

KATE STEELE

New Year's Fire

XOXO

Loose Id®

HOLIDAY KISSES:

NEW YEAR'S FIRE

Kate Steele

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Chapter One

“Are you ready yet?”

“Don’t be so damned impatient,” Dean admonished gently, while pulling the zipper up on his olive green canvas barn coat. “It’s not like we’re getting a late start or anything.”

“We will be if you don’t quit dragging your feet.”

Dean eyed his lover, who stood with his hand resting on the front doorknob. Normally, Scott had a sunny disposition, but today, he wore an expression of mild annoyance. His blue eyes sparkled with barely suppressed ire and his blond hair was still tousled from running his hands through it in frustration. He’d been pissed ever since his favorite football team had given up what was supposed to be an easy victory. Scott’s shouts and curses as he’d sat in front of the television had sent their dog, Dickens, scurrying upstairs to hide on the landing.

“Just because your team lost doesn’t mean you have to get your panties in a twist. Give it a rest.”

“Shut. Up. I don’t give a shit about that. I’m going. If you ever get ready, you might want to come out and give me a hand.”

With that, Scott opened the door. Dickens, who, in contrast to his master, had been patiently waiting, now bounded outside ahead of him. In the wake of man and canine, a draft

of frigid air swept through the open doorway. With an exasperated sigh, Dean thought for a moment and realized that what Scott had said was probably true. It wasn't really that disastrous football game that was bothering him. From the moment Scott had gotten up, he'd been quieter than usual or rather snippy when he did say anything. Something else was definitely bothering his partner.

Grabbing his gloves, Dean followed dog and lover out the door and paused on the porch as the door swung shut behind him. It was snowing. Again. The fat white flakes brought a crooked smile to his lips.

He descended the porch stairs and stopped. Then, as he bent down, he called out, "Scott! You dropped something." Gathering a double handful of snow, Dean expertly packed it together. When Scott turned, Dean straightened, assumed a throwing stance, and let his snowy missile fly. It caught Scott dead center in the chest, exploding in a cloud of stinging white.

"You asshole!" Scott yelled, wiping the cold remnants from his chin and throat. "You are so asking for it." And the fight began.

Snowballs were constructed and released with precise accuracy, while Dickens furiously barked at his masters' antics. The combatants maneuvered around the yard, doing their best to dodge the icy projectiles that were flying fast and furious. Slowly, incrementally, Dean found himself being herded into a trap. By the time he realized what was happening, he was caught at a corner of the house against the porch and fenced in by the honeysuckle trellis. He had nowhere to go when Scott charged, grabbed him around the waist, and pulled him down into a snowdrift.

A large hand cupped Dean's head and pushed his face into the snow, while another hand shoved piles of it under the collar of his coat. Body flailing and bucking against Scott's hold and the blistering cold that engulfed his head, neck, and back, Dean was finally able to break free. He came up sputtering and cursing to hear the welcome sound of Scott's laughter.

Wiping the snow from his face, he struggled to hide his satisfied grin. Their snowball fight had certainly lightened his lover's dark mood.

Presenting Scott with a mock scowl, he clambered to his feet and unzipped his coat, flapping the loosened garment to rid himself of the wet, slushy mess that was stuck inside. Unlike his scowl, the goose bumps that marched over his skin were quite genuine. "You fucker. This shit's cold, you know."

"You started it, babe." Scott stood, brushed the snow off himself, then moved to stand in front of Dean. Reaching out, he took hold of the lapels on Dean's coat, and with a forceful yank, brought them nose to nose. "And I finished it. Let's get the horses seen to; then I'll take you to bed and warm you up."

His lips closed over Dean's. Dean immediately melted against him. This was the man he was used to. This hot, happy, and oh-so-sensual man. He willingly opened his mouth to accept the insistent tongue that demanded entrance. Scott's kiss was so scorching in its intensity that the heat it kindled made Dean shiver from the tips of his frozen ears to his icy toes, which were curling inside his boots. He pushed himself deeper into his lover's embrace and held on, groaning a protest when he was finally released.

"Work first, Doc," Scott reminded in a low rumble.

Dean frowned in earnest. "Come on, then," he grumbled, letting Scott go. "Let's get this done. Damn, you have a one-track mind." He turned and stomped off in the direction of the barn, fumbling for the zipper of his coat and fastening it as he walked.

"Now who's grumpy?" Scott caught up to him and gave him a slight jab with his elbow.

"I'm not grumpy. I'm horny."

"There's a dwarf Disney never thought of." Scott opened the barn door and stepped inside with Dickens on his heels.

Brow wrinkling, Dean followed and closed the door behind them. "What?"

Without stopping or looking back, Scott headed for the feed room. “You know, Grumpy, Sneezzy, Sleepy? They’re all rather mundane. Horny probably would have livened them up.”

