



December Promise

KC Kendricks

DECEMBER PROMISE

...Did he seek closure or renewal?

"Why don't we ask the concierge to suggest a place? I drove in, so we can take my car and go the long way around. Maybe drive up to the overlook and check out what's new in the view."

Paul tapped his coffee cup to Lee's. "I like that idea."

Lee downed the dregs of the lukewarm liquid in his cup. Damn, contact with foam containers made coffee taste nasty. His memory came alive with recollections of how a younger Paul's skin tasted. Would it have the same musky sweetness now? He had to get his mind off sex before he got hard.

It was too late to recall the thought. Goose bumps prickled over his thighs and belly. His cock pulsed, lengthened. He hoped Paul wouldn't notice, but he knew better.

Paul uncurled his long frame to gracefully roll to his feet in a display of controlled strength. He held out his hand to Lee.

Lee didn't hesitate to reach out and wrap his fingers around his ex-lover's. Paul pulled him to his feet. Standing so close to him, face-to-face inside the aura of heat and scent, the buried sorrow of all the lost years vanished. His inaction had created the worst mistake of his life—he'd allowed Paul to walk away.

Just a few short weeks ago, he'd counseled a friend to follow his heart. Now he had the chance to follow his, if he were brave enough.

His chin lifted as he gazed into Paul's blue eyes. There were so many things he wanted to say, but only one seemed relevant.

"I've missed you, Paul..."

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DECEMBER PROMISE

BY

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DECEMBER PROMISE
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*To Lee Ann, Yvonne, and Roxy—
thanks for the love and laughter that transcends time zones.*

CHAPTER 1

Paul Macy jogged along the quiet beach, his mind and thoughts focused on his breathing. It had rained during the previous night, a gentle soaker that smoothed the sand and left it firm under his running shoes. He waved at a neighbor, a kindred early-riser. The woman lifted her coffee cup in greeting and turned away, having long ago given up her attempts to entice him to her deck. Paul ran on with the sound of the sea and his footfalls as pacing partners.

He had to make a decision today.

The jangling of his cell phone interrupted the rhythmic song of the waves and brought him up short. He slowed and pulled the hated contraption from his pocket. Someday he'd fling it into the ocean and keep at least one promise to himself. He flipped the phone open.

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Yeah. Macy.”

The terse voice in his ear grated on his nerves. “I need you at the office today for a pick-up. Be here by one.”

No fucking way. “It’s Sunday, Bob. The first Sunday I’ve had off in eight weeks. You’ll have to call in someone else. I need some time to relax.”

“I don’t care what you need. You get your ass here or you’ll find your assignments drying up. You got it?”

“I got it.” *You homophobic prick.* The phone closed with an angry click.

So many things had gone wrong lately, what was the loss of one more weekend? He didn’t need any exercise or a decent meal. Wasn’t getting enough sleep the sign of a lazy person? And sex? Who needed to get laid on a regular basis? His work had been his lover these past weeks, and he should be man enough to call that adequate. Right?

Wrong!

His hand fisted around the cell phone. He reared back, extended his right arm, shifted his weight forward onto his left foot, and pitched the device into the sea with all his might. He watched it fly, then splash down into the Pacific Ocean.

Huh. That was a pretty good throw. Maybe he should try out for a center fielder position in the major leagues—right after he laid the requisition form for a new phone in front of Bob.

Damn. He’d have to eat shit on that, too.

Thankfully, Bob was on the way out. The man didn’t know *his* supervisor was gay or that he’d noticed a few things such as Bob’s blatant homophobia. All Paul had to do was hang tough, and in a few short months, if it took that long, no more Bob. He told himself, repeatedly, he could do it.

DECEMBER PROMISE

What could have happened that the agency needed him to drive into town today? Most of his assignments arrived by courier. He only drove to the office to deliver completed translations, which maintained a necessary level of security with the chain of custody. He didn't like it, for more than one reason, but maybe no one was available for the delivery today.

Or maybe the CIA didn't want this packet to go astray. Although what any translator received was only bits and pieces of a larger puzzle and not complete documents, not since one went missing last year. Thank God it happened before his name was attached to it.

Fuck it. Who cared what had happened? He didn't need the agency politics, nor did he want to be a part of them. He didn't want another top priority job.

Maybe it was time he put it all behind him. Maybe he should throw in the towel and retire. Money wasn't a big issue thanks to his grandmother and a frugal lifestyle. He had enough invested to generate a small income. His gal-pal LaVerne needed part-time help at her coffee shop a few days a week from noon to six. That would keep him in bread and lunchmeat, get him out of the house, and leave time for freelance work.

All he had to do was stroll into human resources and request the forms. There was even a good chance the agency would rehire him as an independent contractor, and he could dictate his own workload. Translators with his knowledge of Arabic and Turkish, and his security clearance, didn't grow on trees.

Paul stared at the waves. The sea had been his constant companion for the last ten years. He was in tune with its rhythms, the mystery of its tides. The smallest change in the rise and fall of the water snagged his attention with its portent. Today it whispered

DECEMBER PROMISE

of sunshine and gentle winds and, like a lover, it pleaded with him to stay.

Soon, he would. It was time to make a few changes.

Putting off the inevitable didn't make it any more palatable. It was better to get today behind him. Paul turned and jogged back down the beach toward home. He climbed the long, shallow wooden steps to his deck and stepped into the kitchen, not lingering to give the sea one last loving look. The invitation fastened to the front of the refrigerator with the little seashell magnets he'd made greeted him.

He was tired, physically and mentally drained from the workload Bob had dumped on him these last weeks, but there was light at the end of the tunnel. He hoped the trip back to Newark for the dedication would give him a chance to see Lee again, and maybe bring closure on a few things in his past. If that happened, then he could truly move on with his life.

The deadline was today. He picked up the house phone and dialed the number listed on the invitation.

* * *

Lee Kendall gripped the handle of his tennis racket and waited, tense and alert to the subtle clues his opponent unknowingly gave away. Lee always won, and the president of Transformed Sands, Lee's major client, never knew how he did it.

"Hit the ball, Jon!"

"Are you in a hurry to win or something?"

Lee grinned. "Are you yielding?"

Jon lofted the ball skyward and whacked it, driving it straight at him. He sidestepped and backhanded it across the net. After a few

DECEMBER PROMISE

heated volleys, Jon sent it out of bounds, then tossed his racket toward the benches and walked off the court. Lee followed.

“Okay, Lee, I’m conceding this game. You’ve beaten me three times today, and in this heat, enough is enough.” He held out his right hand, and Lee shook it.

“I’m willing to learn racquetball this winter. Maybe you’ll do better.”

Jon snorted. “I’ll consider it, but nothing can change the fact you’re twenty years younger than I am. I used to be just like you. I couldn’t be beat.”

Lee didn’t doubt it. “You’re still tough, Jon.” He waved his tennis racket in the general direction of the parking lot. “There’s Cameron.”

Jon’s open, happy look turned wary. Lee leaned back against the bleacher behind him. He didn’t like to pry, but Jon had become a friend, as well as a business associate.

“Still not going well?”

Jon shook his head as he retrieved his racket. “I haven’t been able to completely forgive him. I’m just thankful he cheated safely and didn’t bring anything home to me. I should show some pride and ask him to leave, but I don’t want to. Maybe I really do love him.”

Lee sensed Jon had truly forgiven his lover for his transgression, but maybe Jon needed permission to admit it to himself. It was time to give his friend the best advice he had to offer.

“Then let go of it, Jon. Don’t let it own you like this. If life is better with him than without him, don’t keep punishing him and yourself. Move on from it.”

“He talked with you?”

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Yes. He said he deeply regrets hurting you, and I believe him. Give him some *little* trinket and get on with life.”

Jon stared across the tennis court and wide expanse of lawn at the solitary man, waiting.

“I’ll lock up the black credit card before I tell him I forgive him. How’s that?”

Lee grinned. “Forgiving him is for *you*. And don’t buy him a new car, for heaven’s sake. Get him a gift certificate to his favorite men’s wear store or something.”

“Maybe two weeks at the house in Belize would be fun.” Jon clapped Lee on the back. “You could find a vacation buddy and come with us.”

