whispers, his mouth hovering over mine, his breath warm against my skin.

And then, without another thought, he closes the gap, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that’s long overdue, that’s as fierce and intense as every charged look, every lingering touch that’s been building between us. His hands slide around my waist, pulling me closer, and I lose myself in the feel of him, in the way his mouth moves against mine, claiming me, like he’s been waiting for this as much as I have.

He breaks the kiss, his breath ragged, his forehead resting against mine. “You have

no idea how much I've been wanting to do that."

"Then why'd you take so long?" I ask, my voice breathless, my hands still tangled in his shirt, holding him close.

He chuckles, low and rough. "Guess I needed a little push."

I grin, tugging him down for another kiss, my hands winding around his neck, his warmth, his strength surrounding me, filling every part of me that's longed for him since the night we spent together. His fingers trail down my back, pulling me against him, his mouth tracing a path down my jaw, his breath hot against my skin, leaving me dizzy, my body humming with need.

"You know we're in a classroom, right?" he murmurs, his voice rough, teasing, as his hands find my waist, his grip possessive.

"I know," I whisper, breathless, not caring about anything but the feel of him, the way he's looking at me like I'm the only thing he sees.

He chuckles, his hand sliding up to cup my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek. "You're something else, Ivy."

"And don't you forget it," I say, grinning, pulling him down for another kiss, losing myself in him, in the way he makes me feel like I'm the only thing that matters.

But then, slowly, he pulls back, his gaze shifting, a shadow crossing his face, like he's remembering something, some barrier between us that I can't see.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my voice soft, sensing the change in him, the way he's suddenly distant.

He shakes his head, stepping back, his hand falling from my face, his expression unreadable. “Nothing. Just...forgot myself for a second.”

I frown, reaching for him, but he steps back again, his gaze avoiding mine, his posture tense. “Cole, what are you talking about?”

He sighs, his voice low, almost defeated. “You don’t belong in my world, Ivy. This... whatever this is—”

“Why do you think that?” I stare at him, my heart sinking, the warmth between us fading as he pulls further away, the walls going up around him like a fortress.

He glances at me, his eyes dark, almost haunted. “Because you deserve better than some guy who spends his days alone on a mountain. You’re too bright for that, Ivy. You’re so damn happy it’s like you were raised in a cult or something.”

“The cult of Christmas cheer maybe.” I tease, my hand traveling up his red flannel. “I want to get lost in you.”

“Fuck, I want that too.” He groans as I tighten my grip, stroking and teasing him with my thumb. “I just don’t want you to have regrets—”

I cup his cheeks in my palms. “Never.”

His dark eyes sparkle with hope and maybe even a little festive cheer. “Need to be reminded how much I love that sweet, dripping pussy of mine?”

I nip at his ear teasingly. “Always.”

He moans through clenched teeth.

"I need you, Cole." I press a kiss to his lips. "Take me. Ravage me." I hum in his ear, "Make it hurt."

He swallows. "Fuck, baby, see what you're doing to me?" He presses his hand against his pants to feel his steel-hard dick as he bites at my neck. And then his finger slides under my skirt and along my wet slit before sliding inside, making me nearly lose control. "God, you're so fucking turned on."

He spreads my slick arousal around my clit causing me to gasp and arch my back.

"I want inside you. Now." He squeezes my breasts through my red silk blouse before tearing it off and pushing me against my desk.

He kneels at the edge of the desk and pulls me closer to his face. With my legs over his shoulders and his mouth against my pussy, he takes a long lick up my length before gently biting on my clit. I moan and tangle my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer.

A smirk plays on his lips as he kisses along my body, leaving love bites where thigh meets torso. He teases with his tongue as I beg for more. He nips at my skin, leaving marks that will likely be tender in the morning but promise to remind me of his touch.

And I know the wild side of me will enjoy feeling them as I move throughout the day tomorrow.

As he presses his tongue against my clit, I let out a low moan. My arousal sweet on his tongue as he flicks and swirls, until my body shakes and my knees tighten around his head.

The teasing pain of his teeth on my sensitive bud nearly unravels me before he thrusts two fingers inside and finds my g-spot. I explode with pleasure as he laps up my

juices, his fingers still pushing against that special spot inside me. As I catch my breath from my powerful release, he trails kisses along my flesh, stopping to suck and nibble at my nipples. When he bites down too hard, I can't help but bite back, sinking my teeth into his neck as he rotates his hips and plucks at my breasts. He grunts in response, teasing me with his fingers in my mouth.

"Stop moving," he growls, smacking at my nipple when I don't listen. But I can't stop myself, the pleasure too intense. He pinches harder and I finally take notice of his warning. Our eyes lock, both filled with a mix of anger and lust.

"Got your attention now?" he taunts as he circles his thumb over my clit again, making it impossible for me to stay still.

"You think so?" I challenge as I near another orgasm with only the slightest graze of his fingertips along my slit.

I gasp when he smacks my sensitive area as punishment for talking back to him. I can't help but moan in pleasure. My gaze drifts down to his hard dick tenting the front of his pants. I look up at him with a mischievous smirk.

He sends me one right back before he unzips his pants and reveals his heavy cock to the cool air. I groan at just the sight of it before he positions himself at my entrance. He lifts my legs high above his head and crosses them at the ankles, before he leans over to angle me in a way that he fits snugly inside of me.

With one hand gripping my ankle and the other on my ass cheek, he slowly pushes into me, causing me to cry out with pleasure.

"Yes, Cole, fill me up," I beg as our bodies become one. In that moment, all of my desires and needs are fulfilled by him. All I can think about is how much I need him. How much I want to be connected to him always so that we can face whatever life

throws at us together.

"I love you," he whispers as he thrusts into me again, biting down on my neck and gripping my throat with one hand while the other plays with my breast. As we reach the peak of pleasure, I feel like nothing can ever tear us apart. With another powerful thrust, his body goes rigid, a deep grunt releasing from his lips as he cums in thick jets inside of me.

I love him so much it scares me. He takes care of me and loves me unconditionally. Tears well in my eyes as I cling to him tightly, knowing that this man has now become my everything.

"Happy holidays, Mrs. Claus," he mutters against my lips.

I smile, happy tears clinging behind my eyelids. "I love you, my mountain man Grinch. I love you so much."

### Chapter Eight

C ole

I stand in the workshop, Ivy's laughter still echoing faintly in my head, even though she's long gone. She has this way of filling up a place, making every inch of it seem brighter, warmer, like she's single-handedly chasing away the shadows I've spent years cultivating. It's been two days since that tangled moment in her classroom, wrapped up in her, with her lips pressed against mine like she'd been waiting for it just as long as I had. And it's been days since I realized I was in way over my head.

I try to push her out of my mind, focusing instead on the steady rhythm of the wrench in my hand, the feel of metal and grease grounding me. But I can't get her out of my head. And that's the problem. I can't shake the feeling that I don't deserve her. She deserves someone bright, someone who can match her fire, her unstoppable belief in all that Christmas cheer she loves so much. Someone who isn't dragging shadows along with them.

I wipe the back of my hand over my brow, the cold air doing nothing to cool the heat that's still simmering under my skin whenever I think of her. Which is too damn often. The door opens with a soft creak, and I look up to see Knox, his usual confident smirk tempered with something I can't quite place. He leans against the doorframe, watching me with a knowing look.

"You look like hell," he says.

"Nice to see you too," I grunt, going back to the task at hand, tightening a bolt that

doesn't need tightening.

He doesn't leave, just stands there, his gaze steady. "So, are you going to tell me what's going on, or am I going to have to guess?"

"There's nothing going on." I shrug, not looking up, hoping he'll drop it.