Dean chuckled. His irritation fled. “You ass. You’re nuts.”

“About you.” Entering the feed room, Scott handed Dean a bucket. “You shovel up the oats. I’ll start on the water buckets.” With a wink and a grin, he left Dean to his assigned chore.

Shaking his head, Dean filled the bucket, then went out into the stables proper and began his rounds. He measured grain out in scoops, stall by stall, to occupants that were more than ready for their evening meal. As he fed them, Dean talked to each horse, doling out pats and molasses cubes, which he carried in a zipped baggie in his pocket. The cubes were made by a friend of his who dealt in homemade treats and foods for pets, and they had quickly become a favorite in the stables.

Dean had grown quite fond of the horses. Since meeting Scott, he’d become more deeply involved in the treatment of livestock. As he was a new veterinarian living in this area, it had taken a while to acquire the trust of those who had substantial money invested in their horses and cattle. Scott’s initial willingness to use Dean’s services and Dean’s proven success had brought other equine and livestock owners on board. That, in combination with his already flourishing pet clinic, had him seriously considering the need to take on a partner to keep up with the increasing success of his practice.

Scott passed by, carrying fresh buckets of water. “Easy on the sugary treats, Dad. You’ll give the kids cavities.”

“I hear you,” Dean groused with mild sarcasm, before he returned to loving on Miss Dotty, who was nuzzling his arm hopefully. “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. I won’t let strict Daddy talk me out of giving you your treat.” He smiled at the muffled mumble Scott uttered as he disappeared into a stall farther down the way. Although he talked tough, Scott was just

as susceptible to spoiling the horses with treats as he was. About to move on to the next stall, Dean halted in surprise at Scott's abrupt yell.

"How the fuck did you get in here?!" Before Dean could react, a small black-and-white ball of fur came barreling out of one of the stalls and disappeared into the feed room, Scott hot on its heels. "Come back here, you little bastard!"

"What the hell?" Dean murmured as he hastened after them. He arrived at the feed room and stood in the doorway watching a moment as Scott began an investigation into every nook and cranny.

Scott growled. "Where are you, runt?"

"Was that a kitten?" Dean felt a frown play between his brows; Scott was overreacting on a large scale.

"Yes, it was. Help me find it and give it the boot."

"Scott!"

"What?!"

Dean stepped forward into the room. "Get a grip. Go wait outside. *I'll* find it."

"It's not staying, Dean." Sending him a warning glare, Scott stomped out.

Dean rolled his eyes and sighed. Sitting down cross-legged on the concrete floor, he started calling softly. "Here, kitty. Come here, little guy."

In seconds, he was answered by a loud meow. The half-grown kitten appeared from behind a large grain bin and, with only a moment's hesitation, rushed to Dean. At the first touch of Dean's hand, the purring began.

Delighted, Dean picked up the animal. "Aw, look at you. Black and white, just like a panda. That'd be a good name for you too. Pandy. You like that, Pandy?" The little one rubbed a whiskered cheek against Dean's, eliciting a soft laugh. Dean stood up, bringing the kitten with him. "You're hungry, aren't you?"

Scott peeked around the corner. "Didn't take you long to nab him."

“Well, I wasn’t chasing after the poor thing and barking -- like some lunatic I know.”

“Very funny. Now toss him out.”

“No way! I can’t believe you’d even suggest such a thing.”

“I don’t like cats.”

“I don’t see why not. Look at the poor baby. So adorable.”

“You wasted your time naming him. He’s not staying.”

“Scott.”

“I said no. I won’t have that flea-bitten pest sneaking around the horses.”

“A cat’s not going to bother the horses. Didn’t he come out of Dapper’s stall? If that touchy stallion can tolerate him, the other horses will. Besides, when he’s bigger he’ll catch mice.”

“That’s what the mouse traps are for.”

“Come on. Just look at him,” Dean pleaded. Pandy was now snuggled into his arms and sleepily blinking.

Taking a stern stance with both arms crossed over his chest and his blue eyes holding no hint of relenting, Scott made his position clear. “N. O. No. I don’t want that feline menace in *my* stables upsetting *my* horses.”

Dean leveled a calm look at Scott, one that belied the hurt that made his heart contract. The man standing before him had suddenly become the stranger from earlier. “I see. Now they’re back to being your horses and your stables. So those papers we signed didn’t mean anything? You remember those, don’t you? The ones that made this place and my practice *ours*. I guess they’re only ours as long as you get to decide everything, and to hell with what I want. Is that the way it works?” Dean shoved his way past Scott and headed for the barn door.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Where are you going?”

"I've put up with your bullshit all fucking day and I'm tired of it. I'm taking the kitten to *my* clinic. I don't know when you became such a heartless hard-ass, but this is a side of you I could have done without seeing."