A familiar empty ache filled Lee’s chest. He didn’t have anyone in his life he’d be able to tolerate for fourteen days of sun and sand, and fourteen nights of vacation sex.

“I’ll pass. You guys need the time alone to re-bond.” He plucked Jon’s racket from his hand. “Now walk over there, tell him you love him and to get packed.”

“You’re right, Lee. You always are.” Jon squeezed Lee’s knee as he rose to his feet and walked straight for his partner.

Lee leaned back, elbows on the back of the bench behind him, long legs spread comfortably as he looked across the park. The maples showed the first red tips of autumn.

He wasn’t always right. He’d made quite a few mistakes over the years, just no glaring ones lately. He watched Cameron place his hand on Jon’s chest as his back straightened. The men embraced, holding each other for long moments. Lee hoped they’d soon come to a complete reconciliation. Any fool could see they loved each other, and Lee wasn’t a fool.

Except in his youth.

DECEMBER PROMISE

No, not even guaranteed sex for fourteen nights in a row was enough of a temptation for him to take a vacation—but the invitation lying on his desk was.

* * *

Paul peered out the window of the taxi at the bright autumn foliage. New England in the fall was beautiful. He'd missed it, but not enough to give up the raging glory of the Pacific pounding the cliffs. Monterey was home to his soul, not just his body. But every now and again, a person's soul needed a change of scenery. After the ceremonies, if nothing else was left to him, he planned to hop a plane to Burlington, Vermont, rent a fancy sports car, and drive through the New England countryside to take in the seasonal colors before heading out on his leisurely journey home to California.

He had twelve weeks in which to cross items off his bucket list before he went back to work as an independent contractor for the agency. He'd officially retired, gotten a lump sum bonus, then cut the deal of his career to continue doing the work he loved. When he said he needed a sabbatical, he got the go-ahead to take it, and he intended to enjoy the time off.

With good weather, he'd see Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons. Then, if he wasn't anxious to get back to the ocean, he might make a stop at the Grand Canyon. It all depended on his mood of the moment—a refreshing attitude adjustment to contemplate.

The cab drifted to a stop in front of the hotel. Paul paid the driver as a bellboy loaded his suitcase on a dolly. He'd splurged on his accommodations for the weekend, upgrading from the block of rooms reserved by the university for invited guests to an upper

DECEMBER PROMISE

level corner suite. One look out the window convinced him the money was well spent. The town of Newark sprawled to his right, and to the left, the new building on the university campus could be seen.

Twenty years ago, Paul and a small group of like-minded students had petitioned the dean to expand the college's program to include courses on emerging technologies. The proposal had been a few years ahead of its time, but the dean agreed the idea had merit. It had not been forgotten, and now, after all these years, Paul and the others who'd signed the proposal were invited guests for the dedication of the new building where Emerging Technology would be taught in both classrooms and working labs. His gaze drifted to the boys' dorm.

Lee Kendall. Lee was two years younger than Paul and had made no bones about his displeasure to be stuck with "Racy Macy" as a roommate. Looking back, Paul couldn't blame a then inexperienced Lee for not wanting to room with a guy who admitted to sleeping his way across the campus and back again.

Struck speechless by the younger boy's dark good looks and clear gray eyes, Paul silently vowed to give up his quest to fuck every hot guy in town and woo the shy, reluctant Lee into an exclusive agreement until graduation parted them. And he had.

The nights they'd spent in each other's arms were burned into Paul's memory. Lee had been so young—and inexperienced. Paul made sure everything that went wrong during his own first sexual encounters went right for Lee and reaped unimagined rewards as Lee gained confidence. Leaving his first serious lover behind to finish his education was the most difficult thing Paul had ever had to do.

They'd stayed in touch for a few months, but the physical

DECEMBER PROMISE

distance eventually took its toll. The last time Paul saw Lee was during Christmas break, the December after Paul's graduation, when Lee was a junior.

Paul closed his eyes and the memory of their last kiss rose up inside him. He'd come to visit Lee on campus and he'd known immediately Lee was involved with someone new. Time had marched on.

They'd made no promises to each other. That was what they both said they'd wanted. They agreed they both had careers to build and some living to do. That parting kiss had been bittersweet, but Paul treasured it. He licked his lips and felt Lee's tongue in that sweeping caress. Paul opened his eyes.

It was strange how that part of his past stayed with him when so much else refused to linger, lost in the blur of busy years.

He could unpack later, after he grabbed a coffee to go and took a walk around the campus to discover what else was new. He patted the back pocket of his jeans to make sure he had his wallet, held the keycard to his room in his hand, and scooted out the door before he tucked the piece of plastic in a front pocket.

The hotel coffee shop bustled with activity. He stood quietly in line behind a slightly shorter, well-built fellow with dark hair. Paul's gaze traveled down to the man's denim-clad ass. *Nice*.

More than nice. Something in the man's easy stance, the relaxed shoulders, the firmly planted feet, the tilt of his head, all whispered familiar.

The line moved forward, and the man in front of him spoke. Paul's mouth went dry. His chest swelled with the hope he could no longer deny. This was why he'd really come back. Could it really be him? He tapped the guy on the shoulder.

"Lee?"

CHAPTER 2

Lee turned at the quiet voice behind him, curious and surprised anyone would recognize him. He'd not physically visited the campus in ten years. His curiosity turned to shock, then a strange quivering awareness of the intimate stranger in front of him.

Hadn't he prayed for this very thing to happen this weekend?
"Paul? *Paul?*"

The man smiled at him, and the years dropped away. The tall, slender college senior had fleshed out his six-foot-one frame in the most remarkable—and muscular—way. The long, brown curls were gone in favor of a short, carefree style, but the intelligent cobalt eyes were exactly the same.

"Hello, Lee. It's great to see you."

That was all he had to say after all these years? Paul had

DECEMBER PROMISE

abruptly walked out of his life, with no explanation, with no goodbye, and all he had to offer was, Great to see you?

“It’s good to see you, too, Paul. You’re here for the dedication, of course.”

Talk about banal conversation. *Christ, Lee! You get close to him again and you’re still hopeless!*

“I am. Are you here for the ceremony and festivities, too?”

Lee hesitated. In the printed program, his contribution was grouped with other anonymous donors to the new building. He didn’t need to confess everything. His ex-lover didn’t need to know he’d promised one hundred thousand dollars, payable over ten years, to the university.

“I made a private pledge to help with the cost of the new building, so they were gracious enough to invite me.”

The guy serving coffee rapped his knuckles on the counter to get Lee’s attention. “Hey, buddies, time to get your caffeine fixes and move out of the way, okay?”

Lee started, then touched Paul’s elbow. The server was right. Their conversation was holding up the line. “I’ll buy. What do you want?”

“Thanks. I’ll take a medium Columbian.” Paul stepped to the side and picked up several packets of cream and sugar, napkins and two stir sticks. “I’ll go grab the sofa.”

Lee kept his expression neutral and nodded. The chaotic thoughts bumping around in his brain didn’t allow him to speak. The couch was a loveseat, and a small one at that. He and Paul would be shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip sitting on it. Things could be worse. They could be so far apart they’d need to shout to be heard. He carried both cups to the sofa and handed one to Paul before he eased down beside him.

DECEMBER PROMISE

“So, how have you been, Paul? Where did you settle down? Close to home?”

Paul shook his head. “I left San Diego and moved up to Monterey, right on the beach. It’s beautiful country.”

Lee sipped his dark roast. It was too hot, so he set the cup on the coffee table. “You always talked about Big Sur, maybe living right beside the ocean.”

He watched a rosy flush spread up Paul’s neck as he fidgeted in his seat. “You remember that?”

Did the man think he’d ever forget those quiet, dreamy conversations in the dark, cocooned in each other’s heat? Lee burned to know if Paul lived alone, or with a companion, because if his former lover was here with someone, it was better to know before he shoved his foot in his mouth—and all the way down his throat.

“That’s fantastic! Are you here alone?”

Paul stared at him. Inside, Lee’s sense of humor danced with glee. Paul Macy—speechless. Tongue-tied. The silent happy dance skidded to a halt. *Fuck*. Paul wasn’t alone and didn’t want to admit it.

