



*The Taming of the*

# SCROOGE

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

CASSIE MINT

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# The Taming of the Scrooge

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## One

# Noelle



The city streets are packed with holiday shoppers, everyone squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder. Gold and silver string lights twinkle overhead, swagged between the buildings like washing lines, and the faint sound of carols drifts out of every coffee shop I walk past.

The air smells like frost and roasted chestnuts, and my tote bag crinkles under my arm, stuffed with newly wrapped presents. It's a perfect December evening, crisp and dark.

Gusting out a blissful sigh, I beam at the holiday cheer all around me... then mentally brace myself for another few hours with the ultimate Scrooge. Better get it out of my system now.

Twenty more steps until I'm back at work for the evening. Back with *him*.

Ten more steps.

Five.

Our office is in a small but classy building, wedged between a boutique houseplant store and a macaroon bakery. Those macaroons don't torture me as much as they usually do

when I walk past tonight—not with a warm mince pie sitting snug in my belly.

A forbidden mince pie. An illicit treat.

Because technically speaking, I, Noelle Granger, am a holiday-free zone—around my boss, anyway. That’s our deal: Christmas does not exist in our office. Santa who?

But what Reid Merryweather doesn’t know can’t hurt him, and that mince pie is long gone. Snarfed somewhere between the pop up chestnut stand and the huge Christmas tree outside city hall.

It was delicious, by the way. Buttery and crumbly and sweet.

That gorgeous Scrooge doesn’t know what he’s missing.

The crowds bustle along, barging each other pleasantly down the sidewalk. An older man dressed in a Santa outfit has taken up residence on our stoop—a risky choice of location, though he doesn’t know that yet.

The Santa rings a bell as I approach, shaking a bucket of pennies in my direction. “Ho ho ho! Spare some change, miss?”

Digging in my coat pocket, I wince over his red velvet shoulder at our office door. Did Reid hear the Santa’s bell? He must have, right?

Oh, god. He’ll be so cranky.

“You’ll want to find a new place to stand,” I warn the Santa, my handful of coins pattering into his bucket. “I work here, and the boss *really* doesn’t like Christmas. Just some friendly advice.”

The Santa blinks, then turns and squints at our office door—like he can’t believe such a cheerless ogre could exist.

Oh, he exists alright. Reid Merryweather is as undeniable as gravity.

And he’ll enjoy finding a Santa on his doorstep about as much as he’d like the gift of a dead bird.

“Thanks for the tip,” the Santa says, his tone a lot less jolly now, before brushing past me to rejoin the crush of people on the sidewalk. As he passes, I catch a whiff of stale cigarettes.

Ha.

Biting back a laugh, I climb the steps to the office door and key in my code to get inside.

Sometimes, I wish I could talk to my boss about holiday stuff, because even Reid might smirk at the irony of a smoking Santa. I could crack chimney jokes, trying to tease his dimples out. You know, if he didn’t loathe Christmas with every fiber of his sculpted being.

As soon as the outer door swings open, I know—Reid Merryweather is in a snit. My spidey senses are tingling. The air feels thick with tension, even out here in the corridor where there’s nothing but coat hooks and cubby holes. All the tiny

hairs stand up on my arms under my knitted gray sweater, and my ears strain for signs of life.

“Noelle,” the boss calls when I dawdle too long, hanging my coat and smoothing out the sleeves. His rich voice carries so easily, and now I’m shivering for a whole separate reason. “Get in here, please.”

Hmm.

Is that his grumpy-calm voice?

Or his three-breaths-away-from-murder voice?

Biting my lip, I tiptoe to the door that leads to our shared office space, fussing at my sweater and dark pants. As I push my shoulders back and smooth down my blonde hair, I check myself over for telltale crumbs and give myself a silent pep talk.

There’s no way he can tell.

That mince pie is *gone*. It’s a distant, delicious memory.

When I nudge the door wide, Reid Merryweather glowers at me from my desk in the corner. It’s a small desk with an older computer, a framed photo of my tabby cat, Bo, and a succulent in a bedazzled pink plant pot.

The succulent is wearing a tiny bow tie, but I know from experience that the boss won’t even look at it. Won’t acknowledge the existence of such shameless whimsy. It doesn’t fit with his oh-so-serious universe.

“Where the hell is that reservation?” Reid says.



He's sitting on the scratched wood of my desk, with the monitor spun around to face him. His dark hair is all ruffled, like he's been tugging on it and grumping around while I've been gone. His red tie is crooked, and his white shirt sleeves are rolled up.

God, this man is pretty. My heart pulses with longing at the sight of him.

So unfair.

But I'm used to being slapped in the face by Reid's cranky male beauty, so I stroll to the desk and pat the top of the monitor like I'm not affected at all. No butterflies here, no sir.

"Hidden in the depths of my inbox, I expect."

"Noelle," my boss says flatly.

Sinking into my desk chair, I smile up at him. Even sitting down, Reid looms. "I'll forward it to you now."

Like I already did last week—but who's keeping track?

I don't blame him for forgetting. Reid Merryweather has a lot on his mind. He's the top corporate lawyer in the city—not that you'd know from our cozy little office. So he's constantly in demand, hired for an eye-watering fee, and his big, frazzled brain has a lot going on.

Besides, I never take his mood swings personally; never get flustered by his grumping and grouching. Even though no one else seems to think so in the whole wide world, *I* know that deep down, this man has a heart of gold.

Deep down.

Deep, *deep* down.

“Nice tie,” I hear myself say. My fingers race over the keyboard, the keys rattling in the quiet room. “Red. Very festive.”

The boss goes statue-still. His icy blue eyes bore into mine, and my stomach plummets to my toes. What happened? My fingers freeze on the keyboard as my words catch up to me.

Oooh shoot.

“I mean...” God, I’m sweating under my layers. Why the hell did I say that? “Not—not *fest*—”

“Don’t say it.” Reid raises a hand. He’s scowling like I’m a bug on his shower wall. “I’ll let that first one go, Noelle, but this is your final warning. If you say it again, you know what will happen.”

Yeah, yeah, I know. He doesn’t have to spell it out.

If I mention Christmas again, I can kiss my December bonus check goodbye. The money I desperately need if I want to keep my picky tabby cat in premium cat food.

It was dumb as hell to say the f-word. I should know better.

Because Reid Merryweather may have a heart of gold—but it’s buried under layers of snark, impatience, exhaustion

with the world, and most of all, a hatred for Christmas. At this point, that heart is mostly theoretical.

“What’s in the bag?” he asks now, glaring at the tote still hanging from my shoulder. It’s stuffed with forbidden contraband—gift-wrapped holiday presents for the little old Polish lady who lives above my apartment.

She watches Bo for me sometimes, and she knitted him a mouse toy. She *deserves* a gift, damn it!

But my boss is staring so hard he might burn a hole through the canvas bag. Like his x-ray vision is about to nix my December bonus. Why oh why did I go gift-shopping on my break? Why get cocky like that? Why risk it all?

“Nothing,” I lie. “Just stuff.”

Maybe because this rigid, severe man makes me *yearn* to push his buttons. To test his control. If we were in kindergarten together, I’d be stealing Reid’s crayons just to get a reaction.

“Stuff,” the boss repeats, his tone sour. “What kind of stuff?”

“Tampons,” I tell him brightly. “Boxes and boxes of tampons. Would you like to inspect them one by one?”

Reid rolls his eyes and stands, striding back to his own desk. Muttering under his breath about *assistants* and *ridiculous* and *more trouble than they’re worth*.

I don’t take it personally. I never do.

But I do watch him go, biting the inside of my cheek at the way his dark pants hug his toned ass. It's inappropriate, but then it *is* Friday night. A girl needs to live a little, you know?

“Send that reservation,” Reid says, kicking his own chair out and throwing himself down. “If you can even find it in the nuclear wasteland of your inbox.”

A heart of gold, I'm telling you.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure.

## Two

# Reid



**D**ecember is always one long migraine for me. A seemingly endless month of gaudy string lights, raucous crowds of tipsy shoppers, and cheesy holiday tunes that grate on my last nerve.

It's inescapable. Everywhere I look, wide-eyed kids warble out carols in choirs; scruffy Santas ring bells and shake buckets at passers-by; and store windows bristle with tinsel and plastic trees.

Half the Santas aren't even fat, for Christ's sake. They've got pillows shoved up their ugly red jumpsuits—fake padding to match their fake stringy beards.

Hideous.

“Brace yourself,” Noelle says as I lock up the office for the evening, stamping her ankle boots to keep warm. We're crowded close together on the top step, but I try not to notice that fact. Try to ignore the warmth of her, and the telltale crinkle of that tote bag that says she lied to me before, and the

green apple scent of her hair. “When I came out here earlier, this street was holiday mad.”

I grunt, shove my hands in my coat pockets, and lead the way down the steps. At this time of year, *everywhere* in this city is holiday mad. No—everywhere in the country. In the goddamn Western world.

Nowhere is safe.

Noelle and I fall into step easily as we drift onto the sidewalk, strolling in the direction of her apartment. It’s a seven block walk, and in the exact wrong direction for me, but she doesn’t know that.

It’s better this way. If she knew I detoured out of my way each night to walk her home, that might raise questions.

Inconvenient questions—and I don’t have good answers.

“We’ve got the Aspen Ridge meeting tomorrow.”

Noelle hums, her shoulder brushing mine as we walk. And tomorrow is Saturday, but she’ll work it without complaint. She always does. That’s why I pay her astronomical wages for an assistant role—Noelle’s evenings and weekends are *mine*, damn it, and I guard them like a dragon’s hoard.

“I’ll pick you up at eight AM sharp. Don’t be late.”

She laughs. “When am I ever late, boss?”

That’s fair. Noelle Granger is punctual, bright, sweet, and funny. Efficient and—disastrous inbox aside—unfailingly

reliable. She's the perfect woman and perfect employee, and I've somehow kept her with me for the last three years.

Probably because she has bottomless supplies of patience. Will she ever grow tired of me? Ever leave? Surely she will.

Chest burning, I scowl at a fabric snowman in a department store window. Its eyes are lopsided buttons. Is that supposed to be cute?

Ugh.

"Know what I'm gonna do when I get home?" There's a skip in Noelle's step, and a smile plays around her mouth. She always chats more freely with me when I walk her home—I suppose because she's off the clock.

These stolen moments together always stick in my brain. The way she teases me sometimes... it ruins me for hours afterward.

"What?" I ask.

"A girl in my building has a load of bath bombs she doesn't want." Noelle's practically bouncing down the sidewalk. She's so small down there, the top of her head barely reaches my shoulder. "They're from her ex, and he won't take them back, but she doesn't want to use them. Guess it's awkward. So she gave a few to me, and there's a giant cherry-scented one I've been saving for a special occasion."

My headache pulses, squeezing my temples.

Noelle in a bathtub? All that bare skin, slippery and wet, with her blonde hair piled on her head? The images batter me

in a torturous slideshow, and I swallow back a groan.

“Nice,” I grit out. That’s what a normal person would say, right? A normal boss with social skills. That’s me. “What’s the special occasion?”

“Because it’s Friday night, obviously.” Noelle’s pointy elbow digs into my ribs, and it’s pathetic how much I treasure that fleeting contact. “Most people have weekends free, Reid. Crazy, I know. And I still observe the Friday night celebrations, even if my grumpy boss needs me bright and early on Saturday morning.”

Noelle glances at me out of the corner of her eye, checking that I’m not offended by her teasing. My face is stony, my shoulders hunched against the cold, but that’s standard procedure, nothing to do with her, and she knows it. She brightens.

“What about you, boss man? Any big Friday night plans? A hot date, maybe?”