Fuming, Dean marched to the barn door and shoved it open. Ignoring Scott as he called out to him, Dean closed the door with a decisive *thunk*. Stalking across the yard and driveway to the house, he grabbed his wallet and keys from where they rested on a small table near the front door. Back outside, he removed a small animal carrier from the trunk of his car and eased the sleepy kitten inside, before placing the carrier on the passenger seat. Rounding the car, he folded himself behind the wheel, started the engine, and then, after giving the car a minute to warm up, he took off.

The drive to his practice, which normally took about ten minutes, was extended to fifteen because of the snowy road conditions. During the trip, Dean brooded. How could Scott have suggested he throw that poor defenseless kitten out into the snow? The man had always seemed so fond of animals. God knew Scott loved the horses, and Dickens always got more than his share of attention from him. And it wasn't just that that bothered him. What about the whole property thing? Deep in his heart, did Scott really consider the farm and horses to still be solely his?

"Was it only lip service when he told me that everything he had was mine too? I know I meant it when I put his name on the deed to the clinic." Dean's words, spoken out loud, brought a small meow from the cage beside him. "It's okay, Pandy. We'll figure it out."

Once at the clinic, Dean took Pandy inside and quickly fixed a roomier cage for the animal. After a quick examination, which prompted a raised brow and a "hmm" of discovery, Dean placed the kitten into the cage with a healthy serving of food, a bowl of fresh water, and a litter box. In the adjacent cage was Mr. Darling's tabby, Finster, who had been neutered that morning and was spending the night.

"There now," Dean told Pandy, giving the cat a last rub behind its perked little ears, one black, one white. "You and Finster can keep each other company tonight."

After checking to see that Finster had food and water and was still doing well after his surgery, he left the animals and walked down the quiet hallway to his office. Flopping down in the chair behind his desk, he put his elbows on the neatly ordered surface and glumly rested his chin in one hand.

Why did this dustup with Scott have to happen now, especially since tomorrow was New Year's Eve. He'd planned a quiet, intimate, and -- he'd hoped -- decadent celebration for the two of them. If he and Scott didn't straighten this mess out, he had a feeling his plans were doomed. But was it really up to him to play the diplomat this time? It was Scott who had taken things a little too far, after all.

The more he thought about it, the more riled he became. "I'll be damned if I'll be the first to apologize," he muttered. Suddenly, the phone next to his elbow jangled for attention. His lips curved into a frown when the caller ID revealed the call to be coming from home.

He picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Is that any way to answer the phone?"

"At this point, it's the best you're going to get."

"I called to see if you were coming home, but I see you're still pissed."

"Yeah, I'm still pissed, but that doesn't mean I'm spending the night here. I'll be home when you see me."

"Jesus. Fine. Whatever."

The line went dead as Scott hung up. Dean replaced the handset with a bang. "Jerk. Merry fucking Happy New Year. We're off to a great start."

Chapter Two

Dean delayed at the clinic until well after nightfall. He took a side trip into town and stopped in at the local diner, Martha's, for a bite to eat, then headed home. The security light attached to the barn spilled its blue-white brilliance over the barnyard, driveway, and house. The porch light was also on, but no lights shone past the blinds at the windows. Letting himself in, he found the ground floor shrouded in near darkness but for a hint of radiance shining through the three small panes of glass in the front door, which illuminated the stairs. Divesting himself of his coat and boots, he climbed the steps and was greeted by the muffled thump of Dickens's tail against the carpeted landing.

"Hey, buddy. You guys went to bed early."

After giving the dog a few fond scratches and rubs, Dean made his way silently to the bedroom, where the dim glow from the night-light in the bathroom alleviated the gloom. Scott was in bed, unmoving and unspeaking. Unsure if his lover was asleep, Dean went about getting ready for bed as quietly as possible. He was more than ready to put his problems to rest in the oblivion of sleep. Once he was done with his preparations, he eased himself onto his side of the mattress and sighed. Now that he was finally able to relax a bit, he realized just

how tired he was. All the tension he'd been operating under for most of the day had drained him.

Dean was just telling himself how glad he was that Scott was asleep when his lover's voice came out of the darkness.

"You're home."

"Yeah," Dean answered cautiously, feeling tension begin to grip the back of his neck.

"Look, about earlier, I didn't really mean it. Any of it."

"Then you shouldn't have said it."

"I know. I've been a bastard all day. I'm sorry."

Scott started to reach for him, but Dean wasn't ready to let things drop so easily. "I'm tired. Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

The extended hand halted its movement. "Sure. Whatever you want."

