Don’t Mess with the Sack . . .

by

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CHAPTER ONE

“Seriously?” I playfully scoffed. Whenever I called the North Pole, Bull answered and demanded I complete a random task before my call was put through. Since their boss’s number changed often, I had to do it. “You couldn’t pick a festive holiday movie?”

“Vahla, you know better than to ask. We could have a repeat of your last call with answers-by-music.” He laughed, surely remembering how he made me rap songs to get through. I’d received a standing ovation for my rendition of Kanye’s “Monster.”

As if these damn elves didn’t have anything else to do this time of year but bust my balls. I was the CEO of Hell, the true ruler and power, and couldn’t help but smile that these little shits did this anytime I called for Nicky, AKA Santa. “Fiiine.” I sounded like a petulant child.

“You know the drill. Hang up and call back on FaceTime.” So, I did.

“Hey!” The large group yelled. Bull was standing on a stage. He was built like a brick shit house, with a military buzz cut of white-blond hair. His wife, Babe, who was a very successful salon owner and a voluptuous raven-haired beauty, was next to him.

A sea of elves behind him waved and yelled greetings, telling me he had the call up on their big screen so every elf, reindeer, critter, and NPE (North Pole Entity) would be able to see me.

Bull clapped his hands. “Okay! Let’s quiet down and get the party started!”

Ridiculous hoots, hollers, and banging of what sounded like instruments rung out.

“All right, all right!” he yelled through a big smile.

“All right, all right, all right!” they yelled back in unison.

“Really?” I snorted, their attention returning to me. Damn it. I would’ve stayed quiet, but they had to go and quote *Dazed and Confused*.

Damn elves and their love of pop culture.

“Our pal Vahla, AKA Queen of Hell, AKA Demon Queen, AKA Ruler of the Underworld, AKA The Real Devil, AKA—"

“AKA Hottie!” someone yelled from the crowd. Everyone hooted again, giving high-fives and head nods.

“Can’t argue with ya there,” Bull said, his wife playfully pinching his nipple. He responded with a firm squeeze to her ass, whispering in her ear and making her cheeks flush.

“Moving on.” He waved. “Vahla, here, wants to speak with our boss. But we have rules, don’t we?”

“Yes, sir!” they yelled.

“You all make shit up as you go.” I gave them the stink eye. They ignored me.

“What’s our rule?” Babe asked, hand cupping her pointy ear.

They all answered, “The rules are clear, so be a dear and answer the request for all to hear. If you choose to deny, you will certainly cry as we raise our hands and wave bye-bye-bye. No ifs, ands, or buts, our rule will stick. So, you want to talk to Nick? Don’t be a dick!”

I tried hard not to laugh, failing just like last time.

“You’re all nuts!” I pointed at them.

“I’ll show you some nuts!” another elf yelled.

Tears rolled down my cheeks and laughter cramped my abs.

“Moving on! Time is precious.” Bull faced me. “To talk to the big man, you’ll need to do the task chosen for you. If you can’t do it now, take five minutes from the time we disconnect, to learn it, and FaceTime back with the answer. Babe? Pull a request from the hat, please.”

She walked across the stage; low whistles had Bull turning his fierce gaze to the crowd. Babe kept going like it was her personal catwalk, waving as she went, repeating the sashay on her way back. Instead of grabbing the paper from her, he pulled her tight to his body and dipped her, taking a nice hard kiss, making her sigh loudly.

“Get a room!” the crowd and I said in unison.

Once they finished, he opened the paper and cleared his throat. “Okay, Vahla, for me to transfer your call to *the man*, please do the following: recite, word for word, Mona Lisa Vito’s explanation of why Vinnie’s nephew’s car couldn’t have possibly made those tire tracks, therefore proving the boy’s innocence.” He looked at me. “Do you choose to answer now or take five and call back?”

I feigned a nervous look, saw triumphant smiles, and heard tiny snickers. They thought they had me.

“Umm, I-I think I’ll try it now,” I said.

“Now?” Bull was surprised.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “’Cause my biological clock is ticking like this!” I stood from my office chair, stomping my foot. “And I have a ton of other shit to do, unlike you dwarfs.”

“Hey! We ain’t dwarfs!”

I turned away from the camera, finger-teased my hair, then applied red lipstick. When I faced them moments later, I recited the entire courtroom spiel—accent and all—and received a standing ovation that Bull had a hard time reining in.

“I believe I’ve earned that phone call after my standing O,” I said.

“I’ll give you an O!” Two elves jumped up for chest bumps at the offer. Bull yelled, “Fun’s over! Back to work, ya pervs!” The mass of elves quickly exited.

“V, that was awesome,” Babe said.

“Thanks, doll! See you at girls’ night?”

“Wouldn’t miss it!”

A handful of supernatural women and I got together every January fifth. Bull usually carried us out, but at least we rode in style in his custom sled. So much easier than puking out a window.

“I recorded your performance so we can watch it anytime.” Bull laughed. “Hang on, I’m transferring you now.”

“Thanks, guys! Talk soon,” I said as another face popped on the screen.

CHAPTER TWO

“Well, well, well. Look who the elf dragged in.”

“Har, har, funny guy.”

“That’s Big Man to you.” We laughed, his crystal blue eyes sparkling. “How are you, Vahla?”

“Good, Nicky. You?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled, his smile faltering. “Good. Busy time of year but can’t complain.”

“And how’s Cheryl?” His wife was an asshole who had pretended not to be to snag him. She was mean, spiteful, and petty. Naturally, I wanted to beat the shit out of her. The only reason I hadn’t was because he asked me not to.

He sat back in his high-backed red velvet chair with a thud. I saw his big black belt and shiny chrome buckle and a hint of the red-leather pants he liked. His full bare chest on display. Ripped abs and thickly muscled arms. Cords of muscle running up and down his forearms and salt-and-pepper hair thinly coating his chest. He rubbed his beard, which was more salt than pepper this time of year.

He was handsome, for sure, but he didn’t hold a candle to my Gabriel. That amazing man who would always be more than enough for me. Nicky had that kind of love once, and I still wished that he and Amanda had fought harder for each other.

“She, ah, goes by Cherri now but with an ‘i’.” His eyes briefly shut.