Knox just laughs. "Nothing going on, huh? Then why do you look like you've been chewing on nails since Christmas started?"

"Just tired." I try to keep my voice steady, but he's not buying it.

"Cole," he says, his voice gentler now, cutting through my defenses. "We all know you've got something going on with Ivy."

I stiffen, feeling a spark of irritation rise up in my chest. "What's it to you?"

Knox raises an eyebrow. "It's nothing to me, but it sure as hell seems to be something to you. And maybe to her."

My jaw tightens. "She deserves better."

"Better?" He frowns, crossing his arms. "What does that mean? You think you're not good enough?"

I shrug, my frustration simmering just beneath the surface. "She's sunshine and Christmas lights, Knox. She's...more than what I can give her."

Knox watches me for a moment, then he sighs, shaking his head. "That sounds like your insecurities talking, man, not the truth."



“It is the truth,” I snap, my voice a little too loud. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. “She’s better off without me. I’m just a guy with a workshop and a cabin up the mountain. I’m not what she needs.”

Knox’s gaze sharpens. “You think you’re the only one around here with doubts? We all have them, Cole. But the thing is, Ivy sees something in you. She wouldn’t be sticking around if she didn’t.”

I sigh, glancing down at the wrench in my hand, my grip tightening. “Maybe she just doesn’t know any better.”

“You know,” Knox says, his tone a little lighter now, “Perry once told me that a good woman sees right through a man’s walls. Even the walls he doesn’t realize he has.”

I scoff, my chest tight with the truth I’m not ready to admit. “And what, I’m supposed to just let her tear them down?”

Knox smiles, giving me a pat on the shoulder. “Something tells me she’s already started, brother.”

I grunt, unable to shake this dark feeling.

Knox’s gaze narrows before his grin twists into a smirk. “You love her—that’s why you’re all twisted up like this. Betty’s gonna have a field day with this match. The grump and the school teacher.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I throw back.

His laugh fills my shop. “Tell you what, you old dodgy bastard, if you love her—trust her. It sounds cliché, but just follow your heart on this, and ignore your head.”

“Did you just come up the mountain to give me bad advice?”

He shrugs, eyes swinging around my shop. “She’s really left her mark on you—it’s festive as fuck in here.”

I shrug. “I kinda like it.”

“Because it reminds you of her.” He says, sager than he’s ever been.

“Damn, Perry has really done a number on you. You’ve gone soft, bro.”

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way. Ivy is a good woman—maybe she deserves better, but take my advice and don’t let this one get away. The good ones are hard to come by.”

I grunt, unwilling to admit how right he is.

“You comin’ to Christmas Eve at ma’s place?” Knox shifts subjects. “That’s why I came here, she sent me because you’re not answering your damn text messages.”

I roll my eyes. “Got shit to do.”

He chuckles. “I figured. She’s makin’ prime rib, she needs a head count. Said to bring your new girl if you want.”

I nod. “I’ll ask her.”

“Good, I’ll let ma know.” He turns, then pauses when he reaches the doorway. “If you fuck this up with Ivy I’ll never let you forget it.”

“Great, what are you fucking Cupid, now?”

Knox shrugs. “Love man, it’s a drug and Perry’s got me happily addicted. You should try it sometime.”

I narrow my eyes, throwing a candy cane Ivy left on my workbench at him. “Bah-fucking-humbug.”

I can’t help the smile that lifts one side of my lips as his laugh echoes around my shop while he walks out the door.

## Page 9

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### Chapter Nine

Ivy

I stare into my hot cocoa, the swirls of whip cream folding in slowly, like it's taking its time deciding to mix in at all. Maybe it's the perfect metaphor for Copper Mountain—the stubborn way this town holds on to its grumpy demeanor, resisting anything sweet or cheerful that tries to settle in. I thought I could bring a little Christmas spirit here, but now I'm starting to wonder if I'm just another naive outsider thinking I can change something that doesn't want to be changed. Especially when it comes to Cole.

That man could win awards for his ability to build walls. Every time I think I've chiseled through, he throws up another layer, harder and colder than the last.

"Hey, Ivy!" Perry's voice breaks through my thoughts, and I look up to see her and Ruby smiling as they approach, steaming mugs in hand. I wave them over, grateful for the distraction.

"You look like you're carrying the weight of the world," Perry says, settling into the booth across from me with a concerned smile.

I force a laugh, but it comes out a bit too weak. "Just wondering if maybe I'm fighting a losing battle with Copper Mountain."

Ruby raises an eyebrow. "You? Giving up on Christmas cheer? Didn't think I'd ever see the day."

I let out a sigh, resting my chin in my hand. “It’s not the Christmas cheer, exactly. It’s just...well, I thought I could bring a little light to this place, you know? Maybe show people there’s still magic in the season. But some people seem determined to shut me down.”

“Let me guess,” Perry says, grinning. “Cole Mitchell?”

Ruby laughs, her eyes twinkling. “It’s always the grumpy ones, isn’t it?”

“Always,” Perry agrees, shaking her head. “Hate to love them, I swear. But you know, sometimes it’s those hard shells that protect the softest centers. They just don’t know how to show it.”

“Exactly,” Ruby chimes in. “Pope was like that too, all rough edges and scowls. But once I got past all that...” She trails off, a secretive smile spreading across her face.

Betty, who’s been lingering nearby, sets down a fresh pot of coffee on the table and joins in, folding her arms over her apron. “These mountain men act like they’re carved from stone, but they’re really just big ol’ teddy bears at heart. They don’t want anyone knowing, though. That would ruin their whole tough-guy act.”

I laugh, feeling the warmth of their words settle around me like a blanket. “I don’t know if Cole’s a teddy bear, though. He’s more like...a stubborn old grizzly.”

Betty laughs, patting my shoulder. “All men have a softness in them, Ivy. Sometimes it just takes the right woman to coax it out.” She sighs. “That’s how it was with my Richard. Hard on the outside but soft as a sweet caramel on the inside. Bless his soul.”

A part of me wants to believe she’s right, but I can’t shake the doubts clinging to me like shadows. “But what if he never lets me in? What if he’s just...too stuck in his

ways?”

Perry leans forward, her gaze sympathetic. “Listen, if anyone can break through those walls, it’s you. You’ve got more determination than anyone I know. Besides, I think he cares more than he lets on. You just need to give him time.”

Ruby nods in agreement. “And if he’s worth it, he’ll come around. Just don’t let his walls convince you that you’re not making a difference. You are.”

Their words fill me with a renewed sense of hope, a flicker of warmth that starts to melt away the chill Cole’s withdrawal left behind. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I just need to keep being persistent, to show him that he doesn’t have to carry his burdens alone. I love this man and he says he loves me, but I’m afraid his love will always feel just out of arm’s reach. Maybe he’s not capable of settling into something sweet and meaningful like I’m hoping.

Betty gives me a soft smile before heading back behind the counter, and I turn to Perry and Ruby, feeling a surge of gratitude for these women. They’re part of what makes this town so special, even if some of its residents can’t see it yet.

“So,” Ruby says, nudging me playfully. “What’s the plan? Are you going to keep pushing Mr. Grizzly to see the magic of Christmas?”

I grin, feeling that familiar spark reignite in my chest. “Oh, you better believe it. If he thinks he can scare me off, he’s in for a surprise.”

Perry laughs, clinking her coffee cup against mine. “Now that’s the Ivy we know and love.”

I smile, feeling the doubts start to fade away, replaced with a renewed sense of purpose. Cole Mitchell may be the most stubborn man I’ve ever met, but if there’s

one thing I'm good at, it's bringing a little cheer to even the grumpiest of Scrooges.