Lee reached for his coffee. Paul’s knee bumped his and stayed there. The heat of his thigh seeped through two layers of denim to warm Lee’s skin. Paul’s body temperature had always been like a warm furnace, especially on cold winter nights.

But he had someone in his life, and remembering those times in the dark would only get in the way of renewing their friendship. Lee smiled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry into your personal life.”

Paul swallowed, hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. He cleared his throat. “Actually, it’s okay. I live alone, and I’m here by

DECEMBER PROMISE

myself.”

Thoughts suddenly spinning, Lee nodded. That information cast new light on possibilities for the weekend, not all of which Lee found pleasing. The last thing he needed was to get all worked up over Racy Macy again. He'd been a teenage idiot and his only excuse was that he got caught up in the excitement of his first sexual experience. He needed closure on those days, not renewed involvement.

Chicken-shit. Coward.

The shrill voice of the boy he'd been was right. He was afraid to admit...

“Yeah, I live alone, too, these days. I don't seem to manage having a housemate very well.” Lee tested the temperature of his coffee and burned his tongue.

Paul nodded. “That's pretty much my story...that and work.”

“I remember you were a real neat freak.” Lee smiled. “Man, you had a vendetta against dirty socks.”

They both laughed. Paul bumped his shoulder against Lee's.

“Trust you to remember that. So, where did you end up? It's a shame we lost track of each other.”

Lee busied himself with his coffee again. Did the man really care? Maybe he did. People did things when young that they often came to regret. Perhaps Paul was sorry he'd walked away, but what about his own excuses? He could have searched for Paul during the intervening years and he hadn't.

“I didn't get too far from home. I'm with an ad agency that has main offices in New York and Buffalo. I handle all the work for our largest client, Transformed Sands Ceramics and Glass. After my dad died, I moved back into the house on Dune Road.”

Paul touched his hand, a light brushing of his fingertips to

DECEMBER PROMISE

Lee's knuckles, quickly over. "I'm sorry about your father, Lee. I know you and he were pretty close." Paul crossed his legs, right over left, and turned slightly toward Lee. "God, I haven't kept up very well with anyone from my college days."

Lee mirrored Paul's pose, left leg over right, and relaxed. Paul's interest in catching up appeared genuine and it warmed him all the way through. Maybe, if he broached the subject just right, Paul would agree to have dinner with him tonight.

"I still miss my parents. Moving into their house without them was tough at first. Heck, living there still is, sometimes. Southampton is upscale, sure, but the house feels too big and lonely to me. But enough about that. I remember you were a language major. I always wondered how that would translate into a career."

Paul laughed, a low, relaxed chuckle that hung in the air between them. "I know you said that with no pun intended, but I'm a translator."

Lee's curiosity kicked up a notch. "Okay, so it's none of my business, but what do you translate?"

Paul sipped his coffee and settled deeper into the loveseat. "Believe it or not, right now I'm translating a lot of romance novels into Italian and Russian. It's been quite the education about women, let me tell you."

Lee's mouth fell open. "You've got to be joking. *Romance?*"

"I'm serious! It's good bread-and-butter work, and the things I've learned..." Paul shook his head; the corner of his mouth curved ruefully. "You don't want to know about that. I also work on instruction manuals and medical research papers. Now *those* are tricky. I, um, also do some freelance work, too, like I'd always hoped."

DECEMBER PROMISE

Something in Paul's intense blue gaze begged him not to pursue the subject. An intelligent man, Lee knew why. He understood what Paul meant by his last statement. It harkened back to those intimate conversations with the blankets pulled over their heads.

Paul had landed the kind of job he'd dreamed about as a younger man, so determined to do something for his country that didn't involve guns. He translated for the government and couldn't talk about it, not even to say what federal agency he was with. Any other work was a smokescreen.

Paul tapped Lee's knee with his shoe and changed the subject. "If you work with just one client, you must get into some interesting areas, too, like television."

Lee took a deep breath. It was now, while he had his nerve up, or maybe never. "I'll tell you over dinner tonight."

The smile faded from Paul's face. Lee's stomach plunged. He'd moved too fast. *Damn it!* How did he always manage to fuck things up with Paul? How had he suddenly regressed to an introverted, bumbling twenty-year-old who couldn't say the right thing for blurting out the wrong? He was about to apologize when his old friend surprised him with a quiet acceptance.

"I wondered if you'd ask, or if I'd have to go down on one knee and invite you first."

Lee blinked, several times, as the floodgate of his memory opened. The night they'd sat in the bleachers and eaten cold pizza. The afternoons spent sitting on the curb sharing fast food French fries. The morning the toaster caught fire and incinerated the frozen waffles. They'd shared so many meals, but they'd never gone to a restaurant and sat down to a "real" dinner. Of course, as college students, they'd rarely had a lot of pocket change. His

DECEMBER PROMISE

father believed a young man needed to earn his own money, and it wasn't until after the elder Kendall passed that Lee had access to his father's money.

"We never went out, back in the day."

Paul cocked his head to the right. "Speaking of—I'm out. Are you?"

"Yeah. I was sorta low-key about it after graduation, but once I interned at Cohen and Kimble, I relaxed. One of the owners cruised me, then brought me in permanently after I turned him down. Pretty much everyone on staff is part of the GLBT community."

Paul looked at the ceiling and his voice held a hint of wistfulness. "It must be heaven to work in a gay-friendly environment."

Lee watched a young hetero couple squeeze into an overstuffed chair on the other side of the lounge, giggling at their own silliness and togetherness. He might be out, but he'd never do something like that in public.

Well, at least not these days. He'd behaved like that in the first few years after college, but never during those years with Paul, not with his scholarship to protect. Lee sipped his coffee before answering. Advertising was a dog-eat-dog world.

"I guess it's easier in some respects, but there's a lot of pressure, too. We have to work hard to convince prime clients we're better than the straight boys and girls."

Paul turned toward him, shifting in his seat. "Do you like what you do?"

"I do." Lee grinned. "I get to be very creative. The president of Transformed Sands has one goal...and that's to get his product into every market. He's great to work with. The company has an

DECEMBER PROMISE

amazing research and development program. It keeps me on my intellectual toes.”

“God, I detested my last supervisor, the prick. Thank heaven, and the airlines, he’ll be gone when I go back to work.” Paul leaned back and stretched his arm along the back of the loveseat. “Where do you want to go for dinner?”

Where indeed? Someplace dark and quiet would fill the bill. Lee rolled his shoulders and uncrossed his legs to allow his thigh to press against Paul’s again. He tried to ignore the phantom sensation of Paul’s arm sliding down to pull him close, but the weight of his memories made it too real.

Their body heat merged. Lee’s pulse quickened when Paul didn’t attempt to move away. Dare he hope they would spend the night together? Such a foolish notion.

Did he seek closure or renewal?

“Why don’t we ask the concierge to suggest a place? I drove in, so we can take my car and go the long way around. Maybe drive up to the overlook and check out what’s new in the view.”

Paul tapped his coffee cup to Lee’s. “I like that idea.”

Lee downed the dregs of the lukewarm liquid in his cup. Damn, contact with foam containers made coffee taste nasty. His memory came alive with recollections of how a younger Paul’s skin tasted. Would it have the same musky sweetness now? He had to get his mind off sex before he got hard.

It was too late to recall the thought. Goose bumps prickled over his thighs and belly. His cock pulsed, lengthened. He hoped Paul wouldn’t notice, but he knew better.

Paul uncurled his long frame to gracefully roll to his feet in a display of controlled strength. He held out his hand to Lee.

Lee didn’t hesitate to reach out and wrap his fingers around his

DECEMBER PROMISE

ex-lover's. Paul pulled him to his feet. Standing so close to him, face-to-face inside the aura of heat and scent, the buried sorrow of all the lost years vanished. His inaction had created the worst mistake of his life—he'd allowed Paul to walk away.

Just a few short weeks ago, he'd counseled a friend to follow his heart. Now he had the chance to follow his, if he were brave enough.

His chin lifted as he gazed into Paul's blue eyes. There were so many things he wanted to say, but only one seemed relevant.