“Because . . .” It hung like a question.

“No idea.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. “Let’s talk about you. To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

“Gabe and I have reconciled.”

He perked up. “No shit. That’s great news!”

I flushed at his excitement. “Yeah, it really is.”

“Took you long enough.”

“I know. The timing was shitty before.” I was shitty before, truth be told. And I avoided Gabe’s attempts to see me until he stopped for a while. I eventually took a meeting with him and here we are.

“He was just waiting on you. There was never anyone else but you.”

Flutters of a thousand butterflies invaded my belly. I hadn’t been as good to my husband as he’d been to me, and guilt punched me in the gut.

“Nope. Don’t go there,” Nicky said, sensing my shift. “Different set of circumstances and stress. You love him and only him, nothing more to say or apologize for. Let’s just blame your dickwad brother. He’s a good go-to since he’s always fucking things up.”

The lightness of his voice made me laugh. “So, he’s on your Naughty List?”

“Eww, when you say it like that.” He mockingly shuddered.

“Hahahhaa. Anyway, with it being my and Gabe’s first Christmas back together, I want to give him something special, but I need your help.”

“Of course! What do you need?”

“You know how the aurora borealis and the light pillars align and mix perfectly?”

“Sure do. Only once about every five hundred years.”

I bit my lip. “This is that year.”

He looked at his wristwatch and then smiled. “And today is that day.”

I nodded. “And you’re the only person or being who can enter that space. Trust me, I consulted with other supers and magicals before I called. I didn’t want to bother you, especially this time of year.”

This was a big ask. Not only was he the only one who could get to it but also rumor had it that climate change could render this magic extinct. So, this was now or possibly never.

His head tilted. “How will you use it?”

“If I mix that magic with elements from Hell, Gabriel will be able to see me when I’m down there. No matter what I do, I can’t find a way that allows him to enter my realm. He hates that he can’t get to me wherever I am, and so do I.” I sighed. “At least this is a way for us not to feel so separated when I’m there.”

Nicky’s stare grew serious. “I’ll get it.”

I was grateful that he’d help but upset because I saw the deep sadness he tried to hide. His eyes told me all I needed to know about his life lacking love.

For now, I’d concentrate on a gift for my husband that I couldn’t reach but Nicky could.

Then I’d be popping Cherri in a very different way.

CHAPTER THREE

“Ah!” I’d no sooner hung up with Nicky than strong arms wrapped around me and a large, warm palm rested between my breasts.

“Why so jumpy, love?” Gabriel nuzzled through my hair to my ear, the laughter from catching me by surprise clear in his voice.

I sighed and relaxed into him. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Mmmm.” He slowly kissed the column of my neck. My body responded, and my hips began a slow roll as I pushed into his solid erection. He tugged me closer. “Who were you talking to?”

“No-no one. Just work.” I choked out, almost spilling Nicky’s name by accident.

“You were talking to no one, huh?” His sexy chuckle gave me shivers and would have made my panties wetter had I been wearing any.

I lifted my arms and wrapped my hands behind Gabe’s neck. He gave a low hum of approval as his hands roamed, teasing me with strokes but never stopping at the places I needed him most. My nipples hardened and were practically reaching for him as they ached for his fingers or mouth. My pussy throbbed, and my clothes suddenly felt too tight, too restrictive.

I rocked into him harder, loving each groan he gave.

We stood in our living room, facing the wall of windows as my eyes fluttered opened and closed. It was a gray and cloudy December day in New York City, and even with the bustle of shoppers and tourists, it was peaceful and quiet this high in the sky. The only sounds were our breaths and the rubbing of the annoying fabric of our clothes that separated our skin.

“I got you an early Christmas present, baby.”

“Oh?” I breathed out.

His big hands grabbed my hips to stop my rocking. I whined and tried to keep going, but my archangel husband was strong as fuck.

“You know I have obligations in Heaven this week, so I wanted to give you at least one gift before I left. I’ll be back to you by Christmas Day.”

Every level of angel had obligations the week leading up to, as well as the day of Christmas. It was a big deal, and I knew he had to go. I would never ask him to miss it or choose me over it. Plus, it gave me time to prepare his gift.

I looked at him from over my shoulder and nodded. “Okay.”

His fingers grabbed my jaw, pulling me a bit closer and angling me exactly how he wanted right before his mouth crashed into mine, and he kissed me like he was going to war.

His lips were soft and strong, demanding I take what he gave and give him all of myself in return. Our tongues slid against each other and stroked to a rhythm that had me vibrating with need. His mouth caught my sighs and mine caught his deep, vibrating groans. Sheer pleasure ripped through me as his free hand slid into my pants and hovered right over where I needed his fingers.

“Please, Gabriel.”

He nipped my bottom lip and went back to owning my mouth. I bucked, but he just continued to slide his fingers back and forth, back and forth along the inside waistband of my pants.

He pulled away abruptly, harsh breaths echoing off the walls and marble floors of the room. My eyes, mere slits, saw the beginnings of a snowfall. Each flake gleaming like a tiny crystal as it floated gracefully past our windows.

“Hands up,” he said. I released my grip on his neck, doing as he asked.

His palms burned a sensual path up my sides, lifting my shirt up and over my head.

“This hair.” He wrapped it in a fist and tugged, forcing my head back. I shook with anticipation of what he would do in this position. But too soon he released me. “Keep watching the pretty snow, Vahla.”

I could only nod. Lust had overridden my ability to speak.

His one hand cupped a heavy breast as both breasts pushed against the white lace of my bra for his attention. Gabe squeezed and moaned his appreciation. With a quiet scraping sound of the lace, I saw the white, wispy material falling to the floor.

“Hands on the back of the couch.”

I wanted to scream as I did what he wanted. My nails dug into the leather as he pulled my hips back. Then his tongue was licking down my spine while he stroked me through my pants from my clit all the way up my ass cheeks until he reached my lower back. Again and again, he did it and hazy spots danced in my vision.

“Gabe.” I didn’t recognize my voice, never this needy when it came to sex.

But this was more than sex. More than sensual torture and sinful seduction.

This was love. Raw, real, terrifyingly beautiful love. I finally had it back, and I wanted to deserve it. To deserve him. An unstoppable sob broke through me.

