

A Samhain Publishing Freebie



*For Real*  
*Erin Nicholas*

For Real

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The biggest problem with her wedding rehearsal, in Reese Macom's humble opinion, was that the groom was standing between the bride and the man she was in love with.

Reese rolled her neck trying to loosen the huge knots of tension that held her shoulders at her earlobes.

Yeah. It was definitely a big problem.

Sure, her Aunt Frances was allergic to the poinsettias and evergreen garlands (and dust, strawberries and apparently Reese's mother) but the sneezing and complaining from the second pew was nothing compared to facing the fact that Reese was going to have to stop this wedding. *Her* wedding. Her beautiful Christmas Eve wedding. *Oh, God.*

She didn't feel bad for the little prayer. If she couldn't pray for help— or better yet divine intervention— in church, where could she? What she wouldn't give for an angel descending with a message right now.

Then again, God was probably thinking "This is your own fault. You said yes. You took this chance. Deal with it." Sometimes God could be like that. He seemed big on learning lessons.

So, this was a freaking mess. That she'd stay away from if she was God too.

Reese concentrated on breathing. Stopping breathing was only going to result in her fainting and prolonging this whole thing.

It was mostly her own fault —though she definitely blamed the two men standing just to her right for some of this— that it had come to this. The last minute. The big drama. The end of the world.

She managed to get a deep breath into her lungs. Okay, it wasn't going to be the end of the world. Big drama, yes. But the world would still turn.

Probably.

"Next I'll have you go through your vows, then..."

Reese didn't hear what the minister said and she didn't really care. This was a rehearsal for a wedding that wasn't going to happen. Seemed that her energy was better spent on concentrating on not freaking out.

She hadn't turned her neck to the right for almost thirty-five minutes now. Because she couldn't look at either of the men in the first two positions of the male side of the wedding party. One was the man who had kissed her under the mistletoe a year ago, romanced her, declared his love and proposed to her. The other was the man she *wanted* to do all of those things. Not to mention a whole bunch of things that she hadn't let Grant do. Like spend the night, see her naked, or give her an orgasm, just to name a few. She couldn't let Grant do those things. Because the whole time she would have been thinking about Tony.

Just what the hell she'd thought her wedding night was going to be like, she couldn't say.

*Dammit.*

She glanced at the cross on the wall behind the minister. She could have probably chosen her words more wisely, but she wasn't getting a lot of help from the Big Guy so He could at least forgive her that little slip.

"Then we'll..."

The minister was still going on. Reese breathed. Then started to glance to the right, then stopped herself mid-turn.

It didn't matter what Tony was doing. Where he was looking. What he was thinking. How he looked.

She'd carefully avoided looking at him all day, even coming down the aisle. *Especially* coming down the aisle.

Still, she was almost painfully aware of him. Not that that was anything new. She'd met her fiancé and his best friend Tony at the same Christmas party. They'd both been

charming and flirtatious. Until Grant got her under the mistletoe. From then on Tony had been nothing but a friend.

A sexy, intelligent, interesting, funny friend.

Reese should have admired his respect for Grant. However at the moment, it was all about her. He shouldn't have given up so easily. He should have gotten his own mistletoe. She'd wanted more from Tony from minute one. Hoped for more. Every time Grant asked her out, or bought her something, she'd hoped Tony would finally step up and say something. Like, "Reese, *I'm* in love with you. I want to marry you. I want to spend my life with you."

Or even, "Take your clothes off."

*Anything* that indicated what she thought, and felt, was going on between them really was. Because he never said anything about Grant or wanting her or not being able to live without her. He just showed up at the bar where she worked part time for every single one of her shifts, parked his tight butt on the stool, put his sexy lips on a glass of soda and... talked to her. For hours.