Without another word, Scott withdrew and turned on his side away from Dean. Dean presented his back to Scott too and stared with unseeing eyes at the ribbons of light that made it past the blinds at the window. The slight tinge of hurt that had appeared in Scott's voice made him feel like a heel. It was a long time before sleep found him.

In the morning when he woke, Scott was already up and gone. The smell of coffee and bacon wafted up the stairs. Dean's stomach rumbled as he bathed and dressed. In the kitchen, he found Scott just rising from the table, his meal consumed. He was freshly shaved and showered, but the dark circles under his eyes revealed the fact that he, too, had gotten little rest the night before.

"Morning," Dean offered cautiously. His tentative gaze was met with a neutral look. Scott was giving nothing away, not a single hint or indication of how he was feeling.

"Morning. Coffee?"

"Please."

Scott poured him a cup as Dean peeked under the covered dish on the table. There was bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast that was already buttered.

"I fixed extra. Sit down and eat. I've got some chores to take care of, so I'll see you later." Setting the coffee cup down beside Dean's plate, he leaned in and placed a quick peck on Dean's cheek.

Biting his lip, Dean watched Scott disappear through the kitchen doorway. He cursed softly. "Shit." *Damn it. I've gotta fix this. Fuck. Why did I have to be such an ass last night? He did apologize, and like a jackass, I turned him away. Nice job, you fucking idiot.*

Still silently berating himself, Dean dug into the breakfast Scott had fixed. Although his appetite was blunted by the tension between them, he didn't want to add insult to injury by seeming to refuse Scott's breakfast offering. While he ate, Dean pondered their problem. They needed something to reunite them, something more than just a simple apology. He thought again about the plans he'd made for this evening. It *was* New Year's Eve. What better time to reaffirm their love and show Scott just how sorry he was?

Liking the idea, Dean felt his spirits rise. Maybe, just maybe, his plan would work. It had to. There was no way he was going to let things go on like this. With a decisive nod, he finished his breakfast, washed the dishes, and headed for the clinic.

He threw himself into his work, glad that he'd already arranged to close early. Cassie, his assistant, fussed over Pandy. The kitten ate up the attention, and Dean made up his mind to keep the little one at the office. His colleague Doug Wayland over in Winchester had two cats that wandered freely at that clinic; Dean figured that Pandy probably wouldn't find a more loving situation than what he, Cassie, and Sean, his second assistant, could provide right there.

Among the three of them, they kept things moving efficiently, treating the pets that were brought in and managing to keep the animals' owners happy and satisfied. Dean even

found some humor in the day when one of his clients brought in a couple of lovebirds. She'd wanted Dean to sex them for her; he'd had to explain that sexing the pair could only be positively done by having their droppings analyzed. When he'd asked her to describe the birds' behavior, the somewhat prim-and-proper lady explained, her cheeks growing redder by the second, how the two took turns mounting each other. She had been somewhat disconcerted by this as the pet shop had assured her they were a mated pair, one male and one female.

"I don't think it's normal for the female to mount the male. Is it, doctor?" she'd asked.

It had taken all Dean's self-restraint to not only keep his grin under wraps, but also to keep from joking that she might have a pair of frustrated male lovebirds. He had opined that both birds were probably male, and he was able to provide her with the name of a reputable dealer who could supply her with a guaranteed female.

After that, the day went by quickly. All the while, in the back of his mind, Dean was reviewing his preparations for the coming evening. Before he knew it, the last client was ushered out with wishes for a Happy New Year and the front doors were locked. Once he'd finished shutting off most of the lights and setting the alarm system, he, Cassie, and Sean filed out the back door.

"Now don't worry about a thing. I'll look in on Pandy and the others in the morning," Cassie assured Dean.

"And you know I'll be in at two to clean out the kennels and feed everyone," Sean added.

"So, you just enjoy your New Year's Day with Scott," Cassie admonished with an encouraging smile.

Although he hadn't discussed the particulars of his personal dilemma, Cassie and Sean had evidently picked up on the fact that he and Scott were at odds. He smiled back. "Thanks, guys. I don't know what I'd do without you."

“Well, you’d hire somebody else...but they wouldn’t be nearly as good as we are,” Sean quipped.

“Too true,” Dean agreed. The three of them exchanged a round of Happy New Year wishes and went their separate ways.

With the day’s work behind him, Dean went into full preparation mode. His first stop was a gift shop that sold nicely scented herbal candles, his second was the supermarket, and his final was the liquor store. Purchases made, he headed home. On the way, he pondered how he was going to keep Scott from nosing around while he got things ready.

He needn’t have worried.

When he arrived at the house, the first thing he noticed was Scott’s missing truck. Wondering where his lover had gone, Dean unloaded the car and muscled all his purchases inside, while accepting Dickens’s enthusiastic greeting. Hauling everything into the kitchen, he found a note on the table.