“No, baby. Don’t cry.” Gabe’s thumbs were at my cheeks, wiping the tears away. “What’s wrong?”

I closed my eyes against my shitty internal self-talk. Gabriel loved me. Always had and hopefully always would. I’d never loved anyone else. Never gave them anything other than the shell of my body. No mind or soul and definitely no heart. But I had given my body freely once a tremendous amount of time had passed after my fall from Heaven, and once my loneliness became so unbearable, when I truly believed he was never going to try to come for me, I started searching for a peace that I had only ever found with Gabriel.

Warm lips kissed my eyelids. “Open, baby.”

His face was a watery blur, and I was biting my lip to stop more tears. Instead, I took a deep breath and let it out.

“I want to deserve you.”

He pressed his forehead against mine. “What makes you think you don’t? You’re so beautiful and strong. A survivor and a ruler in her own right. I pale in comparison.”

My shoulders shot straight, not expecting that. “I—you, what?”

His rumbled laugh had me snuggling into his chest as his arms wrapped around me.

“Do you know how nervous I was from the second you left Heaven? How many times I thought you found someone equal to you?” He kissed the top of my head. “Someone who would make you not only forget me but also make our time non-existent?”

”Never.” I leaned back. “You know—” I swallowed hard. “You know what I’d been doing during those years.” The sex and the careless regard for the escape it gave me. Did he not know just how hard I’d pushed the limits of magic I let people use or practice on me?

His jaw tightened. “I do. So, I took every assignment I could so I wouldn’t think about it or how I couldn’t get to you. I fought in every battle. If there was a war, I was there.”

“Did it distract you from me?”

He shook his head. “Were you distracted by your choices?”

I shook my head.

“Two peas in a pod.”

I snorted. “The devil and her gorgeous angel.”

He pressed my head back to his chest and rubbed my back. In a whispered tone, he said, “You don’t need my forgiveness. You never have. I love who you were and who you are and all that you will become. You own me.”

I melted. Without him holding me, I’d have been heading for the floor. “I more than love you. It may take me a while to believe you’re real and here and love me as I am.”

“I plan on showing you every day.”

He stepped back from me.

“I love you, Vahla. My wife is the perfect mix of angel and devil. Two sides of a sexy-as-fuck coin.” His sly grin had my body aching anew.

With adept fingers, he unbuttoned his perfectly pressed white shirt one . . . slow . . . slip at a time. It hung open, showing a golden chest and a dusting of hair that I could practically feel scraping over my nipples as his weight pressed me down and his cock drove into me so hard, touching me everywhere and tearing orgasms from me.

I licked my lips at the dark, thin trail of that hair that led to a long, thick dick I knew was waiting to be released. With the flick of his fingers, his belt was undone, and one hand rubbed over the hardness that I wanted in my mouth. When his hand came back up, he slowly lowered his zipper. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

“Gabriel.” I sighed and moved toward him. He shook his head and stopped his sexual torture-tease.

I moved back until my ass hit the couch. My knees shook and my pants soaked more as I watched him.

“I love every side of you, wife.” Then he let his pants drop to the ground. Without underwear, his striptease torture was over, but a new torture of need and raging lust came rushing in.

“Oh.” It came out so breathy, I was surprised I could make out the word.

His smile. Oh, his fucking divine smile.

He gripped his cock, which was erect and incredibly hard. As he tugged, light caught on the silver of the piercing.

I struggled to breathe.

My husband was sporting an apadravya.

He’d pierced his cock.

He dropped to his knees before me and unclenched my fists. His hands smoothed down the sides of my legs, down to my ankles, and up the insides of my calves, stopping to splay his hands high on my inner thighs. His thumbs giving the most perfect swipes and pressure to the seam of my pants, teasing me with small bits of pressure to my clit. I shut my eyes tightly against the maddening slow assault and let loose a groan of frustration, only to be met with a low chuckle as he finally removed my pants. Then he was standing in front of me, his lips brushing mine one, two, three times before he rubbed his thumb across my bottom lip.

He nipped my ear. “I have your appointment scheduled for your piercing.”

I gasped. “Oh, yeah?” Fuck, I was turned on.

“Oh, yeah.”

His mouth crashed to mine as he lifted me, and I wrapped my shaking legs around him. As he walked, his hard length slid through my folds and skimmed my clit just right. The tiny metal of his piercing teasing my skin with each step.

We hit the bed, my perfect, muscled husband on top of me, kissing the air right out of my lungs before breaking away.

“Look at me, baby.”

When my eyes met Gabriel's, he slid into me. Inch by inch. Pulling back and then shallowly pumping back in. My eyelids grew heavy and low with the ecstasy of how he felt inside me.

"Eyes." He demanded with a harder thrust.

The piercing rubbed my inner walls, making my entire body quake. I had to fight my eyelids from closing.

"So wet, baby. So. Fucking. Wet for me." He groaned. His eyes sparkled and his jaw tightened.

Then he pushed himself fully into me. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he stilled, both of us taking a moment to enjoy the feeling and new sensations. Fire lit in his eyes, and he grinned right before he let loose and pounded into me and I was yelling out his name.

The orgasm hit me hard and fast, and I felt the tingles of another starting.

"Come on, baby," Gabe said between thrusts. "Give me another one."

He bent and took one nipple in his mouth, sucking and nipping and then swirling his tongue around it before giving the same attention to the other. With a pinch of that nipple, his hand trailed down the sheen of sweat all over my skin and his thumb pressed and circled my clit. I exploded.

"Gabriel!" I wrapped my legs around him, my heels pressing into his perfect ass.

I throbbed and my body gripped his cock as he pulled out until only the tip remained inside me. The lack of his heated skin on mine had me shivering and punching my hips up to get him deeper. Slowly, he thrust back in as deep as he could, and the pressure coiled and built and hovered with his lazy strokes and circling of his hips.

My nails dug into his back, and he bent to me, taking my mouth and kissing like a starving man.

"Who do you love, Vahla?" he asked with his lips still on mine.

I was lost to him. Every sensation running riot in my body. Tingles and then teeth grazing my breasts. A thumb pressed to my clit and then fingers pinching my nipples.

"You. Only. Ever. You."

"And I fucking love you."