They talked about everything. Politics, sports, current events, favorite movies and books, debated the past three seasons of American Idol, exchanged childhood stories. But there was never any talk about their feelings, or her and Grant or Tony and the plethora of women he spent time with. It was always just the two of them. And it was wonderful. In addition, Jaden—Tony's sister-in-law and Reese's friend— had spilled to Reese that Tony hadn't been out with a woman, or had one over, in months. Reese hesitated to think that had anything to do with her, but a monk, Tony Steele was not.

Except there was never any kissing with her either. Or hand holding. Or *any* touching of any kind. In fact, it was almost like he avoided it on purpose. Honestly, how could two people interact regularly for a *year* and never even brush arm against arm?

Which made her really curious. Because she knew enough people who knew Tony and Reese knew for a fact that he really enjoyed touching women. Also, he didn't generally spend a bunch of time talking to them unless it was part of his seduction.

If Tony wanted her he would have said something, *done* something, before now. Like when Grant first kissed her under the mistletoe. Or on New Year's Eve. Or asked her out on that first date. Or the twentieth. Or *proposed*.

Then again, she definitely wanted Tony and yet she'd kept saying yes to Grant.

She had a good reason, though. More than one.

Sometimes it was because she thought maybe it would finally make Tony step up.

Sometimes it was because she was mad that Tony hadn't stepped up.

Sometimes it was simply because, if Tony didn't feel the same way she did, she had no reason to say no to Grant. He was good-looking, sweet, dependable. Husband material. Definitely. Grant was the kind of guy a girl should marry, plant shrubs with and buy a dog with.

Tony was the kind of a guy a girl should dirty dance with, wear skimpy clothes with, make out in inappropriate places with and use whipped cream in ways it was not intended with.

Not the marrying kind.

Not even the monogamous kind.

Yet, still...today, the day before Christmas Eve, in church, preparing for her wedding, she knew that she couldn't marry Grant—or anyone—if she felt the way she did about Tony.

"I now pronounce you..."

Those four words from Pastor Mark's mouth caught her attention. Her heart started to pound, her palms got sweaty...

"...man and w..."

"Hold on."

"Wait."

"Stop!"

Grant, Tony and Reese all spoke at once.

Everyone else in the church froze.

Slowly Reese turned to look at Grant, then her eyes flickered to Tony, but she didn't meet his gaze. She did notice the square set of his shoulders, however, and realized he was tense.

Tony Steele never got tense about anything.

Pastor Mark asked tentatively, "Is there a problem?"

"Yes," Reese responded. It was now or never.

"Apparently," Grant said.

"Definitely," Tony added.

Reese's heart flipped. Tony was speaking up. Maybe...

"Wh...what problem?" Mark asked.

Reese chose to focus on him. She wasn't about to break *his* heart, or throw herself at *him*. She couldn't say the same for the other two men in the closest proximity to her.

"You skipped something," Grant informed him..

Mark was a high school classmate of Grant's. He shrugged. "This is just the rehearsal, Grant. I skipped a lot of stuff. It will all be there tomorrow."

Grant looked back at Reese. "We need to do the part about if there's anyone who thinks we shouldn't get married."

Reese had no idea what her face looked like as she felt a vibration of shock rumble from her scalp to the bottom of her feet. Oh, wow. Oh, boy. Oh, no. *Oh, God*. It was as much, or more, of a prayer than the one she'd uttered earlier.

"I agree."

The deep voice just behind Grant's shoulder jerked Reese out of her daze.

"You do?" Pastor Mark looked from Tony to Grant. Then to Reese.

"If this is how Grant wants to do this, then we should absolutely let him," Tony said.

Tony stepped forward and Reese finally let herself look at her fiancé's Best Man.

Unlike everyone else, he didn't look shocked. Or worried. Or confused.

Pastor Mark's eyes were huge. "Do what, exactly?"

Reese didn't dare look at anyone else in the church. No one said a word. In fact, she wasn't positive any of them were breathing. She was certainly struggling with it.

"Just ask the question," Grant said simply.

