



Fantasies: New Year's Eve

By
Cassandra Gold

A Silk's Vault Electronic Publication, in arrangement with author Cassandra Gold.

Copyright © 2006 by Cassandra Gold

Cover Design and Art by Carmel St. James, © Copyright 2007

Edited by Camille Anthony

Silk's Vault Publishing

www.silksvault.com

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in part or whole, in any form or by any means, without permission from both the author and publisher.

All characters, incidents, situations, institutions, governments and people are fictional and any similarity to characters or persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

July

This is it, my life is perfect, Eric Wright thought as he lay in bed, listening to Bill humming in the shower. He wondered if his lover was up for some company. Just as he was about to get up and find out, the walkie-talkie/cell phone on his bedside table chirped.

Damn!

He grabbed the phone. "Wright."

"Sir, we need you at the front desk right away."

Sometimes being the manager isn't all it's cracked up to be. Guess the shower for two will have to wait until later. Oh well... "I'll be right there."

Dressing quickly, Eric headed downstairs, eager to do what had to be done in order to get back to his interrupted love life. Luckily the problem was easily resolved. Feeling good about having wrapped up a sticky situation, his mind on a naked Bill in a steamy shower, Eric absently answered the ringing phone at the front desk.

"Fantasies Colorado, Eric speaking. How can I help you?"

"I need to leave a message for my son, William Weathers. His wife is in labor and we need him to return home right away."

Everything inside him froze. Ice incased his suddenly pounding heart.

His wife?

"I believe I know where Mr. Weathers is. I'll deliver the message to him personally."

He never recalled how he finished the conversation. He'd been on autopilot as he left the desk.

Bill has a wife—a pregnant wife!

Eric couldn't believe this was happening. The short walk up to his room seemed difficult for his suddenly leaden feet. The rush of his blood roaring in his ears drowned out the sounds around him. For the first time in a long time, he'd actually believed he shared a relationship that was going somewhere. Instead, Bill had been using him to cheat on his pregnant wife the entire time. Every single thing his lover had told him had been a

lie! The numbness he'd felt at first was rapidly turning into betrayal. He grew angrier with each step he took. By the time he reached his room, he was furious.

When he opened his door, Bill was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, shaving, wearing only a towel. A few minutes ago, the sight of the tanned, fit older man had been arousing, but now Eric felt sick. He closed the door behind him and went to stand in the bathroom doorway, his anger momentarily tying his tongue.

"Hey, lover. Where'd you go? I thought you might join me in the shower." Bill stopped shaving for a moment and smiled at Eric teasingly in the mirror.

"I got called down to the desk. While I was there, someone called with a message for you."

"Oh, yeah? Who called?" Bill continued shaving calmly, clearly not noticing Eric's silent fury.

"Your mother says you're needed at home. Apparently your *wife* is in labor."

Bill's face went white, and he dropped the razor into the sink. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"You know, Bill, all this time I thought you loved me. Guess you fooled me, huh?"

Bill turned to face him. "Eric. Listen. You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. You were using me to cheat on your pregnant wife. Nothing you can say will change that. I want you to leave."

"Eric, please! Can't we talk about this? We've had a lot of fun together!"

We've had a lot of fun together? After six months that's all you can say? The urge to punch his now ex-lover's pleading face was strong. "No! Get dressed and get out. I don't ever want to see you again!" Eric went back into the bedroom, grabbed the other man's clothing, and threw everything at him. Unwilling to stick around for anything else Bill might say, he headed out to the balcony.

This is what I get for trusting someone, he thought as he leaned on the railing. *Why do I keep making the same mistake over and over again?*

December 27

Eric hated the holiday season. Lonely Thanksgiving dinners in front of the television sucked. Christmases with no tree, no presents, and no family weren't any better. New Year's Eve, though – that holiday was the worst. Nothing made Eric feel more alone (and lonely) than the frantic parties with their countdowns and couples kissing joyfully while “Auld Lang Syne” played in the background. Each New Year's Eve only reminded him another year had passed just like the one before with no change in the foreseeable future. He tried to tell himself he should be happy to be alive and healthy, with a job he loved and excelled at, but on New Year's night especially he watched all the happy couples around him and wondered what made him so unworthy. What default lurked within that kept people from loving him?

Pensively, Eric recalled the prophetic words of his last foster mother. As they'd waited for a social worker to come and take him to the boys' home, she'd snarled, “No one will ever want you.”

The ten-year-old Eric had felt those words like a knife to the chest. He'd actually liked living with Janice most of the time, despite her quick temper. She'd never told him why she was sending him away, or what could possibly be so wrong with him as to make no one want him. He'd spent the next 18 years trying to prove her wrong.

Though he'd been a model child at the Home, no one had wanted to adopt an older boy. He'd studied hard in high school, graduated early, and gotten a college scholarship where he'd earned a dual degree in hotel management and business. At 26, he'd gotten his first job in the industry, snagging an unbelievable job as assistant manager for the prestigious Fantasies Resort chain's Colorado ski resort.

Eric loved everything about his job, from dealing with guests and employees to his small, luxurious suite in the resort. The only negative aspect of his near-meteoric rise in his chosen profession was the little time left for pursuing a personal life.

It was that lack of experience, that dearth of a love life that had led to one of the biggest mistakes of his life. Bill, a handsome forty-year-old businessman and a frequent guest of the resort, had exploded onto the scene and captured his starved heart. . Looking

back, Eric realized he'd been stupid not to question anything, and to ignore his own hard-earned lessons.

He'd broken his rule of never getting involved with anyone at work. He should have remembered how his first relationship, with a classmate in college, had turned out. Life at the boys' home had taught him a great many (mostly inaccurate) things about sex. The whole thing had sounded rather disgusting to him when the other boys talked about sex and girls. He hadn't figured out the reason for his unease about the subject until he went away to school and started noticing a guy who was in many of the same classes he was. One night at a party, Brad had kissed him and things developed quickly from there. Afterwards, they'd been nearly inseparable for about two months, until Brad had abruptly dumped him, not even giving him a reason.

Hurting, confused and angry, he'd dealt with the difficult awkwardness of running into the guy constantly on campus and in most of his business classes. Handling that situation for several months had taught him to be careful who he dated. Or at least, it should have...

Two months after the breakup, Bill had returned to the resort. While there, he'd had to be ejected from one of the restaurants for sexually harassing an 18-year-old waiter. Eric had realized then he would never be free of Bill. As manager, he'd possibly have to intervene in more situations of the jerk hitting on straight, barely legal waiters. He'd promptly asked for a transfer.