“We come together. Come on, baby.”

Then his bold, bright, huge white wings flashed open behind him in a whoosh of wind and light. My back ached where my own wings should have been had they not been lost when I fell, but I had no time to think of it because as his wings propelled him, he fucked me deeper, harder as they spanned wide, cocooning us in their softness.

My body arched and I bit his shoulder as Gabriel lifted his head to the ceiling with a deep groan before shouting as he came with me.

My angel nuzzled my neck as we both struggled to catch our breath, he whispered. “And that, my love, was your first present.”

Oh, my soul, I love this man.

CHAPTER FOUR

I had just exited Radio City Music Hall two days later, deciding I was taking over one of the Rockettes roles next year, when the tiny pulsing of my bones made me pause. My bones had been my radar to alert me that something was coming since my fall from Heaven. It was never a good something. I ignored it and buttoned my floor-length, white wool coat, brushed the snow off the huge fluffy fur collar and cuffs, and began to walk as my phone rang.

"Vahla." The voice was gruff and exasperated.

"Nicky?"

"Yeah. Listen, we got a problem."

I heaved a sigh and walked around a group of people huddled together looking at a map, talking in confused circles about directions. With a soft and unseen touch of my finger to one's head, I gave them the walking route they were looking for.

"What's wrong?"

"My sack is missing."

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I teleported to my home office. Plopping into my desk chair, I asked, "I'm sorry. What?" I opened my laptop, ready to take notes and help however I could. And then a worrying thought flared to life in my brain and my eyes squeezed shut while I spoke it aloud. "Please don't tell me the magic for Gabriel was in it."

"Shit." He sighed. "It was, but that's not all."

Right. No sack, no gifts for anyone. But that was way at the bottom of my list of concerns.

"Just tell me."

"The magic is empty, and the northern lights no longer have the stream where the power mix was held because it may never exist again. If we don't find my sack, I can't replace it. I took the last of that magic."

Crackling echoed in my ear because I began to crush my cell phone.

“How the fuck did that happen?”

“Ugh, please don’t yell.”

“Why are you groaning like you’re in pain? Did someone attack and sack-nap you?”

Silence.

“Nicky!”

“I’m fucking hungover, all right!” There was the soft clattering of pills in a bottle and then him gulping something before he continued, “Cheryl, ah, Cherri, wanted to go to dinner and then the underground fights. And . . .”

“And?”

“And I know we went because of a stupid selfie and this hangover, but I don’t remember dinner or the fights. And, uh . . .”

Through gritted teeth, I tried my best for calm. “And. What?”

“I woke up with a black eye, my hands taped, and silk shorts on.”

“Wait. Like you actually fought?”

“Ugh, yeah. Cherri has the video.”

I stood and paced. “Did you use your sack as entry into the ring?” I stopped, closed my eyes, and pinched the bridge of my nose as I waited for his answer.

“I, uh. . . .”

“Don’t remember.” I answered for him.

“I don’t, but Cherri told me I entered with a one-time drive of my sled. I didn’t realize Bull had my sack already loaded.”

“But no matter what you used, you needed someone to financially pick up the cost of your entry. So, who paid the money for the one-time ride to get you into the ring?”

My bones throbbed, readying to pop through my skin. Thanks to my growing anger, I burned the rug I paced on. Cherri was still fucking up his life.

His response was muffled. “Lucifer.”

Fucking great. My brother had control of Santa’s sack and it held a priceless, once-in-a-lifetime gift for Gabriel.

I had six days to get it back.

What could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER FIVE

After hanging up with Nicky, I teleported straight into a lavish hotel room in Las Vegas that was so trashed it belonged in the movie *The Hangover.*

"Oh. My. Fucking. Fuck." I blinked, unsure if I was hallucinating.

There were five tigers, three pianos, and more empty beer and liquor bottles than I could count. The handful of other fallen angels were either naked or barely covered by hotel robes. Naked women lay sporadically around the room with pizza boxes and a hundred pounds of Mike and Ikes.

Forgoing yelling, I picked my way toward where my brother Lucifer was passed out and dug the pointed toe of my stiletto boot sharply into his side.

"*Owwwwwah*!" He groaned and rolled over, struggling to open his eyes even a fraction. "Whadda wan, V?"

"I want Nicky's sack."

"That's what she said." I knew that voice.

"Shut it, Baelz." I snapped without bothering to look away from my idiot brother. "You fronted the money for the fight. The reindeer that go with the sled are drinking out of the ridiculous fountain right over there! And—" *Seriously?* "Why the fuck are they wearing robes and gold chains?" I closed my eyes.

I stomped to the bathroom, then to the kitchen, and then back to Luce.

"Here." I held his jaw open, shoved five Motrin into his mouth, and then dumped in Gatorade to help him wash them down. He groaned but sat up against the wall. "Talk."

He rubbed his head. "I haven't been this hungover in a while."

"I don't care. The sack."

"You said sack." He laugh-snorted and grimaced from the pain of it. I whacked the back of his head, and he whined. "I don't know. We picked up chicks. Club hopped. They said they loved my sled, and I thought they were talking about my massive dick and—"

"Focus!"

"I think I saw like five sleds. And then I don't really remember."

“I need it back ASAP. Close your eyes, I’m reading your mind.” I leaned in closer, almost getting drunk from the fumes coming off him.

Luce drunkenly slapped my hands to get me away. “Nooooo, I don’t like that! It hurts!”

“Sleep it off later,” I said, planting my hands on his head.

His mind was a mess of fuckery. I saw some of the joy ride, but everything was a kaleidoscope of images. Useless. That sled could go anywhere and everywhere with no restrictions.

Baelz shuffled over in his robe and slippers, sipping something steaming from a mug. “Want one?” he asked as he pulled a handful of something from the robe’s pocket. “I got hot chocolate and tea and Arabian coffee.” From his other pocket, he withdrew a colorful treat and ate it. “*Mmmmm*, soooo good.” He looked at me. “Wanna bite?”

My senses snapped to attention. I could smell the unique confectionary delight from where I stood. I went to him, took the treat, and popped it into my mouth.

“Hey.” He balked. “I said a bite, not the whole thing!”