Mark cleared his throat. "Um, yes, all right." He looked out at the audience. "If there is anyone here who has a reason that these two should not be united in marriage, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

"I do."

Those two words shot through Reese like she'd just downed a shot of liquor. Tony had said 'I do'. He had a reason she shouldn't marry Grant...

Grant.

Her eyes flew to his face. He met her gaze directly. "Kiss him."

Reese felt her eyes widen. "What?"

"I want you to kiss him."

"T...Tony?" she choked out, tripping over his name.

"Yes."

She gathered some bravado from somewhere. "Are you actually standing here at our wedding rehearsal telling me to kiss another man?"

Grant nodded. "Yes."

"You sure you want me to do that?" Tony asked Grant easily, unruffled. Almost... confident. "There won't be a question anymore if I do."

He didn't say it as if he thought Grant was insane. He also didn't say it defensively, as if he was guilty of something. He said it with poise, as if he was truly giving Grant the chance to reconsider because he knew what the outcome would be.

Everyone else was completely silent.

Reese's heart pounded so hard she felt it in her pinky toe. She suddenly felt flushed and jittery and... excited.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Grant's chin lifted. "I'm very sure."

"Okay." Tony stepped forward.

Reese stepped back as Tony came toward her. She couldn't quite pull her eyes from the determined look on his face, but she addressed Grant, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's about damned time you did it and found out," Grant said, obviously irritated.

Reese looked at him. "Found what out?"

"If all the chemistry is real."

"Chemistry?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

Grant snorted. "I'm not blind or stupid, Reese. I've been waiting for something to happen between you and Tony for a year now." He ran a hand through his hair and chuckled, though no one believed he was amused. "Anyone else would have just cheated by now and none of this would be necessary. But no. You two would never do that to me. So, now I'm stuck being the one to figure this out before we walk down that aisle for real."

Tony stopped directly in front of her. Close enough that she could smell him, feel his heat, study every line on his face. It was the closest they'd ever been to one another. There was usually a wide wooden bar between them.

Their eyes met.

There was nothing separating them now.

And she felt it all the way to her bones.

She wanted to kiss him. Desperately.

She wanted so much more than that.

Desperately.

\* \* \*

Tony watched Reese slowly—evidently very slowly— process what was happening.

The moment their eyes met though, he knew. She felt it too.

For better or worse.

He'd known, deep down, for months now that there was something happening between them. It was the oddest situation he'd ever been in.

Reese was the first woman that he'd wanted and not pursued, never even touched. Yet he was drawn to her with an intensity he couldn't even describe to himself.

He was a playboy. He loved flirting—was an expert, if he did say so himself—and seduction—also something he was very, very good at. He almost couldn't help being charming or that women found him attractive.

However, none of his normal play with women had happened, or even been tempting, with Reese. He genuinely liked her. Of course, he wanted her. More than he'd ever wanted anyone or anything. In spite of that, he was more than content to just be with her.

He'd spent the past twelve months doing just that. Being with her.

Yes, he went home every time with desire and need churning in his veins. But he hadn't been with another woman since he'd met Reese. She was the one he wanted. The only one.

It had felt so right *not* doing all of the things he normally did with women, that he hadn't worried about Grant. Even after he proposed. Tony just couldn't make himself believe that Reese would truly become another man's wife.

So he hadn't done a damned thing to prevent it. Until suddenly he'd found himself driving to the church to rehearse her wedding. To another man.

It had taken him almost an hour to really get that through his head.

The problem was, he was too laid back about... well, everything. He didn't get worked up. He didn't worry. He didn't expend a lot of energy period.

In business as well as his favorite hobby of high stakes poker, sometimes he won, sometimes he lost. Still, overall he ended up on top and he was fine with that.

He approached relationships with women similarly. He just let them happen. Or not. Whatever. Basically, he was never without a date to a social event or without a willing body in his bed if he wanted one, and that was enough. That was all the effort he was really willing to put out.

Until Reese.