### Chapter Ten

#### Cole

I'm in the workshop, hands busy tightening a bolt on the engine in front of me, though it doesn't need it. But I can't seem to get Ivy out of my head, memories playing on repeat of fucking her in that festive classroom like my life depended on it. Hell, maybe it did. This woman grounds me and makes me feel alive all at the same time. It's like she's stamped into every corner of my mind—the way she laughs, filling up every space around her, her energy so damn big it's contagious. I grunt, twisting the bolt just to have something to do, hoping it'll pull my mind back to reality. But it's no use. The image of her smile, that glint in her eyes when she's up to something, sticks like glue.

Footsteps pull me from my thoughts, and I look up to see Knox and Pope standing in the doorway, arms crossed, watching me with a mix of amusement and...something else that makes me want to go right back to my tools and ignore them.

“What do you two want?” I ask, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice.

Knox smirks, crossing his arms. “We came to talk some sense into you.”

I scowl, turning back to the engine. “I don't need any sense talked into me, thanks.”

Pope lets out a laugh, shaking his head. “Oh, I think you do. And I think it starts with a certain Christmas elf who's been putting up with your grumpy ass for a little too long.”



My jaw tightens, hands freezing on the bolt. “Ivy’s...she’s just doing her thing. Bringing Christmas cheer to everyone.” I grip the wrench harder, forcing the words out. “I’m nothing special to her. If she knew what was good for her—”

Knox snorts, folding his arms. “You’re delusional if you believe that, Cole. That woman’s been bending over backward to get through to you, and all you’ve done is throw up walls like a man who’s never heard of holiday spirit.”

Pope nods, his tone softer. “Look, we know it’s not easy for you. But Ivy’s good for you, Cole. Since she came around, you’ve actually been, dare I say, happier. More... yourself.”

My fists tighten around the wrench, but I keep my eyes on the engine, refusing to look up. “And what happens when she gets tired of it? When she realizes I’m not worth the trouble?”

Knox steps forward, his tone gentler than usual. “Cole, it’s not about whether you’re ‘worth it’ or not. It’s about letting someone in. Trusting that she cares about you, even if it scares the hell out of you.”

Pope gives me a steady look. “If you let her slip away, you’re going to regret it. Maybe not now, but someday. She’s something special, Cole, and you know it.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, I just stand there, feeling my chest tighten with a mix of fear and longing. I don’t know if I can give Ivy what she deserves, but I know one thing: I don’t want to lose her. Not now. Not ever.

With a deep breath, I look up at Knox and Pope, my resolve hardening. “Alright,” I say quietly. “Maybe it’s time I stopped being an idiot.”

Knox grins, clapping me on the back. “About damn time.”

### Chapter Eleven

I vy

I'm perched high up on a ladder, holding a string of lights and carefully looping them around the towering Christmas tree in the center of Copper Mountain's town square. Perry and Ruby are on the ground, handing me supplies and guiding me on where to drape each strand. The tree is a massive evergreen that stretches up into the crisp winter sky, its dark branches layered with fresh snow. It's cold, and my cheeks and nose are flushed from it, but there's a warmth in my chest that makes everything feel just right.

I reach down to grab the next strand of lights from Perry, and she grins up at me. "Look at you, decorating like a pro. You're practically a mountain woman now."

I laugh, securing the lights and adjusting my balance. "Thanks to you guys. I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Ruby laughs, brushing her hands together after tossing me an ornament. "I think the town's coming around to your charm too. Well, most of it, anyway."

I know exactly who she's referring to, and I can't help but let out a little sigh. "Some people are tougher nuts to crack."

Perry gives me a knowing look.

I roll my eyes, but I can't stop the smile tugging at my lips. "I just...I don't know. I

didn't expect to care this much for him. It was supposed to be a fun way to bring some cheer to the town. I never thought I'd get so tangled up in it. Or in him."

Ruby's gaze softens, and she exchanges a look with Perry. "Sometimes, the best things in life aren't planned, Ivy. And I think you bring out something in Cole that he's forgotten about. Don't let him scare you off."

I adjust the string of lights and take a deep breath, the truth of her words settling over me. I didn't come to Copper Mountain looking for a life-altering experience, but here I am, tangled up in this town, and even more tangled up in a man who makes my heart race and my head spin.

When I finish with the lights, I climb down, stepping back to admire our handiwork. The tree sparkles against the snowy backdrop, its lights bright and warm, and it fills me with a strange, fierce pride. This isn't just any Christmas tree. It's our Christmas tree. A tree we've decorated together, as a community. And in that moment, I realize just how much this town has become a part of me.

Ruby nudges me with her shoulder, her voice soft. "You know, Ivy, sometimes you don't choose where you belong. Sometimes, it chooses you."

I look at her, my chest tight with a mix of emotions I can't quite put into words. I nod, feeling the weight of her words and knowing, deep down, she's right. And if that means fighting a little harder to break through to Cole, then that's what I'll do.

### Chapter Twelve

#### Cole

The festival's winding down, but the air's still buzzing with that holiday energy, the glow of lights casting a warm haze over the snow-dusted square. I shove my hands into my coat pockets, scanning the crowd for her. Ivy. I'd give anything to make her laugh tonight, to hear that sound that's been stuck in my head since the first time I heard it. It took Knox and Pope smacking me upside the head with reality to realize how deep I'm in with her, and now I'm just hoping I'm not too late.

Then I spot her, standing by the big Christmas tree, her face lifted up to the lights like she's drinking them in. She looks...magical, for lack of a better word. She's bundled up in that red coat of hers, a soft red scarf wrapped around her neck, and her cheeks are flushed from the cold—or maybe from the sheer joy she can't seem to keep hidden. I feel my pulse kick up a notch, just watching her.

I make my way over, steady and slow, like I've got all the time in the world, though every nerve in my body's telling me to hurry. When I'm close enough, I clear my throat, and she turns, her eyes widening a fraction when she sees me.

"Cole." She smiles, but there's a hint of surprise in her voice. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Figured I'd make an appearance," I say, keeping my tone light, though I know this isn't the time for jokes. "Can't let you be the only one bringing Christmas cheer to Copper Mountain."

She lets out a soft laugh, but I see the hesitation in her eyes, a flicker of something guarded. It twists something in my chest, knowing I'm the one who put that there, put that doubt in her when she deserves anything but.

I step closer, holding her gaze, and for once, I don't try to mask what I'm feeling. "Ivy, I need to tell you something."

She nods, her eyes searching mine, waiting. There's a vulnerability there, something she's trying hard to keep under control, and I feel a surge of determination. I'm not letting her doubt me. Not tonight.

"You've...done something to this town," I say, my voice low, almost rough. "And to me. All that Christmas cheer you brought in, all those ridiculous decorations and contests—it's not just for show, is it?"

She blinks, a hint of confusion flickering across her face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." I take a breath, stepping even closer until there's barely any space left between us. "I thought I didn't need anyone. Thought I'd gotten too comfortable on that mountain, living by myself, no one to answer to. But you came along with your damn Christmas spirit and shook everything up."

Her lips part, her breath catching, and I reach out, brushing a strand of hair away from her face, letting my fingers linger. "You're exactly what this town needed, Ivy. Exactly what I needed."

She stares up at me, and I can see the effect my words have on her, the way her cheeks flush, her eyes brightening as she processes what I'm saying. "Cole..."

I take her hand, squeezing it gently, grounding myself in the feel of her warmth. "You made me realize I've been missing something. A spark I thought I'd buried a long

time ago. You brought it back, Ivy. And I didn't even know I needed it."

For a moment, we just stand there, the snow starting to fall around us, soft flakes catching in her hair. She's looking at me like I've just handed her the moon, and damn, if that doesn't make me want to give her everything.