So it was that Eric now stood behind the front desk at Fantasies Hawaii, overseeing the work of a new desk clerk and contemplating the return of another hated New Year's. For a while, he had thought Bill and he might be together for more than the holidays. Eric had actually been thinking about making a future with the creep, a fact which depressed him. At least he had stuck to his guns when Bill wanted to have sex without a condom. God knows what he could have picked up otherwise!

The chirp of his walkie-talkie phone pulled Eric away from his little trip down memory lane. The hugely important penthouse guest had arrived. The famous crime-thriller author D. M. McAllister would be staying at the resort under the name Dexter Mitchell. Only Eric and his boss, the senior manager, knew Mr. Mitchell and the author was one and the same person. Eric had been ordered to ensure Mr. Mitchell enjoyed his

stay and was not disturbed. As the doors opened and their newest guest approached the desk, he pasted on his most professional smile.

McAllister stood several inches taller than Eric's own 5-foot-ten height, and was a lot more muscular than Eric would have expected a writer to be.

The author removed his sunglasses as he reached the desk, and Eric stopped, caught for a moment by the beautiful eyes those sunglasses had hidden. They were a deep, clear blue like the warm ocean water outside. They went well with his chocolate brown hair, square jaw, and slightly crooked nose. The photos in the back of his books clearly didn't do him justice. He was without a doubt the most attractive man Eric had ever seen.

"I'm Dexter Mitchell. Is this where I check in?"

His professional smile back in place, Eric nodded and began the check-in process. As he'd been instructed by his boss, when he finished he escorted Mr. Mitchell to his room. After pointing out the amenities, he handed Mr. Mitchell the key. "If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to call the front desk," Eric finished his spiel. "I hope you enjoy your stay with us, Mr. Mitchell."

"Please, call me Dex. 'Mr. Mitchell' makes me feel old." As he spoke, Dex grinned for the first time and Eric was momentarily stunned by the warmth of his smile. He shook off his paralysis quickly, however, and went to the door.

"Have a nice evening, Dex."

Later, Eric sat on the terrace of a local bar drinking Scotch and staring at the ocean. He reflected on his earlier attraction to Dex. Obviously he had learned nothing from the Bill debacle. Here he sat, wasting time daydreaming about a guest when he should be thinking about something which *wouldn't* end with him needing another transfer. It was unlikely the man was gay, and even if he was, the chance of him being truly interested in a boring hotel manager was slim to none. Eric had already been someone's weekend diversion and didn't plan to fill that slot again. The experience had hurt too much.

Even as he pondered his gloomy thoughts, a shadow appeared beside his table. "Is this seat taken?" a familiar, sexy voice asked.

Damn it! Better tell him I'm meeting someone.

"No." *What the hell did I say no for?*

Dex sat down across from Eric. “Sorry if I’m bothering you. I know your boss told you to keep me happy, but if you want me to get lost, just say so. I won’t hold it against the resort.”

Eric couldn’t help smiling. “No, you can sit here. I was drinking alone anyway. I’ve been told that’s a bad thing.”

Dex laughed. “It is indeed,” he agreed. “You’re lucky I came along when I did.”

“Maybe so. What brings you out tonight?”

“I felt so tired when I got here I slept for hours. Then I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep, so I decided to walk around a bit. I’d started on the way back to the resort when I saw you. I thought I’d come over and say hi.”

“Well, you picked a good night for a walk. It’s really beautiful tonight.” Eric looked up. The stars glimmered in the cloudless sky. The moon wasn’t full, but it shone brightly. Its rays bathed the waves lapping peacefully at the shore. At first he’d missed Colorado, but on nights like this Eric thought Hawaii must be the best place on Earth to live.

“Yes it is. And so peaceful. Not at all like New York.”

He could feel the other man’s eyes on him, and Eric felt his face getting warm under the scrutiny. He scrambled for something to say. “I’ve never been to New York. What’s the city like?”

“Busy. Crowded. Everything’s so fast-paced, and there’s so much pressure all the time...” Dex trailed off. “Well, I guess the last part doesn’t apply to the whole city. In some ways it’s a great city, with so much life and energy. I’m a small-town boy at heart though. Guess I just got burned out on all the excitement.” He smiled ruefully and shrugged.

“You came to the right place to recharge.”

“I hope so.” They sat in silence for a moment, and then Dex stood. “Well, I’m glad I was able to save you from drinking alone. I better get back to my room and try to get some sleep. I don’t want to be up all night and sleeping all day.” He turned and walked away. Eric watched him walking, trying all the while not to look at his tight ass.

December 28

Eric awoke from a dead sleep to the chirping of his phone. He blinked at the clock and discovered it wasn't even six am. He'd had trouble getting to sleep last night, so he had only gotten a few hours. He normally began work at seven, so there must be some sort of situation. When he answered, a frantic kitchen worker informed him the delivery they'd just received was missing most of the items needed for the New Year's Eve party in three days. She told him the chef, always temperamental at best, had become nearly hysterical. Eric threw on his formal suit/uniform, figuring sheer chaos required his most professional attire, and rushed over to work.

On the short walk there, he thought about his and Dex's conversation last night. The author had sounded really tired. Hopefully he would be able to relax here. As he reached the resort's main building, Eric reminded himself the only reason he concerned himself with Dex's tiredness was because part of his job was to make sure the guests relaxed and had a good time. He didn't have any more time to worry about Dex, however, because the second he walked in the door one of the employees rushed over to him.

The rest of the day turned out to be difficult. He had to soothe the chef, call the supplier several times, and skip lunch in order to get everything back on track for the party. While he dealt with the chef's problems, a computer issue came up at the front desk for him to resolve. He was supposed to be off duty at three, but his scheduled time came and went with no break in the action. He felt hungry, tired, and frustrated by the time he finally got the most important issues cleared up.

Eric thought the day couldn't possibly get any more trying, but it turned out it could. He was preparing to leave when the desk clerk informed him he had a phone call at the front desk. "It's Mr. Turner, sir." The clerk thrust the phone at Eric as if the handset were a poisonous snake. At any other time, the desk clerk's terror about a phone call from the senior manager would have been amusing. Right now, Eric was just annoyed.

Mr. Turner wanted to ask if their resident author was enjoying his stay.

"I'm not sure, sir. I haven't seen him today." Eric paced in front of the desk impatiently.

“Well go find out, Wright! I’m counting on you to make sure Mr. Mitchell has nothing but good things to say about Fantasies resorts!”

Just what I need to cap off a crappy day, he thought tiredly. His watch said six o’clock. He’d missed both breakfast and lunch. Jeez! No wonder I’m so hungry. And now I have to go babysit the hot writer for a while when what I really want to do is go home and eat a freakin’ sandwich!

Resigned, he put aside his longing for food and some casual clothes and headed upstairs to the penthouse. On his way, he stopped by the kitchen and picked up the room service order the desk clerk informed him Dex had placed.