Her smile flickers, like she doesn’t like her own joke, but then she pastes it back on even wider.

I suck on my teeth, shielding Noelle from the worst of the crowds as we make our slow progress down the sidewalk. Seven blocks can sometimes feel like an eternity—or like they pass by in a blink. Tonight, this walk will be over too fast.

“No plans,” I say.

And definitely no hot date—not unless you count my shameful daydreams about my assistant.



Noelle shakes her head, bemused, and hops over a crack in the sidewalk. Her tote bag crinkles under her arm. “I don’t get it. You’re, like, rich and successful and handsome as hell. Shouldn’t you be dating dozens of women? Batting them off with a stick?”

My expression doesn’t change, but my heart thuds harder in my chest.

As hell? Is that what she just said? Handsome as *hell*?

Does she mean that? And is that an objective assessment, or her personal opinion?

“I don’t date.” The words come out thick and clunky, my mind still reeling from Noelle’s compliment. Maybe she’s being kind. Noelle is like that: always building people up. It’s maddening. “In fact, I don’t do relationships in general. At all. Ever.”

Noelle should know that better than anyone. She knows exactly how off-putting I can be, with my moods and impatience and endless demands.

But Noelle tuts, weaving around a trash can then coming back to my side. “Maybe you should give them a chance,” she says softly. “People might surprise you, Reid.”

I scoff, glaring right ahead. “Not so far, they haven’t.”

Noelle’s shoulders slump. My headache flares.

We don’t speak again for the rest of the walk.

\* \* \*

“Eight AM,” I call as Noelle climbs the steps to her building’s front door. There’s a wreath hanging above the brass knocker, and I glare at that green monstrosity. “And bring your laptop.”

Noelle shakes her head, not even bothering to glance back at me over her shoulder. Her mittens slip around her key, and she fumbles it in the lock. “I have done this before, Reid. Most weekends for the last three years, remember?”

Yes. Well.

“People get complacent. Maybe I don’t want you getting sloppy, Noelle.”

Finally, a wry glance over her shoulder. “Heaven forbid.”

Her front door pushes open an inch, but she doesn’t go inside yet. She stands there, one mitten braced on the painted wood, and stares back at me with a thoughtful expression. Seeing way too much with those searching brown eyes.

Always seeing too much. That’s her problem.

“Call me later,” Noelle says out of nowhere, and suddenly blood rushes in my ears, my pulse thundering. It’s so loud I nearly miss her next words. “If you get bored, or whatever.”

Can’t speak. Can’t think.

Can’t nod. Can’t react at all.

Not without giving away the meltdown happening in my brain.

Because... *call* her? Call my beautiful assistant outside of work hours? To say *what*? I mean, look at me—I can barely

string a sentence together, and that's in person, never mind the awkwardness of talking on the phone.

Besides, Noelle doesn't mean that offer. She's just being polite and considerate, like she is with everyone. Pitying me for my lack of dates.

Slowly, robotically, I turn on my heel and walk away.

## Three

# Noelle



**I**t's a four hour drive to Aspen Ridge, and we're spending the whole freaking journey in stilted silence. At first, as we drove out of the city, there were logistics to go over. Key points about the meeting, stuff like that. That was fine.

Then we ran out of work-related things to say, so I tried putting the radio on. Big mistake.

We made it through six different channels, all blaring Christmas music, before Reid slapped it off with a snarl.

So.

Yeah.

Now it's just us. Our steady breaths, the muffled rumble of the car engine, and the faint thud of my heart. Occasionally, we'll drive under a dark cloud, and sleet patters against the roof.

“There's a cow in that field.”

My boss grunts.

Reid's car is sleek, black and fancy, with leather seats and that new car smell, even though he's had it for at least the three years I've known him. Doesn't he ever tramp mud in here? Or gobble down handfuls of fries at a drive in? Does he ever relax his ironclad control?

And who the hell doesn't like cows?

"We could play a game," I say, as though I've never met this man in my life. As if Reid Merryweather is even capable of such frivolity. If he ever plays games, they're probably elite chess matches where everyone watches in silence, then groans politely when the player loses their queen.

But clearly the world is topsy-turvy today, because Reid glances at me, his grip tightening on the steering wheel, then says: "Alright."

Oh my god. What?

Yay!

My mind goes blank.

Every game I've ever played, every dumb, fun way to kill time—it all falls out of my ears. There's nothing left except shock ringing in my skull.

"Which game?" Reid clips out, his tone impatient, like he regrets this already. Well, you know what? Samesies. But there's no way he'll ever agree to this again, so I need to milk this opportunity for all it's worth.

A game with Reid Merryweather? It's *on*.

“I Spy?” My offer is wobbly. Unsure. I clear my throat and pretend like I’m not freaking out over this. “That’s a classic car game. What you do is—”

“I know how I Spy works, Noelle. Believe it or not, I had a childhood.” Reid gusts out a sigh then says, “F.”

The grin spreads over my face faster than I can bite it back. My legs cross and uncross, and my fingertips tap together in my lap. “So... you won’t say the rhyme?”

Dead silence.

Dead, dead silence.

“For god’s sake.” Then, as though he’s pulling teeth, Reid grits out: “I spy... with my little eye... something beginning with ‘F’.”

Empty scrubland rushes past the highway, dotted with barns. The dark clouds are getting thicker overhead, gathering in moody clumps.

This is the best day of my life. Reid Merryweather, grumpy boss and ultimate stern hottie, said the I Spy rhyme.

“Farmhouse?” *Be cool, Noelle. Be cool.* “Fields?”

Reid grunts. His jaw is tight as he nods.

And this is fine. This is normal.

This is a totally normal thing to get butterflies about.

My turn. “I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with ‘T.’”

“Trees.”

“Uh-huh.”

Cows. Barns. Sky. It’s not a long game, and we run out of things to spy pretty fast. But I’ve never seen my boss this mellow before, the whisper of a smile playing around his stern mouth, and I don’t want it to be over yet. Don’t want to go back to taut silence.

“How about Fuck, Marry, Kill?”

Reid frowns out at the highway, flexing his fingers on the wheel. “I don’t know that one.”

“It’s fun, I promise.” Let’s hope so, anyway. “I say the names of three famous people, and you say who you’d fuck, marry and kill.”

The look he gives me is so sour. Finally, Reid breaks eye contact and stares out at the road. “Go on, then.”

I name a Hollywood starlet, a supermodel, and a famous singer.

“Kill, kill and kill.”

Reid jumps when I burst out laughing.

“Oh my god.” He’s so grumpy, all his man-feathers ruffled up as he glares over at me, but I can’t stop wheezing with laughter. “You can’t kill them all, you psycho.”

“Why not?” His shoulders are tense, climbing up. “I don’t want to fuck or marry any of them, and there’s no ‘leave them alone’ option.”

Wiping away a tear, I slump back giggling. “Okay, okay. Um...”

I name three famous men. A billionaire, a rock star and a football player. You never know, right? Maybe I was presumptuous.

But Reid side-eyes me and says, “Kill, kill and kill.”

He *really* doesn’t get this game.

But I kind of love it. Now that I’m faced with the prospect, I don’t want to hear that Reid Merryweather would fuck another woman. *Or* a man. Don’t like picturing him with anyone but me.

Tragic, I know. Especially since he didn’t call me last night, even when I put myself out there like that. Made it so painfully obvious that I *always* want him to call, always want to hear his low voice, even after a whole day together. Because even though I moan about spending all of my time at work, I miss him terribly when we’re apart.

“Forget that one. Let’s play truth or dare.” Wriggling in my seat, I try to stretch out my stiff legs. Two hours down, two hours to go until we reach Aspen Ridge—though at least the scenery is getting prettier, dusted with a fine layer of white. “You know this one, right?”

Reid harrumphs. He’s slowed the car since we hit snow. “Seems self-explanatory.”

“Right. So... truth or dare?”



“I’m driving,” Reid says flatly. Always such a bundle of joy.

“Truth, then, I guess.” I pretend to think about it, tapping on my chin, then pluck up my courage. “Why didn’t you call me last night?”

Reid blinks out at the road. A truck rumbles past, going way too fast and rocking our car. Reid curses and slows even more.

“Because it was after work hours,” he says at last.

And... bleurgh. Was I expecting a real answer there? Honestly?

“You’ve gone quiet.” Reid’s voice is hushed too, like he senses this conversation is delicate, and his jaw clenches when I shrug. He’s probably pissed that I’m being such a baby, making things awkward, and that’s fair... but I can’t help it.

Three years, I’ve longed for this man, and he doesn’t think of me. Only sees me as an assistant. Bet he’d swap me out for Siri if he could, because he’s always rolling his eyes at my bright clothes, the tunes I sing, and the cute lunch bags I pack myself.

He’s the best part of my day, and I’m an irritation for him to suffer through.

“Your turn.” Reid’s thumb taps against the steering wheel, impatient.

“Dare.” As if I’d ever pick truth now. *Please*. I’d rather poke out my own eyeballs than confess anything to this man.

“I dare you to tell me what’s bothering you.”

Ugh! That is such bullshit!

“Stop loopholing me. You are such a lawyer—”

“Tell me, Noelle.”

Neck tight, I peer around the car, but my boss is too freaking tidy. There’s nothing loose to throw at his head.

“Tell me,” he says again. Always so stern. Always so *bossy*. And usually I love that, I love his pinched eyebrows and hard jaw and piercing eyes, but right now, I’d happily commando roll out of the window onto the snowy highway to avoid him.

“Noelle. Tell me.”

Fine! Whatever! I throw up my hands.

“I’m hurt, okay? I wanted you to call.” My throat is tight, and this moment couldn’t be more humiliating if it tried. I hate Reid for forcing this out of me. “I forgot that you don’t like people, Reid. That you don’t like *me*. Sometimes I forget, and the reminder... it sucks.”

Reid is quiet for a long, long time. As the snow falls thicker, he flicks on the wipers.

Then he turns on the radio, and we listen to Christmas music all the way to Aspen Ridge.

## Four

# Reid



**T**his town is revolting.

It's like someone took a postcard-perfect small town, complete with a small cinema and kooky shops and a bustling diner, and vomited holiday decorations all over it. If they hang one more string light in Aspen Ridge, surely there will be a national power shortage. Wondering where all the pine trees have gone? They're here, being whored out for the holidays.

“Stop scowling, Reid. You look like you just ate a bug.”

Noelle strides alongside me, businesslike, all trace of her earlier outburst gone. She's dressed smartly for today's meeting in a short green dress and black leggings, bundled against the chill in a thick gray coat. Her leather boots crunch through the snow.

Yes, even the *snow* here is picture-perfect. Ugh. Fluffy and white and crisp, nothing like the brown slush we get in the city. I miss puddles.

“I can scowl if I like. They're hiring me to win a case, not to make friends.”

“Just as well.”

Glancing down at the top of Noelle’s blonde head, I wince. She has every right to be frustrated with me—I know that. But I won’t pretend it doesn’t make my insides ache.

I’d give anything not to disappoint this woman. Anything to be the kind of man she wants and needs. Someone *normal*, who can make nice with strangers and who feels emotions at an appropriate level. Not someone who feels dead inside most of the time, then like he’ll explode after a single glimpse of his assistant.

*Psycho*, she called me. Because of that game, but still.

Does Noelle believe that? Does she think there’s something seriously wrong with me, all because I’m not... socially gifted?

I’d hate that. I’d really hate that.

We pass a coffee shop with steamed windows and laughter seeping out through the glass. When someone opens the door and spills out onto the street, a bell tinkles and we’re hit with a misty, coffee-scented cloud.

Noelle moans, lusting shamelessly after her afternoon caffeine fix.