"I've missed you, Paul."

CHAPTER 3

Paul froze, his insides suddenly a quivering mass of nerves as he held Lee's hand. His palm tingled as if his skin possessed its own memories of late-night walks, fingers entwined when no one could see. Lee's silver gaze met his, full of cautious hope, his expressive eyes unable to hide the truth of his words.

Hadn't he hoped his link with Lee could be renewed someday? He'd daydreamed Lee would be here this weekend and say hello. It was time to show a little courage. He squeezed Lee's hand.

"I've missed you, too. I regret so many things."

Lee blinked, his face suddenly unreadable. "C'mon. Let's get out of here. We can decide where to eat on our own. Hell, this is a college town, so there's pizza sold on every corner. My car is in the parking garage. We can take the elevator down."

DECEMBER PROMISE

Paul nodded and reluctantly released Lee's hand so the man could fish his car keys out of his pocket. Somehow—and he didn't know how—he managed to keep his mouth shut when one swift glance at Lee's zipper revealed a definite bulge. Wanting some sort of physical connection, he placed his hand on the small of Lee's back.

It felt so natural, that light touch to steer Lee gently across the lobby. He'd taken the lead in everything when they'd first been a couple. That had changed as Lee's confidence in the relationship increased. They'd grown together, moving seamlessly to a place of equality, especially in bed. Then he'd graduated and it was all gone. But today, here and now, with Lee leaning closer, Paul sensed he needed him to step up and take the lead again.

The elevator doors opened to reveal two men he and Lee had been friends with during their college years. The drop to the parking garage was swift, and the four men quickly made plans to sit together at the luncheon following the dedication the next day so they could catch up. Pleased as he was to see them, Paul considered it a stroke of good fortune their car was on the upper level of the garage and they exited before he and Lee. Another fast drop, then he guided Lee out of the elevator and followed a half step behind as Lee walked toward a snazzy little black coupe.

Instead of remotely disengaging the door locks, Lee unlocked the passenger door for Paul with the key.

"You're such a gentleman."

Lee grinned at his teasing. "You're just trying to get me to pay for dinner, too."

"I can't allow you to do that. The coffee was enough." Paul leaned in and brushed his lips to Lee's in a soft, brief kiss. He pulled away and met Lee's surprised gaze. "It really is good to see

DECEMBER PROMISE

you, Lee.”

Lee’s mouth opened, then he swallowed, hard, as he stared at him.

Paul ran his thumb over Lee’s lower lip. *Damn it!* He’d pushed too fast. “Sorry.”

“No, no. Don’t be sorry. I’m not.” Lee reached out, cupped the back of Paul’s neck, and drew him in for a longer kiss.

Quick as lightning, Paul wrapped his arms around Lee. Desire, swift and sweet, swept through him, jumbling his memories, as Lee’s mouth moved over his. His lips opened, and Lee’s tongue licked into his mouth as he backed Paul against the car. His cock responded, swelling rapidly as a delicious urgency seized him. He inhaled sharply, and Lee’s spicy scent exploded in his memory, refreshed, better now for holding him again. Paul stroked his lover’s back, his hands going down to cup Lee’s firm ass. Lee pressed closer and flexed his pelvis to his. Paul gripped tighter, needing to feel every inch of the steel rod rubbing against his.

This was nuts. They couldn’t just pick up where they’d left off. Could they?

Nothing had changed. They lived on separate coasts. They’d made separate lives. It should be easy to stop kissing him and explain why this was a bad idea, and friendship was the best they should hope for.

Paul shivered as Lee yanked his shirttail out of his jeans, his hot palms sliding across the planes of his chest. Paul made a sound of encouragement as Lee’s finger teased his left nipple. Trust Lee to remember how he loved to have his nips touched. He thrust his tongue into Lee’s mouth. Lee pushed against him, breaking off the heated kiss.

“Hey, easy. We need to cool down a bit.”

DECEMBER PROMISE

Paul grabbed at him, but Lee gently swatted his hands away. “I mean it, Paul.”

Behind him, people spoke. A car engine started. He shivered as the testosterone haze cleared. Lee smiled crookedly at him.

“Best we not get tossed onto the street for lewd and obscene behavior.”

He was right. Paul took a deep breath and tried to ignore the tightness in his balls. Thank heavens Lee had his wits about him. “So you think me going to my knees in the parking garage would be a bit much?”

Lee chuckled. “Uh-huh. I think the state still has laws against it.”

“I’ll do it, you know.”

“And I’ll let you, you know.”

Paul’s heart did a little dance in his chest. His stomach fluttered, swirling cold, then flaring red-hot. “Don’t say that if you don’t meant it, Lee.”

“I do mean it. Now why don’t we find some food and think about how big a mistake we’re about to make?”

“Are you going to smirk at me?”

Dark brows knit together, Lee tilted his head. “Why would I?”

His voice tailed off as Paul dipped a hand down the front of his jeans and settled his genitals to a more comfortable position before he tucked in his shirttail. Amusement sparkled in his eyes, turning them bright silver in the overhead lighting. He shrugged, and it was Paul’s turn to laugh as Lee made a similar adjustment. Paul risked giving Lee another quick kiss before opening the car door.

“I’ll behave now.”

Lee patted his ass. “Tell me another one, Racy Macy.”

“Oh, geez.” Paul dropped into the passenger seat and fastened

DECEMBER PROMISE

the seat belt. "I always hated it when you called me that."

Lee closed the door, then walked around to the driver's side and got in.

"You didn't hate it." Lee stuck the key in the ignition and turned the switch. "You liked it, runner-boy."

He had, when Lee called him that. When other guys used it, the underlying affection wasn't there. Paul remained silent as Lee skillfully maneuvered the car out of the parking garage and merged with the street traffic.

"We've never been in a car alone together before."

"We were on the bus one night, just the two of us." Lee changed lanes. "I'm starving. I need more than pizza. I saw one of those chain steakhouses on the way into town. Are you good with that?"

"The bus doesn't count because of the driver, and 'yes' on the restaurant."

Lord, the night on the bus. How long had it been since he'd thought about that ride? The bus driver had known there was hanky-panky going on in the last row and cut the interior lights. Paul had kept telling Lee to stop, that the lights could come back on at any second. Lee refused and stroked him until he almost came, then refused to finish him off until they were locked in their dorm room. The driver gave them a stern warning as they disembarked, but Paul never shook the impression they'd amused the fellow.

Now, he squirmed in his seat as his dick rose again, and he cast a surreptitious glance at Lee.

Great. The man knew what was going on in his pants. Lee's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"Go ahead and laugh. Snicker all you want, Kendall."

DECEMBER PROMISE

"I will." Lee laughed openly, filling the car with the bright, cheery sound. "As I recall, you paid me back for that escapade. You kept me tied to the bed for four hours."

"You loved it." Paul grinned at him. "You'll be disappointed to hear I don't have any ties with me this trip."

"Shucks." The car slowed as they approached the restaurant. Lee maneuvered it into a parking space at the far end of the crowded lot. He cut the engine. "I guess we should go eat instead of making out in the car."

Paul's stomach rumbled. He looked down. "Apparently so."

Laughing, relaxed and easy in the glow of a renewed connection, the men exited the car and went into the restaurant. Lee requested the table by the corner window, and the hostess seated them. Paul smiled, remembering Lee's affinity for the corner booth at the fast food places they'd frequented. He couldn't eat like that these days. When the waiter came to take their order, Lee told the young man to give him the check. Paul raised his eyebrow.

"Now what did I tell you not thirty minutes ago? I'm not a poor, broke student any longer, you know."

"I know. But you have a good idea of my financial situation, too. There's no point dancing around it. When Dad died, I inherited quite a bit. I want to buy your dinner. Please."

Paul nodded. How could he refuse when Lee said please? He watched as his dinner partner approved the wine, then he accepted a glass. He sniffed and sampled before he nodded in agreement. The cabernet was excellent, much better than he'd expect for a franchise restaurant.

Lee set aside his goblet. "I can't believe we're actually having dinner. Would you think me silly if I confessed I hoped I might

DECEMBER PROMISE

catch a glimpse of you this weekend?”