A few minutes later, Eric reached the penthouse suite. He shifted the tray and bucket with chilling wine to his right hand and knocked at the door, calling “Room service” as he did so.

“Just a minute,” he heard, and then Dex opened the door. Once again Eric found himself momentarily speechless. The author wore an old, faded t-shirt which clung to his muscled chest like a second skin and a pair of equally worn jeans. His feet were bare, his hair wet and tousled as if he had just come from the shower. “Wow. I must really rate to have the manager bringing my room service.” The other man leaned against the doorframe casually as Eric gaped.

Stop staring, idiot! Eric told himself. He forced a professional smile to his lips. “Of course we want to ensure your stay with us is perfect,” he said in his “perfect manager” voice.

Dex looked almost disappointed for a moment, but then he motioned for Eric to come in. “So far this place is great. You’ll get no complaints from me. Could you put the tray on the balcony for me?” He disappeared into the suite’s bathroom.

Eric took the covered tray outside and set it on the balcony table, along with the bottle of wine. He arranged the napkin and silverware carefully and poured a glass of wine. Then he leaned over the banister and gazed out at the ocean for a moment, thinking what a great view the penthouse had. Certainly a better view than the on-site employee housing had. He reentered the suite and noticed laptop, papers, notebooks and writing utensils covering the desk. The thought occurred to him the author must be working on his next novel.

Dex emerged from the bathroom, and Eric took the opportunity to make his escape. “I put everything outside for you. Is there anything else I can do for you?” His professional smile remained firmly in place, despite the strain he felt. *For the love of God, please say no.*

For a moment Dex’s eyes glittered with an unnamed emotion, but then his expression changed to one of concern. “You look like hell,” he stated bluntly.

Eric was taken aback. He could feel his professional smile slipping. *What the fuck am I supposed to say to that?*

“What time did you start working this morning?”

“Before six.” *Why are we having this conversation?*

“Did you eat anything today?”

Eric rolled his eyes, suddenly feeling angry, mostly at himself for noticing the man, but also at Dex for being so nosy and hot and such a damned important guest. “No, Mom, I didn’t. When would I have had time? Between dealing with hysterical chefs, fixing computer glitches, and moonlighting as a delivery boy?”

Dex’s eyebrows went up, and Eric realized he had just snapped at the most important guest ever to come to Fantasies during his tenure as manager. He took a deep breath. “I’m very sorry, Mr. Mitchell, I shouldn’t have spoken to you so rudely.”

He had almost managed to make his getaway at last when the other man spoke. “Maybe you should have. I was being really nosy. Comes from being a writer, I guess. You don’t have to treat me like I’m some spoiled prince you have to placate, Eric.”

The sound of his name on the other man’s lips drove out what was left of Eric’s anger. He didn’t know what to say, so he tried for a joke. “According to my boss, you are.”

Instead of being offended, Dex laughed. He sobered and met Eric’s eyes. “I don’t want to be the famous guy everyone sucks up to while I’m here. I came here to find a place where, for a little while, I could just be Dex.”

Eric could understand his wish. “Okay, Dex.” He smiled, a real one this time. “You’re a regular guy. Just don’t be mad when I’m not at your beck and call all the time.”

The author grinned. “Damn it. I knew there was a downside to this regular guy thing.” He paused for a moment, looking uncertain. “Look, Eric, the reason I asked you about eating earlier was because...well, you really do look tired, and I wondered if you’d like to eat some dinner with me. I won’t be able to eat everything I ordered, and I’ve been in here writing all day. I could use a little company...”

Eric hesitated for a long moment, thinking of Bill and how their relationship had turned out. *Maybe he’s just lonely. I’m probably the only person he knows here. This is such a bad idea—I’d better say no.* “All right,” he heard himself saying. *What is with my stupid mouth saying whatever it wants to?*

Dex’s relieved smile made him feel better as they went out to the balcony. Eric started to serve the meal, but the other man stopped him with a look and began to serve them himself. In no time Eric found himself looking at a plate loaded with seafood pasta, Caesar salad, and crusty bread. Dex also handed him the glass of white wine Eric had poured earlier.

“There isn’t enough silverware, and you need a glass.” Eric started to get up.

“Stay there,” Dex ordered. “You’ve had a long day. Take off your jacket. Get comfortable. You just eat. I’ll call down and get more.”

Since he was starving, Eric obeyed. He took off his jacket and hung it over the back of his chair. Then he loosened his tie and started eating while Dex went inside. When the other man returned a few minutes later, Eric had already eaten half of his meal.

“Wow, you really were hungry!” Dex sat down, dished up his own plate, and began to eat. Neither of them spoke for a while. They were both too busy chewing. Dex made sure Eric didn’t have to do anything. He refilled their wine glasses, and when they finished he cleared away the dishes.

At last Dex broke the silence. “Want some dessert? I ordered the Chocolate Fantasy Cake.”

“I was going to say no, but only an idiot would pass up Chocolate Fantasy Cake.” The cake was a special creation just for their Fantasies location, and the chef guarded the recipe carefully. Eric rarely got to indulge in a piece. The cake generally vanished long before employees got to the leftovers. Even though he knew he should be getting the hell

out of the penthouse while he could, the temptation of the decadent dessert proved too much to resist.

Dex cut the huge piece of cake in half and placed the larger half on a plate in front of Eric. Eric all but snatched up his utensil and forked a bite into his mouth. He nearly moaned at the rich chocolate flavor. He closed his eyes for a moment to savor the taste. When Eric opened his eyes, the man was staring at him with a strange expression on his face. Self-conscious now, Eric put his fork down. "Try it. You'll see."

Dex took a bite of the cake. "God, that's good," he said when he finished chewing. "I'd gain 500 pounds if I stayed here too long."

"Told you so." Eric smirked. "I said only an idiot would pass it up. Luckily for my waistline, there's almost never any left for us working stiffs." He set to finishing his dessert.

They ate in silence. Eric stood and motioned toward the table. "Thanks for dinner. I'll take these back down to the kitchen."

"Let someone else do the work, Eric. You're off the clock. And thanks for joining me." Dex's deep blue eyes met Eric's own brown ones, and Eric could have sworn something passed between them. Suddenly he just had to get out of there. With a quick smile, he tossed a good-night over his shoulder and left.

December 29

The next morning, Eric realized he'd left his favorite jacket on Dex's balcony. No way in hell was he going up there to get the stupid thing, however. He would settle for his more casual uniform of khakis and a polo shirt with the Fantasies logo. Once again he'd slept badly. A hot shower refreshed him somewhat, as did a large cup of coffee he hadn't had time for the day before. Today was December 29th, just two days before the New Year's Eve bash. He had another busy day coming, hopefully too full of party preparations and other duties for him to think about Dex. He'd spent half of last night thinking about the look in the other man's eyes after dinner, and he didn't want to do it again today.