The marzipan and all its yummy goodness exploded on my tongue. I grinned and knew instantly where it was from. But my grin faded when I realized where I’d have to go if my guess where these fools went was correct.

He snatched another cookie from his robe pocket and took a bite. “Whatever it is, can we get it delivered to Hell in bulk?”

Back to my brother. “Did you cross into that nutfucker’s realm?”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. “I have no idea.”

“How the fuck can you not remember going there?” Baelz laughed. “Those hot chicks had husbands dressed like soldiers. You don’t remember those big dudes chasing us?” He waved the cookie in front of Luce, who smelled it and wretched. “And this bakery? Fuck, I need to go back there.”

Luce rubbed his temples harder and shook his head.

“Dude!” Baelz kept eating while he spoke. “There were too many of us in the sled to get high enough off the ground when they chased us.”

My heart raced as I voiced my next thought. “How’d you get away, then?”

“We dumped shit from the backseat.” He shrugged.

“What did you dump?” I clenched my fists.

He scratched his head. Then his balls. I closed my eyes, begging for patience.

“Uh, extra reins, big fucking silver balls—”

“Bells. They’re bells.”

“Whatever. And some red knapsacky thing that Luce was using as a pillow. After we dropped that sucker, we took off like a fucking rocket.” His arm shot up into the air for a visual.

“Shit.” I growled more than spoke. Nicky’s sled had access to places I didn’t. I ruffled my fingers in Luce’s hair, releasing a dusting of particles he had picked up. “Nut dust.” Exactly what I needed because this stuff was the only way for me into the Nutcracker’s realm and it was just enough to get me there. If I asked Luce how he got the nut dust in the first place, I was sure I’d stab myself in the ear before he got to the fucking answer. I was just glad I didn’t need more of it to get out. Teleporting would do the trick. But the realm itself was problematic. Anyone who entered had their power cut by half, so my ability to teleport with Nicky’s sack would be tricky. I’d have to conserve power until I needed to leave.

Before I could be even a smidge happy about this lead, the windows exploded, glass tinkling over the white marble floor, landing on sprawled bodies.

Small black objects repelled from the outside and rolled like bowling balls into the suite. Each one popped up, red-and-white striped guns drawn.

Baelz, still eating, sidled up to me, “*Uhhhh*?”

I stared as ten figures—who were no more than three feet tall—took positions around the room, guns drawn, lasers fixed on targets.

Recognition took me a second until I saw their chest patches.

Baelz snorted. “Attacked by little sweeties?” The reindeer went to the closest one.

“Motherfucker.” That closest one rumbled as he took off his helmet and lowered his balaclava. Gun still trained on us, head tilted up slightly, “We need to change this fucking squad’s name!”

Yeah, having SWEET across their chests to identify themselves, and being short by nature, was not helping their cause, even if they were the Special Weapons Elite Enforcer Team of the North Pole. Santa's super military force.

"We're taking the one against the wall," he said.

"Yeah, not happening," I said. "Call your boss. Tell him Vahla knows where his sack is."

The elf's eyebrow would have quirked had it not been one fluffy long unibrow. He motioned for one of his men to make the call.

"What's your status?" the man himself asked.

"Hey Nicky," I called out.

"Vahla?"

"Yup. Tell your team to stand down." He did and they all lowered their weapons and removed their face coverings.

"So, you found Luce first. Tell me you have something for me."

I sighed. "I do. But you're not going to like it." Then I filled him in.

"Fuck!"

"Yeah." I knew his frustration because it was pulsing inside of me too. "Listen, I know you can probably find someone to magic you in, but if he finds out and then finds your sack first? He'll destroy it and go to the council. He'll bring charges against your Pole for you being there outside of Christmas Eve. You can't risk it and you know it."
I startled at the sound of things crashing on his end of the phone.

"I don't want you dealing with that asshole. But I have to declare a Pole-wide emergency and try to fill a backup sack. I can't be in both places." He mumbled a ton of expletives.

"Um, *hellooo*? I deal with assholes for a living. I got this, Nicky."

"But it's him." He ground out.

"Exactly why you can't go. Now, tell your people to fix the windows they broke. Oh, and make sure you drug and alcohol test the reindeer that are here before you let them fly anywhere." They both hissed at that. I narrowed my eyes at them.

"Call me with an update."

"Will do."

The call disconnected.

It looked like I was going to have to use this dust and go pay a visit to Connery, the Nutcracker King.

I was confident he wouldn’t still be mad at me.

CHAPTER SIX

"How the hell did you get here?"

"Nut dust." I wanted to add *stupid asshole, that's how everyone enters here*, but it wouldn't get me far in this conversation.

He sat sideways on the throne, eating from the hands of two concubines who had forgotten to put on shirts along with their girdles to cover their tits.

"This can be a very short or very long visit." I grinned. "Your call."

He waved his hand, and the women headed toward the door, scowling at me as they passed. I let my eyes and fingertips heat with flames, and they couldn't scamper away quickly enough.

"Where is it?"

"Where's what?" He looked at his nails, bored as could be.

"Nicky's sack." He perked up with a sly grin. "The fat bastard lost it?" He laughed.

They hated each other.

Funny he called Nicky a fat bastard. Conn was the one who let himself go over the years. Slobbish with a huge round belly. His hair had lost the golden shine from his youth. I saw the yellowing of his teeth from where I stood and crumbs of food pooling at the corners of his mouth. Gross.

He abused his power as king. Taxes were too high, and he took from his people instead of giving, using fear as motivation.

"It's missing. I believe it's here in your realm. I've come for it."

He clumsily swung his stubby legs off the arm of the throne and faced me, smirking. "You came to get something from my realm?"

"Yep."

"I should string you up naked in the courtyard and have my peasants throw shit at you."

"Oh, stop it. You're still mad about the displays?"

His face heated to red. *Yup, still mad*.

"You stripped every display of my likeness naked for an entire holiday season, and I've never lived it down!"

Here it comes . . .

"And I do *not* have a small penis!"

Luce was having a particularly bad holiday season one year, so I decided to cheer him up with some fun. We snuck in and out of window displays all over the world, stripped each nutcracker out of their clothing and reassembled their *(ahem)* parts—with small doll pinkies. Luce put a long-stemmed flower in each mouth, and we laughed until we cried. It was a real sibling bonding moment.