Paul swirled the dark red liquid in his glass. “Nope. I’m sorry I didn’t stay in touch.”

“The last time I saw you, you were pretty distant.”

Surprised, Paul leaned forward. “Me? I came for a visit over Christmas, and you barely spoke to me.”

Lee blew out a tired sigh and stared out the window. He licked his lips. “I remember. I’d just found out my father had cancer. I was pretty numb.”

Paul shivered on a wave of relief as the release of long-held stress loosened his neck muscles. No wonder Lee had been so emotionally distant. It hadn’t been anything he’d done that had upset Lee. He wished he’d known the real reason back then. Maybe he could have comforted Lee somehow.

“You should’ve told me, babe.” Paul reached out and took Lee’s hand, his throat thick with regret. “I thought you... Damn it.”

Lee gripped his hand. “What? What did you think?”

“That you were seeing someone else. What else could I think when you hardly talked to me? When you pushed me away when I tried to make love to you?”

Lee paled. “When I didn’t hear from you after that weekend, I thought *you* had someone else.” He took a ragged breath. “Sixteen years, Paul.”

Paul’s stomach clenched. So much time had passed. How did they pick up the threads of friendship and relationship, and discover what, if anything, was really left between them?

Seeing Lee again was wonderful. His kisses were as sweet as Paul remembered. Yes, he wanted Lee, but he got a woody whenever he kissed a guy. Was this more, or a simple, normal

DECEMBER PROMISE

response?

It was possible the nostalgia of being on campus again affected both of them. They'd had a great time together during those distant college days. Maybe they were just two lonely guys, facing the onset of middle age, and foolishly wanting to turn back the hands of time. How would they know if that's all it was? *When* would they know? After they made jackasses of themselves?

Maybe that was the only way to be sure.

If they fell into bed and got it—whatever it really was—out of their systems, perhaps it would make it possible for him to say goodbye and get back to his own life. Move on. Finally have a mature relationship with someone else without the little voice whispering “maybe” in the back of his mind.

His last chance to find out was tonight, not tomorrow.

It was now.

“I don’t know what to say, Lee. I wish I’d known what was going on in your life. I was so sure you’d met someone... I should’ve fought for you. I wish I’d forced you to tell me what was wrong, but I didn’t think it through. I was so sure... That was a huge mistake on my part. I want to make that right.”

CHAPTER 4

Lee's stomach quivered. Paul's sincerity shone like a bright beacon through the fog of his uncertainty. Lee flipped his hand over to wrap his fingers around Paul's.

"We need to let go of what we can't change and look forward."

He meant every word and he hoped Paul believed him. Thankfully, Paul nodded.

"Forward is good." Paul squeezed his hand once, then released it. "So what do you think about the new program at the university?"

"I think it's too bad it wasn't there for us, but it wouldn't have made any difference. What they taught us back in the eighties is on primetime television as 'history.'"

They laughed, and their dinner conversation focused on the

DECEMBER PROMISE

university. But behind the small talk, Lee's thoughts raced ahead to the night and the very real possibility he and Paul would share a bed.

He was still in good shape for thirty-seven, but he had a few gray hairs here and there. Mostly there. Hell, it was all *there*. Of course, if the lights were off, Paul wouldn't notice.

Lee coughed and hastily took a drink of water under Paul's curious gaze. Ordinarily, he'd worry about keeping a decent hard-on, not his oddly aging pubic hair, but with Paul, he knew it wouldn't be a problem. Thank heavens tennis and free weights kept his muscles toned.

Maybe he shouldn't be concerned. Paul wasn't twenty-two anymore, either. He probably had the same worries, although nothing in his demeanor spoke to that.

In reality, who cared about a few—or a lot—of weird gray hairs? It was silly to angst over it. *Wasn't it?* It had be his brain's way of distracting him from mapping out what part of Paul to lick first.

Over after-dinner coffee, Paul suggested they drive up to the overlook before it got too dark. That way they could watch the lights of the city come on.

Lee paid the bill and kept silent when Paul insisted on leaving the tip. As they approached the car, he opened the doors with the keyless entry, aware he took a coward's step back from kissing Paul again. What he wanted, what he hoped for, was too precious to rush.

The overlook obviously remained popular with the college crowd. Lee eased his car between a pair of little street racers and parked. Paul pulled the lever and let his seat slide back as far as it would go.

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Who knew the place would be so crowded you can’t even open the car door?”

Lee snorted. “Maybe they’ll leave soon. Isn’t there a senior corn roast bonfire or something at one of the sororities? That should get these boys moving along soon.”

“I saw something about that on the weekend schedule.” Paul held up his hand and crossed his fingers.

Lee grinned and did the same, then pointed north. They pointed out landmarks and noted the changes time had wrought. Paul pointed out the new bridge, its graceful lines reflecting on the water, lending it an air of being working art. Lee nodded.

“Yeah, kudos to the architect on that one. I can’t see the fairgrounds any longer. Those trees grew.”

“Sixteen years is a long time. It’s all different.”

Lee didn’t answer as he gazed across the town and river to the valley beyond. Everything had changed that long-ago cold December night when Paul kissed him goodbye. He hadn’t known how much until today.

“Paul, do you ever wonder why we never made any promises to each other?”

“They’d have been lies. What could we pledge to each other at that age? We didn’t even live on the same coast—still don’t.” Paul held his hand out, palm up. Lee took it and laced their fingers together.

“I still can’t promise you anything, maybe not even tonight.”

“I wouldn’t want you to, babe.” He squeezed Lee’s hand.

Babe. Back in the day, Lee had been outwardly embarrassed, but inwardly thrilled, every time Paul called him that. Hearing it again settled a little warm glow around his heart. He knew better, but there it was. He planned to hold onto it for as long as possible.

DECEMBER PROMISE

Shadows grew long over the city as dusk crept nearer. The first streetlights appeared in the deepening twilight. The river below became a palette of reflective blues, pinks and purples as the city lights blinked to life. The kids departed in groups of two or three, then in a sudden mass exodus just before full dark.

Lee relaxed in the peaceful silence between them. Every once in a while, a smile teased the corner of Paul's mouth, but he didn't ask to share whatever memory—or fantasy—brought it. To speak would break the spell; halt the blending of breath and scent and simply *being* the intimacy of the car's interior created. One by one, stars appeared against the dark night sky. Paul sighed.

"I remember the first time I saw you."

"Oh, yeah? When I barged into our dorm room and started to bitch about having to room with the campus gay Lothario?"

"No. It was the January before that. You'd just transferred in from Penn State and created a little buzz among the gay crowd."

Lee snorted. "Buzz. Good fucking description. I saw the blue haze drifting over the dorm building and smelled the pot smoke a half-block away."

"It wasn't that bad." Paul laughed softly. "At least not in my section."

"Right. So, when did you first see me?"

"It was five in the morning. You were on your way out."

Lee started and stared at his companion. "And you were on your way in. I knew who you were—Racy Macy." *Gorgeous, gay, out and proud. And he noticed me?* "What took you so long to cruise me?"

"You seemed so nice. So quiet and unassuming. So rich." Paul shifted in his seat, leaning closer. "I had to trade roomies four times to land you in my dorm room."

DECEMBER PROMISE

Lee's eyebrow shot up. "You never told me that."

"I figured you'd be pissed if you knew I plotted and schemed all summer to arrange it."

He might have been, back then, but now he was flattered. "So what's your plan to get me into your room tonight?"

A slow smile spread across Paul's handsome face. "Ask you on my knees, if necessary."

Lee pulled his hand free and reached for the ignition switch. "As promising as that sounds, I won't make you beg." He stopped, mid-motion, as Paul's hand slid up his thigh.

"We're all alone. Wanna make out like a pair of horny college boys?"

"Sure." Lee leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Good enough?"

"Ha. Not by a long shot, but I get your point. Back to the hotel we go."

It was the better choice. A police cruiser would arrive to check activities at the overlook sooner or later, and they didn't need to run afoul of an officer in a bad mood. Instead of starting the car, though, Lee took Paul's hand again.

"I'm a little nervous about tonight."