I have a couple of errands to run. I’ll be home about eight. Love, Scott.

When he saw how it was signed, Dean smiled. “That sounds promising.” Dickens sat nearby, ears perked and tail wagging. Dean’s smile widened. “All right, buddy, let’s get this show on the road.”

By the time Dean heard the rumble of Scott’s truck as it pulled up in front of the house, everything was ready. He positioned himself somewhat nervously by the front door. Hearing the slamming of a truck door, he waited, then heard a second door open and close.

Puzzled, he went to one of the windows and lifted a slat on the closed mini-blind. He peered out just in time to see Scott, lugging a big cardboard box, disappear into the barn. A few minutes later, his lover returned to the truck, opened the passenger door, and pulled out a large basket. Hurriedly moving away from the window before Scott saw him spying, Dean moved back to his former place by the front door.

Seconds later, the door opened and Scott walked in. In that moment, Dean was sure he'd never seen a more beautiful or welcome sight. With his cheeks ruddy from the cold, Scott's blue eyes shone even brighter. Light from the overhead fixture gleamed softly on his golden hair.

Nearly tongue-tied at the longed-for arrival of his lover, Dean finally managed a softly voiced, "Hi."

"Hi," Scott replied in return. Keeping his gaze firmly fixed on Dean, he set the basket he held on the floor and unzipped his coat.

Dean felt his heart stutter then race as Scott walked toward him. His breath ratcheted a notch higher. Without hesitation, he moved to meet the man he loved. The two of them came together, arms encircling each other, mouths meeting and melding. The kiss they shared was deep and needy and filled with mutual desperation. When they finally separated, both began speaking at once.

"I'm sorry, baby. I don't want to fight anymore."

"I should have accepted your apology last night. I'm the one who's sorry."

"It's okay. It was my fault. I was a total bastard yesterday."

"That's what got to me. I couldn't understand why. You're not like that. It was something more than the football game, wasn't it? Did I do something to piss you off?"

Scott pulled Dean close, wrapped his arms around him, and laid his head on Dean's shoulder. "No. You didn't do anything. It was all me."

Dean felt his lover's body go lax. He slipped his arms inside Scott's coat to hold him tighter and to savor the warmth he'd been missing. "What is it?"

"Remember when I told you about how my dad died? About how he had an accident because the roads were bad?"

"Yeah."

"It was in December. December thirtieth. Yesterday."

Realization dawned, filling Dean with remorse and understanding. "Oh, Scott. Baby, why didn't you tell me?"

Scott shook his head against Dean's shoulder in denial. "My dad didn't raise a whiner."

"Sharing your pain with me doesn't make you a whiner. Did you think I was whining when I told you about the things my dad put me through?"

"Of course not."

"Then share stuff with me, don't shut me out."

"I didn't mean to. It's just hard to talk about."

"I understand, believe me, I do. Are you all right?"

Scott raised his head. His eyes were calm. "Yeah. Especially now. Thanks."

"Dope," Dean admonished lightly. "Why don't you take your coat and boots off and stay awhile?" he teased.

"Smart-ass," Scott grumbled as he pulled away.

Dean smiled and followed him back to the front door. He took Scott's coat and hung it up while Scott rid himself of his boots. "So, what's in the basket?"

"I was wondering if you'd ask. It's the result of one of my errands." Scott picked the basket up from the floor and offered it to Dean. "It's for you. Open it."

Taking Scott's gift, Dean carried it over to the sofa and placed it on the cushion next to him as he sat. When he untied the ribbon that held the opaque cellophane closed, the wrapping fell open to reveal a treasure trove of goodies. Inside were several varieties of cheese, plump grapes, apples with flawless skins, his favorite Oriental pears, a small loaf of crusty bread, and a bottle of vintage Merlot.

"I got some of your favorites from the gourmet shop over in Tempe. I was hoping you'd let me out of the doghouse so we could picnic in front of the fire and welcome in the New Year together."

Dean chuckled. "This is too funny. Great minds think alike." He rose and reached for Scott's hand. "Come on, I have a surprise for you too."

He led Scott into the den. When he opened the door, all his hard work was revealed. A fire crackled merrily behind the spark screen in the fireplace. Dean had moved the sofa to one side of the room, and in its place, a blanket was spread over two thick sleeping bags. On the side farthest from the fire, several covered platters were laid out with an iced bottle of champagne at their center. Candles on mirrored tiles flickered from several vantage points, filling the air with their fresh herbal scent.

"You did all this for me?"

"For us. I've been planning it for a while now. I thought the fight was going to put an end to it, but I made up my mind not to let it spoil things. No matter how bad tempered you get, I love you."

Scott nodded, and Dean could see a luminous sheen fill his eyes. "I'm really sorry. I love you too."

"It's all right. Let's just drop it and enjoy the evening together. Okay?"