"I'm sure you don't, Conn." *I'm sure you do.* "How's Amanda?" She was his beautiful, sweet wife who he did not deserve and totally manipulated into marrying him instead of Nicky, the man she should have ended up with.

"On one of her stupid humanitarian missions."

One day, he was gonna get it.

Sack first. Douche later.

"What makes you think it's here?" Smarmy fucker.

"A hunch. I'll look around and then be out of your hair."

He cocked his head. "What if I say no?"

"What if I set your throne on fire with you on it?"

"You know I can go to the council and have you punished."

"You can certainly try, but I am on the council and Nicky's job is important to the children in every realm." My punishment wouldn't be severe anyway.

"Not mine."

Not to *him*. He already tried to ban Nicky from delivering gifts here and lost.

"You have an hour as long as you give an oath that you will never attempt to deface my image again."

I nodded, and he dismissed me. Once the doors were closed behind me, I paused and listened.

"Find that sack and bring it to me so I can give that gift-giving asshole enough trouble and ultimatums to crush him and his entire organization," Conn said. "When I step in and save the day, I'll be the most loved and revered holiday symbol in the world." He laughed maniacally. "Now, bring me my concubines and don't disturb us."

And the race was on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I headed straight to the only shop in any existing realm that made that marzipan. I moved through the main street crawling slowly with colorful and bubble-shaped motorbikes, and dewdrop taxis. The deliciously sweet confections smell grew heavier as I walked, as did the sound of children squealing in delight as they ran by with sweet treats in hand.

If I weren't in a hurry—and in a realm where the king hated me—I'd have stopped to enjoy it. Instead, I smiled up at the hanging sign above the door above me and entered, the bells above chiming and bringing attention my way.

"Ay! Itza our girl! Bea!" he yelled. "Beatrice! Come on 'ow here!"

The beautiful curvy woman with a salt-and-pepper bun perfectly situated on her head came barreling through the kitchen doors, wiping her hands on a green apron with the bedazzled words "Nobody's Got Buns Like Mine."

"Whatdayouneed, Goothna! My buns are rising!"

I'd been walking closer the whole time; my mouth sore from my huge smile. I assumed their accent was unique to the Mouse King's realm. One he couldn't return to until Connery freed him. Something he wouldn't do until Gunther and Beatrice paid their debt to him. A debt he kept changing the amount of.

As soon as she said buns, he waggled his white-and-gray eyebrows, the wrinkles around his eyes deeper with his smile, and pulled her in for a kiss while grabbing her butt. She laughed and swatted him away. Then he pointed in my direction.

"Oh!" She lifted the counter at the end of the long bar and hugged me hard. I bent to get my arms around her since she was, at best, four and a half feet tall. Gunther joined us at his staggering five foot two.

"Comecomecome." She sat me down, hustled to the counter, got a cup of coffee and a plate with buttered buns and Gunther's signature marzipan cookies.

They sat with me. "Eat. Itza new dough recipe." She winked.

I ate and moaned, and she clapped at my response.

"Itznot just a visit, yeah?" Gunther asked.

"Unfortunately, no."

“You don’t owe me for your brother’s friend’s treats. He had no money, so I give him what was left at the end of the day.”

“You saw Baelz?”

“He had a string tied to your brother. Said itza so he didn’t lose him!” He belly laughed. “Love is love, no?”

After a good laugh at that, the three of us sat at the corner table while I explained my visit.

“*Foozameklitleberz*!”

“Huh?”

“Goontha, language!” Beatrice chastised. “But I feel the same.”

Once Gunther stopped his cursing and turned to me. “*Thee* soldiers will be at the bar now. They go each day before they start their shift. *Woon* of them will know something. They talk and gossip like *feckilindoolees*.”

That sounded like an insult, but I wasn’t asking.

Standing, I hugged them hard. “If you hear anything, call me.”

“Don’t be strange!” Gunther called out as I reached the door.

I heard Bea slap his arm. “A *stranger*! Itz ‘don’t be a stranger,’ Goontha!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Christmas music blared as vendors handed out samples of caramel popcorn balls and sweets. No toy stores were allowed, so everyone reveled in the additional sweets and anticipation of Santa coming.

I crossed into the other part of town with bars, pawnshops, and strip clubs. Holiday scents were replaced with the smell of beer, burgers, and perfume. The music of each establishment vied for dominance in the street.

Rock blared from the bar as I entered, walking over crushed peanut shells on the floor. Sports games going on around the globe were broadcast over multiple screens and every pool table was filled with players.

I headed to the bar because bartenders pretty much knew all. Spotting an empty chair in the middle, I walked around the boisterous crowd, and sat. He smiled as he wiped the wood in front of me. “What can I get ya?”

I grinned. “Just some info, please.”

His smile fell. “About?”

I gave the CliffsNotes, letting him know I didn’t want his nutfucker king to find it first.

“Got ten grandbabies who’d be awful disappointed if you don’t find it. The king’s decent soldiers are here now.” He nodded to the pool tables. “They’ll be your best shot at finding out.”

I left him a hefty tip. “For those grandbabies’ college funds.” I winked, and he laughed as he put the thick roll of cash in his apron.

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I slapped money down on the pool table and heads lifted, pausing the game. The tallest and broadest of the soldiers spoke first.

“Can we help you, ma’am?”

“Hope so.”

“How?” He put down his stick and widened his stance, arms crossed over a massive chest. I was going to trust the bartender and go for broke that these guys were good ones.

“A friend of mine misplaced something, and I believe you might be able to help me find it.”

His eyes narrowed. “If you’d like to be more specific.”

So, I was more specific. When I finished, they had all gathered around and I had a beer in my hand.

“I know who was involved in that chase.” Moving closer, he spoke. “One of the wives works over at Mademoiselle Ginger’s. Find her and you’ll find your answer.” He slipped a piece of paper into my hand. “Here. Tell Nick we’re ready if he ever wants to challenge the king.”

CHAPTER NINE

My hips swayed with some extra pop as I headed toward the gold-trimmed white doors of the Ginger Club.

“Here for a job?” asked the burly gingerbread man bouncer at the door.

“Maybe another day.” I smiled.