“On our way back,” I find myself promising, even though it will mean spending more time in this godforsaken snow globe. “We’ll stop in there before we leave.”

Noelle gives me a cautious smile. Her cheeks are pink from the cold.

The diner windows are fogged over too, and when I open the door for Noelle, we're hit with a wall of heat and laughter. The conversation is loud, almost deafening after the muffled quiet of the street, and my headache squeezes my temples. The air tastes like oregano.

"In that booth at the back." Guiding Noelle gently between tables, I glare at anyone who dares to stare at her too long. Yes, she's beautiful, the most beautiful woman in the world, but they can still put their tongues away. "The older gentleman."

"The silver fox," Noelle murmurs, so quiet only I can hear, and I want to both laugh and punch the wall. "Haven't you seen a nature documentary, boss?"

At least she's teasing me again. That's something, right?

"I missed that special. Watch that step."

I don't take my hand off her back until we reach the booth.

"Merryweather." Our client stands up, his smile broad, and pumps my hand in a firm handshake. His beard is indeed tinted silver, trimmed close to the jaw, and he's dressed in a pinstripe vest and white shirt. An honest-to-god pocket watch is tucked in his pocket, the chain dangling against his chest. When he nods politely at Noelle without reaching for her too, my shoulders relax an inch. "Ready to sue these motherfuckers into oblivion?"

So much for the genteel silver fox. As we shrug off our coats and all settle into the booth, getting acquainted, there's a

hungry glint in my client's eye. Not for food, or even for Noelle, but for victory. It's that corporate blood lust.

That's why he hired me. Why he's happy to pay a small fortune to get us out here, working his case.

I always win.

Always.

And Noelle is used to this posturing. Used to the testosterone that always seems to flood the table at these meetings, like we're planning an actual battle rather than a lawsuit. She unfolds her laptop serenely, fingers poised and ready to take notes.

Ready to be everything I need, even if I never return the favor.

\* \* \*

"You're not happy," Noelle observes several hours later, marching back along the snowy sidewalk with a take-out coffee cup clutched in her hands. The wind is stronger now, snowflakes stinging our cheeks, and we're not wasting another minute in this town. Need to get home before the weather turns for the worse.

She's wearing those mittens again today, the wool slipping around her cup, and I keep panicking that she's going to spill scalding coffee all over herself.

Since when am I such a goddamn mother hen?

"Mm?"

“You’re not happy,” Noelle says again. Right. Yes. “Usually, after these meetings you’re all arrogant and puffed up. Ready to make some rich businessman cry.”

I rub my jaw, the day’s stubble rasping against my palm. My coat collar is turned up against the cold, but the wind slips inside my layers, chilling me from the inside. The sky is getting darker, clogged with black clouds. “Maybe all this festive bullshit is dampening my spirit.”

Noelle hums, genuinely sympathetic, and hooks her spare arm through mine. The wind gusts so hard, I have to hook her closer to keep her from staggering off the sidewalk.

When did the weather turn so badly?

Are we going to get home?

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

We can’t linger here. The diner closes in a few hours, and then we’d be screwed.

Noelle squeezes my arm, not bothered by the gathering storm. I suppose she trusts me to keep her safe—an idea that is equal parts satisfying and alarming. “Why do you hate Christmas so much, anyway?”

“None of your business,” I rasp. And I’m being rude, being awful like always, but my fingers are clumsy from the cold and I’m fumbling for the car keys, marching us closer to our vehicle. Snow has already gathered around the tires, and there’s a lump of dread in my belly.

This does not bode well.

Need to get her inside. Need Noelle *safe*.

I wrench the passenger door open with my heart in my throat. “Get in. And don’t spill coffee in my car.”



## Five

# Noelle



I don't watch many disaster movies. I'm too much of a wimp, and I cringe when anyone gets injured on screen. So I don't have much to compare this sudden storm to, but in my mind, it's like some B-movie blizzard thriller—one where the lead actors get trapped in a car at the side of the highway, and have to rely on their wits to survive.

Not good. I don't have any wits! Not the kind you need to survive a blizzard, anyway. Because it wasn't so bad as we left Aspen Ridge, just a few snowflakes and cold wind, but after forty minutes of creeping along a whited-out highway, I'm *really* wishing we holed up in that diner until this storm blew over.

“Are we going to die?”

Reid is hunkered over the wheel, stiff with tension. “No.”

But it's crazy out there, thick snow buffeting the car so hard it rocks, the twin lights of other vehicles nothing but dim, hazy orbs as they creep past in the other direction.

We're inching forward, headlights on, wipers in a frenzy. My teeth chatter, either from nerves or the cold or both.

"We should have stayed in Aspen Ridge."

Reid looks pained. "I can't turn back now."

"Can we stop somewhere?"

We'll have to, right? We can't inch our way back to the city through *this*.

Reid's mouth flattens in a line, but he nods. "I'm going to take the next exit. There must be some farmhouse we can shelter in until the storm passes. With any luck, we'll still be home tonight."

"It's like the universe is conspiring against us," I say as our car drifts off the highway, creeping down the snow-battered exit. And I'm just rambling from nerves, fidgeting in my seat, but Reid gusts out a sigh.

"Hardly."

"No, I'm serious." Okay I'm not, but teasing Reid always makes me feel better, and I'll take any distraction from this life-or-death storm. "Maybe the gods don't want you to escape the Christmas cheer, Reid Merryweather."

"The gods can eat shit," he mutters, turning the wheel and guiding us gently around a bend.

Despite our current peril, I bite back a smile.

Out here in the wasteland between small towns, we could drive for ages before finding shelter. Fumbling my phone out

of my pocket, I check for signal. Zero bars.

Better hope we don't have an emergency, huh?

I burst out laughing.

"Calm down." Reid squints through the swirling mass of snow. It's getting dark out. "I'm going to fix this. Noelle? Stop laughing. You sound insane."

I *feel* insane. Giddy and jittery and scared. And when a building looms out of nowhere through the gloom, studded with festive lights and lit from below, I don't feel any saner. This is like seeing an oasis in a desert, right?

"The Mulberry Inn." I read the sign out loud as Reid curses, wrenching on the wheel and turning us off the road toward the building, tires crunching through snow. We trundle up the winding driveway, both craning forward to stare at the miraculous inn.

It looks like a giant gingerbread house, decked out in holiday decorations. There are balconies twined with string lights, a Christmas tree in the lobby window, and an honest-to-god statue of Santa and his sleigh on the roof.

My neck cranes. "What is this place?"

"The ninth circle of Hell."

Reid kills the engine, parking in front of the inn's postcard-perfect decking. The second we stop moving, snow starts gathering in heaps, and I fight against the wind to get the door open.

In the end, Reid yanks it wide, looming over me like a fancy yeti in the snow. He reaches into the car and plucks me out, bundling me under his arm like I'm one of his legal briefs, and marches us up over the deck and into the Mulberry Inn.

\* \* \*

A bell tinkles as the door opens. It's warm in this lobby—cozy and quiet, like there's no storm raging just outside those windows. As the door snaps shut behind us, a hush falls, like this is the only place on Earth.

Reid sets me down on a thick, patterned rug. The air smells like freshly baked cookies.

“Evening, folks!” A young man with styled black hair and tawny skin beams at us from behind the polished wood of reception. He's college-aged, wearing a bright white shirt without a single crease in the fabric. “Welcome to the Mulberry Inn.”

Reid stomps to the desk in moody silence, but our host's smile doesn't dim a single watt.

“What brings you lovely folks to our neck of the woods?” His name badge says, *Hi! I'm Anirudh.*

“A blizzard,” Reid says. “Do you have two rooms?” He turns back to face me, but won't meet my eye. “We can't drive again tonight. The car is in a snowdrift.”

No kidding.

And does he seriously think I want to head back out into *that*? When it's so cozy and welcoming in here? And there are freshly baked cookies somewhere nearby? This place is my dream!

Anirudh grins at me past my boss's shoulder. "The cookies are in the guest library. They have cardamom." He mimes a chef's kiss. "My mother's best."

Reid clears his throat. "The rooms?"

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Anirudh says, going on like Reid never spoke. He smiles wide, all mischief and sunshine. "Indians and Christmas? Who knew? But many Indians are Christian, my friends." A stern finger points between us. "Don't be racist."

I choke back a laugh, and Reid gusts out a long-suffering sigh. Yeah, my boss doesn't like being teased by anyone but me.

"Two rooms. Do you have them or not?"

Anirudh winks at me. Reid bristles.

"Let me check my magical booking software." Our host hops up onto a stool, dragging his keyboard a few inches closer. He types fast, fingers thundering over the keys, and his mouth twists as he scans his computer screen. "Two rooms," he repeats slowly. He taps his chin. "Two... rooms. There is good news and bad news," Anirudh says at last.

Reid pinches the bridge of his nose. "Let's hear it."

“The good news is that you’re both safe from the storm! You won’t be exposed to the elements overnight. Wonderful news, I’m sure you’ll agree, and far more important than any pesky details.”

I *do* agree. As far as I’m concerned, Anirudh is our guardian angel, especially if I can go track down those cardamom cookies anytime soon. A guest library, too? *Sweet*. This inn is awesome, and I knew Reid would make everything okay.

“And the bad news?” My boss’s tone is clipped.

“The bad news,” Anirudh says, “is that there is only one room available tonight.”

My belly swoops. “With two beds?”

“No.” Anirudh gives a mournful shrug, but his regretful tone doesn’t match his eyes. “I’m afraid there is only one bed.”

## Six

# Reid



“Oh my god.” Noelle claps with delight, bouncing beside me in the doorway of our room. Our *shared* room. There are cardamom cookie crumbs on her coat. “It’s so—”

I cut across her. “Don’t say it. Do not say it.”

Because this room drips with more tinsel than a department store on Christmas Eve. Ugh. How can an intelligent woman have such dreadful taste?

“It’s like a separate blizzard blew through here and tossed cheap decorations everywhere. Vile.” I shrug off my coat and sling it over a nearby armchair, then march to the laundry hamper. “Help me with this.”

Noelle sighs and peels off her own coat, piling it on top of mine. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

Obviously. Because I’m her boss—inappropriate feelings aside—and if I spend ten more minutes surrounded by gaudy cheer, my head will explode.

So with much creaking of wicker and rustling of tinsel, we work our way around the room, stuffing armfuls of holiday tat into the hamper. Flecks of shiny tinsel stick to my shirt, and baubles *thwump* onto the pile one by one. I throw them harder than necessary.

“You are such a Scrooge,” Noelle says for the millionth time, lifting the holly wreath off the inside of our door. She lays it carefully in the hamper, like she’s settling down a precious child for a nap. “Tell me why you’re like this.”

“No.”

“We’re going to hurt Anirudh’s feelings.” Noelle folds her arms as I take down the pair of red and green stockings dangling from the mantelpiece, tossing them in the hamper without a second glance.

“I highly doubt that.”

“He’s saving our *lives*, Reid. This is going to seem so ungrateful.”

Ugh. Fine. “I’ll leave an obnoxiously large tip. Feel better?”

Noelle rolls her eyes—but her shoulders do relax.

And with the decorations gone, the laundry hamper exiled to the corridor outside, this room feels much better. Uncluttered. There’s a double bed with a kitschy patchwork quilt; a mantelpiece and TV screen over an unlit hearth; a coffee table carved from oak. Several lamps that cast a warm



glow, two squashy red armchairs, and a separate door leading to an en suite.

Where Noelle will shower at some point.

I'm going to hear her shower. I'll be this distance away—barely any distance at all—and hear the water drumming through the wall, maybe the soft thump of a shampoo bottle. After she's done, I could go in there and breathe the same steam.

Christ.

I'm unhinged.