"I'd like that."

"Great. Here, strip and put these on." Dean handed Scott a soft pair of sweats and a T-shirt. Aside from the colors, the clothes mirrored the outfit Dean himself was wearing.

"What are these for?"

"I want you to be comfortable."

Scott leered. "I'd be really comfortable in just skin."

"Yeah, but then we'd never get anything to eat, and I'm starving." Dean wasn't about to tell Scott that he was also hiding something. Knowing that their reunion would probably make them both impatient, Dean had lubed himself and inserted a plug. Its presence was a constant reminder of how he wanted the evening to end.

"A compromise, then."

“What?”

“Bottoms only.”

“I guess I can go for that.”

“Deal.”

While Scott stripped off his jeans and the flannel shirt he wore, Dean worked his own T-shirt over his head. He tossed it over to the sofa. Accepting the clothes Scott handed him, he sent them flying in the same direction. Amazingly enough, even with his eyes glued to his lover's body, he managed to lob them on top of his discarded T-shirt. Yeah, no matter how many times he saw Scott naked, Dean never failed to appreciate the sight.

Miles of golden skin covered firm muscle that smoothly shifted with every move the man made. Blond whorls of hair made a soft mat on his chest and a line that angled straight down to his groin. With his gaze drawn there, Dean felt an answering ache at the slight thickening of Scott's cock.

Apparently having noted Dean's interested perusal, Scott gave him a knowing grin. “It's not too late to opt for naked.”

Debating for a second, Dean gave in. “All right, but we're still eating first, horndog.”

“I'll agree to that.”

Sans clothing, they moved to the blanket and settled cross-legged and facing each other. It took some doing, but after fidgeting a bit, Dean found a comfortable position. He took the lids off the platters while instructing Scott to open the champagne. Flutes were filled with sparkling wine. Dean accepted the glass his lover handed him, and both of them brought their drinks together with a lyrical clink.

“What should we drink to?” Scott asked.

Dean felt a bubble of mischief rise inside. “How about harmony?”

Scott's chuckle was immediate. “After the last two days, that sounds like a great idea. To harmony.”

The glasses were again briefly touched together, and they took tentative sips. Brows rising in approval, Scott took a heftier draft. "This is good. But that looks even better," he commented as he looked at the variety of foods Dean had prepared.

One platter held cubes of various cheeses, rolled slices of cold cuts, several types of crackers, and slices of baguette. Another smaller platter held savory, bite-size, baked meat pies wrapped in flaky, golden crusts. The third held an assortment of cut-up veggies and fruits. Each platter contained small cups of dips: honey mustard, ranch, poppy seed, and sour cream, along with chocolate, caramel, and whipped cream for the fruit.

Dean reached for one of the meat pies and held it to Scott's lips. He accepted the tidbit, chewed, and closed his eyes in obvious pleasure. "Umm, so good."

With the first bite taken, they dug in with hearty appetites, feeding themselves and each other while talking and laughing. A short time later, Dean stretched out on his side and reached for a slice of extra-sharp cheddar. It was followed by a bite of yeasty baguette. He knew Scott was watching him and made a show of sensually stretching. Scott turned his attention to the fruit plate and came back with a slice of apple dipped in thick caramel. He leaned over Dean, urging him to his back. Dean rolled to accommodate him, and Scott touched the coated fruit to his belly.

Dean gasped then hummed at the teasing slide over his skin. "What are you doing?"

"Painting a little picture. Hold still."

Scott bent, his lips and tongue following the sweet, sticky trail. Dean's breathing became short and shallow, every nerve in his abdomen electrified by the warm, wet glide of that tactile and teasing tongue. Ribbons of sensation slithered down and gathered in his groin, signaling his heating blood to move south. Dean shifted and groaned, wanted more than anything for that agile tongue to shift focus to his needy cock.

Scott ignored his body's obvious desire and continued until he'd licked Dean's skin clean of caramel. Then, he brought the apple slice to Dean's lips, silently presenting him with

the succulent offering. Dean took a bite. It was crisp and tart. A drop of juice lingered on his lips, but before he could lick it away, Scott bent to capture the errant bead with his tongue, then finished the partially devoured apple. He unfolded his long body and lay down on his side, facing Dean with one elbow cocked and supporting his head. Dean echoed his new position.

"You know, everything was delicious, but there's one more dish I really need to sample."

"Just sample?" Dean asked breathlessly. His gaze centered on Scott's groin where his lover had dropped his free hand. Fingers wrapped around his own cock, Scott was slowly jacking himself.

"Actually, I'd like to devour it whole."

"Sounds like you're being greedy."

"Greed is the only way to go with this dish."

"You know what I think?"

"What?"

"Every once in a while, it's good to just take what you want."

