

A STEELE FOR CHRISTMAS

SPECIAL EXCERPT

Scene – Eli meets Stacey’s ex-fiance and ex-girlfriend at the Lewises’ 40th anniversary party.

(unedited)

Stacey paused at the entrance of the ballroom where Dee’s parents’ anniversary party was being held. Glancing up at the man at her side she released a deep sigh. She and Eli had arrived in Memphis early that morning so there was no reason for them to be arriving late...other than the fact Eli had wanted to make love to her several times in the city where she was born. She couldn’t help but blush when she thought about all they’d done, typical Eli Steele style.

“Is anything wrong, Stacey?”

She shook her head and smiled at him. “No, what could be wrong?”

He shrugged massive shoulders. “Are you trying to prepare for when you’ll see your ex-fiancé and your ex-girlfriend again?”

Stacey rolled her eyes. “I don’t have to prepare for that, trust me. Gail did me a favor. If she hadn’t taken Wallace off my hands I wouldn’t be marrying you on Christmas Day, now would I.”

Eli chuckled. “No, you wouldn’t. But that doesn’t mean I won’t have the urge to knock the hell out of the guy when I see him just from the humiliation he caused you.”

She eased up close to Eli. "I'd go through it all again if in the end you would be my reward, so forget about what Wallace did and try and be nice to him and Gail, and I will do the same."

Eli grunted. "I won't be making any damn promises."

Stacey shook her head again. Somehow she'd known he wouldn't be. Taking his hand in hers, she said. "Come on. I can't wait for you to meet the Lewises. And Cohen will be here so you'll at least know someone."

With her hand firmly planted in his they entered the ballroom amidst all the bright lights and beautifully decorated room. She immediately she saw Dee. When her best friend saw her she raced over toward her and gave her a hug. "I was beginning to worry about you two," Dee said, smiling at them both.

"Sorry, we sort of got delayed," Stacey said, grinning over at Eli.

Dee chuckled. "Yeah, I bet. Come on, my parents have been waiting for you. They can't wait to meet Eli."

A few moments later Eli had met Dee's parents and liked them immediately. They told him they plan to attend the wedding and Mrs. Lewis had gone on and on about how much she had admired his mother and how she had kept up with Eden's modeling career back in the day.

He and Cohen had a chance to talk and he knew Cohen felt better knowing Stacey would be marrying him and that Eli was serious about settling down to being a married man.

He and Stacey were standing near the French doors, when a couple approached. He could tell by the way Stacey's body stiffened that the couple were the infamous Wallace and Gail.

"Well, hello Stacey, good seeing you again," the woman said smiling.

Eli couldn't help raking his gaze up and down the woman, trying to figure out what in the hell she supposedly had over Stacey when his woman was definitely better looking in all aspects. And he couldn't help but notice the way Gail was staring back over the rim of her wine glass. Female interest. He would recognize it any where.

"Gail, Wallace. It's good seeing the both of you. And I'd like you to meet Eli Steele, my fiancé," Stacey said.

It took everything within Eli to be a gentleman and offer both of them his hand. "So, Gail, I understand you're the woman I should thank," Eli said, pulling Stacey close to his side.

"Thank?" Gail asked with a confused look on her face. "Why should you be thanking me?"

"For taking Wallace here off Stacey's hands. Had you not done so I wouldn't be marrying her on Christmas Day."

"You really seem to be happy about it," Wallace sneered.

Eli chuckled. "You can't even imagine. Overjoyed is more like it." He lifted Stacey's hand to his lips. "And I can clearly see that the two of you deserve each other," he added.

Gail blinked upon seeing the ring on Stacey's hand and almost choked on her wine. "That ring. Is it by Zion?"

Stacey smiled up at Eli before answering. Her ring was always an attention grabber. "Yes. Zion is a friend of Eli's."

"He is! Wow," Gail said. "That ring is gorgeous."

"And most deserving," Eli decided to interject. "Stacey is all the woman I need. In fact, she's all the woman any man would need."

Gail leaned close and whispered. "Too bad Wallace didn't think so."

He felt Stacey flinch and his hand tightened on hers. This was one night he would be the one to fight this particular battle of hers. "Then maybe I need to rephrase that and say that she's all the woman any *real* man would need."

Wallace stiffened his spine. "What are you trying to say?"

Eli chuckled. "I didn't try. I said it. And you said it by the choice you made. But as for me, I figure why settle for less when you can have the best, and I'm satisfied that I got the best. Again, I want to thank you both. Now if you will excuse us."

And without waiting them to say anything, Eli tightened his hand on Stacey to lead her away, but Stacey couldn't resist saying before they walked off. "And Gail, I love your ring. And I must admit that it looks better on your hand than it ever did on mine."

When they were a distance away from the couple, Eli said. "Do you mean to tell me that she's wearing your old engagement ring?"

“Yes. He added a couple of small diamonds to give it a new look but it’s the same ring. Dee had told me it was, but I didn’t want to believe Wallace would be that cheap and that Gail would let him. You’re right. They deserve each other.”

Eli stopped walking and pulled her into his arms. “I’m anxious to get back to our hotel room.”

Stacey chuckled, filled with love to the brim for the man who wanted her as his. “I don’t have to guess why.”

Eli smiled. “No you don’t.” He pulled her close to his side. “When it comes to me, the one thing I won’t have you doing is guessing about anything. You’ll always be certain of where you stand and it will always be at my side.”

She doubted she could love him anymore than at that very minute. She glanced across the room at Gail and Wallace who were still watching them, and thought Eli was right. They owed those two their thanks.

“Come on,” she said to Eli. “Let’s tell everyone good night. I’m ready to go back to the hotel and be loved by a Steele some more.”