Paul leaned over and kissed him. With his free hand, Lee cupped the back of his neck and brought him closer. Paul's tongue licked into his with gentle coaxing to set aside his fears. Paul ended the brief kiss and rested his forehead against Lee's shoulder.

"I'm sorta on edge about tonight, too. I don't know if I can measure up to my twenty-two-year-old exuberant self."

"You don't have to, I swear."

Paul raised his head and met Lee's gaze. "Neither do you. Start the car."

Lee complied, driving slowly down the winding road into

DECEMBER PROMISE

town. An orange glow against the dark night sky gave witness to the location of the party, so he detoured a few blocks to avoid illegally parked cars and revelers who might wander into the streets. The hotel parking garage was empty of people, and they didn't have a wait for the elevator.

Just inside his room, Paul abruptly stopped. "Shit. Do you have condoms?"

Lee stared at him, dismayed. "No. *Now* one of us thinks about it. I can run back out."

Paul shook his head and closed the door behind them. "I'm negative, but I think it's better we keep things simple."

"So am I, and I agree." Lee opened a cabinet to reveal an assortment of liquor miniatures. "Would you like a nightcap?"

"I'd love a drink. It's, um, been a while since my last test. I've been in a...dry spell. When were you last tested?"

Lee rolled his eyes. "Dry spell, is it? Mojave or Sahara?" He held up a small bottle of bourbon, and Paul nodded. "Ice?"

"More like Antarctic, and I don't need ice. Just give me the mini like in the good old days."

They tapped the miniatures together and sipped. Lee motioned at the sofa, positioned in front of a large window with a view of the Newark skyline. Paul took his hand and led him to it, pulling him down beside him.

How often had they sat nestled together, Paul's arm around his shoulders? Whenever they were alone, Paul seemed happy to hold him. He'd taken it for granted as a younger man. Now he looked back on it with wiser eyes, knowing the action said what words didn't.

He'd been too caught up in the flush of his first relationship to examine Paul's actions too closely. Foolishly, Lee believed the

DECEMBER PROMISE

gossip about Paul sleeping his way across campus and back meant Paul wasn't capable of any deep emotion. Only later did he realize how much Paul cared.

It was a long time ago, and they were different men now, but one thing hadn't changed. Paul's arm around him just felt *right*.

Lee relaxed against Paul's warmth and finished his drink in two quick swallows. Paul's lips brushed his temple. "You haven't confessed how long it's been since you were with someone."

He nudged Paul with his elbow. "Okay, Nosey Rosy. It's been over two years." Lee stretched out his legs. "It's strange. I get a lot of offers, but for some reason, I never say yes."

Paul set his empty bottle down on the end table. "Are you going to say 'yes' now?"

"I'm working up to it."

Lee drained the last drops from his miniature and set it aside. The bourbon warmed his belly; its heat slowly seeping outward to his knees and elbows to relax him. He needed it, too. He wasn't just shy. Scared was more like it. So much rested on tonight, so many dreams. If tonight didn't go well, if his wish of one more night with Paul turned to bitter fruit, he'd have to live with it for the rest of his life. He rested his hand on Paul's thigh, tipped his head back, and kissed the soft skin below his ear.

Paul sucked in a quick breath a moment before his mouth came down hard on Lee's. Lee opened his lips and thrust his tongue into Paul's heat, beginning a dance of give and take. The ebb and flow of desire pulled him ever closer to the moment when fear would flee and he could embrace Paul without any hesitation or reserve.

Low in his throat Paul moaned, a sound full of need and encouragement that sent a shiver down Lee's spine into dark, private places. His balls drew up close to his body, even as his

DECEMBER PROMISE

cock pulsed and swelled. He needed Paul to go slow and fast, all at the same time. His fingers found the tab of Paul's zipper and tugged it down, while Paul aided his efforts by undoing the button.

He didn't protest as Paul pushed him down beneath him on the narrow sofa, never breaking the kiss. Sweat broke out on his skin as a burst of arousal skidded along his nerve endings. Lee's memories blended with the newness of the moment.

Paul was heavier than he used to be, his six-foot-plus frame filled out with mature muscle. But the sudden press of his hard cock along Lee's thigh was familiar, a coming home to what was right and to where he belonged.

Lee nibbled at the corner of Paul's mouth, teasing his lower lip. Paul slid his lips along his jaw line, his chest expanding as he sucked in a deep breath. Lee slipped his hand under Paul's shirt to caress dewy skin.

"Oh, God, Paul, do you know how many times I dreamed of this?"

Paul rose up enough to look at him with his eyes gone black and unsettled. "One less time than me?"

"Get off me. Let's go to bed."

Paul licked his lips. His gaze darted away and quickly back.

"I need you to know something first."

CHAPTER 5

Why did he need to talk about anything? Couldn't he let it go and kiss Lee instead? Sure, he could, but the last thing he wanted to do was hurt him again. Paul touched Lee's face with gentle fingers, stroking the light stubble on his cheek.

"Babe, I want to fuck you in the worst kind of way. And maybe not only tonight. But if we do this, for whatever reasons we both might have, and you walk away in the morning, I'll understand."

Lee grasped his shoulders and gave him a shake. "You worry too much. You always did. Now stop analyzing and let me up because this couch isn't big enough for what I want to do to you."

"Oh? What is that?"

Lee shoved him, and Paul rolled them off the sofa, landing beneath his lover and absorbing the impact. Looking up at Lee, he

DECEMBER PROMISE

knew what he wanted. “No condoms, babe. Remember?”

“How stupid can men our age be? Don’t answer that.” Lee rolled to his feet in a strong, fluid motion and put his hand out. Paul took it and allowed him to pull him up. He held his jeans up as he kicked off his shoes, then let the pants drop.

Lee’s eyes gleamed as he switched on the bedside lamp and his gaze took in Paul’s low-rise briefs with the steel rod inside. “Nice undies, lover.”

“When do I get to see yours?”

Lee toed-off his shoes, leaving his hands at his waist. Paul made a circular motion with his hands, urging him to proceed, then yanked his shirt over his head without bothering to unbutton it. Instead of dropping his pants, Lee took off his shirt.

“You got hairy, babe.” He tugged the dark fur in the middle of Lee’s chest. In their college days, it hadn’t been there.

“Now, I have to warn you about something.” Lee’s jeans hit the floor.

“I knew they’d be navy,” Paul teased. “I remember you like to color coordinate.”

Lee flipped down the bedspread and sprawled back onto the pillows. “That’s not it, but forget it. It can wait until you see it in the morning. Coming?”

“I’m not coming too soon, I hope. And that’s a big tease, Lee. I’ll wait until morning to find out if you insist, but the curiosity might keep me awake.”

“It’s not worth losing sleep over. Trust me.” Lee patted the spot next to him.

Paul flopped on the mattress beside him and quickly turned off the lamp.

The room plunged into wild patterns of shadow and silver

DECEMBER PROMISE

created by the lights of the city outside. He got a leg over Lee's thighs and slipped his hand down the front of his shorts. His fingers closed around Lee's rigid shaft.

Paul rolled the velvety foreskin back, down over a hard inner core, and was rewarded by his lover's soft sigh. Lee had the only uncircumcised cock he'd ever sucked. He rolled to his knees and eased Lee's skivvies off his hips. His dick looked dark against his pale abdomen. He wished he'd left the light on so he could see Lee's mature body better, but he'd waited this long and he'd make it until morning.

Lee's familiar scent expanded in his consciousness, bringing with it the knowledge of why he had stopped dating some guys. Even the scent of soap on other skin had sometimes been wrong to him, and he'd never consciously realized why, until now. He didn't have time to dwell on this new realization. Very slowly, he licked around the rim of Lee's cock.

Grasping the base of the shaft, he went down over it, deep throat. Lee moaned softly, his hand fisted in the sheet, his hips moving restlessly. He shifted and smacked Paul's bare ass with enough force to sting. Paul responded by nipping Lee's thigh hard enough to warn him not to start something they'd have to finish. Lee laughed, a sound caught between a chuckle and a gasp as Paul carefully allowed his teeth to graze the rim of his dick. Lee smacked Paul's butt again.