"You don't have to be so serious about it," she teases softly, though her voice wavers slightly. "It's just a bit of Christmas spirit."

I smile, letting out a rough laugh. "Maybe for you. For me...it's a lot more than that."

Her gaze softens, and I can see the warmth there, the trust she's slowly letting back in. She takes a step closer, her hand slipping up to my chest, her fingers curling into the fabric of my flannel coat. "I'm glad, Cole. I was starting to wonder if I'd pushed you too hard. Maybe pushed you away."

I shake my head, catching her hand and bringing it to my lips, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. "I'm glad you did. I needed it."

She swallows, her breath a little shaky as she stares up at me. The lights from the tree cast a warm glow around us, the snow falling softly, and I can't hold back anymore. Not when she's looking at me like that, like I'm the only thing in the world that matters.

"Come here," I murmur, pulling her closer, my hands settling on her waist. I can feel her pulse under my fingers, the warmth of her body pressing against mine, and it's like every wall I've ever built crumbles in that moment.

I tilt her chin up, watching her eyes flutter closed, and then I close the distance, my lips finding hers in a kiss that's been building between us for far too long. She responds immediately, her arms wrapping around my neck, her body pressing into

mine like she's been thinking about this just as much as I have. The kiss is slow, unhurried, but there's a heat simmering beneath the surface, a hunger that neither of us is trying to hide.

Her fingers slide into my hair, tugging slightly, and it sends a surge of need through me, my hands tightening on her waist, pulling her even closer. She tastes like warmth, like Christmas and cinnamon, and I don't think I've ever felt anything this right in my life.

When we finally pull back, we're both breathing hard, the cold air mixing with the heat between us, our breaths visible in the night air. She stares up at me, her eyes dark and a little dazed, her lips swollen from the kiss.

"Cole," she whispers, her voice barely more than a breath. "I...I thought you'd never come around."

"Well, here I am." I press another soft kiss to her forehead, feeling a sense of peace settle over me. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes light up, and she leans into me, resting her head against my chest. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close, and we stand there in the quiet, under the falling snow, with the sounds of the festival in the background. It's like everything else fades away, leaving just us, and for once, I don't feel the need to keep my guard up. I don't feel the need to hold back.

"Do you think Copper Mountain will get tired of my Christmas cheer?" she murmurs, a smile in her voice.

"Not a chance." I chuckle, running my fingers through her hair. "They might pretend to grumble, but they love it. Just like I do."

She lifts her head, her eyes sparkling. “You love my Christmas cheer?”

I grin, brushing a thumb over her lips. “I love everything about you, Ivy. Even if it’s taken me a while to admit it.”

She smiles, and it’s the kind of smile that makes the whole damn world feel brighter. And as we stand there, wrapped up in each other, I realize that maybe Christmas isn’t so bad after all—especially if I get to spend it with her.

“Come on,” I say, taking her hand and leading her through the snow. “Let’s walk for a bit.”

She nods, her fingers laced with mine, and we stroll through the town square, past the Christmas lights and decorations that she’s worked so hard to put up. She leans into me, her head resting on my shoulder, and for the first time in a long time, I feel...at peace.

“Thank you, Ivy,” I murmur, squeezing her hand. “For bringing all this...bringing me back to life.”

She looks up, her eyes shining with something warm and unspoken. “I think you did most of that on your own, Cole. I just helped you remember what was already there.”

I pull her closer, feeling the truth of her words settle over me. Maybe she’s right. Maybe she just reminded me of the parts of myself I’d forgotten. But I know one thing for certain—I don’t want to forget again. And as we stand there, watching the snow fall under the glow of the Christmas lights, I realize that Ivy’s not just a part of my life now. She’s become the best part.



### Chapter Thirteen

Ivy

The crisp night air nips at my cheeks as Cole and I make our way back to his truck, the snow crunching underfoot. Christmas lights glow around us, casting a soft, warm light that only seems to intensify the hum of energy sparking between us. I glance over, catching the hint of a smile on his face—an expression I’m coming to crave more than anything else.

Once we’re back at his workshop, he opens the door, letting me step inside first. The familiar scent of wood and oil wraps around me, grounding and warm, but tonight it feels different. There’s a tension here, a pulsing undercurrent that’s been building between us, reaching a point where holding back feels impossible. I look up at him, and he’s watching me with an intensity that makes my pulse spike.

“So...” I manage, trying to keep my tone steady. “I see you’ve accepted being on the Naughty List this year.”

He chuckles, low and deep, the sound rolling through me like a challenge. “Pretty sure I earned my spot.”

“Oh, I know you did.” I step closer, feeling the air between us thicken. “All that resisting and Scrooge attitude?—”

“Which I don’t plan to do anymore,” he cuts in, his voice rough, eyes dark with intent. He reaches out, hooking a finger around my scarf and pulling me closer, his

gaze flicking between my eyes and my mouth. “You look like a cute little holiday elf...I might need you to remind me what happens to people on the Naughty List.”

I bite my lip, feeling my heart thunder as I tilt my chin up to meet his stare. “You can call me Kandi Kane the Christmas elf,” I grin, thinking back to our candy cane shenanigans the first time I stayed the night with him. “And maybe boys on the naughty list get what they’ve been waiting for.”

The next second, his mouth is on mine, a hot, urgent kiss that leaves no room for doubt. His hands settle on my hips, pulling me flush against him, and I feel his heartbeat, strong and steady, echoing against my own. I sink into him, my fingers finding the edges of his jacket, tugging him closer as his mouth moves over mine with a hunger that has me breathless, lost in the heat of it.

His hands slide up my back, rough and possessive, and he breaks the kiss just enough to look down at me, his gaze intense. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted this all day. How much I’ve wanted you.”

“Then show me,” I whisper, my voice thick with need. I slide my hands up his chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle beneath his plaid shirt, my fingers tracing the outline of him, savoring every inch.

He growls softly, pressing me back until I feel the cool surface of his workbench against my back. His hands trail down my arms, his fingers curling around my wrists as he pins me there, his mouth hovering just over mine, teasing. “You’re so beautiful...my festive little Kandi Kane.”

I giggle, meeting his gaze. That’s all he needs. He leans in, claiming my mouth again, his kiss turning deeper, rougher, as his hands explore, pulling me closer, like he’s trying to memorize every inch. His mouth trails down my neck, leaving a heated path of kisses that make me shiver, my skin lighting up under his touch.

He slips my coat off, his fingers deft and unhurried, and I feel a thrill as he slides his hands over my shoulders, down my arms, taking his time like he's savoring every second. I arch against him, my hands tangling in his hair as he pulls me closer, pressing me against the bench that's strewn with Christmas garland and shiny bulbs. I lose myself in the feel of him, in the taste of him.

"Cole," I breathe, my voice shaky, caught between laughter and desire. "You know this isn't very... professional in your place of business."

He laughs against my neck, a warm, delicious sound that makes my skin prickle. "Good thing I'm off-duty," he murmurs, his lips grazing my collarbone. "And tonight...you're all mine."

The words send a thrill through me, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer, needing more, needing all of him. His hands slide under my sweater, the heat of his touch setting my skin alight, and I shiver as he traces slow, deliberate patterns up my spine, his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

"Cole..." My voice is barely a whisper, but he hears it, his head lifting to meet my gaze, his eyes dark and filled with something raw, something real. He steps back just enough to pull off his own jacket, his movements deliberate, and I watch, captivated, as he lets it fall to the floor, his gaze never leaving mine.

Then he reaches for me again, his hands firm as he lifts me onto the edge of the workbench, stepping between my legs and pulling me close, his mouth finding mine in a kiss that's as fierce as it is tender. There's no hesitation, no holding back, and I match him, kiss for kiss, my hands exploring the lines of his shoulders, the strength in his arms, the rough warmth of him.