He returned my smile. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you let Mademoiselle Ginger know that Vahla is here to see her?”

He stood and put his shoulders back. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

With a nod, I said, “It’s fine.”

“Sergio.”

We shook hands. “Nice to meet you.”

As he waited for someone to answer his call, I asked, “What’s today’s date?”

Time moved differently in each realm. It was like time zones throughout the world, but the differences could be days, weeks, months, or even years from realm to realm.

“What realm’s date are you looking for?”

“New York.”

“It’s nine AM December twenty-fourth.”

Shit!

He pressed his earpiece, and a second later, a man dressed in a black suit came out. “He’ll escort you to Mademoiselle.”

“Thanks, Sergio.”

“Anytime, Queen of Hell.”

I loved the pristine white, gold, and red decorating the interior. I spotted at least eight stages with dancers. The variety of gorgeous shapes of each of the Sugar Plum Fairy dancers was impressive. Curvy, skinny, tall, short, plus sized. A stunningly mesmerizing view to behold. The holiday themed scraps of costumes they wore were sparkling and eye-catching. I’d ask if I could get one of those sexy, candy cane striped French maid ensembles to go.

“Vahla!” Ginger’s sultry raspy voice rung out when the elevator doors opened.

“Gigi!”

We hugged and air kissed as shirtless men in gold bowties brought us trays with tea and cookies.

“I hear that nutjackoff is trying to find Nicky’s sack first.” She shook her head and blew on her tea before sipping it. “I hate that fucking guy. I wish Amanda would divorce him.”

“Me, too. But how do you know about the sack?”

“Sweetie, I know everything.” She shrugged. “His steward showed up hours ago and drank too much as usual. Started spewing the story, and that’s how I knew you were in the realm.”

I told Gigi what happened, and she sat quiet and thoughtful as she reclined on the white tufts of her baroque gilded chaise lounge.

“Finally, you and Gabe figured your shit out!” She laughed. “I heard your brother stopped by, but I didn’t see him. Blaine?” she called, and another man came in, sitting at the end of her chaise, lifting her foot to remove her six-inch stiletto to rub it.

“Yes, love?”

“Who mentioned the glow near Mistletoe Canyon?”

“Lonnie. Said she saw it when her husband chased guys away from her and some other wives.”

“Be a dear and take our friend Vahla to her?”

“Anything for you.” He peppered kisses and rasped against her skin that was covered by only a sweetheart bodysuit and thigh-high shimmering fishnets.

I stood with Blaine and hugged Gigi. “Still on for girls’ night?”

She winked. “Wouldn’t miss it. Now, go beat that fucker to the prize.”

I turned back to the lady of the house before leaving. “Can I get a candy cane striped French maid outfit to go?” I pulled money out.

“Hell yes, you can. On the house. Blaine, make sure she gets a new one. And Vahla? Tell Gabriel he’s welcome.”

We laughed as the door shut behind me.

Minutes later, I was leaving with the info I needed and my new outfit.

CHAPTER TEN

I reached Mistletoe Canyon as a heavy snow began to fall, making it almost impossible for me to sense any magic from the bag.

Standing still, I thought of Nicky and his turmoil. Of my gift for Gabriel and the horror of Connery ever becoming the face of Christmas. I delicately stroked the mistletoe that descended from the trees and touched my hand as my thoughts wandered. My nose wrinkled, and the scents of anisette, peppermint, and hot chocolate tickled my senses. Gently releasing the plant, I followed the scents to a small log cabin. Before I could knock on the door, it opened.

“I was hoping you’d be on time.”

“Amanda?”

She looked around outside and waved me in.

The house was warm and inviting. A fire crackled in the stone fireplace, and cookies cooled on a tray in the small kitchen. Her hair was disheveled, she had flour on her nose, and there was a contented look on her face. She leaned in and hugged me.

“Conn told me you were on a humanitarian mission?”

She rolled her eyes. “That was weeks ago. As if he cares what I do with my time. He stays plenty occupied.”

I knew what she meant.

“You’re hiding from him?”

“Just taking much needed time for myself to contemplate what I really want in life.” She walked to the kitchen. “Hot cocoa?”

”Sure.”

With warm mugs in our hands, we sat in two oversized chairs by the fire.

“You knew I’d come?”

She grinned. “Let’s just say when I saw the sled and found your brother passed out in it and no Nicky, I planted enough evidence on him that you’d know where to look.”

I snorted. “And you knew I always clean up his messes.”

“And I’m glad for it because there’s more. I want to show you something.” She pressed on a dark notch in the wood of the back wall. A section popped open, revealing

a familiar red sack, shimmering with white magic, no larger than a standard backpack. Nicky's sack. Small now, but when he left on Christmas Eve, it's magic expanded and the sack grew to fill the entire back of his sled, remaining large until every child received their gifts.

"You found it?"

"Yeah. It's strange that after all these years, I can still feel him, you know? I found this first and then the sled. I couldn't get a message to Nicky, so. . ." She hugged the sack and laughed, but it was the saddest I'd ever heard.

So, she led me here. "Oh, Amanda." She and Nicky were childhood, high school, and college sweethearts. Once Connery and Cheryl entered their friendship circle, it all went to shit.

She wiped her tears and sniffled, putting her hand out. "I found this phone, too."

Taking the phone, I tapped the screen, recognizing it as my brother's. "Idiot," I mumbled, typed his stupid password—sixty-nine, sixty-nine, sixty-nine—and scrolled to his most recent pictures and videos.

"Shit." I watched the videos again, blinking several times.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I gotta go." I'd tell her and Nicky about the videos once shit settled down. Taking the sack, I tried to teleport.

Tried and failed.

"It's full, Vahla, even if it isn't expanded yet. You don't have the juice to move between realms with it."

"Fuck." I dropped it and grabbed my phone. "Nicky? I found your sack. I can't move it. It's in NutFuckFace's realm. What the fuck do I do?"

Amanda tugged my sleeve and picked up the sack.

"Hold on, Nicky." I turned to her.

"I added Nut Dust to the sack. The sack is magic. That magic *is* Nicky. It's a long shot, but I think it'll be enough to allow him to enter without being blocked or detected, even if it's not Christmas Eve yet."

I smiled. "Nicky, I'm dropping my pin. Get here." He started to argue. "Trust me."