It was ironic and he knew it. Didn't appreciate it, but knew it.

The playboy had finally fallen in love... with the one woman he would never even kiss... and when he fell in love, he fell hard.

He loved everything about Reese. He loved that her middle name was Penelope. He loved the fact that she only used lip gloss, never lipstick. He loved that she always smelled like vanilla. He loved her sense of humor, her compassion, her confidence and her intelligence that drew him to her like a compass needle toward due north.

They talked about what was wrong with the world. They found the same things humorous. They liked the same kind of music and both followed college football and major league hockey. Though she was working and he had no really good reason for being there, she'd never asked why he'd become a regular and they managed to get to know each other very well.

But he'd never touched her. Very much on purpose.

Because God knew he wanted to.

Reese frowned. "Nothing's going on with me and Tony, Grant."

Tony almost protested that. There was something going on and there was no way in hell she was saying "I do" to Grant, best friend since grade school or not.

Grant beat him to it, though. "Just because you haven't slept together, doesn't mean nothing's going on."

"Really, Grant, I..."

"Tony, tell Reese why you've never even touched her."

Reese was looking at him again, seeming very interested in his answer. He held her gaze as he said, "Because I knew if I started, I'd never be able to stop."

Reese's mouth dropped open and her breathing quickened. Tony's body reacted to the changes in hers. He was *never* going to stop once he got his hands on her.

"I never kissed you," Tony added. "Because then it would have been impossible to deny how we feel about each other."

Reese took a deep breath. "Oh."

"Just do it already," Grant said firmly through gritted teeth.

Oh, he was definitely going to do it.

Grant took a step back. "We're all going to be able to tell if this is real or not."

"Why didn't you say something before this?" Reese asked. She was looking at Tony but the question could have been for either of the men.

"Because I'm an idiot," Tony said honestly. "Because I've always been able to just have anything I want. I didn't know how to actually work for something."

"Why did you let it go on?" she asked Grant.

"Because I wanted to be with you and I figured if Tony was stupid enough to let you go, who was I to argue?"

Reese shook her head. "Wow," she said softly to Tony. "I was just assuming you were content as friends. I was afraid if I said I wanted more, you'd quit coming into the bar to talk and I didn't want to lose that."

"You do feel it, don't you?" Tony couldn't take it any more and reached up to touch her face.

"Oh, yes," she breathed.

"I told Grant this morning that I want you and intended to tell you before the wedding." He'd wanted to warn his friend, in an attempt to save some hurt and embarrassment and to avoid the idea that Tony had betrayed him.

"What did you say?" she asked Grant, seeming fascinated.

Grant rolled his eyes. "I said, 'finally'."

He had. Tony chuckled. "I had no idea he was going to do things this way, though," he said, referring to the big public production.

"I'm not walking down that aisle until you kiss Tony and then look me directly in the eye and tell me that you still want to be married to me." Grant tucked his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I figure it's the only peace of mind I can have. Even though you haven't cheated, I refuse to live with this question surrounding all of us. Who knows when you won't be able to say no anymore? Or else I'll constantly wonder if you're thinking of and wishing for him."

Reese didn't rush to assure Grant, nor did she deny anything he was saying. She also didn't protest the idea of the kiss.

Tony moved forward. She wet her lips.

He almost groaned. He'd tried not to, but it had been impossible to not imagine kissing her. And so much more.

He lifted his other hand to cup her face in both palms.

"This is going to change everything," he said softly to her.

"I know," she agreed.

That was all he needed to hear.

Things were about to get very complicated and sweetly simply at the same time.

Tony lowered his head and touched her lips.

It was everything they'd all expected.

It started softly, but then she sighed and he pressed more fully, tilting her head just so. Reese rose on her tiptoes to get closer, her hands gripping his biceps and Tony couldn't help it. He dove into the kiss, pouring all of his love, want and need, into it.