And this is a terrible idea. I'm her *boss*, for god's sake, and not the kind of man Noelle would ever want sleeping close. She probably likes cheerful men. Loud laughs and tight huggers.

Not prickly asshole bosses who snap at her all day, then obsess over her all night.

“On second thought, I'll sleep in the car.” It's probably warm in there, what with the snow heaped around the sides. Like a makeshift igloo. Cozy, and safe from bad decisions.

“Reid.”

“You can put the ugly decorations back up if you like. I'll see you in the morning. Don't worry, I'll still tip.”

“*Reid.*” When I finally force myself to meet Noelle's eyes, she looks... hurt. Baffled. Oh, hell. “Are you seriously saying

you'd rather sleep out in a blizzard than share a room with me?"

Am I?

Maybe.

Because—all that silky blonde hair, tumbling over her shoulders. Those wide brown eyes and those plump, pouty lips. Noelle is rumped from a long day, pale with tiredness, but even with that creased green dress and those shadows under her eyes, she's still beautiful. Unearthly.

This is why I can't look at my assistant too much. Once I start looking, I can't stop.

"No." My throat is dry. "But I assume you'd be more comfortable in this room alone."

"Well, you assume wrong. Like usual."

I glare at Noelle. She glares back.

"This will be fun," she declares. Laying down the law.

"I don't *do* fun."

But Noelle smirks, raising one eyebrow. "Haven't you noticed, boss? You do with me."

\* \* \*

Noelle takes a long, hot shower, groaning with pleasure under the spray. I hear every drop of water, every pleased sigh.

It's torture.

Out here in the bedroom, I pace in agitated circles, trying not to picture my assistant's slippery, soapy skin in there, the water running in rivulets down her perfect curves. Trying to not imagine myself bursting in there and shoving my way inside the shower and pressing her against the tiles, feeling those groans vibrate against my lips.

*There is a line, asshole.*

*There has to be a line.*

Honestly, I'm not sure where that line even *is* anymore. But I know it exists, and I refuse to cross it.

Better safe than sorry, especially with Noelle. I'd rather spend the rest of my life miserable and alone than make my assistant uncomfortable.

She hums in the shower, the sound echoing against the tiles.

Gritting my teeth, I press the hard bulge of my cock, willing it to calm the fuck down.

When my assistant finally floats out of the bathroom on a cloud of scented steam, she's dressed in a pair of the complimentary pajamas that we found in the dresser. The pants are far too long, bunching up above her feet, and the collared shirt slips to one side to show a glimpse of collarbone. Noelle towels her damp hair, watching me thoughtfully.

I scowl back, neck prickling at the way she's got me under her microscope.

Because *yes*, my muscles are tense on my bones after listening to that shower. *Yes*, my face is hot, and my throat is tight, and I'm clinging desperately to the last thread of my control. What about it?

"No PJs for you?" she says. There was a second, larger pair in the dresser, with identical white and blue pinstripes.

"I'd rather die."

Noelle snorts, padding to the bed and jumping up onto the covers. Bed springs plink, and one pillow slumps to the side.

"They do room service." My hand is admirably steady as I point to the menu I left open on the quilt. "Pick something. Don't take forever."

"Oh, you charmer." Shuffling around to sit cross-legged, Noelle pages through the Mulberry Inn menu. "Hey, look! They have a whole holiday-themed section." A sly glance at me. "Think they'll roast a ham at this time of night?"

Kicking off my shoes, I loosen my necktie an inch. "So sad that you don't want your December bonus. Won't your flea-bitten cat be disappointed? Billy, isn't it? Brian?"

"You know his name is Bo. And he had fleas *one* time, you jerk."

"My mistake."

It's easier than it should be to stretch out on the bed beside my assistant, my back propped against the headboard. I cross my ankles and fold my arms over my chest. No accidental

limb-brushes here, even though Noelle's freshly scrubbed skin smells like lemon-scented soap.

I am in control.

“Want to watch a movie?” she asks, already digging around for the remote.

In. Control.

## Seven

# Noelle



**R**eid is losing his mind. I put on a movie to give him a distraction, something to fixate on instead of freaking out, but I forget that *Die Hard* is one hundred percent a Christmas movie. Ho ho ho, motherfuckers.

“This is treason,” Reid says, his tone mild as he watches gunfire spray across the screen. “Kiss your bonus goodbye, Noelle.”

Yeah, right. “I don’t believe you.”

My boss’s mouth twitches, like he’s pleased I’ve finally seen through his threats.

When our food arrives, we eat wedged together against the headboard, bowls of chana masala and rice held up by our chests. It’s delicious—hot and spicy and *gah*, so perfect—and even Reid hums with approval as he chews, eyes on the movie.

That pleased little rumble, reverberating around his chest... it *does* something to me.

I want to cause sounds like that from Reid Merryweather. Want to make him hum and moan and groan. Would he ever

let me?

“You’re not going to shower?” I ask once we’re both finished eating, placing our plates on a tray by the door. My pajama pants swish as I cross back to the bed, hopping back up onto the mattress. “Seriously, the hot water feels so good after that drive. And you can’t spend all night in a necktie.”

Wordlessly, still watching the movie, Reid tugs his tie off and drops it on the rug beside the bed. My low belly tingles.

“That shirt can’t be comfortable, either.”

Reid flicks open the top two buttons, still not looking my way. My cheeks glow. And he’s shown the tiniest strip of bare skin, the merest sliver of his toned chest, but somehow it’s more erotic than if someone else paraded around buck-nude.

Reid Merryweather is *always* buttoned up. Always stiff and reserved, snapping and snarling when people try to get past his barriers.

But not me.

With me, he’ll stretch out on this patchwork quilt and watch a holiday movie; he’ll eat room service food and take off his tie.

What else would he do? What else does he *want* to do?

“So, those PJs,” I try again, but Reid shakes his head and pats the bed next to him.

“Come here, Noelle.”

Ookay. Wriggling back into place so I'm propped next to Reid against the headboard, I try to focus on the movie. Try to follow the plot.

It's impossible. This close to my grumpy boss, so close I can smell the faint scent of his aftershave and feel the heat of his body, I can't think straight. Can't focus at all. Can't do anything except lie here, body humming beneath my borrowed pajamas, nerve endings singing out with how badly I want to be touched.

Touched by *him*. Reid.

Would he like that? Or would he roll his eyes and go sleep in the car?

Oh god, he's so handsome. Every time I steal a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye, my belly swoops. His jaw is hard, shadowed with the day's stubble, and his forehead is creased with a frown. That thick, dark hair would be so great to tug. Reid gusts out a strained sigh.

"Are you going to watch me or this infernal Christmas movie, Noelle?"

My heart races under my pajama shirt. "You."

Reid's mouth twitches again. He raises an eyebrow, still watching Bruce Willis pick off bad guys. "And after breaking the rules, too. Such a waste of your December bonus."

"Well, since I've lost my bonus anyway..." My hands are damp with nerves as I turn away and dig in the nightstand, pulling out the one decoration I saved from Reid's earlier



purge. Tucked it in the drawer when he wasn't looking: a crumpled sprig of mistletoe, with pearly white berries nestled among dark leaves.

It lands on Reid's lap with the softest of thumps.

My boss blinks down at the mistletoe. Icy blue eyes turn and pin me in place.

Is it always this hard to breathe? My lungs have stopped working.

"Noelle," Reid says slowly. His pupils are expanding, eating up the pale blue rings of his eyes. His chest rises and falls steadily beneath his slightly unbuttoned shirt. "What are you doing?"

My pulse thumps in my ears as I tip over, kneeling in front of my boss. My hand trembles as it rests against his chest, and my voice sounds like it comes from far away, muffled by my own heartbeat. "Oh come on, Reid. Even you know what mistletoe is for."

He sniffs hard, then flings the sprig at the wall. "We don't need that bullshit, Noelle."

I'm tipped over before I can blink.

Pressed down into the mattress, Reid's body covering mine from above. Blanketing me. And god, if any part of me thought he'd be stilted, restrained, tepid in his response to my advances... I was so, so wrong.

It's like a switch has flipped. Goodbye, cranky ice man who hates everyone and everything; hello, hot, *hungry* boss.

Reid takes my wrists and pins them above my head, our hands sinking into the pile of pillows. He scowls at me from mere inches away, dark hair flopping over his forehead, and seals our bodies together from chest to legs. The sounds of shattering glass float from the TV, with the screams of Nakatomi Tower.

“Is this what you want?”

Reid sounds mad. Such a grump, even now.

I crane up and nip his chin.

And my boss *snarls*, then ducks down and kisses me so hard my head spins. Kisses me into oblivion.

It's bruising and harsh. He's punishing me as well as giving in, his mouth moving against mine without mercy, without pause, like he's trying to teach me a lesson. Well, the joke's on him.

Because I *love* this.

Love Reid's weight pressing me down into the bed, squeezing the air from my lungs; love the hard length digging between my legs, prodding me through our clothes; love his hot, wicked mouth. I love all of it.

And Reid Merryweather kisses me like he's been desperate for a taste for years. Like he's craved this since the first day we met, the same way I have, and now he has three years of pent up thirst to slake. His ice blue eyes are open, glaring at me, watching my reactions as he roughly claims my mouth,

but when I tug his lower lip between my teeth... my boss's eyelids finally slide closed.

Reid slants his head and softens our kiss. Goes slower, *deeper*, like he's done punishing me and now he wants to savor every second. Tension leaves his body, and he melts against me, getting heavier. Closer. Everywhere.

*Yes.* I want him to squish me flat.

Want to feel every inch of him.

Strong hands leave my wrists, scorching two hot trails down my sides. My fingers weave into his dark hair; they twist and tug. Every time he rocks to one side or the other, letting up the pressure for a split second, I gasp for air, but I don't care. This is perfect.

I *love* being trapped by this man. Pinned and claimed so thoroughly. Part of me had worried that if I ever coaxed Reid Merryweather into kissing me, if I ever got past his sky-high walls, he'd be rote and tentative. Going through the motions to make me happy, or out of curiosity, maybe—but not really into it.

*That* fear is long gone; it flew out of my brain the second our lips met. Because Reid is not restrained, not at all—his control has finally snapped, and he's lost in me. *Drowning* in me. Taking his pleasure.

“Reid!”

I gasp his name as he sucks hard on my neck. It's going to leave a bruise, but do I care? I do not.

I *am* his. The whole world should know that anyway.

“Oh my god.” Giggles burst between my lips as Reid trails hot kisses down my body, mouthing me through the pajama shirt. He finds my hard nipple easily, sucking it through the fabric.

I bow off the bed with a gasp.

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” His dark hair is thick and springy, and surprisingly soft between my fingers. I scratch at his scalp as Reid kisses down to my belly button, breathing hot air on my navel through the shirt fabric. “I thought you’d, like, peck me on the cheek. This is insane.”

Insanely *good*. A dream come true.

But Reid stiffens, his big hands gripping my hips. “Insane?”

My stomach plummets. “In a good way!”

But it’s too late—he’s already gone eerily still, already withdrawn behind his walls. It’s not Reid-the-hot-lover lying on top of me anymore, it’s Reid Merryweather, cranky boss.

When he rolls off me to one side, I’ve never been less glad for a lungful of air.

“Please come back.” My arms are wobbly, my body going haywire from our kiss, but I reach for him. “Please don’t stop.”

Reid stands by the bed, breathing hard, his dark hair all rucked up. He shakes his head slowly, takes one long look

down my boneless body, then turns and marches into the en suite.

The door slams. The shower stutters to life.

I gape at the ceiling, so turned on and so, so disappointed.