"Move your very fine ass, Macy."

Paul wiggled around until Lee could reach his cock, his fingers closing around the shaft.

"Nice dick," he whispered, his breath tickling Paul's damp skin.

Paul shivered and stopped his movements, all his focus poised

DECEMBER PROMISE

for the moment Lee would put his mouth on him.

“Are you going to torture me, babe?” Paul flicked his tongue across the tip of Lee’s cock and tasted the salty-sour drop of pre-cum that appeared there. His world spun as the heat of Lee’s mouth enveloped him.

Paul forgot to think—or breathe—as Lee took him, his mouth and hand moving in tandem over his cock. Other men had done this with him, but never did it thrill him this way. He sucked Lee’s rod deep, then stroked the flat mushroom of his head with his tongue. He gathered his wits and slipped his hand beneath Lee, his fingers trailing down into the dark crevice between his buttocks to tease for entrance, finally pushing a finger past the tight ring of muscle into Lee. He shifted, giving Lee room to do the same to him.

Wrapped in mutual pleasure they climbed, lick by wonderful lick. Lee moaned, deep in his chest. Paul knew the sound of a man on the edge of falling into darkness and doubled his attentions. He swirled his tongue over the tip of Lee’s cock, the way he used to do to drive him crazy. Lee made the sound again, deeper this time as his thighs tightened. Hot semen hit the back of Paul’s throat. Lee sucked in a deep breath as Paul released him.

Still panting, Lee levered up on his elbow and met Paul’s gaze across the lines and planes of their bodies. Paul’s balls drew up. His cock throbbed with anticipation, eager for the moment of release. Lee licked his lips, then his dark head lowered over him.

Paul didn’t have long to wait. Lee teased beneath his sac, his middle finger opening the eager rosebud. Paul’s shoulders lifted as his whole body tensed. The climax swept through him, then out of him and into the heat of Lee’s mouth. Limp, but not truly sated, he reached for his lover. Lee held him off.

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Jeez, it’s hot in here. I’m cooking.”

Paul settled back on the pillows, extending his arm with the open invitation for Lee to come to him as soon as he was ready. He was sweaty, too, but he didn’t care. Holding Lee was as necessary as breathing. If his memories were correct, and he knew they were, it would only be a minute or two before his lover’s hot flush cooled and he’d want to be close.

“I need a bottle of water.” Lee rolled off the bed and went to the fridge. Paul grinned as the light silhouetted his frame.

Lee had been a scrawny college boy. Now that slender European build had filled out. Those straight shoulders let the eye flow down to trim waist and hips, then lower to muscular haunches supported by long, strong thighs. The refrigerator door closed and Lee turned around.

“Stop ogling my ass, Paul.”

“Too late.” Paul laughed and patted the spot beside him. “Get your ass back in bed, and I’ll stop looking.”

Lee sat on the edge of the mattress and handed him the water bottle. “No after-sex cigarette?”

“Nope. I quit about a year after graduation. You were right.” He lifted the bottle and took a drink.

Lee stretched out beside him, accepted the bottle back, and drained it. “It’s nice not to have to compete with it. I wondered all afternoon if you’d quit, but was afraid to ask.”

Was his cigarette the real reason Lee always moved away after sex and not because he overheated? Paul suddenly knew in his heart it was. God, he’d been such a stupid snot in college.

“You can ask me anything, babe. Come put your head on my shoulder the way you used to do.”

“As great as that just was, things aren’t the way they used to

DECEMBER PROMISE

be, Paul.”

“I know. Can we enjoy tonight and let tomorrow take care of itself?”

To his relief, Lee rolled toward him and rested his head on his shoulder. His lover’s fingers teased his nipple. Above Lee’s head, he smiled at the familiar caress. Some things hadn’t changed.

There were a lot of things he wanted to say, if only he knew how Lee would respond. The last thing he wanted to do was jeopardize what little time they may have. Paul squeezed Lee’s busy fingers.

“I can’t believe we... How strange is it that we found each other in that mob of people this afternoon?”

Lee snorted. “You still don’t buy into the concept of kismet, do you?”

“Maybe I will, after today.” Paul rolled onto his side and rested his knee on Lee’s hip so they could lie closer. “I want to tell you something about my job, but I don’t want you to think I’m pressuring you by telling you.”

“You worry too much.” Lee cupped his cheek. “Being with you again is good.”

“Ditto.” Paul leaned in and kissed him, a light teasing touch. Lee’s lips parted and his tongue swiped across his lower lip. Paul smiled. “Still horny?”

“Like I haven’t been in years.” Lee’s hand snaked between their bodies to cup Paul’s sac.

His body responded, the blood pooling in his groin. His heart beat wildly, then settled to a rapid beat. His cock filled, swelling full as Lee teased the curls between his buttocks.

“Ditto again, babe. Are you gonna tickle my ass or are you going to get serious with that hand?”

DECEMBER PROMISE

“That depends on your hand, *babe*.”

Paul chuckled softly and trailed his palm across his lover’s stomach. Lee sucked in his belly and his questing fingertips encountered the tip of Lee’s stiff dick.

He rolled Lee’s foreskin back and breathed in the rich, musky, fertile scent that wafted up to him as he spread the silky wetness that welled up beneath his touch. “My, my.”

Paul sucked in a sudden, sharp breath as Lee’s finger breached him, sending a jolt of arousal along his nerve endings. Lee chuckled and wiggled his digit.

“Like that?”

“Do it some more so I can decide.”

The pressure eased as Lee withdrew. His fingers found Paul’s shaft and stroked in a slow, lazy movement. “You’re too eager.”

They shifted around, wrapping arms around each other and bracing each other with entwined legs. Equally hard, their erections trapped between their bellies, Lee got his thumb and fingers around both of them and stroked as Paul held him close. Lee’s dreamy voice floated in the darkness behind Paul’s closed eyes.

“We did this a lot.”

“Hmm. It kept us from making so much noise. I had to kiss you right before you came all over me to keep you from waking the neighbors.”

Lee sighed against his cheek. Paul slanted his lips and kissed him as Lee’s sigh turned into a moan. Goose bumps raced across his buttocks and down the back of his thighs. Nothing mattered but those slow fingers moving over his cock, and the man in his arms.

The heat grew between them, pooling sweat where skin touched skin. Paul nibbled the corner of Lee’s mouth, then flicked

DECEMBER PROMISE

his tongue across his lips. Those lazy fingers refused to hurry.

Paul flexed his pelvis. "Lee."

Lee kissed him, hard, his tongue thrusting into his mouth over and over, stealing his breath. Low in his throat he moaned in short, urgent sounds to plead with his lover, but to no avail. The slow, easy strokes didn't falter or speed up. His pulse pounded in his ears, deafening him. His muscles clenched as the threshold raced to meet him.

The pleasure seized him, plunging him into bliss-filled starlight darkness. He thought he cried out to Lee, or maybe it was Lee voicing his own pleasure. It didn't matter. Nothing did except Lee saying his name like a mantra, anchoring him so he could fly.

Paul sucked in a desperate, deep breath into lungs starved for oxygen. Lee trembled in his arms, panting. Wet trails slid down his belly to the sheet beneath him.

This was right. This was what should have been. Now all he had to do was figure out a way to keep it this time.

CHAPTER 6

Lee woke with a start, disoriented. Memory flashed through him. The warm body nestled against his backside belonged to Paul. They'd reconnected, shared dinner, and more. He was in bed with Paul, and the man snored. That was something new since their college dorm nights. He grinned and rolled over.

"Hey, lover, wake up."

Nothing. Not even a grunt.

Lee poked Paul's belly with his index finger. Still nothing. Maybe he should allow Paul to sleep if he was under that deep. He inched away, moving toward the edge of the mattress. The covers rustled. A large hand gripped his left buttock as a raspy voice questioned him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

DECEMBER PROMISE

“To the bathroom.”

“You’re on your own.” Paul squeezed his ass, then let go. “What time is it?”

Lee checked his watch as he rolled to his feet. “Just after six. I’ll get a bottle of water while I’m up.” He closed the bathroom door before he switched on the light so the sudden brightness didn’t annoy his bed partner.