As Eric walked to the resort from the employee housing, he told himself to focus. *Remember Bill? For all I know, Dex is married or in a relationship. Or maybe I'm just overtired and seeing what I want to see. It's got to be the holidays messing with my head.*

Just as he had predicted, Eric had plenty of work to do from the moment he walked in the door. It was a Friday, so there were many departures and arrivals to deal with. He also had to supervise the decorating of the ballroom, which needed to be started today. The decorating meant extra workers to deal with, as well as the diva designer they'd hired.

She kept Eric very busy with her orders and sometimes impossible demands. Finally he had to tell her some of her ideas wouldn't work, which led to him having to coax her out of a pouting session and back to work. On top of all those annoyances, the new desk clerk called several times with questions, and there were issues with housekeeping and the huge alcohol delivery for the party.

Luckily, the issues were time-consuming but easily resolved. Eric actually remembered to eat lunch, even if he only had time for a sandwich. He was amazed when he got everything taken care of and his watch said four-thirty. *Damn, I'm good!* Technically, he was supposed to be on duty until three and on-call until seven. During the hectic holidays, he often worked a lot later than his scheduled time. He felt a great sense of accomplishment over everything he'd finished today. His mood improved even more

when as he left the resort and headed to his room, one of the guests told him what a great time she and her husband were having at the resort.

Eric's pleasure over his productive day and the compliment he'd received lasted all the way until he got to his room, ate another sandwich, changed, and went to the beach. When he sat down on the beach and looked around him, his happiness slowly drained away. Down the beach, the honeymooning couple who had arrived two days ago, right after their Christmas wedding, frolicked on the beach together. Even from a distance their love was obvious.

Why can't I find someone? He wondered as he watched them laughing. *And why the hell am I sitting here feeling this way, in the most beautiful place in the world, after a great day?* Lost in his thoughts, Eric didn't notice an approaching figure until a shadow fell over him. He jumped in surprise and looked up.

"Sorry I startled you." Dex stood over him, holding a pair of sandals in one hand and Eric's suit jacket in the other. "I wanted to return this."

Eric took the jacket from his outstretched hand. *You could have just returned it to the front desk*, he thought uncharitably. "Thanks." He looked away, refusing to meet the other man's gaze.

Instead of being put off by Eric's less-than-sincere gratitude, the other man sat down on the sand beside him. "Sun'll be setting soon."

"In less than half an hour. I like to come and watch it whenever I get the chance. The Hawaiian sunsets never get old."

"You know, I rarely catch a sunset." Dex looked at the ocean, a faraway look on his face. "I've got this great apartment in New York with an incredible view, but I take it for granted. When I got the place I thought I would appreciate the view, but somehow I never did."

"I never used to watch sunsets either, when I lived in Colorado," Eric found himself saying. *My stupid mouth has a mind of its own around this guy!*

"I was surrounded by the most amazing mountains, and my only concerns were about my job, and...other stuff. I didn't appreciate the beauty around me and now it's gone. I won't ignore things like sunsets again."

Dex wiggled his bare toes in the sand for a long moment before answering. “You know, you’re right. I’ve been doing the same thing, but I’m not happy. Since I’ve been here, I’ve made time for things like sunrises and sunsets, and just thinking. And right now, I’m thinking...I feel happier.”

Neither of them spoke for a long time. They just watched the sky as the sun inched closer to the horizon. Boats and late surfers dotted the ocean, which was being painted in gold, orange, and red by the sun. The beautiful sight lifted Eric’s spirits a bit. He drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. He almost forgot Dex was sitting right next to him...at least, until he spoke again.

“It sounds like you loved Colorado. Why did you leave?”

Eric stiffened. “That’s a long story.”

“Sorry, I’m being nosy again. Just tell me to mind my own business. I won’t get pissed off or anything. Actually, I’m used to it.” Dex smiled wryly.

“It’s all right. I made the whole thing sound really mysterious, but it wasn’t. I just had a situation I couldn’t deal with, so I asked for a transfer. They needed a new assistant manager out here, so everything worked out fine. I actually like being here better.” Eric looked away again.

“I like it better with you here, too.”

Eric looked back at the other man in surprise, only to find those blue eyes trained on his face. This time, he couldn’t mistake what was happening. Dex was definitely trying to tell him something. He stared back, trapped.

Dex turned away abruptly. “Sun’s setting.”

Eric looked toward the water, awed as always by the sheer beauty of the Hawaiian sunset. “I wish I could paint, so I could capture this and keep it forever.”

“I wish I could paint too, so I could capture you.”

Did he just say what I think he did? Eric stopped, and then slowly turned toward the other man. “W-what are you saying?” he stammered.

“This.” Dex leaned forward and touched his lips to Eric’s. At first Eric just sat there like a statue, but when the other man’s tongue stroked along the seam of his lips he let Dex deepen the kiss. The feeling of a tongue stroking against his was so exquisite, he felt himself hardening almost instantly. Dex slipped his hand into Eric’s hair to hold him

there. Eric reciprocated by slipping his arms around the taller man's neck and twining his hands into his dark hair. The strands felt soft and sleek. He heard Dex moan, and he whimpered in response. Then awareness hit him like a bucket of cold water. *Shit! He lives in New York. I'm not going to be his vacation fuck-buddy. Been there, done that.* Breathing hard, he jerked away from Dex. He scrambled up as quickly as he could and ran toward home.

Only when he was safely inside did he notice he had forgotten his jacket again.

December 30

December thirtieth turned out to be the worst morning Eric had experienced in a long time. He awoke from his fitful sleep at six forty-five and nearly had a heart attack when he saw the time. His alarm hadn't gone off. *Probably forgot to set the damned thing last night.*

He sat up, clutching his pounding head. He'd spent several hours last night drinking and watching stupid old B-movies on television. Obviously he'd overindulged in both alcohol and crappy movies, because he felt absolutely horrid this morning.

Eric threw on his only clean suit, trying not to think about where and how he'd left his other suit jacket, and then literally ran out the door. He reached the resort just after seven, and the day went downhill from there.

The day's problems made the past two days seem uneventful. The power went out for no apparent reason, and was quickly restored only to go out again later. Both times the entire computer system crashed and had to be rebooted. Several guest issues arose from the power failures, so Eric had to take time out to soothe several upset and worried people. The power failure also caused the chef to completely freak out. Settling him down took the better part of an hour.

Throughout the entire ordeal, Eric's headache continued unabated. He felt vaguely nauseous every time he thought of what had happened on the beach last night. First he'd been stupid enough to respond to Dex's kiss, and then he'd compounded the mistake by running away like a little kid. At lunch time, he barely managed to choke down half his sandwich before the seemingly never ending drama began again.