"I like your attitude." Scott reached for Dean. They squirmed closer together until not even a breath separated their bodies.

The feel of warm, naked flesh against his skin brought a moan ghosting from Dean's lips. Scott cupped Dean's chin in his hand and sealed their parting lips. That small sound passed between them again, accenting the meeting of tongues eager to taste and explore.

Both their cocks were rapidly filling, and the small undulations of their hips sent the hardening shafts sliding against each other. Dean slid his hand over Scott's waist, letting it rove over hard, muscled back, thigh, and the rounded curve of Scott's firm buttock. His movements were mirrored in kind, with Scott's hand delving more intimately between

Dean's cheeks until the traveling fingertips touched the base of the plug he wore. Their kiss ended abruptly.

Scott drew back, the surprised expression on his face almost comical. "Is that what I think it is?"

Dean merely nodded.

"Roll over. I want to see."

With his stomach clenching in anticipation at the commanding growl in Scott's voice, Dean complied until he lay on his stomach. He felt the heat of Scott's breath waft over his ass as his cheeks were parted. Soft lips and a wet tongue caressed the firm swells of his buttocks, while curious fingers took hold of the plug and jiggled it. Dean's sphincter tightened, trying to hold the solid bulk of latex still, but he was no match for Scott's determined toying. In a matter of moments, he was being lightly fucked as Scott rhythmically pulled the plug out an inch or so, only to ease it back in. Dean found himself clutching the blanket under him and groaning.

"Oh, fuck, that's so sexy. Just thinking about you wanting me so much that you'd make yourself ready for me like this... Jeez, if I weren't already rock hard, I would be now. Dean, fuck, baby. I can't wait." Dean made a move to pull his knees under him to fully offer his ass to his lover, when he was halted with a hand at the small of his back. "No. I want you on your side again."

Scott orchestrated their positioning, having Dean lie on his side facing away from him. A large, slightly calloused hand slid between Dean's thighs from behind, and his upper leg was encouraged to lift and ease back over Scott's for support. Dean felt the movement of Scott's fingers as he took hold of the base of the plug. He retained enough foresight to hand Scott a napkin in which to wrap it, then concentrated on the slippery glide of the plug being liberated from its berth in a slow, shiver-inducing slide. The toy was set aside and something longer, hotter, and thicker took its place.

Dean pushed back against his lover, trying to hurry the dragging velocity of his impalement, but Scott resisted.

"Slow and easy, baby. I'm going to enjoy every inch and every minute of this." And that's exactly what he did. At a turtle's pace, he buried his cock within Dean's welcoming channel, kissing, nibbling, and licking his impatient lover's neck and shoulders. Dean panted and moaned, helpless to do anything but let Scott have his way. It seemed forever until he felt the wiry tickle of pubic hair against his buttocks that announced the fact Scott was fully seated.

Dean's anus was pleurably stretched, his channel full, the fat girth of Scott's cock rocking inside with each push and retreat of his partner's hips. The firm glides of that solid bar of flesh over his prostate had Dean gritting his teeth.

When Scott's hand slid over his hip and long fingers enveloped the hard, aching column of his cock, Dean freely cursed. "Son of a bitch! Oh, fuck."

Scott's mouth hovered near his ear, warm breath tickling the whorls and curves. He suckled the plump lobe, before releasing it with a gentle pop. "Something wrong, baby?" Though he seemed unconcerned and relaxed, Dean could hear the underlying strain in Scott's voice.

"Goddamn it. This is driving me crazy. I need to come."

"I want us both to come, but first, I want you incoherent. I wonder if this will help."

The hand that firmly encircled Dean's cock began long, sweeping strokes up and down its quivering length. Dean cried out, arching his body back against Scott's unyielding strength. Scott met his move with a thrust that sent his cock driving deeper. Dean's thoughts spun out of focus with the powerful slams of Scott's hips against his ass that sent sensations, which had hovered at an even level for far too long, rushing out of control.

The aching need centered in Dean's groin, gathered itself into a dense, ultrasensitive mass that throbbed once, twice, and again, before exploding outward in a climax of dizzying

proportions. Convulsive jerks of his body accompanied the thick ribbons of creamy seed that shot from his cock to anoint the blanket, his belly, and Scott's hand. Dean's vision grayed, the fire becoming distant and out of focus, while slowly diminishing shocks of pleasure tightened and released the straining muscles of his groin, abdomen, and buttocks. He closed his eyes, savoring every shivering tremor.

Behind him, Scott's pumping movements sped up, then froze as he ground himself deeply within Dean's encompassing passage. His muffled shout signaled his own release, a thick flood of body-warm semen bathing the tender sleeve of Dean's sheath. Scott's shudders echoed Dean's until finally they began to relax. With every indrawn breath, Dean could feel the pounding of Scott's heart. It matched his own, and as a regular beat was reestablished, he opened his eyes, grateful to see his vision restored to normal.