I laugh softly against his mouth, the sound turning into a gasp as he slides his hands down my thighs, his grip possessive, like he's staking a claim. "You're a cute little

Santa's helper." He adjusts the Santa hat that was sitting on his workbench on my head. "You should get on your knees and put Santa's dick in your mouth."

"You're enjoying this way too much," I murmur, my voice breathy.

"Oh, I'm not the only one," he teases, his voice low, his mouth curving into a grin against my neck. I do as I'm told, slipping off the bench and dropping to the floor. He works the zipper of his pants down and before he can do anything else, I trail my tongue up his thick length, pausing to swirl at the tip. He groans, pushing his hands into my hair. The noises he makes when we're together send me reeling, urging me to swallow him deeper, feel him in the back of my throat until I'm soaked and desperate to feel him deep inside of me.

He must want the same, because a minute later he's pulling me back up from the floor and covering me in a heated kiss. He plants my ass on his workbench again, and I tug him closer, wrapping my legs around him, pulling him in until there's no space left between us, until I can feel every inch of him, hard and unyielding against me. I lose myself in him, in the way he feels, the way he tastes, in the soft growl of his voice as he murmurs my name.

The world outside fades, leaving just the two of us in this dim, warm cocoon of his workshop, surrounded by the scent of wood and oil and something undeniably him. It's everything I've wanted, everything I've been waiting for, and as we move together, as he kisses me deeper, I feel something shift, something settle. Like coming home.

"You're too good to me, Cole," I say, my voice trembling with my impending release as our eyes meet.

"That couldn't be further from the truth, baby." He kisses me deeply, his tongue exploring every inch of my mouth as he expresses his love and desire for me.

"You deserve the world, Ivy, and I'm determined to give it to you," he declares.

"I think you mean Kandi Kane," I quip.

He chuckles, then swats at my swollen pussy with his palm.

"I think Santa's little helper needs my dick," he growls, his hand moving up to my neck as we lock eyes.

"Is that what you think I need?" I tease.

"I know exactly what you need. Your soaked and trembling for me, sweetheart," he rumbles against my neck before pulling my shirt over my head. His hands yank my jeans down my legs swiftly before he murmurs against my neck, "I can feel how wet you are right now."

He slides into me then, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony as our tongues dance and moans fill the workshop.

"The cold steel feels so good against my skin," I pant between kisses, feeling my nipples harden at the sensation. "But your touch makes me feel so hot everywhere else."

I start moving with my own rhythm now, overwhelmed by a mix of emotions—tenderness, desperation, lust, and pleasure. Cole is everything I never knew I needed and it's hard to believe I ever lived without him.

"Cole..." I moan, feeling the first waves of pleasure coursing through my body. "I thought about you every single day." My lips trail down his neck as our bodies move in perfect sync. "Some moments, I was so desperate and turned on I wasn't sure how I survived without you."

"You're the strongest woman I know." His hot breath against my skin sends shivers down my spine as his mouth travels down my body, teasing and tasting until I'm writhing beneath him. "You don't have to be strong anymore, baby. Just let go," he whispers against my heated skin as his fingers trace a path down my hips, finally resting just above my soaked entrance. "Give me all of you."

His words and actions send me over the edge and I can no longer hold back as tiny tremors run through my body accompanied by soft pants.

"This pretty pussy responds to me without even being touched." He growls possessively, and I can feel my arousal coating my thighs in a slick sheen. Just seeing him so hard for me makes me wet.

"Making you feel good is all I care about now. Taking care of your pleasure..." He drops to his knees, his tongue swirling around my clit, causing me to arch off the counter and almost lose control. "Taking care of your delicious curvy body..." His hand presses into the soft skin of my stomach, his rough hands contrasting with my smooth flesh in a way that feels so right. "Taking care of your heart."

I moan as he continues to work his fingers inside of me, pushing and prodding at my favorite spot until I explode in a wave of pleasure, covering his beard in my juices.

"I've spent too much time living without you." He kisses his way up my body, leaving a trail of my arousal along the way. "I don't need any more time to tell me that we need to start our forever together as soon as possible. Hell, I'd take you to the courthouse right now and make them marry us if I could."

He pushes inside of me again, fucking me hard and fast, holding onto me like he'll never let go before his beautiful face contorts with pleasure and he sprays his hot cum deep inside of me with a deep growl. Then, he pulls me down onto the floor beside him, our clothes providing a barrier from the cool surface underneath us as I come

down from yet another orgasm.

“Watching you cum is the sexiest thing I've ever seen... Kandi.”

“Mmm...” My voice sounds sleepy as I snuggle into his side. “Glad to be of service.”

“Did I just give you an orgasm-induced nap?” He laughs, trailing his fingers along my naked skin. “I was thinking of getting some ice cream and eating it off you.”

My sleepy grin widens. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving for you, my love...” He pulls me closer. “Consider me a man starved.”

“You have a way of burrowing into my heart, Cole Mitchell, since the beginning.” I sigh, feeling content and safe in his arms. “You’re the grumpy mountain man I couldn’t help but fall head over heels for.”

“I guess that’s my talent: unlocking your heart.” He snuggles me even closer. I love him so much it scares me, but the thought of being without him scares me even more. We belong together, finally and completely.

I don’t want this night to end.

He presses a soft kiss to my forehead, his arms wrapping around me as we catch our breath, our heartbeats slowing but still in sync. I rest my head against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart, the warmth of him, and I smile, feeling a sense of peace settle over me.

“So,” he murmurs, his voice a soft rumble in the quiet. “I think we just started our own Christmas tradition.”

I laugh, tilting my head up to meet his gaze, my fingers tracing lazy circles on his chest. “Sex in Santa’s workshop, I think I’m okay with that.”

He grins, brushing a kiss over my forehead, his arms tightening around me. “Good. Because you’re stuck with me now, Ivy. Naughty List and all.”

I arch an eyebrow, feigning innocence. “Are you saying I can expect more naughty behavior in the future?”

“Oh, you can count on it,” he says, his voice dark and playful, his fingers tracing a line down my spine, sending a delicious shiver through me. “And I plan on giving you plenty of reasons to put me on that list every year.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him close for another kiss, savoring the warmth, the strength of him, the sense of belonging that fills me. This is where I want to be, with him, building something real, something solid, something that’s ours.

Outside, the snow continues to fall, blanketing Copper Mountain in silence, but inside, there’s only warmth, laughter, and the quiet certainty that we’ve found something worth keeping, worth fighting for. And as I look up at him, seeing the way he’s watching me, his gaze soft and unguarded, I know that this is only the beginning.

We stay like that for a while, wrapped up in each other, lost in the magic of the moment. And as we start talking, planning, dreaming, I feel a thrill of excitement, knowing that this Christmas is only the start of all the ones to come. Because with Cole by my side, I know I’ve finally found my home on Copper Mountain.



C ole

The lights from Copper Mountain's New Year's Eve celebration glow against the fresh snow, casting a warm golden hue over the town square. I walk hand in hand with Ivy, her laugh ringing out as she pulls me toward the ice rink set up in the center of town. She's dressed in that Mrs. Claus costume she insisted on wearing, complete with a fur-trimmed red skirt and black boots that look damn good on her. I can't help but grin, shaking my head at the way she's pulled me into all this holiday cheer. And hell if I don't love every second of it.

She nudges me, raising an eyebrow. "What's that look for?"

"Just trying to decide if you're on the Naughty or Nice list this year," I tease, adjusting the Santa hat she plopped onto my head about an hour ago. "Because from where I'm standing, it's looking a lot more like the former."