Around three pm, Eric caught sight of the very man he he was avoiding. Dex was coming in from outside. Luckily he was in the midst of major preparations for the party tomorrow night, so he was able to pretend he didn't see Dex. Childish, but effective.

The other man practically walked right by him, but Eric focused on his conversation with the diva designer and the florists. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he spoke, hating New Year's more than ever now. The holiday was becoming a pain in the ass.

Finally, at seven-thirty, Eric managed to wrap up all of the pre-party stuff. Everything else would be done tomorrow, before the party. His work schedule had been

changed to evening hours for tomorrow. Mr. Turner had told Eric he was the only manager who could be trusted to handle the party. He enjoyed the praise, but now he would have to work at the hated New Year's Eve party. *Ugh*. At least he didn't have to report in to work until 5:00 tomorrow. Someone else would have to handle most of the food issues and deal with the chef all day.

Eric had pulled off his jacket and started loosening his tie when his phone chirped. "Fuck!" he hissed under his breath as he answered. "Wright here."

"Eric, I know you're off but I need you to do something for me."

Shit, Mr. Turner! "What do you need, sir?"

"An important fax just came in for Mr. Mitchell from his agent. I need you to drop the papers off at his suite before you leave."

No, no, no, no, no! "If the fax is so important, won't he want to come and get it himself?"

"No, he's busy writing. You're the only one who knows who he really is other than me, and I'm tied up right now."

Eric sighed, resigned. "All right, sir. I'll take the fax to him."

"Good man, Eric! I knew I could count on you." Mr. Turner hung up before he could respond. Eric replaced his phone at his hip and trudged into the office to pick up the fax. He slipped the papers into a manila envelope without even glancing at them and took the envelope upstairs. Maybe he'd be able to just slip it under the door and leave.

Eric had just knelt down to put his plan into action when the door abruptly opened. He looked up, surprised.

"Your boss called and told me you were on your way up," Dex explained.

"Oh." Eric felt stupid. He remembered he was crouching on the floor and stood up awkwardly.

"I thought you looked bad the other night, but you look horrible tonight. Are you okay?" Dex sounded concerned.

Thanks a lot! "I'm fine. It's been a long day. I really need to go." Eric kept his gaze firmly on his feet. "Here." He thrust the envelope at the author.

After a few seconds, Dex reached out and took the fax from him. “Thanks, Eric. Wait just a second and I’ll go get your jacket.” Without waiting for an answer, the other man went back into the suite.

Eric stood there, feeling tired, achy, and so lonely. Dex returned quickly with the jacket, and Eric reached out to take the garment, still not looking up. Instead of letting go when Eric had it, though, the other man held onto the jacket. Eric looked up, confused.

“I’m really sorry about last night, Eric. I guess I read you wrong. I was feeling lonely, and I thought we had a connection. It was just so...That’s no excuse, I know...I’m sorry.” He abruptly let go of the jacket and turned away.

Dex sounded so sad and lonely, so much like Eric felt. *A connection. I felt it too. Maybe he’s not just looking for a fuck-buddy. And I don’t want to be alone tonight.* Decided now, Eric reached out to touch the other man’s shoulder. “You didn’t read me wrong, Dex. I just kind of freaked out. It wasn’t you.”

He turned back toward Eric. “It’s not me, it’s you? Are you letting me down easy?”

“No. I’m not letting you down at all.”

“Does this mean—“

“I felt the connection too. I’d like to see where it leads. Are you going to invite me in?”

Dex’s smile could have lit up the whole resort. “Fuck yes, I am!” He held the door open wide and motioned for Eric to precede him. Laughing, Eric went in.

“I hope you have something to eat in there.” Eric tossed his two jackets onto the armchair. “I am *starving*. All I’ve eaten today is half a sandwich. Let me tell you, this holiday crap is about to kill me.”

“I saw you earlier talking to a bunch of people. You looked really stressed out.” Dex stuck his head inside the fridge and rummaged around.

“I have a couple of confessions to make. I actually saw you earlier. I just pretended I didn’t because I was afraid to face you. And one reason I feel bad today is I drank too much last night after I got home. Then I overslept this morning and the whole day sucked.”

“I thought you might have seen me earlier.” Dex finally found what he was looking for in the fridge and stood. “I have a confession too. I made my agent fax me something I

didn't really need, then I called your boss. I knew he'd make you bring it up. I really shouldn't have made you come up here, but I wanted to apologize and give you your jacket back."

"It's okay. If you wouldn't have, I would never have come up here." *And I'm glad I did.*

"Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

Eric sat on the sofa, and the other man brought him a bottle of water and a covered plate. "All I have to eat is some fruit and cheese. I hope that's okay."

"It's great. At this point I'd eat anything." Eric uncovered the plate and began to eat. Dex just sat back and watched him, smiling the whole time. Silence reigned as Eric ate, but it was a comfortable silence. He didn't feel pressured to make conversation at all, a lucky thing since he was too hungry to waste time talking.

When Eric finally finished, he put the plate on the coffee table and leaned back into the sofa's soft cushions. "I feel a lot better now."

"Hope so. I didn't think you were ever going to stop eating," Dex joked.

"What are you trying to say? I'm a pig? Well, I'll let the insult slide because I'm too tired to do anything about your smart mouth right now."

"Too tired, huh? Well, if you're too tired, I guess you'd better go to sleep..."

"I guess I forgot to mention I don't have to go in until five tomorrow evening. Besides, I'm a little too keyed up to sleep. I need to relax first." Eric watched Dex's face. He knew the moment the other man understood what he meant, because those blue eyes flared with heat.

"I can think of a few things we could do to relax you." Dex smiled slyly.

"Hmmm...Why don't you come over here and show me."

Dex's eyes grew even hotter, and he got up slowly. He walked the short distance across the room to the sofa, and sat down beside Eric. "Turn around."

Eric turned around. He groaned aloud as the taller man leaned over and began to massage his shoulders and neck. "God, that feels good." He could feel the tension melting out of him. A new kind of tension began to build, though, as Dex reached around him and began to unbutton his shirt. He helped by yanking his already loosened tie over his head and tossing the bit of silk toward the chair holding his jackets.

When Dex had the shirt completely unbuttoned, Eric yanked it free of his pants. The author slipped the shirt off Eric's shoulders and tossed it too. Eric still wore a white tank undershirt, but the thin cotton wasn't much of a barrier against the other man's insistent hands.

When Dex slid his hands up into the undershirt and teased Eric's nipples, Eric couldn't take the teasing anymore. He turned in Dex's arms and pulled his head down for a kiss. He seemed startled at first, but he quickly took control of the kiss, slipping his tongue into Eric's mouth and deepening the kiss. Eric responded eagerly. This time, he wasn't going to run away.