## Eight

# Reid



**E**ven on its lowest temperature, this shower is not cold enough. Nothing *could* be. I could sprint out into the blizzard and roll around naked in the snow, and I'd still be burning up in my own personal inferno.

“Fucking mistletoe.” My palms are spread over the tiles, head hanging low, while the icy cold shower beats against the back of my neck. Like a thousand freezing needles stabbing my skin. I deserve this. “Fucking Christmas.”

But it's no use. I'm still viciously hard, my shaft flushed and veined and pointing at the shower wall. Like it's pointing *through* the tiles, zoning in on Noelle like a heat-seeking missile.

She must hate me right now. For kissing her like I did, or for stopping so abruptly. Either way, the result is the same.

As soon as the blizzard is over, I'll hire a plane to display it in sky-writing: *Reid Merryweather is not fit for love.*

“Christ.” There's nothing else for it. No way I'm leaving this bathroom this century otherwise. I take myself in hand,

loathing my own weakness, and squeeze my shaft hard.

I jerk myself roughly. Crudely. Like I want it to hurt; like I'm punishing myself. God knows I shouldn't actually enjoy this, not when I left Noelle out there in a baffled little heap.

She looked so flushed and dazed. So lost, stretched out on the mattress alone. *Come back*, she said, but did she mean that? Or was she caught up in the moment, caught off guard when she offered me an inch and I took a mile?

And what a goddamn mile. Kissing Noelle is better than I ever dreamed, and I've pictured it a *lot*. Her heat, her eager whimpers, her fingernails scratching at my scalp, her body bowing against mine...

"Reid?" Noelle's voice is soft, muffled by the wall and the shower spray, and I squeeze my eyes closed and try to blot her out. My fist moves faster, my grip merciless. "Are you okay in there?"

Okay?

Am I *okay*?

I ran away from the woman of my dreams like my shirt was on fire, and now I'm trying to bring myself off quietly so I can go back out there with an ounce of dignity intact. My body is pebbled with goosebumps, and the cold of this shower is squeezing my skull.

Of course I'm not okay. This is rock bottom.

"Give me a minute," I call, and at least my voice sounds normal. Measured. You'd never guess I was in complete and

utter turmoil right now.

“Are you sure?” The bathroom door handle jiggles, and I huff and lean my forehead on the slippery tiles. Why is she trying to get in? What would she do if the door was unlocked?

Come to me in the shower? Touch me? Kiss me again? Drop to her knees, the cold water soaking through her pajama pants, and open her mouth for me, those trusting brown eyes gazing up at me with love?

That last image is what does it. My gut clenches and twists; sparks crackle down my spine. My heartbeat fills my ears, banging like a war drum as my cock pulses, shooting rope after rope at the shower tiles, painting the wall with my shame.

I wait until I can breathe again. Until I’m shuddering under the freezing spray, my fingers and toes going numb.

Then I rinse down the wall, slap the shower off, and get ready to walk to my doom.

\* \* \*

Noelle is watching another Christmas movie when I emerge from the bathroom, dressed again in the same clothes. My feet are bare and my shirt is half buttoned, the sleeves rolled to my elbows, but I can’t bring myself to wear those matching pajamas. That way madness lies.

“What’s this?” My footsteps are muffled by the thick carpet. The mattress plinks quietly as I settle my weight back on the bed, propped against the headboard once more. A safe



distance is restored between us, with my arms folded over my chest.

Nothing to see here.

Noelle's mouth twists, but she lets me change the subject like a coward. "A Muppet Christmas Carol."

For fuck's sake.

"You're pushing it."

"And you're messing with my feelings." When I whip around to stare at her, Noelle frowns at the screen, ignoring me as soundly as I just ignored her. "So I guess we're even."

Oh, hell.

"I'm not—"

"Besides," Noelle goes on, talking over me, "you were right to stop us. It was a terrible idea, and I'm the one who saved that mistletoe. I got us into that mess, so it's my fault. Sorry, boss."

Mess? *Sorry*? Noelle is sorry for kissing me? For making me feel alive for the first time in my whole lonely life?

"That's not—"

"I vote we pretend it never happened." Noelle turns to me at last, smiling wide, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "We won't be the first boss and assistant who made this mistake, and we won't be the last. It happens."

It *happens*?

The most important moment of my life, the thing that changed me from the inside out, that turned me upside down and shook my insides around... was a mistake? A mistake that *happens?*

If my stomach sinks any lower, it'll reach the Earth's core.

Because I know I messed up back there by leaving like that, know I made things awkward—but this is who I am. I'm the guy who needs a minute sometimes to get his head on straight. Things that come easily to most people—things like chatting and emotions—are an uphill slog for me. Noelle *knows* that.

I didn't think she minded. Thought she accepted this part of me.

God knows she's used to my stilted behavior. My moods, my grumpiness, my barked orders first thing in the morning as I stomp around our shared office.

“If that's what you want.”

Noelle turns back to the movie, conversation closed. “It is.”

## Nine

# Noelle



**T**he tricky thing about laying down the law is you also have to stick to those rules. And like a butt-hurt idiot, forty minutes ago I declared that Reid and I should pretend that nothing happened between us—that we never kissed so long and deep and hard that my bones turned to jelly.

Yeah, right.

He agreed, and my boss has been silent ever since. Withdrawn and pale. My heart aches every time I glance at him, his jaw harder than granite, those icy eyes fixed unerringly on Kermit's antics. His damp hair is all ruffled from the shower, and his skin smells like the inn's complimentary lemon-scented soap.

Is Reid okay?

Did I hurt his feelings?

But *he's* the one who ran away from our kiss like he was horrified. I did him a favor by drawing a line under it. Saved him from the thing he hates most in the world—an awkward conversation. Right?

It's a relief when the movie ends and we can crawl under the bed covers. Part of me dreads that Reid will insist on sleeping on the floor, that he won't allow something so pedestrian and intimate between us as sharing a bed, but he slides beneath the covers without comment. We both flick off our bedside lamps, sudden darkness filling the room.

Reid turns over, facing away from me, the sheets rustling against his clothes. He's still dressed in his freaking shirt and pants, but hey. At least he's not curled up in the shower tray, determined to keep away from my grabby hands.

"Night," I say. My voice sounds weird.

"Goodnight."

Oh, god.

This is so awkward.

Lying in bed with my boss, our breaths soft in the quiet, I've never been so aware of my body. The awkward sprawl of my limbs, never comfortable no matter how much I shift position. The itch of my still-damp hair against the back of my neck. My breathing. My gurgling stomach. My racing heart.

The wind moans outside our bedroom window, the blizzard still raging out there. Probably burying Reid's car under mounds of heavy snow. Oh man, what if we're trapped here another night? What if I have to spend *another* night lying beside my boss in bed, dying a slow, agonizing death of awkwardness?

“Stop fretting,” Reid snaps. “I’m not going to touch you, Noelle. You can stop gnawing on your fingernails.”

Balling my hand into a fist, I wrench it away from my mouth. Okay, so maybe I was stress-nibbling. Can’t he just go to sleep and leave me to freak out in peace?

“That’s not what I’m worried about, you giant jerk.”

Reid laughs, bitter and scornful. “Your December bonus is safe too. Go to sleep so we can get this night over with.”

Ugh. Flopping over onto my side, I glare at the shadowed outline of my boss, and picture smothering his beautiful head with a pillow.

It takes a long time. Takes what feels like *hours*, though Reid never shifts or rolls over to face me too.

But I fall asleep with a scowl on my face—and our earlier kiss still tingling on my lips.

\* \* \*

*Heat.*

*Comfort.*

*Safety.*

When I surface from a fuzzy dream, I’m being held. Not just held—*clutched*. Gripped possessively in my boss’s arms, my back sealed against his marble chest. Held so tightly, it’s like he’s worried that pirates might steal me away in the night.

Reid’s sleeping breaths puff against my neck. Slow and deep.

His hard cock digs into my ass cheek.

Ah, crap.

Reid's going to be so weird about this if he wakes up and finds us tangled together. He'll probably storm into the bathroom again and lock the door, barricading himself in there until morning. Guilt swirls through my belly at the thought—but hey, *I'm* not the one with octopus arms in this bed. I'm not the one clinging on for dear life.

That is all Reid Merryweather.

Pressing my lips together, I will my galloping heart to slow down, because I shouldn't be so thrilled to find myself in my boss's arms. Need to focus. Need to slip free.

He'll hate himself if he wakes up and finds out he broke his word. If he finds out he touched me after all, despite swearing he wouldn't.

I can't allow that. Reid Merryweather already hates himself plenty.

“Just... okay...” Whispering to myself, I pat down the length of Reid's arm, trying to figure out a way to unhook him. When his shirtsleeve turns to fever-hot bare skin, I pause, gulp, and keep going.

His forearm is toned and taut. His bones are so much *bigger* than mine, thicker and sturdier, and the fine layer of dark hair feels silky. I find his wrist and then his hand, scooped right around my waist.

Hmm.

We really are locked together, tangled tight.

My lower belly pulses, a traitorous slickness gathering between my thighs.

*No. No.* I won't think like that. Won't notice how good this feels. How right and hot and grounding, with Reid's weight and strength behind me, and the possessive way he holds me. Like I'm his. Like he could rock forward at any minute, roll me face down into the mattress, and slide home into my body.

There are layers of clothing in the way to prevent that. Yes. That's a good thing, because Reid shouldn't do anything like that unless he's awake for it, fully in his right mind.

Still, when he grumbles something in his sleep, the words tickling my ear, and his big palm roams over my belly, slipping beneath my pajama shirt to spread over my bare skin...

I can't help it. I breathe out a blissful sigh.

And god help me, my ass pushes back instinctively, with no input from my brain. It grinds back against my boss's cock, urging him on, and Reid growls into my hair then tips us forward. Questing fingers slip beneath my waistband, slide between my legs, and tease along my seam.

Shit.

Well, there goes my great escape.

"Reid," I moan, so flustered and boneless and overwhelmed. Trying to keep my head even as the man of my

dreams cups my pussy and squeezes, his cock rubbing against my ass. “Reid! Wake up. Shit, please wake up.”

One moment, the man behind me is hungry and insistent. His hand delves between my legs like he belongs there, touching me boldly, spreading my wetness around. His cock rubs against me in a dark promise.

The next, my boss freezes, his entire body turning to stone. His fingers go still, pressed against my throbbing clit, and his breath starts to come in panicked bursts against my neck.

“Noelle?” His voice is pure dread.

“It’s okay,” I say quickly, heart breaking for the horror I can feel coming off him in waves. The choking self-loathing. “You haven’t done anything wrong.” I pat his wrist like a weirdo. “But... you should be awake for this.”

There’s a long, tense silence. Reid’s finger twitches against my clit, and I bite back a whimper.

I will not pressure this man.

I will not rub against him like a cat. Not like this. Not now.

But god, I want to.

Want Reid to touch me again. To squeeze my pussy again. Want him to lick my neck and pant in my ear as he yanks my pajama pants down, rolls on top of me, shoves my legs apart and—

“How did we—?”



Frustrated tears brim in my eyes, even as I give a wobbly laugh. “I don’t know, I was asleep too. Does it matter?”

If the ache gets any worse between my legs, I will scream.

But Reid’s breaths are slowing. Getting heavier. Ragged.

His hand tightens on me, cupping my mound once more, and my whole body flushes inferno-hot. “This is okay?” He sounds like he can’t believe it, like it does not compute.

“It’s more than okay.” At this point, I’m beyond playing it cool. “*Please*, Reid.” My hips roll, grinding me against his hand, and his breath is hot against my neck. Hot and damp. “If you want this too... keep going.”

Silence stretches between us, taut and agonizing.

Then Reid groans and flattens me down once more.

*Yes.*

Thank god.