She smirks, tugging me toward the rink. "I'm sure I could say the same about you."

We step onto the ice, laughter echoing around us from families and kids racing in circles. Ivy clings to my hand, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright as she glides beside me. For someone so light on her feet, she's not exactly steady on the ice, and every now and then, she stumbles, sending a shiver of heat up my spine every time I catch her.

"You know, if you're going to hang onto me like this," I murmur, pulling her close, "you might just end up on the Naughty list."

“Oh, is that so?” she challenges, a playful glint in her eye. “What would it take to end up on the Nice list then?”

I lean in, brushing my lips just beside her ear. “Maybe another year of putting up with me. Think you can handle that?”

Her laugh turns soft, her fingers tightening around mine. “I think I can manage. But you might need a few more Christmas miracles to really win me over.”

“Miracles, huh?” I pull back just enough to look at her, her breath clouding the cold air between us, her lips parted in a smile. “Maybe I’ve got one more up my sleeve.”

Before she can respond, I drop to one knee on the ice, keeping her hand in mine. Her eyes widen, and the laughter fades into something softer, more vulnerable. The sounds of kids cheering and the ringing of bells fade until it’s just her and me under the lights.

“Ivy,” I say, my voice a little rough as I stare up at her, feeling the weight of everything she’s given me, everything she’s brought back into my life. “You’ve changed me. You took a man who thought he didn’t need anyone, who’d closed himself off from everything, and you showed me what it means to really live again. I can’t imagine a single day without you, and I don’t ever want to.”

Her hand trembles in mine, her breath catching as she stares down at me, her eyes shining. I reach into my coat pocket, pulling out a small ring I’d been holding onto since Christmas Eve, waiting for the perfect moment.

“So what do you say, Ivy?” I ask, my voice low, steady. “Will you marry me and make every Christmas, every New Year, a little bit brighter?”

There’s a heartbeat of silence, then she nods, her face breaking into a radiant smile.

“Yes,” she breathes, her voice barely a whisper before she’s pulling me up and into her arms. “Yes, Cole, a thousand times yes.”

The crowd around us bursts into cheers, and I slide the ring onto her finger, feeling a sense of rightness settle over me as I hold her close, her laughter mingling with the sounds of celebration. Knox and Perry are clapping from the edge of the rink, and Pope and Ruby give us approving nods, Ruby wiping her eyes with a grin. All around us, the townsfolk who’ve watched me resist this woman’s holiday cheer are now clapping, cheering as she throws her arms around my neck, pulling me in for a kiss that’s sweet and slow, filled with promise.

As we skate off the rink, Ivy’s arm looped through mine, she glances up at me, a mischievous glint in her eye. “So,” she says, tugging me closer, “how about we start planning next year’s Naughty or Nice contest? This time, we do it together.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You really don’t take a break, do you?”

“Not when there’s work to do.” She grins, leaning into me. “Besides, now that we’re official, I think it’s time Copper Mountain gets a taste of the both of us, fully united. They won’t know what hit them.”

I pull her close, brushing a kiss over her forehead. “As long as I get to keep you by my side, I think we can handle anything this town throws at us.”

And as we walk hand in hand through the snow, Ivy’s laughter filling the night air, I know we’re not just building a life together; we’re building a legacy of holiday cheer, of shared joy and new traditions. And I can’t wait to see what the next year, and every year after that, will bring.

“You should move in with me,” I say an hour later as I carry her into my cabin, setting her on her feet in the hallway and kissing my way along the arch of her neck,

“starting tonight.”

“Don’t be crazy,” she giggles.

“I mean it, I don’t want to be without you another minute.”

She shakes her head, but I continue to distract her with my lips, just how she likes it.

“We see each other every day, you don’t want to wait until we’re married?”

“Not good enough.” I don’t give her a chance to reply as I guide her to my king bed and cage her in my arms on top of the mounds of down. “I want all of you, all of the time,” I growl, tension and tightly strung control twisting through me as I force every move of my body to be tender with hers. I lick my lips and slip my hands under the red sweater she wears, making contact with her skin. “You smell good enough to eat.” I pull the fabric over her head to reveal a fitted little pink tank top underneath decorated with candy canes, the outline of her perfect pebbled nipples standing out. “I’ve been starved for the taste of you on my tongue since you said yes.” With eager hands, I slip off her red skirt and take in the sight of what is mine.

She’s all soft curves and dips, enough to make my mouth water with the need to mark and bite and own every creamy inch of her skin. She is angelic and sexy, and just seeing the way she gazes up at me—with so much trust and love radiating from her eyes—it’s enough for me to beg her to be mine.

“Mmm...” I shake my head as her arousal dampens the crotch of the tiny baby-pink lace-trimmed panties she wears. A low growl escapes my throat as my eyes dart up her body. A crooked smile plays on my lips. “Feels like a fucking year since I’ve been between your thighs.” I lean in, catching her ear with my teeth and dragging lightly. “You drive me crazy, woman. Every single moment spent without you is torture.”

I push down my pants and wrap my hand around the base of my cock, struggling to keep this sweet for her sake. "I've been jerking off to you in my fantasies wearing this this cute little Mrs. Claus getup...imagining calling you Mrs. Mitchell makes my dick leak."

"Cole..." Her breaths are hot and shallow, her pants making her chest rise and fall and causing her nipples to pucker irresistibly. I slide the tank top over her shoulders and kiss my way down her arms as my fingers slip the straps of her bra out of the way. A deep growl escapes me as I unhook the back and expose her full round breasts to my hungry gaze. My eyes hold hers as my lips connect with her nipple for the first time. She arches and groans, pleasure running through my system and hers in a swift current.

"Since the night we lost our virginities together, there's never been another woman for me," I tell her as I move to her other breast, kneading and sucking along her sweet skin.

"Cole, God..." Her voice cracks. She meets my eyes, emotion burning bright there. "I love you so much."

"Baby," I breathe, taking deep breaths to control my emotions. "I'm all in with us, I always was, it just took me a while to admit it to myself." My words crack as my cock presses against her panties, leaving a slick trail of pre-cum on the fabric. "I've spent too many years without you, my heartbeat." I push her panties aside and slide two fingers along her wet and swollen lips. She arches and moans as I press inside her. "This is mine," I mutter before nipping at her pink nipple.

With one hand, I knead and squeeze her breast, feeling the softness under my fingertips. She writhes and thrusts against my hand, riding my fingers until she reaches orgasm.

“Only I taste this. Only I'm inside this beautiful tight little pussy. You only scream my name.” I suck and stroke her walls with my fingers until she comes undone around me. Her heat seeps out of her sweet cunt as she moans and pants my name, one hand tangled in her hair as she arches off the sheets, her breasts thrusting into the air.

“You own my heart, Ivy, and I own this.” With one palm smoothing up her stomach and between her breasts, I wrap my hand around her delicate neck and caress her pulse point with my thumb.

Her hands are traveling over my skin now, our lips locked together as we pant and sweat and share raw emotion between us. “I want all of you, Cole. I wanted you the first day I came to your workshop, and I want you even more now.”

I press my head to hers, my dick hovering just at the edge of her entrance. My heart battles inside my ribcage as this woman soothes all the dark parts of my soul.

"You look so at home in my bed. I want you here forever," I whisper against her lips. I slip my shaft against her slippery folds.

"I want to feel all of you," she replies breathlessly.

Our lips connect in a powerful kiss as I sink into her, circling my hips to work deeper. The feeling of her again about undoing me. I dig my fingers into the creamy flesh of her curvy thigh. "I'll never hurt you, Ivy. You'll never have to worry about anything again. I've got you."