December 30-Later

“Let’s go to the bedroom,” Eric mumbled against Dex’s lips. They’d been making out on the couch like teenagers for more than half an hour. Eric decided the time had come to take it to the next level.

“Are you sure?” Dex leaned back until he could meet Eric’s eyes.

“Is the sky blue?”

“Actually, it’s dark right now, but I’m going to take your answer as a yes.” Dex grabbed Eric’s hand and pulled him up off the sofa.

Eric laughed at the other man’s eagerness as Dex tugged him into the bedroom. He stopped laughing moments later, though, when Dex pressed him up against the bedroom door and kissed him forcefully. He was surprised at how turned on he became at the little show of dominance. The taller man held Eric still as he kissed his way along Eric’s jaw and down his neck. Moaning, Eric arched his neck to give Dex better access.

“You are so sexy,” he panted against Eric’s neck.

In response, Eric rubbed himself against Dex, rejoicing in the feeling of a warm body pressed against his own. Months had passed since the last time with Bill. He’d been celibate ever since, and now his abstinence actually seemed like a good thing. The feeling was sweeter after the long wait. He felt suction on his neck and dimly wondered if he would have a mark the next day, but the thought fled as a large hand cupped his already painfully hard cock.

“God, that’s...Don’t stop!” He closed his eyes, thrusting against Dex’s hand helplessly.

“Sorry. I don’t want you coming just yet.”

Eric whimpered as the hand moved up to his face. Before he had time to be too disappointed, Dex kissed him again. Suddenly impatient, Eric pulled away. He grabbed the hem of the taller man’s shirt and yanked it off. Next, he attacked the button on Dex’s jeans. He had to fumble for a moment before the button popped open. He tugged the zipper down.

Dex moved away from Eric's hands. "In a hurry?" He laughed and danced further away when Eric tried to reach for him again. "You'll just have to wait. I want to take care of you first."

The author held out a hand and Eric took it, allowing himself to be led to the bed. He squeaked in surprised when the other man pushed him down onto the bed. "Take off your pants and scoot up to the headboard."

Eric quickly obeyed and waited to see what would happen next. He didn't have to wait long.

"Lay on your back." When he did, Dex reached out and placed his hands around two of the spindles of the headboard. "Now hold on to these. Don't let go."

Why is he asking me to do this? Puzzled now, he gripped the bars tightly. Moments later, a warm, wet mouth kissed his thigh.

Eric nearly arched off the bed. "Shit!"

He heard a chuckle, and then Dex's mouth closed over him. He'd never felt anything like the warm, wet joy of Dex's lips and tongue on his cock. *Heaven!* He reached a hand down, wanting to do...something. The dark head which had been bent over him tilted up, waiting.

For a moment Eric stared, confused, but he remembered he was supposed to be holding on to the bars. He put his hand back on the bars.

"Good boy."

Eric started to make a smart remark, but found he couldn't speak when the other man's bossy mouth closed over his cock again. Unable to help himself, Eric started thrusting up to meet his lover's mouth. Dex swirled his tongue around Eric's erection, adding the occasional hint of teeth. When he brought one hand up to encircle the base, Eric could feel an orgasm building. He tried to pull away. "Dex, wait, I'm going to come."

Eric's words only made the other man suck harder and faster. With a wordless cry, Eric arched and came. Dex didn't release him, though—he kept sucking until Eric was completely spent. Afterward, he crawled up to lay beside Eric.

A few minutes passed before Eric could speak again. "Wow. No one's ever done that for me before."

“What? Given you a blow job?” Dex looked astonished.

“No. I mean...” Eric blushed. “Let me come in their mouth.”

“I’m glad I could be the first, then.”

They were silent for a while more. “Shit! I’m sorry, Dex, I forgot about you!” Eric sat up.

“It’s okay, Eric. I enjoyed what we did, too. You might not have thought I was getting anything out of what just happened, but it was damned hot watching you come.”

Eric blushed again. Compliments always flustered him unless they were about work. “You didn’t come, though.”

Dex gave him a predatory smile. “We can take care of that. Please tell me you bottom.” When Eric nodded, the smile widened. “Good, because I definitely enjoy topping.” After rummaging in the drawer of the nightstand, the other man triumphantly held up a bottle of lube and a condom.

Eric reached out and took the condom from him. “I’ll help you with this.” Instead of just opening up the condom and rolling it on, however, Eric decided to tease a bit first. He pushed the larger man down and slid his hands over the smooth, hard muscles of his chest. Seeing Dex’s surprise at being pushed, he laughed and leaned down to lick a small, brown nipple. The little bud hardened instantly under Eric’s teasing tongue. He repeated the same treatment on the other nipple, and then blew softly on it. At the same time, he slid a hand down and grasped Dex’s erection. He stroked it lightly.

“Damn, Eric. If you keep that up, this’ll be over really fast.”

“Sorry,” Eric lied.

Dex rolled his eyes, not at all fooled. He took the condom from Eric, opened the foil packet, and put it on. “Lay down on your back.”

“On my back? I’ve never been on my back before.”

“I want to see your face while I make love to you.”

Eric bit his lip, feeling a sudden sting behind his eyes. No one had ever called it “making love” before. Bill had always called the sex between them “fucking,” probably because to Bill, that’s all the act had been.

“You okay?” Dex touched Eric’s cheek tenderly, his blue eyes concerned.

“I’m great,” Eric said, meaning it. He met his lover’s eyes and smiled, and then he wriggled into position on the bed.

Dex’s touch was gentle as he slicked his long fingers with lube and slid one into Eric. Eric’s eyes fluttered closed as the other man prepared him, first with one finger, then two, and then three. He felt the familiar stretch, as well as the indescribable feeling of bliss when Dex hit just the right spot. His cock swelled again as those talented fingers hit the spot over and over.

“Dex, please! Fuck me!” Eric squirmed desperately, unable to wait any longer.

Obviously Dex felt equally eager, because he didn’t argue or tease. He quickly donned the condom and slicked himself. He looked into Eric’s eyes and slowly pushed into Eric’s hole. Dex was bigger than he expected, so a moment went by before Eric could relax enough to accommodate him. Dex thrust carefully past the ring of muscle and waited to make sure Eric was okay. Eric relished the feeling of fullness, of connection, for a moment before he could no longer hold still. He needed more. He wanted Dex to hit the same spot he’d hit earlier with his fingers, only with his cock.

“Still impatient.” Dex laughed and began to thrust. At first, his movements were carefully slow and gentle, but when Eric arched up to meet him, he began to thrust harder and faster. Eric knew Dex’s orgasm was close when the rhythm faltered. He was surprised when a hand wrapped around his cock and began to stroke it in time with the thrusts. Bill had always forgotten about Eric and focused on his own pleasure.