The fire was again bright and merrily flickering. He stared at it for a time, mesmerized by the dancing flames that reached high, becoming pale and yellow before they retreated once more into the hot red-orange heart of the blaze. Scott stirred, his waning erection slipping free of Dean's body. At his lover's urging, Dean again found himself on his back. Thigh sliding between his, Scott draped himself over Dean and took a sweet and somewhat sleepy kiss. The soft touches of his lips and the tender sweeps of his tongue made Dean's heart feel as though it would burst with the love he felt for this man.

When Scott drew back, slumberous blue eyes met brown ones. "Happy New Year, babe."

"Happy New Year, lover," Dean replied, before drawing Scott down.

Contented sighs were exchanged. Bodies lax and replete, they listened to the chiming of the clock on the mantel as it rang out a greeting to the New Year.

Epilogue

"Hey, come out to the barn. I've got a surprise for you."

"Does this have anything to do with that big box you carried out there last night?" Dean's gaze wandered over his lover with approval. The smiling man before him who'd just returned from the horse barn was a welcome and beloved sight.

"You were spying on me?"

"Well, I just happened to look out the window."

"Yeah, yeah. You're busted."

Dean crinkled his nose and grimaced before smiling. "So, what's the surprise?"

"I'm not going to *tell* you. You have to come out and see."

"Give me a hint," Dean wheedled as he donned his coat and boots.

Shaking his head in mock exasperation, Scott grinned. "Remember the note I left you last night? I said I had a couple of errands to run. This was the other one."

"Well, how I am I supposed to guess anything from that?"

"Stop bitching, and *come on*."

Scott grabbed his arm and pulled him out the front door, barely slowing long enough for Dean to close it behind them. With every step hustled along by his teasing, impetuous lover, they arrived at the stable in seconds flat.

“Did we have to run?” Dean asked with a laugh.

“You’ll be glad you did. Look.”

Scott had tugged him along the aisle until they stood before the door of the feed room. A small animal door with a flap for easy access had been installed in the wall beside it.

Brows pulling together in puzzlement, Dean looked at Scott’s handiwork, before transferring his gaze back to Scott. “What’s that for?”

“For that.” With a nod of his head, Scott directed Dean’s attention back to the door just in time to see Pandy nonchalantly waltz through the opening. Dean’s surprised grin was immediate.

“You brought Pandy back!” He bent to gather the black-and-white ball of fur into his arms and rose to face his lover. “I thought you hated cats.”

“I’m not especially fond of them, but I guess I can get used to this one. For you. In the feed room, he’s got a bed, a litter box, and food and water bowls. Cassie told me what all he’d need. She even threw in some catnip-filled mice for him to play with.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Dean said softly, leaning in to give his lover a kiss. His move was aborted when Pandy struggled in his arms. Dean took a firmer grip on the little one, deciding now would be the time to break the news. “Um, Scott?”

“Yeah?”

“You know, it turns out Pandy’s not a he, she’s a she.”

“So? Is that a problem?”

“No, but we could end up with kittens.”

Scott’s eyes widened in dismay. “You’re a vet. Fix her.”

Deciding to tease him a bit, Dean delayed his answer, as though giving it some thought. "Wellll...of course, I can -- but wouldn't it be nice to have little ones?"

"No. Dean, I mean it. No kittens." Suddenly stopping, Scott gave Dean a pleading look. "Please?"

It was easy to see that Scott had learned his lesson about giving orders without consulting his partner. Gratified, Dean relented and stopped fooling around. "I was kidding. I'll make sure she's spayed before that can happen. Thank you for taking my wishes into consideration."

Scott sighed. "You're welcome, and thank God."

Laughing at his lover's relief, Dean set the kitten down. Pandy promptly returned to her new abode. Turning to Scott, Dean hugged him and was hugged in return. "Thank you for bringing her back."

"You're welcome. I just want you to know that we truly are partners. In everything. I love you, Dean. I want you to be happy."

"I know," Dean answered. Before he took the kiss his lover offered, Dean added his own sentiments. "I love you too. Happy New Year."

 THE END 

Kate Steele

By day, mild-mannered Kate Steele lives the quiet life in rural Indiana with family in a century-old farm house. Ensconced in front of her trusty computer, she bravely fights off the attention of two annoying, yet sweet, lovebirds and two dogs who always seem to have to go outside. Transformed at night into a wild and fearless creature, Kate visits alien worlds, fights insatiable bloodlust, howls at the moon, and always brings home the most utterly gorgeous alpha male to indulge in wild sexual fantasies. Ah, the good life.

Visit Kate on the Web at www.katesteele.com.