His clever hand moves between my legs, slicking and swirling. Rubbing and pinching. His mouth is on my neck, and his cock rubs against my ass, and it’s perfect, so perfect, and I was so afraid he’d snatch this away again.

“You must be boiling in those clothes.” My words are half muffled by the pillow, but Reid huffs in amusement.

“Hotter than the sun.”

“Take them off then, boss. I want you naked. Want your skin on mine.”

A pained grunt. His hands leave my body, and by the time I flop over onto my back, Reid's already standing beside the bed, yanking his shirt over his head. It flies through the air, ghostly in the gloom, and I'm glad my eyes have adjusted enough to see this: Reid Merryweather's bare chest in all its glory.

The sculpted planes and toned abs. The scattered dark hair on his chest that forms a line trailing down, down, down, disappearing beneath his waistband.

Reid flicks his pants button open. "You're sure about this?" He sounds strained.

"So sure." Wrestling my way out of my borrowed pajamas, I barely blink as I watch my boss strip down to nothing. As more of that pale skin is revealed, his eyes dark and unreadable in the shadowed room.

He's so handsome. Does he even realize that?

When I'm completely bare, Reid goes still. Standing over me at the bedside, he inhales, long and deep—then gusts out a slow breath. Like he's wrestling for control.

"Come back," I say, raising my arms. And it's just like earlier, but this time, he comes. Reid climbs back onto the bed, settles his weight on top of mine, and now we're chest to chest. Face to face, with nowhere else to look, no way of pretending this isn't really happening. That we're both still dreaming.

Do I want to pretend that?

Of course not. I've wanted this for so long.

“Hey, boss.” My arms wind around his neck, and I kiss the tip of his nose. “Nice ass.”

Ten

## Reid



“Nice ass,” Noelle says, grinning at me in the darkness. She’s stretched out below me, hair spread across the pillow, her arms wound around my neck. The tip of my nose tingles where she just kissed me.

Her bare body is so soft and warm. So welcoming, too, her thighs hitching around my hips, while her breasts mold to my chest.

I’m so hard my gut aches.

But we fit together just right. Slot together like we were made for each other, and Christ, I need to keep a lid on that nonsense. Just because Noelle wants to hook up, that doesn’t mean she feels the same way I do.

One night together doesn’t mean she’s craving forever.

“What do you, ah.” How to proposition my assistant? Shit, I’m going to hell. “What do you want from me, exactly?”

Noelle leans up and kisses my mouth this time, slow and coaxing. I follow her back down to the pillow, my heart slamming against my rib cage.

Whatever she wants, I'll give it. Whatever she wants, that's what *I* want. Because I've dreamed about this so many times, pictured how Noelle would taste, sound, smell, and feel, and she's already better than any of my fevered imaginings.

"Everything," Noelle says against my lips. "I want everything."

Well, fuck. "Everything?"

"Uh-huh." She kisses along my jaw, all the way to my ear, then nibbles at my earlobe. "I want you to take everything you want, Reid Merryweather. Use me like I'm yours."

*Mine.* My heart lurches.

If only.

But for tonight, that's what she's offering. Right? Noelle's giving me an all-access pass. She's writing me a blank check.

And... everything?

There aren't enough hours left before dawn for me to do everything I want with this woman. A week wouldn't be enough. Nor a month. A year. A lifetime.

Because I'm already rocking against her, sliding along her seam, and it's so good. She's slick and plump and ready for me. Noelle is eager for this, and so am I.

There will be time for other things before dawn. Time for tasting every inch of her body and shouldering my way between her thighs; for licking her, deep and merciless, until she cries. I may not be experienced in that department, may

have shunned all human contact before, but I'm a fast learner, and I am *very* motivated.

Right now, though, if I don't get inside this woman, I'm going to lose my goddamn mind.

"I'll lick you after, sweetheart. I'll make you feel good, so good, I swear, but first, I need... first, I need..."

Pushing up on my hands, I frown down between our bodies, watching my shaft skate over Noelle's pussy. Watching it part her folds, the ruddy head coasting through her slickness, as her hips twitch up to chase that friction.

I'm so close to being inside her.

What will that feel like? Tight? Wet? Hot?

"Yes." Noelle grips my shoulders, her fingertips digging into the stiff muscle. "Oh my god, yes. Do it, Reid. Make me yours."

*Make me yours.*

It's everything I want. Everything I need. And as I notch myself Noelle's entrance, as I begin to sink inside, new meaning laces those words—because Noelle is *tight*. Her channel grips my cock, and she whimpers as I push forward.

Shit. "Have you ever done this before?"

Noelle bites her lip and shakes her head. And she's so goddamn worried, fretting at my shoulders, worried that I'll be put off, when in fact—

“Neither have I.” I shake my head, even though liquid warmth is spreading through my chest at the rightness of this. That we should be each other’s firsts.

First and only, if I get my way. Noelle is a walking miracle, and everyone else irritates me beyond belief. I only ever want her.

“Really? You haven’t?” Noelle blinks at my body where it’s stretched above her, like it doesn’t make logical sense. “But you look like *that*.”

What’s her point? She looks like an angel, and she’s in the exact same position.

“So?” Reaching between us, I rub at her clit, slow and steady. I may not have firsthand experience of these matters, but I’m not entirely ignorant. “What do my looks have to do with it? You’ve met my personality.”

Noelle laughs, wriggling to chase my touch. The inch of me that is already inside her is wedged in heaven. Hot, wet heaven. “As if. That wouldn’t stop you from hooking up if you wanted to, Reid. I call bullshit.”

True.

“Well, then maybe I never wanted to.” Until now. “Maybe I was waiting for the right woman. An infuriating assistant with an insane love for Christmas, for example.”

Noelle’s laugh bleeds into a moan as I thrust a few inches deeper, sliding more easily now. She’s softening around me,

melting back into the bed, her body welcoming me in. Sucking me inside.

“Why *do* you hate Christmas, you big Scrooge?” Her fingers play in my hair.

“Not now.” Pulling out again, I draw in a long breath—then sigh as I push back inside, even deeper. “Have mercy, Noelle. Not now. Fuck, you feel too good to be true. So slick and tight. You’ve been wanting this, haven’t you? Wanting my cock.”

Where have all these words come from? Usually I can barely stand to make conversation, and now I can’t stop talking.

“Uh-huh.” My assistant hiccups in agreement, clinging on for dear life as I thrust harder now, plunging all the way deep. The wet noises that drift from where our bodies meet are obscene. The air around us is hot and muggy, and it smells like bare skin and sweat and sex. The mattress creaks as I move above her.

“You wanted this. Say it.”

“I wanted this.” Noelle’s head tosses on the pillow as her heels dig into my ass. I’m pounding her now, going at her hard enough to make the bed frame creak, but she takes it all with an insatiable hunger, writhing in my arms. “I wanted this so much, Reid.”

My hand cramps where I’m still rubbing her clit, but by god, I keep going. The only thing that would stop me now is if



my damn hand fell off. “Tell me.”

“I th-thought about kissing you. Screwing you. Crawling under your desk at work and s-sucking you off—oh!”

Noelle’s teeth clack together as I lean back and pound her harder, gripping her hips now to hold her in place. I’ll get back to rubbing her again, to bringing her off, but first I need to *use* her, need to rut, need to make her feel every inch. Need to punish her for making me wait so long.

I’m running on instinct, here, and this woman has been driving me insane, and I’ve got three years’ worth of frustration to work out.

I’ve never felt this awake. This alive.

Because Noelle is *mine*, her body spread out at my mercy, her tits jiggling with every thrust. That blush climbing her neck and staining her cheeks—it’s mine. Those kiss-bitten lips—they’re mine, too.

The tangled hair, that mole on her hip, the wet noises between her thighs. Mine, mine, mine. All mine.

No one else will be her first. That thought snakes through me, dark and delicious, because no matter what happens after this, mine will still be the first cock that was inside her. She gave me that gift, and she can’t take it back.

Tension coils in my belly. Sucking a thumb into my mouth, slicking it up again, I find her clit again and rub jagged circles.

“Shit, Noelle. That’s it, sweetheart, I can feel you pulsing. You’re so greedy for this, aren’t you? Well, take it. Come for

me.”

Her eyelids flutter, her complexion almost milky in the dark. Noelle’s breath hitches, her lips part, and her body clamps down on mine, her channel fluttering around my cock. Pulsing and squeezing. She comes in wave after shuddering wave.

And as she does, Noelle’s perfect body sucks the soul clean out of my body. Couldn’t stop this if I tried, couldn’t fight this tide, so I come and come, spurting inside her, filling her up. A high-pitched whining sound fills my ears. I’m still rocking and thrusting, still heaving for breath.

Is this real?

She moans and hugs me tighter. We’re both damp with sweat, and I collapse onto my elbows.

...Holy shit.

Wish this could last forever. Wish I could drag it out even more, but I’m only human, only flesh and blood, and when I finally roll to Noelle’s side, I’m sticky and aching and ruined.

I’ll clean her up in a second—then I’ll shoulder my way between her legs.

But first, I bury my face in her throat and just breathe.

## Eleven

# Noelle



I've never done the whole *morning after* thing before, and I'm not sure what to expect. Breakfast in bed? A sleepy, spooning repeat of last night? Awkward silence? Regret?

When I wake up to the faint glow of dawn seeping around the curtains, tired and sore but so happy I could levitate, I roll over to find—

An empty bed.

The covers are tossed back on Reid's side, the sheet wrinkled where he slept. There's still a dip in the pillow from where he lay his head, but when I smooth out one palm, the bed is cold.

The nerves start in my toes, then skitter up my body. My teeth dig into my lip.

Reid is gone? Like... *gone* gone?

But—no. My boss wouldn't leave me here. Not abandoned in a snowy inn, far from other forms of transport, with my body still aching from the way he screwed me last night. Not even Reid Merryweather would be that heartless.

The bathroom door is open, with only shadows inside. I sit up slowly, squinting around the room like Reid might jump out from behind the dresser and yell, “Surprise!”

Nothing. No signs of life.

Only my own strained breaths, getting quicker.

Jeez, did I get last night all wrong? Swinging my legs out of the bed, I wince as my bare feet hit the cool rug. Because I thought last night was this amazing thing we shared, this life-changing experience for us both, one that went on for hours with breaks for talking and laughing in between...

After the first time, Reid buried his head between my legs and made me come with his tongue, just like he promised. And I explored *his* body too, brought him off with my mouth and hands, before we settled down for slower sex afterward, grinding and deep and desperate.

Flashes from last night flicker through my brain, heating my cheeks. And I sit there at the edge of the bed, lost and lonely, too confused to get my body moving.

My insides are sore. My boss is not a small man, and I can feel where he thrust inside me. He left his mark.

But if Reid has gone... if he's left me here... what do I do? Does that mean I'm fired too? How will I get home?

And once I'm home, how will I ever get past this knot weighing down my stomach? This leaden weight that says I had my chance at happiness and somehow blew it?

Sheesh. It's too early for thoughts like these. Rubbing my knuckles in my eyes, I gust out a sigh.

Then leap up with a yelp as the door flies open, Reid striding inside with snow dusting his shoulders.

"I dug out the car." He's freshly showered and fully dressed, complete with his long black coat. He tugs on the cuffs as he crosses to the window, then throws the curtains wide. "Anirudh lent me a shovel. Funnily enough, I like him better this morning. Wonder why."

My boss turns to me with a smirk—which fades as he takes in my bedraggled appearance and slumped shoulders. My hair is a rat's nest, and I'm dressed only in the pajama shirt, the hem skimming my thighs.

I fiddle with the fabric as he looks at me. Can he see the guilty thoughts I had a moment ago? My lack of faith in him?