My thrusts ease into a steady rhythm as I try to keep my epic unraveling at her hands at bay. My fingers work against her quickly, our bodies moving together feverishly like we'd both been starved for this moment. My release burns low at my spine, my balls reaching an unbearable tingle. But it doesn't matter because I've already lost

everything to her. She's taken it, taken me completely.

"I wouldn't survive another day without you," I murmur softly as my orgasm tears through my body, flooding my veins from my legs straight out to my fingertips. "I wouldn't survive you."

I drop her thigh from my waist and run both of my fingers through her damp hair. I pull her mouth to mine and caress her with my lips, our tongues tangling together, dancing and caressing, smoothing and tasting.

"I love you, Cole..." She cuts me off with another desperate kiss before pulling away and finishing, her lips dusting against mine. "Forever and ever."

I nuzzle my head into her neck, feeling her palms run soothingly over my back, her nails leaving faint marks on my skin. In every single moment, this woman never fails to amaze me.

We snuggle up together, our limbs tangled in a messy heap as our heartbeats gradually return to a steady rhythm.

"Mmm," I murmur contently, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her closer to me. My tongue darts out to taste the sweet, sweat-slicked skin along her neck. "I want you to wake up every morning with my tongue on your body."

Life has completely turned around in the past few hours. She's mine, officially. She said yes and it's finally settling in that soon, we'll be married and hopefully starting a family.

"You make me so damn happy, Ivy. It's not every day your dream girl walks into your life." I kiss her knuckles tenderly, paying extra attention to the ring that sparkles on her finger. I'm unable to keep my hands off her for even a moment.

Her smile widens at how genuinely happy and content I am with her by my side. “Bet you never thought you’d marry Kandi Kane the Christmas elf.”

“You smartass,” I smack her on the bare flesh of her bottom.

“You love my smart ass.” She wiggles against me.

“It’s a beautiful one,” I agree, smoothing my palm across her round ass cheek and dusting my fingers along the sensitive flesh between her legs.

“Stop,” she moans.

“That stop sounds more like a go.” I drag my fingers through the wetness, pleased to find she wants me again.

“Mmm...” She traces her fingertips up the searing hot flesh of my quickly stiffening erection, making it jump and leak uncontrollably. I catch her by the wrist.

“Not fair play. Right now is about you.”

“Let me finish, it’s not every day I get the chance to steal Santa’s cum twice in a row,” she coos, hand back at my cock.

I laugh out loud at that. “God, look at your greedy little hands begging for my cock. I’ll let you finish only if you promise to let me finish after.” I tug at her nipple with my thumb and forefinger. “Horny like a teenager for me, huh, Ivy?”

“You’re the horny teenager.” Both of her hands are wrapped around my cock now, pulling gently. “You’re so hard again. What did you do before me? A Christmas elf blowup doll under the bed?” she teases.



“No need for blowup dolls, baby.” I grin. “I’ve been this hard for you since the last time your hands were on me.” My cock jumps and leaks a bead of more pre-cum. “There’s no taming me when it comes to you.”

She strokes my shaft, looking all gorgeous and attentive to my dick in the prettiest way, but I can’t stand watching her please me without having something to do to her. I haul her to my waist, catching her in a long and slow kiss. My hands roam her skin tenderly, my cock darting just at her entrance before she angles her hips, slipping me just inside her until she is riding me easily, our moans echoing off the walls of my room—our room now.

“I want to put my babies in you—soon.” I pull her chin to me and kiss her soft lips.

“Babies, huh?” She giggles, and my heart lifts a little more. If I can keep her smiling and happy, I will forever count my blessings.

“As many as you want.” I nod and kiss her lips one last time. “And I plan on practicing. A lot.” I smack her bare ass, and she shrieks before I haul her over in my bed and ravage her with my tongue all over again. “I have a pressing need to see you cumming on my tongue again, Mrs. Claus.”

She laughs. “I can’t wait.”

Ivy—one year later

The scent of pine and cinnamon fills the air, and the Christmas lights strung up across Copper Mountain's square seem brighter this year. Everything feels fuller, warmer, like the entire town is lit with a new kind of magic. I stand in the middle of it all, holding our daughter in my arms, bundled in her little red coat with a white fur-trimmed hood, looking for all the world like Santa Claus in miniature.

Holly stirs in my arms, her tiny pink face wrinkling as she yawns, one chubby hand reaching out, curling around my finger, making my heart melt all over again. She's got Cole's serious look already, which makes me laugh because she's also got my stubborn streak; that's clear anytime she doesn't get what she wants. The Steele brothers joke she'll be as fierce as the rest of the people on this mountain, but right now, I'm just savoring her softness, her tiny warmth pressed to me.

Cole steps up beside me, his arm wrapping around my waist, and he leans in, brushing a kiss over Holly's head. "She's the cutest Santa this town's ever had," he murmurs, his voice low, teasing, and my heart does a little flip, like it always does when he's close.

I grin, nudging him with my shoulder. "You say that because she's your spitting image."

He chuckles, slipping an arm around me, holding us both close, like we're his entire world. And maybe we are. He glances down at Holly, his eyes softening as he reaches a finger down for her to grab. "Nah, I see a whole lot of her mama there too. Besides, I can't take all the credit if she ends up as stubborn as you."

I roll my eyes, feeling that familiar spark of banter that's always between us, that never seems to fade, no matter how many Christmases we spend together. "Stubbornness or determination? Maybe she'll get a double dose."

Cole laughs, his gaze locking onto mine with that same bold, unfiltered look that always gets under my skin. "Good. She'll need it to keep up with us."

Just then, Knox and Perry join us, Perry letting out a little squeal as she leans over to peek at Holly. "Oh my goodness, Ivy! She's just perfect. Look at her—already giving that 'don't mess with me' look. That's pure Copper Mountain attitude right there."

Knox grins, giving Cole a hearty slap on the back. "Better watch out, bro. In another fifteen years, you're gonna have your hands full."

Cole grins back, not an ounce of worry on his face. "Good. Keeps life interesting."

Pope and Ruby join us next, and Ruby's coos over Holly send my heart soaring with pride. "Oh Ivy, she's beautiful," Ruby says, gently brushing her fingers over Holly's tiny mitten-covered hand. "She's going to be breaking hearts before you know it."

Pope smirks, crossing his arms. "Let's just hope she doesn't take after her dad in the grumpy department."

"Oh, she's got plenty of her mama's sunshine to keep her balanced," Cole says, squeezing my waist and pressing a quick kiss to my temple. His voice drops, low and intimate, making me shiver. "Lucky for me, she inherited her mama's charm."

The warmth spreading through me is almost too much to bear, and I can't stop the grin that spreads across my face. "We're just getting started, aren't we?"

Barron and Tamlyn approach, Barron giving Holly a nod like she's already one of

them, part of the family. He's got his arm around Tamlyn, who looks down at Holly with a quiet, sweet smile, eyes lighting up. "She's perfect," Tamlyn says.

Archer sidles up with Bella, a playful gleam in his eye as he studies Cole. "Cole, did you ever think you'd be the guy bringing a baby dressed as Santa to a Christmas festival?"

Cole laughs, and I feel his hand tighten on my waist. "Never in a million years," he admits, grinning down at Holly. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything."

King, Cruz, Arrow, Judge, and Creed Steele are the last to join us, forming a circle around Holly and me, their expressions a mix of pride and amusement. They're all big, tough men, yet each one softens a little at the sight of her, like she's a spark of light they can't help but be drawn to.

"So," Creed says, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Are we all ready to start taking bets on whether she's going to be a heartbreaker or a troublemaker?"

Perry laughs, leaning into Knox as she watches Holly with that loving gleam in her eyes. "Knowing her parents, I'd say she'll be both."