“God, Eric!” His lover’s hand tightened as he came, and Eric’s orgasm overtook him as well. Dex collapsed beside him, panting, arm over his face. “Damn. I think you killed me.”

Eric poked the other man in the side, snickering when he flinched. “You don’t look dead to me.”

“I might as well be. I feel like my brain went out through my cock.”

“Is what you just said supposed to be a compliment? Because if it is, it’s a really weird one.”

“Yeah, it’s a compliment.” Dex moved his arm off his face and turned to look at Eric. “It’s my idiotic way of saying I really enjoyed myself.”

Eric rolled his eyes. “What a way with words. How did you ever get on the bestseller list?”

Dex smacked Eric in the head with his pillow. “Shut up, you. I’ll be back.” He got up and headed for the bathroom. When he returned, he had taken care of the condom. He tossed Eric a damp washcloth and got back into bed.

Eric cleaned himself off and tossed the washcloth in the general direction of the bathroom. He started to get up to make sure the wet cloth had gotten there, but Dex pulled Eric into his arms and dragged the covers up over them. Being in the other man’s arms felt unexpectedly safe. He tried to savor the feeling, but he was tired. A few minutes later, Eric fell asleep.

He awoke to find they’d shifted in sleep, so Dex sprawled across the mattress from him. He lay there for a while, wondering if he should get up and sneak out. Dex hadn’t said anything about him leaving, which didn’t necessarily mean anything. After the wonderful lovemaking they’d shared, an awkward, regretful morning-after would ruin everything.

Maybe I should just go. I don’t want to stay and see an “I wish you were gone” look in his eyes ... And there’s no way this can go anywhere. He lives in New York, and he’s famous. I know I shouldn’t have slept with him in the first place, but I can’t regret what we did. Whatever happens now, this night was worth it just for the way he made me feel.

Eric rolled over and started to get up.

The other man stirred and reached out for Eric. “Eric?” When Eric didn’t reply, Dex turned on the lamp and sat up. He saw Eric sitting on the edge of the bed and frowned. “Were you leaving?”

Eric shrugged. “I didn’t know if you’d want me here in the morning.”

“I want you here in the morning, Eric.” He put his hand on Eric’s shoulder. “This wasn’t just a one-night stand for me. I hope you feel the same way.”

Eric turned to face him. The vulnerable look in Dex’s eyes surprised him. *He really wants me to stay!* “It wasn’t for me either.”

“Good.” His lover’s face lit with relief. “I’d really like for you to spend the day with me tomorrow, at least until you have to go to work.”

“I’d like to spend the day with you, too. But I don’t have any clothes. I’m awake now, so I’ll go get some.”

Dex leaned forward and kissed him.

Unable to hold back a smile, Eric got up and felt around for the clothes he’d worn earlier. “What was that for?”

“Incentive to hurry back,” Dex said softly as Eric left.

Eric made the trip to his place in record time, dropped off the two jackets he’d left at the penthouse, and grabbed jeans and a t-shirt for the next day. He laughed at his own hurry, but he didn’t slow down. Dex was waiting for him!

When he got back upstairs, Dex welcomed him with a very hot kiss before they made love again. This time, Dex thrust slowly into him from behind. He loved the experience as much as the first time. Afterward, Dex curled up behind him and fell asleep. Snuggled in his lover’s arms, feeling safe and happy, Eric fell asleep as well.

December 31

The next morning, Eric awoke from a very hot dream to find a hand stroking his morning erection. He smiled and stretched. “Mmmm. What a way to wake up.”

Dex kissed him softly, and then gave him an exaggerated frown. “It’s about time, sleepyhead! I’ve been waiting forever.”

Eric didn’t reply, just slid down the bed and took the other man’s cock into his mouth. He could hear muffled cursing from above him, but he didn’t stop. He reached down to fondle Dex’s balls as he sucked, causing more cursing. He knew he’d driven Dex completely insane when the author pulled him up, tossed him the lube, and hurriedly shoved a condom on.

“In a hurry?” As he got up on his hands and knees, Eric echoed the other man’s comment of the night before, knowing the repetition would annoy him.

“If I am, it’s because of you,” Dex retorted.

Eric cried out in ecstasy as his lover bent him over and thrust into him forcibly. In this position, he couldn’t see Dex’s beautiful eyes, but the deeper penetration made up for the loss. “God, that’s good. Don’t stop!”

His teasing had put the other man close to the edge, but Dex was able to hold off long enough for Eric to come before he did. The feel of a hard cock hitting the sweet spot on every thrust was incredible. To his shock, Eric actually came from penetration alone. Dex followed right afterward and collapsed on top of him. He smiled as he felt a soft kiss on his back. *I could definitely wake up like this more often.*

It was almost noon when they finally got out of bed, Dex promising to order some food from room service while Eric showered. While he headed off to the living room to make some calls, Eric used the bathroom and took a shower. He didn’t linger under the hot spray, not wanting to miss out on time with Dex before he had to go to work.

Still damp, dressed in the old t-shirt and faded jeans he’d gotten from his apartment, Eric padded back into the bedroom, wondering what Dex had ordered for their lunch. After that busy night and morning, Eric was starving.

His lover wasn't in the bedroom, so he headed for the living room. Through the open door, he heard the author talking on the phone. The phone was obviously on speaker, because he could hear another man's voice as well.

"Aren't you bored to death yet? I bet you can't wait to get back to New York," the other man said.

"Not at all. You know me, I can always find *something* to amuse myself."

Eric stopped, not liking the turn of their conversation.

There was silence for a moment, then a big booming laugh from the other man. "You dog! You're fucking that little manager! Now I know why you wanted me to send a useless fax."

Eric felt the impact of those words like a punch in the stomach. *I can always find something to amuse myself. You're fucking that little manager.* He didn't wait to hear the rest of the conversation—he just turned and fled. After the door slammed behind him he felt the carpet under his bare feet and remembered he'd left his shoes behind, but he didn't care. He ran through the halls and down the stairs, ignoring employees who spoke to him or looked at him oddly. He had to get home. *I can always find something to amuse myself. You're fucking that little manager.* He tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

After what seemed like an eternity of running, Eric reached his rooms. He unlocked the door as quickly as his shaking hands would allow, entered, and leaned against the inside of the door, gasping. *How could I have been so stupid? What else could I possibly be to him, other than a temporary amusement?* The words of his last foster mother ran through his head over and over like a mantra: *No one will ever want you.*

Eric slid down the door, wrapped his arms around his knees, and huddled there. "You were right, Janice. You were right," he whispered.