"Are you alright?" Reid's eyebrows pinch together, and the sight of his scowl is soothing, somehow. Familiar. "We don't need to rush off. You can eat and shower and so on."

I clear my throat. "Thanks. Very gracious of you, boss."

But my teasing falls flat—for both of us.

This is alien territory. And everything changed for us last night, changed in a way that means our relationship can never be the same, but we didn't *talk* about that. Didn't agree on a path forward; didn't say what this means for us. Our mouths were full, you know?

So... am I Reid Merryweather's girlfriend now? He said he doesn't do relationships. But if not, will we hook up again? Will we be exclusive? What is *happening*? I shiver in the cool light of dawn.

"You're freaking out," Reid observes, folding his arms. Those snowflakes are shocking white on his shoulders, melting slowly. "Go and shower, Noelle. I'll find us food, and then you'll feel better for the drive home. Go on."

*Food.*

That's a good idea.

I stagger to the bathroom, my insides all jumbled up and raw.

\* \* \*

It's so surreal being in this car again. Driving along the same roads as yesterday, watching the same snowy fields whizz past the window, smelling the stiff leather seats and Reid's lemon-scented skin. It's almost identical to yesterday's journey—minus the Mulberry Inn soap smell—and yet my whole world has turned upside down.

Gah.

This man was inside me last night.

He pinned me down with his weight. Drove his cock into my body until I wept with pleasure, writhing and begging for more. He spanked my ass and pulled my hair and said so many

things, such filthy, wondrous things, and now I'm supposed to sit here and make polite chit-chat? Maybe play I Spy?

"You're blushing." Reid glances me out of the corner of his eye, that icy blue gaze raking over my body. "And you're stiffer than a board. Noelle, you don't have to be afraid of me."

My laugh is strangled. "I'm not *scared* of you, you big dweeb. I'm just—this is weird. Don't you think?"

Reid says nothing, frowning out at the highway.

It's slower progress today, what with the deeper snow heaped at the sides of the road, but the sky above is blue and sunny. Guess the blizzard blew itself out overnight, while we were too lost in each other to notice.

Oh, god. If we never have that again... if that was my only taste...

I'll die. I'll curl up and die like a lovelorn bug.

"Tell me something," I blurt, desperate for a distraction. "Tell me why you hate Christmas."

"Hard pass," Reid says, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. We pass a red-painted barn, its roof heaped with snow. "Ask me something else."

Oh, come on. "But *why*? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but can you at least say why?" As we bicker, my stiff back melts against the seat, and my shoulders relax. Yeah, this is better. This is familiar. Safe.

“Because it’s private.”

“Well, duh. That’s the point of telling me.”

Reid is silent for a long time. I wait.

“Because it’s embarrassing,” he confesses at last, glancing at me again. My normally confident boss is unsure. “It’s embarrassing, and you’ll see me differently, and then this,” he waves a hand between us, “will have to end. I don’t want that.”

He doesn’t? Eee!

If there weren’t laws about safe driving, I’d crawl into this man’s lap right now. I’d pepper his cranky, beautiful face with kisses.

Instead, I settle for resting a hand on his thigh. The muscle jumps beneath my touch, but he’s so warm and solid, anchoring me. “I promise that won’t happen.”

Reid scoffs. “So you say.”

The heater hums quietly, warming us both and turning our cheeks a matching pink. My thumb swoops over Reid’s thigh, back and forth, rubbing him gently, and his leg presses into my touch.

“I’ll guess, then.” Now that we’re talking again, *touching* again, I feel so, so much better—like the world is back on its axis. The giant mound of pancakes probably helped, too. “And I have to assume that one of these reasons is the truth.”

Reid nods. “Go on.”



“You had a pet reindeer once and it bit you.”

“No.”

“A Santa mugged you in an alley.”

Reid’s smiling now, relaxed too. “No.”

“You once wore a thong made of tinsel and it chafed you terribly.”

Reid laughs, low and velvety. “No.”

And I guess it’s okay if I never know the truth, so long as I can keep making this man laugh. So long as he relaxes with me, shooting me those heated looks. Every second with him like this feels so warm and gooey.

But then the humor drops away from Reid’s face, and he sits up straighter. “Actually, it’s nothing so dramatic. I have a large family, Noelle. A *close* family. Well, close—except for me.”

It’s happening! Reid is telling me his baggage. Pressing my lips together, I fight to keep still. To *listen*. Snowy fields drift past the car windows, and my fingers twist in my lap.

“Growing up in that house, it was always holiday mad. So many decorations, gifts, and family traditions—Easter, Halloween, Christmas, you name it. And as a little boy, one who struggled to make sense of other people sometimes... I didn’t always understand those traditions. I pushed back. Asked too many questions. Made things less fun.”

My heart aches, and I can see it now. Little Reid with a tiny scowl on his face, bristling at being told what to do. At being told to be happy, to be *cheerful*, without understanding why.

“Over the years, my family got tired of it. Tired of *me*. Can’t blame them, really, but once I went away to college, the invitations to family events dried up. I’ve spent every Christmas alone since I was eighteen. That’s why I’m a—what did you call me?—a Scrooge.”

My stomach churns, and I’m queasy at the undercurrent of hurt running beneath Reid’s words. The emotional damage that only I can hear. This man wears such armor, and finally, I’m getting a peek at his squishy middle.

“My own family didn’t want me, Noelle.” Reid’s hands are white-knuckled where they grip the wheel. “Because I’m a killjoy. So tell me that’s not embarrassing; tell me that doesn’t put you off. Go on.”

And he throws me this look, like he’s daring me to even try. Like it’s unthinkable that I’d find out about that lonely little boy, find out about *him*, and still want him.

Such bullshit. I suck in a deep breath, puffing up my chest underneath yesterday’s green dress.

“I’m sorry, Reid, but your family are grade A assholes. And you’re not a killjoy. I have fun with you all the freaking time.”

So much fun. Even discounting last night's pure, sweaty joy, this man makes me laugh all the time. Teases me and lets me tease him back. He walks me home after work and pretends he doesn't live in the opposite direction; he 'forgets' my cat's name and calls him a fur ball.

He played I Spy and Fuck, Marry, Kill with me. Badly.

He detoured to get me coffee in Aspen Ridge, and watched A Muppet Christmas Carol.

Reid Merryweather has a heart of gold. I called it.

"Yeah?" My boss's throat works.

I squeeze his thigh, and my heart throbs like a guiding star.  
"Absolutely."

## Twelve

# Reid



Noelle lingers by her front door, fiddling with her coat sleeves. Traffic rumbles past in the street, and even here in the city, snow has covered the buildings and sidewalks like icing.

It's late afternoon, the sky is pink, and the wind whistles through my clothes. I stand three steps down from Noelle, hands in my pockets and my heart in my throat.

*Invite me in.*

*Invite me in.*

I won't say it out loud, but by god I'm thinking it. Beaming it to her via brainwaves.

Noelle still wants me—that's what she said in the car. Even after my many awkward missteps, even knowing that my own family couldn't get rid of me fast enough, my dream woman still wants me.

*Fucking hell, please invite me in.*

“Do you, um.” Noelle fishes for her door keys, her mittens slipping around the metal. “Do you want to come up?”

Thank you, universe.

“No pressure,” she adds, with a nervous laugh. “I know you must be sick of me by now.”

I’m at the top of the steps before she can blink, plucking the keys out of her useless mitten. “Never.” My heart thumps as the key slides home and turns.

In all my years of walking Noelle home, I’ve never been inside her building. Have never seen past the red brick facade with its climbing ivy and sloping roof, a metal fire escape clinging to the side. I don’t even mind the holly wreath on the front door as I push it open, because somehow I know, instinctively, that Noelle hung it there.

Her apartment is probably a real life Santa’s workshop. An explosion of tinsel and string lights and cheer. Already there are decorations all over the lobby, and a Christmas tree twinkles by the window.

Noelle must be thinking the same thing, because she follows me to the elevator slowly, tugging on the back of my coat. “Um. Reid?”

“Mm?”

Someone’s baking on this floor. Chocolate brownies, judging by the smell. My stomach growls, and I resolve to order us both food once we’re done ravishing each other. It may be some time.

“You know how you hate holiday stuff...”

I fight a smile. “Yes?” The elevator doors rumble closed, and the ground swooshes up beneath us.

Noelle chews on her lip. “Maybe I should go in first and, you know. Tidy up.”

“No.”

“But I’ve...” Her voice drops, like she’s confessing a terrible secret. “I’ve *decorated*.”

“Good,” I say simply. “You like Christmas.”

“Well yeah, but—”

“Then I like Christmas too. If it makes you happy, I like it.”

And it’s so much easier already, moving through the world like this. Not grumping and groaning and resenting small things. After the last twenty four hours, I have a new metric: *How does Noelle feel about it?*

If she’s a fan, I’m a fan too. Easy.

Don’t get me wrong, I still have my own preferences. I won’t sentence Noelle to dating a man with all the personality of a houseplant. But I’m not going to wait in the hall while my girlfriend scurries around in her apartment, hiding all the decorations she painstakingly put up. Hell no.

But Noelle isn’t so sure, and she shifts her feet. “I still think you might prefer—”

“What I’d *prefer* is going straight inside and bending you over the nearest flat surface.” I brush a stray snowflake off my sleeve. “If you’re amenable.”

Noelle goldfishes for a second, both in the mirror and by my side. The elevator shudders to a halt, the doors creaking open, and I tug her gently out into the hall. She’s so adorable when she’s flustered.

“I’m amenable,” she says at last, stumbling toward a door with yet another holly wreath dangling from the painted wood. “Holy crap, I’m amenable. Let me just—god, these stupid mittens.”

Noelle tugs one off with her teeth, shoving the key roughly into the lock, and my belly warms at how eager she is. How desperate to get inside and get back to each other.

The door swings open and Noelle strides across the room, flicks on a table lamp, then wrenches her coat off her shoulders. Mine joins hers in a heap on the floor, the door slamming shut behind me, and the mystery apartment is already a blur as the two of us rush together, colliding with two soft *oofs*.

Our kiss is biting. Hungry. Sparks ripple down my spine, and I catch Noelle’s face between my palms and tilt her head back. Taking control.

An answering shiver wracks my assistant’s perfect body, and I smile against her mouth before kissing her harder. She likes me bossy, even now. Especially now.

A glance over her shoulder finds a bookcase, with a kitschy Christmas ornament on top. A glittery painted ceramic of a snowman.

“Put your hands there.” She’s so easy to spin around, so pliant. Noelle gasps and braces her hands against the bookcase, leaning forward and jutting out her hips. She looks back at me over her shoulder with those hooded eyes, those swollen lips, waiting obediently for me to take what I want from her.

Fuck.

What I want is everything, and it’s so close now. Within my grasp. My chest burns as I flip up the back of Noelle’s dress and tug down her leggings and panties, baring her sweet little ass to the air.

She whimpers and wriggles. Grips the bookcase so hard the wood creaks.

“You’re going to be mine, Noelle.” Her skin is soft under my palm, warm and smooth. I stroke her ass cheek with reverence, then slip my fingers between her legs, rumbling with approval at how wet she is already. How needy. “Mine forever.”

She chokes out a laugh, shaking her head like I’m crazy. “I already am.”

Her clit is swollen, hard, and I gather wetness from her center then slick teasing circles around that bud. She makes



the best noises I've ever heard, high and breathless. "I mean I'm going to marry you."

Noelle's ass nudges back at me, chasing my feather-light touch. "Challenge accepted."

My heartbeat booms in my ears. Did she just agree? Holy shit.