Seconds later, a thud resounded on the porch outside, followed by knocking. Amanda looked like a deer in headlights stuck in drying cement, so I walked to the door and opened it.

“Hey, V, where’s my—” Nicky froze as I moved to the side to let him in.

His Adam’s apple bobbed with his swallow. “Amanda,” he whispered.

“Hi, Nicky.”

Didn’t need supernatural abilities to see the love. It poured out of them and filled the room.

His eyes lowered to her chest where his sack laid. “You found it?”

“She kept it safe for you. Knew what Conn would do if he found it.”

The mention of NutPrick made Nicky’s fists clench.

Amanda walked to him then, becoming his sole focus. It was as if I wasn’t even there. She stopped a foot from him.

“Can I get my gift and go?” I was in a rush. Amanda held out the sack for him, and without any effort or a glance away from her, pulled my gift free and handed it to me.

Fuck it. “Before I go.” I opened the phone and pulled up the videos.

In the first one, Cherri was getting busy on a table in the locker room at the fights while Nicky was passed out against a back wall, a bottle of beer spilling at his side. I bet she slipped him a mickey. In the second one, Baelz was recording Luce sneaking into Conn’s castle and peeking through the open door of the throne room. Conn fucking his concubine as she bent over his throne was much more interesting, as per his commentary as he recorded.

Neither reacted at first. Then Amanda exhaled heavily and smiled. Nicky tilted his head, watching her closely.

“Thank you, Vahla. I’m not at all surprised. That’s the proof I needed to finally serve him with those divorce papers burning a hole in my safe.”

“Divorce?” Nicky sounded like gravel blocked his throat.

She smiled triumphantly. “He’ll be up against either the laws of his land or public humiliation. His choice. I’m out either way.”

“Seems that we’re both giving our spouses the same gift this year,” Nicky said.

“Cherri’s in the same position as Conn.”

“Different position.” I coughed. Nicky snorted.

“Here’s the phone for proof.” I gave them the code. “Wipe it when you’re done.”

At the open front door, I turned just as Nicky pulled Amanda close, and I was damn happy I had a part in that.

“Mand,” he whispered reverently. His white magic surrounded them.

“Nicholas.” She sighed.

With Gabe’s gift in hand, I teleported to one of my businesses in New York City and got to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Christmas Eve 11:59 PM

After retying the gold bow for the fifteenth time, I decided to place the gift under the small Christmas tree I picked up earlier. Strands of white lights were the only illumination in the large area of the penthouse as I stood in front of the window in my white fluffy robe, enjoying the sight of my city, blanketed in white not yet disturbed.

A flash of light high in the sky caught my attention. It blazed like a meteor toward me, and I grinned.

I was getting a fly-by.

In slow-motion, the reindeer passed my window. Some smiled, some nodded, and Vixen stuck her tongue out. The grand sleigh paused in front of me.

Amanda sat snug next to Nicky, who had one hand on the reins and the other arm wrapped around her shoulders. Pulling her close, he mouthed *thank you* as Amanda's happy tears fell and she blew me a kiss. Then they were off.

"You have friends everywhere, don't you?"

I turned quickly to see my husband taking off his long camel coat and brushing the snow from his hair. I couldn't help myself. I ran and jumped into his arms.

He laughed and kissed my temple. "Missed me, huh?"

"So much."

"What have you been doing while I was away?"

I smiled into his neck. "Running errands."

I slid down his body as the clock rang in Christmas Day. "Merry Christmas, baby."

I wrapped my hands around the back of his neck. "Merry Christmas, Gabriel."

"Come." He took my hand, walking past the couch and toward a swirl of light golden rays. Grass formed a luscious green patch on the floor as a soft cloud of green and white spun up, revealing something that stole my breath.

"Oh, my soul." I gasped.

In front of me stood a magnificent tree, its huge trunk and plume of leaves on top filling the space. I looked to my husband in awe. His pleased smile and nod encouraged

me forward. I walked as smiles, laughter, and tears abounded. The trunk's bark was dark and perfectly unblemished.

Except for one spot.

My fingers reached for it. Absolute love and devotion rocked my body as I made contact with the carved heart, an arrow's trajectory and an infinity symbol through it scored in a tad deeper than the rest.

G loves V

V loves G

Gabe rested his palm over mine. "In the season of trees decorated with meaning, I could think of nothing better, nothing more meaningful than this one. Our tree from Heaven as a reminder of us. Not just the old us, Vahla. The new us. The forever us. There is no *until* for how long I will love you because there is no end."

I kissed him then. He took my mouth harder and deeper, stealing my air and owning my heart.

"I have something for you, too."

I turned, and he smacked my ass before I ran over to the little tree, taking the black velvet box with the gold bow from under it.

I shook with anticipation as I watched him open it.

"Vahla, these are magnificent."

And they were.

New circular cufflinks cast small beacons of light to the ceiling.

"The circles are mixed with hellfire, brimstone, and the magic particles that lay between the aurora borealis and the light pillars. They're one of a kind."

"How did you get to the magic?"

"I know a guy." I shrugged. "And this is the last of the magic for a very long time, if ever." I placed my hands on his face. "Gabriel, this magic will allow you to see when I'm in Hell. I know we haven't figured out how to get you entrance. We will. But for now, you can always find me." I kissed his lips softly. "Always."

Gabe ran his thumb over the red-and-opalescent encased magic on the links.

"Thank you, Vahla." He choked out. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"How about you show me?"

“You don’t want to open the rest of your gifts first?”

”You first,” I said as I opened my robe to reveal my candy cane striped French maid outfit.

Stacie Santoro lives with her family in New York, in the town where she was born and raised. She is the mom to three amazing boys and wife to a great man (who swept her off her feet with his basketball skills). When she's not running with her family, you can find her enjoying a glass of wine or cup of tea, reading a book, or daydreaming about a million things; like stories to write, putting her toes in the sand or owning every lip gloss created. Or maybe having one created just for her.

And she's a true believer that it's never too late to make your dreams come true.

Books by Stacie Santoro

The Real Devil; Journal One

The Real Devil; Journal Two *(Coming Soon)*

Broken Notes (Book One In The Bar Lies Series)

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