Reese groaned and lifted her hands to circle his neck with her arms, tangling her fingers in his hair. His hands dropped to her hips and pulled her up fully against him. Her lips opened under his and he tasted her, her tongue against his the sweetest flavor he'd ever experienced.

It was finally Pastor Mark clearing his throat that pulled them, reluctantly, apart.

Reese settled back fully onto her feet and they moved out of one another's arms. But their gazes clung. Her lips were rosy, her eyes bright and her cheeks pink and Tony felt a surge of satisfaction.

She was his. There was no question now.

Tony managed to glance around at the group. The bridesmaids were all staring, clearly stunned. The groomsmen were all grinning. His brother Adam was shaking his head, but smiling and Jaden was practically bouncing in her seat. Lastly, Tony looked at Grant.

He looked resigned.

"Okay." Grant clapped his hands together. "That clears it up for me." He started for the steps leading from the dais.

"Grant, wait..." Reese started.

Grant did stop and turned to her with a smile. "Honey, you've never looked like that after I've kissed you. That's all I needed to see."

She took a deep breath, then simply nodded. "What about the... wedding?"

It was amusing that she hesitated on the word that was the reason they were there in the first place.

"I think it's fair that I get out of fixing that mess," Grant said. The way he said it wasn't nasty, but it was obvious that while he'd expected this outcome, he wasn't thrilled.

"You're right," she agreed. "Definitely."

Grant started down the aisle toward the door.

"Sorry, I just have to..." Tony took Reese's hand and slipped Grant's engagement ring from her finger. "Hey, Grant!"

Grant turned and Tony tossed the diamond to him. He caught it one handedly, gave Tony a wry smile, put it in his pocket and left the church.

Reese turned to Tony but just as she started to speak he said, "I intended to say this to you in private when I begged you not to marry him, but I'm more than happy to do it right here and now, in front of all of these people." He cupped her face again. "I love you Reese. I can't imagine ever feeling this way again in my lifetime and I want to feel it every day for the rest of my life. Marry *me*, Reese."

Her eyes and smile widened. "Tomorrow?" she asked.

Tony smiled. "Now. Right now. Right here."

Her eyes started to sparkle even as she protested, "I don't even have a dress on." She and Grant had agreed the rehearsal would be casual.

"Well, you're not wearing the dress you picked out to marry Grant, anyway." No way, no how.

"I..." She cleared her throat, suddenly sounding choked up.

"Just like you are. Right now." He moved close and dropped his voice to a husky whisper. "I'm not going to bed without you another night, Reese."

"Oh," she breathed.

He hadn't flirted or seduced her... up to this point. He was going to turn on every ounce of everything he had to convince her now. "I've had a year to come up with a very long list of things I want to do with you," he told her.

She laughed and blushed at the same time. "Maybe this is just intense lust between us."

He shook his head slowly, smiling. "Hot-air ballooning past Mount Rushmore and spending a month in the Italian countryside are on my list. But it's good to know what's on *your* list."

Her cheeks got even redder. "The hot-air balloon sounds amazing."

Tony leaned in until their lips were millimeters apart. "I fully intend to find out if it's possible to make love in the basket of a hot-air balloon."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll figure something out," she said mischievously.

Tony felt heat shoot through him, settling full and thick in his gut. "I've been waiting too damned long for this." He kissed her long and hot, then raised his head. "Okay, Padre," he said to Pastor Mark. "Let's take it from the top. And don't skip *anything*. This time it's for real."

## **About the Author**

Erin Nicholas has been reading and writing romantic fiction since her mother gave her a romance novel in high school and she discovered happily-ever-after suddenly went a little beyond glass slippers and fairy godmothers! She lives in the Midwest with her husband who only wants to read the sex scenes in her books, her kids who will *never* read the sex scenes in her books, and family and friends who say they're shocked by the sex scenes in her books (yeah, right!).

Tony Steele first appears in *No Matter What* Erin's first release from Samhain Publishing!

For more information about Erin and her books, visit:

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