"I want babies with you," I say, pushing for more. Trying to show her, even if it risks everything, how serious I am about the two of us. How gone I am for her, irrevocably ruined for any other woman. No one else can compare. "If you want them, anyway. Awkward babies that we'll love even if they're cranky little shits."

Noelle slumps over the bookcase with a blissful sigh, resting her forehead on her hands—and I'd be worried if it weren't for the way she's rubbing against my hand, riding my touch, coaxing me toward her center. When I press a finger inside, she sucks me in, so hot and tight. "Good. I want that too."

My chest has never felt so full. "You do?"

"Uh-huh."

Horrifyingly, my eyes brim. Blinking that moisture away, I glare around Noelle's small living room, bedecked in string lights, with its squashy sofa and knitted throw. Adding a second finger, I crook them inside her.

*"Reid."*

"I'm here. I've got you, sweetheart."

And I may not be the easiest man to live with, I may be on my own wavelength, but Noelle has always understood me. We've had a kinship from the start. Like now, as she sobs into her hands and thrusts back against my fingers, her whole body shivering with desire—I know what she needs. And I know *how* she needs it.

## Thirteen

# Noelle



**R**eid is torturing me, sliding his fingers in and out of my body, pressing the most ticklish places inside me. It's so much, his fingers longer and thicker and more intense than when I touch myself that way, and yet it's still not enough.

He *knows* what I need, the jerk.

And he's going to make me say it anyway. Going to make me beg.

Love that. Love him.

"Please." The words tumble out of me on a groan, my legs shifting as wide as my half-lowered leggings will allow. "*Please*, Reid. Fuck me. Please, I need your cock."

There's a soft sigh behind me. Then the clink of Reid's belt buckle, followed by the scratchy sound of his zipper.

*Yes*. I wiggle my ass, breathless with anticipation.

This felt so good last night. So full and *right*. Like I've been wandering around feeling hollow for my whole life without even realizing it.

There's no better feeling than Reid Merryweather thrusting deep into my body. Nothing I want more than his strength at my back, his hot breath on my ear, his hands, his cock, his love. All of it.

The broad head of his shaft slides between my legs, getting slick. Toying with me. As my pulse thuds in my wrists, my throat, my clit, I sigh against the bookcase and focus every ounce of my attention on that feeling.

How hard he is. The satin-soft feel of his skin. The moisture that beads from the tip, tickling me and mingling with my own wetness, and the bruising way Reid grasps my hips.

“Ready, sweetheart?”

I nod, too worked up to speak. Too desperate.

“Okay. Breathe out, relax.”

A strong, masculine hand strokes up the length of my spine, soothing some of my jitters as his shaft nudges my entrance. And Reid sinks inside me smoothly, stretching me with his girth, with less resistance than yesterday.

Guess I'm adapting to him. Fitting to his body.

I like that idea.

Like the idea of wandering around the office, making copies and doing tasks, while both of us know that beneath my skirt, I'm tailor-made for his cock. That he could bend me over the desk and slide home any time he wants, and I'd fit him like a glove.

What is wrong with me?

Ugh, who cares? It's hot, and Reid loves me, so whatever.

"Fuck," he grits out once he's all the way in, the fronts of his thighs brushing my trembling legs. "Do you know how goddamn good you feel, Noelle?"

My head rocks from side to side as my boss starts to move behind me, pushing in and drawing out. Starting slow, then finding a rhythm.

Can't breathe. Can't think.

"You don't?" Reid's laugh is dark. Strained. That low sound makes my belly twist, my channel gripping him tighter. "Let me show you, then. Let me fuck you how you deserve."

Hell. Yes.

And I always rolled my eyes at my stern boss, always teased him for his crankiness. But I *love* his bossiness now, how strict he is, how in control as he thrusts me against the bookcase and fucks me into a needy puddle. Since he's got me locked down for life, he's even more confident than before—master of the universe.

"You're mine." A large hand reaches around my waist and grips my mound, squeezing my pussy even as his cock keeps plunging in and out. "This is mine. Forever, you hear? All mine."

"Y-yours." My voice is weak, thready, but only because this feels so freaking good. It's overwhelming. "Reid, I'm yours."

And he's mine.

The man growling and thrusting quicker behind me, strumming my clit—that's my future husband. My forever guy. Has anyone ever been so lucky, in the long history of lovelorn assistants?

They can't have been.

And the pleasure builds and builds, growing heavy in my lower belly, twisting tighter until I can hardly bear it. Until I'm begging, babbling, moaning like a champ.

I clamp down on Reid's shaft, coming so hard my ears pop.

And he buries deep, then fills me up with a groan.

\* \* \*

*Three years later*

It takes some careful balancing, but I get the tiny green elf hat to stay put after a few tries. My son sucks on his fingers, drooling around his own fist, then smacks two colored wooden blocks together, oblivious.

“That's it, gorgeous boy. Hold still while I take a photo for Daddy.”

Fishing for my phone in my cardigan next to us, I keep my eyes fixed on the tooth-rotting cuteness before me.

We're sitting together on the rug in front of the fire, playing with blocks and wrapping gifts together on Christmas

Eve. Well, *I'm* wrapping gifts. There's a clear division of labor here. But mostly, I'm dressing my adorable little monster up as one of Santa's elves and sending photos to Reid as he closes up the office for the holidays.

My husband is a hard worker. Always has been, always will be—but these days, he has new priorities. Family first, work second.

“Okay, say cheese!” My phone screen is smeared with some unknown stickiness, but I wipe that with my sleeve and click onto the camera app. The fire dances in the background, safely held at bay behind the grate, and the string lights wink on the mantelpiece. This home is festive A.F.

There's an answering gurgle—but the front door opens out in the hall, and I whoop and fling my phone onto the sofa. Why mess around with pictures when Reid can catch the live show?

“In here,” I call, my voice drifting over the soft carols playing in the background. “Hurry!”

Reid's footsteps thud against the floor, and he strides into the living room, pale eyes searching.

That icy gaze melts when he finds the two of us by the fire, surrounded by wooden blocks and heaps of gifts. Reid's mouth curves up, and he strolls to join us, sitting on the rug with a sigh.

“Cool hat, huh?” Sure, it's slipped to a rakish angle, but the cuteness cannot be denied. Our son babbles nonsense

words and throws a block on the rug.

“I’m not sure ‘cool’ is the word. You’re going to ruin our child’s street cred, Noelle.”

But Reid is smiling, gently tipping the hat up so it’s level again.

“Good day?” I ask, leaning over to smell my husband’s neck. He always smells so delicious to me, like his pheromones are calling my name. Even now, my body crackles back to life, and I start mentally counting the hours until bedtime duties are done and we can be alone.

“It is now.” Reid catches my chin, kissing me hard on the mouth. After three years, his enthusiasm for me has not waned. Neither has his hunger. We *want* each other constantly, and even though it makes us late for many appointments, I hope that feeling never fades.

Gazing at my handsome, prickly husband, I’m confident it won’t.

He’s my Christmas wish, and that shit lasts forever.

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading *The Taming of the Scrooge*! I hope you loved it. :)

For another socially awkward hero, check out [The Gift](#). *This year, I’m giving my favorite shy scientist an extra special gift... me.*



And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

Cassie xxx

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# Teaser: The Gift

My first week on the job, Kristina warned me Dr Galkin was rude. *Stuck up*, she called him, and so awkward that I'd wish I never had the misfortune of speaking to him.

“Deliver to his cubby,” she told me. “Even the parcels. The man's a block of ice.”

That's not normal, leaving parcels by the cubbies, but I guess Kristina really didn't like him. When she spoke about him, her mouth went all pinched, the lines at the corners getting deeper, and her curly red hair practically quivered with indignation.

Still, the first time a box came for him in the mail, I wasn't going to risk it being stolen on my watch. Not even if Dr Alexei Galkin really was rude.

I stop outside his office door, tugging on the thick winter coat of my uniform, my mind hazy with memories of that day. The first day I met him; the first time I felt his burning hot gaze scorching down to my soul.

He'd frowned at me. Scowled, I suppose. But our fingers brushed when he took the parcel from me, and when he gritted out his thanks, a pink flush crept over his high cheekbones.

A block of ice? Ha. Kristina should look closer.

Dr Alexei Galkin is secretly all fire.

The envelope crinkles in my hand as I tap gently on his door. Behind the wood, there's the creak of a desk chair. Soft, drumming footsteps, and then a shadow shifts beneath the door.

He's right there. I flatten my palm to the wood, breaths coming shallow. Can he hear me? My heart's thumping so hard, I bet he can hear it all the way inside his office.

*Let me in. Please.*

A floorboard creaks. The shadow shifts. And for a horrible, sickly moment, I think he's not going to answer. That he's going to make me slide his letter under the door and leave empty-handed, leave without having *seen* him today, with this desperate ache still throbbing inside me.

But then the handle spins, and the door wrenches open, and I'm staring up at him. Dr Galkin.

"Yes?" He sounds annoyed. He always sounds annoyed, but I see through him. He can't fool me.

Dr Galkin's not annoyed. My scientist is simply shy.

"You have a letter." I hold it out gently, carefully, like I'm trying to coax a wild animal. His burning gaze drops down, fastening onto the envelope in my grip, and I take a moment to study him openly. To soak up every detail of him that I can.

His dark blond hair is ruffled, like he's been running his hands through it, and his eyebrows are pinched together in his customary frown. His black-framed glasses hide chocolate brown eyes, and a flush lingers on his sharp cheekbones.

Dr Galkin is always blushing. Is it because of me, or does he blush around everyone? I have no way of knowing, and it drives me insane.

“Thank you.” He plucks the letter from my hand, careful not to touch me, and flips it over to read the handwritten address. A pang shoots through my chest at that, at his avoidance, but I school my features before he scowls at me again. “Do you hand-deliver everyone’s letters in this building?”

I swallow. Something tells me he already knows the answer to that question—that otherwise, he wouldn’t ask. “Um. No.”

He watches me for a long moment, then nods, the movement curt. “Good.”

*Good?*

What is that supposed to mean? Is he mocking me? Does he just hate the cubby system? Gosh, I’ve chosen the most infuriating man to have an all-consuming crush on.

“Why?”

Dr Galkin shrugs, his shoulders shifting under his pale gray shirt. The fabric looks soft, and the rolled sleeves show off his toned forearms, dusted with dark blond hair. My mouth is dry just looking at this man, and yet he’s still scowling at me. Still cool and unaffected.

Except for those burning eyes, anyway.

“Have you sent any gifts?” I blurt. “For the winter exchange?”

It’s a tradition on the island. A way to cheer each other up through the endless night. For one week in the depths of winter, when we’re halfway through with over a month still to go, we give each other gifts to lift our spirits.

Dr Galkin didn’t receive any gifts for the last two winters. Everyone knows. He didn’t send any either, and he must be the only person on the island left out.

It’s been haunting me, the thought of him not receiving anything this week. I keep checking my mail bag each morning, crossing my fingers for him, but he only gets official looking stuff. Nothing fun.

“No.” That’s all Dr Galkin says. *No*. And his jaw firms, set with warning.

The message is clear: don’t push. It’s none of my business. But he sure *feels* like my business, and I can’t help myself.

“Maybe if you sent one first—”

“Goodbye, Miss Dahl.” The door clicks shut in my face. I splutter, blinking at the unpainted wood, anger and longing warring in my chest.

I want to poke his stupid chest. I want to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his clean-shaven throat.

What does he smell like up close? I’ve never gotten near enough to know, and I definitely won’t today. I spin on my heel with a growl.

Dr Galkin is shy. He's misunderstood, and I know it.

Doesn't mean he's not an ass sometimes.

\* \* \*

Check out [The Gift!](#)

XXX



*Cassie Mint*



# About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT insta-love with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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