Eric Wright, who hadn't shed a single tear since his mother abandoned him when he was six years old, put his head down and cried.

December 31- Evening

It seemed like hours later when Eric finally got up from the floor and went to shower again. He kept the water cool and let the droplets run over his face, hoping the shower would make his face look less red and puffy. Throwing on khakis and his last polo shirt, knowing he'd have to change into a tux right before the party, he grabbed his phone and clipped it to his khakis. He'd received several calls while he'd been sitting on the floor. He'd known they were calls related to work or Dex, and hadn't felt like dealing with either problem. Not bothering to check the waiting messages, he left for work with no enthusiasm.

Keeping himself too busy to think turned out to be relatively easy.

The party preparations took up every spare minute Eric had until just before eight, when he changed into his tux and went into the ballroom. Everything had turned out wonderfully. The food was artfully arranged, the decorations were stunning, and the band sounded great.

Eric should have felt a great sense of accomplishment, but he only felt numb. He kept his best "perfect manager" smile pasted on as he talked with employees and guests, circulating throughout the room solving little problems as they came up and praying for the night to end. Everywhere he looked; people were smiling and having fun. Several guests approached him to tell him how much they were enjoying the party.

One middle-aged woman and her friend came over to talk to him for a while, and as they were leaving, she said, "I'll be expecting a kiss at midnight, young man!"

Her friend rolled her eyes. "Oh, quit teasing him. I'm sure he's got someone a little younger to kiss!" *But I don't have anyone to kiss. Not anymore.*

After several hours of nonstop small-talk, smiling, and schmoozing, Eric spotted Mr. Turner approaching, accompanied by the "big boss," as they called the owner of the resort. Eric made sure his smile was extra bright as they stopped in front of him.

"Wright!" The owner clapped him on the shoulder. "You and the rest of the staff have done a great job with this party. Go outside and relax for a while. Have a little champagne. You deserve to have some fun! And I'd better not see you here any later than two o'clock tonight. We have plenty of people to clean up the mess."

Grinning, the owner plucked a glass of champagne off a passing waiter's tray, handed the crystal flute to Eric, and gave him a little push toward the terrace. Eric, never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, immediately took the opportunity to escape the incessant happiness around him. He gratefully slipped outside onto the moonlit terrace.

As he leaned on the stone railing, Eric stared at the moon—not full yet, but nearly so—and thought about how so many things changed, while so many others stay the same. Once again he stood alone on New Year's Eve while happy couples around him made plans for another year together. A few months ago he'd been in almost the same situation he faced now. The only real difference was this time he'd really truly believed things could be different. Bill's betrayal had hurt, but at the same time he'd almost expected to be let down. He hadn't really believed in Bill, or himself. Why he'd been stupid enough to believe in Dex after only a few days would probably remain a mystery.

"Maybe some people just aren't meant to be happy," he said aloud. "Maybe I'm just not meant to be happy."

"I don't believe that." Eric tensed at the sound of Dex's voice, but he didn't turn around. He didn't reply either, so the silence stretched out for several long moments.

The other man broke the silence. "Where did you go earlier? I tried to call you several times, but you never answered."

"Don't." Eric had the childish urge to cover his ears.

"Don't what?"

"Don't act like you care!" Unwilling to continue the charade, he turned to face the man who'd broken his heart.

"What? Of course I care!" Dex stared at him, his face a study in hurt confusion.

"Oh, of course!" Eric felt suddenly *furious* Dex would stand there looking hurt. "You care because if I'm not around, you'll have to find another way to 'amuse' yourself besides 'fucking the little manager'! Well, I'm sorry, Dex, but I'm not a toy you can amuse yourself with and just throw away when you leave. I won't be used again!"

Trembling, on the verge of tears, Eric tried to go back inside. Dex moved to block his way. He tried to go around, but the taller man grabbed his arm. Eric yanked his arm away and backed into the railing, trapped.

“Wait, Eric. Please.” Dex turned an anguished face toward Eric. “What happened between us last night—I wasn’t just using you. If you’d heard the rest of my conversation with Tom earlier, you’d have heard me tell him you mean more to me than he thought you did. I don’t know how it happened, because we’ve only known each other a few days, but I care about you.”

Eric stood there for several long moments, afraid to hope. He met Dex’s eyes, searching for the truth. “You care about me?”

“Very much.” The other man looked back at Eric, his blue eyes unflinching. “And I hope some day you’ll be able to believe me.”

“I want to believe you, but...trusting people hasn’t worked out too well for me.” Eric looked down, ashamed of his cowardice.

“I’m a little scared too, but I won’t let fear stop me from caring.” Dex reached out to stroke Eric’s cheek. Eric leaned into the touch, joy suffusing him as he understood this man cared for him. Inside, he could hear the party guests beginning the countdown to the New Year. Normally the sound was enough to have him feeling depressed, but suddenly Eric didn’t mind so much.

“...Two!...One! Happy New Year!” Dex and Eric smiled at each other, and then Dex leaned in to kiss him.

“Happy New Year,” he murmured against Eric’s lips.

“Happy New Year.” And for the first time, Eric meant the sentiment.

December 31—One Year Later

“It’s about time you got home.”

Eric sank down on the beach beside Dex. “Sorry, I got tied up with the party setup. You know how work gets is this time of year.”

“Yeah, Mr. Senior Manager. I missed you, though.” Dex put his arm around Eric and pulled him close.

Eric put his head on his lover’s shoulder. “I missed you too, but I’m sure you had plenty of writing to do. I told you I’d be home before midnight, and here I am.”

“And you always keep your promises. Ready to make another?” He gently turned Eric to face him.

“What do you mean?”

“I know we can’t get married, but we can exchange a promise with each other.” He picked up something which had been sitting in the sand beside him and handed the small object to Eric. It was a small box. Eric opened the lid, revealing two gold bands.

For a moment the lump in his throat kept Eric from speaking. He swallowed a couple of times. “Oh, hell!”

After a brief struggle, he let the tears come. The past year had been wonderful. Dex had gone back to New York as planned, but he’d come back as soon as he could. Eight months ago he’d bought the beach house and asked Eric to move in with him. Of course, Eric had agreed, and they’d been happy together ever since. Still, Eric had thought about how great life would be if they could have their commitment recognized. He looked at his lover, touched more than he could say by Dex’s thoughtfulness.

He took out the two rings and handed one to Dex. He reached for Dex’s hand and slipped the on, and watched as Dex did the same for him. From down the beach he could hear the countdown to another New Year. Taking a deep breath, he made a vow. “I’ll promise you this year, and every other one I have.”

Dex reached out and gently wiped the tears from Eric’s face. “Happy New Year, my love.”

Leaning forward to kiss the love of his life, Eric realized New Year’s had become his favorite holiday.

The End.