Cruz chuckles, nodding. "Exactly what Copper Mountain needs—a little more spark to keep things interesting."

They're all bantering back and forth, trading jokes and laughter, but my focus drifts to Cole, who's watching me, his eyes warm and steady, like he's taking in every detail of this moment, locking it away somewhere only he has access to. I feel the familiar warmth of his hand on the small of my back, and I lean into him, savoring the way he holds me, like there's no place he'd rather be.

"You've really made this place feel like home," he murmurs, his voice low, just for

me.

I glance up at him, my heart so full it feels like it might burst. “We did it together, didn’t we?”

He nods, a soft smile tugging at his mouth as he looks down at Holly, his hand coming up to brush his thumb over her tiny cheek. “She’s the best Christmas gift I ever got.”

The festival is in full swing around us, families skating on the rink, kids running around with cups of hot chocolate, and couples cozying up under twinkling lights. Everywhere I look, I see happiness, warmth, and love, and I can’t help but feel like the luckiest woman in the world, wrapped up in this life we’ve built together.

After a while, we all head over to the big Christmas tree, gathering around with the rest of the town as everyone counts down to the lighting. The Steele brothers, their wives, and Cole and I huddle close, sharing stories, teasing each other, and laughing, while Holly dozes off, her tiny breaths warming my chest.

The lights on the tree burst to life, casting a golden glow over the square, and as I look around at everyone—my family, my friends, my heart—something inside me settles, a deep, unshakable happiness that I know will carry me through every season, every year, as long as I have Cole by my side.

He leans down, his lips brushing against my ear, his voice a low, warm rumble that makes my toes curl. “Merry Christmas, Ivy. Here’s to a lifetime of Naughty and Nice lists.”

I laugh softly, tilting my head up to meet his gaze, feeling that familiar spark, that endless, addictive pull that’s always been between us. “I’m looking forward to every single one of them.”

He kisses me then, slow and deep, a promise and a declaration all in one. And as I melt into him, with Holly in my arms and the warmth of our family surrounding us, I know this is everything I've ever wanted—my perfect Christmas, my perfect love, my perfect life, here in Copper Mountain.

“I love you, Kandi Kane. From now until forever.”

I burst into a fit of giggles before my husband pulls me into a heated kiss, promising so much more just as soon as we get back to Santa's workshop.

The End.

Turn the page to read an excerpt from

Mistletoe and the Mountain Man and don't forget to grab your free steamy read from me here!

Read Pope and Ruby's story in Built to Last, a grumpy-sunshine, opposites attract, over-the-top alpha insta-love story in the Men of Copper Mountain series here.

### Rugged Hearts Series

#### Poppy

The snow crunches under my boots as I step out of the rental car, my breath puffing into the crisp air like little clouds. Devil's Peak sprawls around me, blanketed in pristine white, the kind of winter wonderland I'd dreamed about since the minute I booked this last-minute Christmas getaway. My fingers tingle with the chill, and excitement courses through me as I take in the cozy cabin tucked into the woods, its sloped roof piled high with snow, smoke curling lazily from the stone chimney.

I heft my duffel over my shoulder, balancing a paper bag full of cookie ingredients in my other hand. I'm already planning the first batch—gingerbread men with a little too much frosting—and picturing myself curled up with hot cocoa and a holiday movie.

My grin falters when I step up to the porch and hear something that doesn't fit my idyllic picture—a low voice, deep and rough, drifting through the slightly ajar door, followed by the sharp crack of wood splitting.

I push the door open, the warm cabin air hitting me full force, carrying the scent of pine and sawdust. And there he is, all flannel and broad shoulders, bending over a wooden beam with a mallet in one hand and a scowl so fierce it could split the room.

I gape for a second too long. The guy could walk straight out of a lumberjack calendar and steal every month of the year. His dark hair is tousled, a little too long, and his jawline sports a beard thick enough to make my knees weak. I can't help

imagining the feel of it rasping against my skin in all the right ways. When he glances up, catching me mid-stare, those eyes—blue, sharp, like a glacier’s edge—narrow.

“You lost?” His voice is deep, unfiltered, with an edge that suggests he’s not in the habit of indulging strangers.

I find my voice, ignoring the heat that rises in my cheeks. “Nope. Just wondering why Santa dropped a lumberjack in my Christmas cabin.”

One brow lifts, and there’s a flicker of amusement, quickly smothered by irritation. “This isn’t your cabin.”

I open my mouth, then snap it shut, pulling out my phone and showing him the booking confirmation. He wipes his hand on a rag and leans in, eyes scanning the screen before shaking his head.

“The app messed up. This cabin’s under maintenance for the next few weeks. I’m staying here to refinish the deck and loft stairs.” He gestures to the half-finished woodwork and the chaos of tools scattered around.

The realization hits like a snowball to the face. I drove hours for a holiday escape only to find out it’s double-booked. “But—there’s nowhere else nearby, is there?”

He leans back, crossing his arms, which only makes him look more imposing, more unfairly attractive. “Not unless you want to bunk in at the lodge with the ski crowd. Doubt they have availability, though. That place gets booked up a year in advance.”

I stare at him, at the fire crackling in the stone hearth, the wreath on the wall, and my plans start to unravel. Just then, my phone buzzes, and I see Winter’s name pop up. I swipe to answer, and before I can say a word, she’s already talking.

“Poppy! How’s the cabin? Is it as cute as it looked in the pictures?”



I move to the side, turning my back to Mr. Glacial Gaze. “Yeah, it’s... occupied,” I whisper, shooting a glance over my shoulder. The sexy lumbersnack’s brow rises, and a smirk tugs at the corner of his lips. Great. He’s listening.

“Occupied?” Winter’s voice sharpens with interest. “By who? Don’t tell me a hottie in flannel.”

My face heats up like the fireplace, and I mumble, “Something like that.”

There’s a deep chuckle from over my shoulder, and I realize he heard every word. I want to evaporate on the spot.

“Oh my god, Poppy. Are you snowed-in with a lumberjack?” Winter’s laughter rings through the speaker.

“Shut up, Winter,” I hiss, turning away and lowering my voice. His smirk grows, like he’s enjoying this a little too much.

Winter keeps talking. “Listen, don’t run off. Have a little fun, even if it’s just eye candy. You never know—these mountain men can surprise you.”

I hang up before she can say anything else embarrassing and turn to him. He’s still watching me, arms crossed and eyes glinting with amusement.

“So, what’s the plan, Little Miss Mistletoe?” He gestures to my sweater, which is a bright red with little sprigs of mistletoe and reindeer dancing across it. I’ve never felt more out of place in my life.

I swallow hard, straightening. “The plan is I stay. Unless you’re going to kick me out into the snowbank.”

His eyes flicker over me, assessing. “You can stay. But no decorating this place like

Santa's workshop and no interruptions while I'm working."

I shift the bag of cookie ingredients in my arms and grin, deciding to take a little of my power back. "Deal. But you might want to get used to the smell of gingerbread."

The man's smirk softens into something else, something that makes my heart thud a little faster. "I'll survive."

The tension in the room shifts, charged, and I feel it in the way he watches me, like he's weighing every word, every move.

"I'm Poppy." I thrust out a hand.

His eyes shift down my form and back up to my eyes. "Of course it is. Think I'll stick with Little Miss Mistletoe." His smirk deepens. "Name's Cade."

And with that he turns back to his work, leaving me in a puddle of embarrassment and something else...something I don't quite have a name for but hate to say I like all the same...

When the grumpy loner of Devil's Peak and a curvy city girl looking for a holiday mountain escape share the same tiny cabin, sparks fly and hearts ignite...