Making love with Paul was even better than he remembered. He still had a lot of feelings for his first lover; now what was he going to do about them? When he exited the bathroom, Paul lay propped up on the pillows, receiver to his ear. He covered the microphone.

“The alumni breakfast is at eight-thirty. Are you going?”

Lee opened the drapes a few inches. It was still dark outside. They could lie in bed and watch the sunrise. “Yes, unless you have an alternative plan that involves me.”

Paul lifted his hand. “This is Paul Macy, room eight-one-eight. I’d like a carafe of regular coffee with two cups. Cream and sugar.” He smiled at Lee and patted the bed beside him. “Ten minutes is fine. Thank you.”

Lee slipped beneath the sheet and tapped his foot to his lover’s. Paul hugged him, then rolled away. “Don’t move.”

“Oh, great. You tempt me back to bed and you leave.” Lee laughed as Paul smacked his own butt and closed the bathroom door.

When he came out, Paul retrieved a pair of sweat pants from his suitcase and pulled them on.

Lee flipped the sheet back for him. “Those need to come off.”

“They will as soon as the coffee comes. If we go to the breakfast, then the luncheon, then the dedication ceremony, we

DECEMBER PROMISE

won't have much time left. My flight leaves at five-fifteen."

Lee's throat tightened. "I guess it can't be helped. Real life never goes away."

"Listen, Lee. About..." Paul stopped at the quiet rap on the door. "That's room service."

Lee reached for his wallet, but Paul waved him off. "Thanks, but no. I'd have ordered this with or without company this morning."

He watched Paul tip the bellboy, accept the tray, and close the door with a well-placed kick. Paul set the tray on the dresser, fixed two cups, and set them on the nightstand next to Lee. They settled shoulder-to-shoulder. Paul lifted his knees to his chest and wiggled out of his sweatpants. Lee patted his butt while his feet were tangled in his pants, then played innocent.

"What were you going to say before the coffee arrived?"

"Oh, just something about my job. It doesn't matter."

Lee sipped his coffee and wished he knew what to say that wouldn't sound like prying into Paul's business. Whatever he almost said had some significance. Paul Macy chose his topics of conversation carefully. "I'm interested in your job, so tell me."

Paul draped an arm over Lee's shoulder. "There was a major shake-up recently, that's all. A few contract changes."

"And it affected you?"

"Yeah, but in a good way. I've got a lot more options."

Lee's pulse quickened. Why would Paul mention this unless he entertained ideas of what it meant for both of them? If that active mind of his weren't busy churning out scenarios, he would have remained silent. "Do you want to toss a few of those options out for discussion?"

Paul rested his head against Lee's. "I'm not sure. It doesn't feel

DECEMBER PROMISE

like there's time."

"I have all the time you need."

It was true. The meals, the dedication—nothing mattered more than hearing Paul say he'd like to figure out a way for them to stay in touch. Or more. And Lee wanted more.

"I don't know what I need." Paul swirled the coffee in his mug. "You know, I always thought when I was older I'd know myself better, but that's not working out so well."

Lee leaned closer and kissed the spot below his ear. "I know what you mean. Go to breakfast or call room service again. Decisions get harder."

Paul laughed softly and trailed his fingers along Lee's jaw line before tipping his head back to kiss him. Lee didn't let him linger. The last thing they needed was hot coffee in their laps.

Time was, he wouldn't be so practical. The grin on Paul's face said he had much the same thought. He planted a kiss on Lee's temple.

"It was important to me to come for the dedication, and now it's secondary."

"Are we saying we're going to forget the official itinerary and stay in bed all day?"

"In the elevator, we told Josh and Mike we'd see them at the luncheon."

Lee's skin prickled. He and Paul talked as if they were a couple again. "We" this and "we" that. Did Paul realize it, too? Had they simply fallen back into old habits, or did it mean something more? "A phone call to the concierge will handle that."

Paul sighed, took a drink of coffee, then set his cup aside. "Actually, I think I'm supposed to stand up and smile at the luncheon. Breakfast in bed works, though."

DECEMBER PROMISE

Under the sheet, Paul's hand slid along Lee's thigh. Lee looked at him, eyebrow raised, as his cock swelled, lengthened. Last night wasn't enough. Making love this morning wouldn't be enough, but he'd take whatever he could and never complain aloud.

"Yes, it does, but it's on me. No argument, Macy." He grabbed that busy hand through the covers. "Now, before the sheet comes off, I need you to promise me you won't snicker."

Paul cocked his head, curious. "Babe, I've seen it. I know how big it is, and it's nothing to snicker about."

"It's not that. I know you, Paul. Now swear you won't laugh."

Paul's eyes widened in feigned horror. "Oh, my God, you tattooed my name on your dick!"

"No!" Lee sighed. He might as well get it over with.

He flipped the sheet back to reveal his silver bush. Paul leaned back, his lips pressed tightly together. Nothing could disguise the amusement in his shining blue eyes. Paul cleared his throat.

"Well, it's a perfect match for your gray eyes." He laughed. "I guess I can't call you a silver fox, though, can I?"

"I would prefer you not." Lee grinned. "This happened about a year ago. Talk about your early midlife crisis. I thought for sure the hair on my head would turn, too, but not yet."

Paul slipped his hand into the soft crease where Lee's thigh met his torso, his fingers tucked along his sac. Lee's cock responded, moving slowly across his abdomen as it filled and hardened. Paul moistened his lips.

"I hate to say it, but this probably means your hair will turn next. You'll look very distinguished when it does. So, are you done with your coffee?"

Pulse fluttering, Lee lifted the mug to his lips and swallowed the remaining liquid in his cup. "Yep. Finished."

DECEMBER PROMISE

He stretched out a long arm to set the empty mug on the nightstand and missed as Paul's warm, wet mouth closed around his cock. Already half hard, his dick swelled rapidly to its full eight-inch glory. Paul rolled his foreskin back and teased the sensitive rim. Lee stroked the back of his head in encouragement.

Paul released his cock and kissed his belly button. Lee closed his eyes to focus completely on the path his lips took, suckling one nipple, then the other. Each pull of Paul's mouth sent a jolt of pleasure along his nerve endings. He forgot to breathe as Paul straddled his hips and reached for his cock.

"Paul, raw isn't a good idea. I'm not ready for it."

"I didn't lie. I'm negative. And you? You couldn't tell a lie if your life depended on it."

Lee grasped his hips, stopping him. "No. I mean it. This is too fast for me."

Paul stared at him for a very long thirty seconds. Lee's arousal waned with the knowledge his lover was hurt and angry.

"I'm sorry, Paul." Lee reached for him, but Paul rocked back on his heels, his face impassive.

"Did you lie about your status, Lee? Have you changed that much?"

"No. I've changed, sure, but not in that. You've changed, too."

With a quick, controlled movement, Paul got to his feet beside the bed. "And you can't trust me."

All the little hopes Lee had that he and Paul could find a way back to each other shriveled. The half-formed and only partially acknowledged dreams faded. Those things he'd hidden from himself bloomed and died, and it was his fault.

If he had a code, it would be "do the right thing." He'd done that, but this time it cost him the one thing he'd discovered he

DECEMBER PROMISE

wanted more than anything else—Paul. There had to be a way to salvage their new start, to make his lover understand his reticence to take the risk.

His lover. An old-fashioned word, but he'd never thought of anyone else in that way. All the others had been friends with benefits, nothing more.

Lee took his hand and tugged on it. "I'm sorry, Paul. Come back down here so we can have a rational conversation about this. I've always needed to go a little slower than you, or don't you remember?"

Paul rolled his shoulders, then blew out a long breath. "I do remember. That was a stupid move, and now I'm the one who is sorry." He held his hand out to Lee. Lee tugged on it as he scooted over toward the center of the mattress.

"Get back in the bed. Please."

To his great relief, Paul eased down beside him. The moment where they would make love had passed, but if he were patient, maybe they would move back to it. Lee wanted that badly. He wrapped his arms around Paul, who responded in kind. They lay in silence as the world outside welcomed the morning.

Slowly, with small caresses and soft whispers, they relaxed into each other again. Lee rested his forehead against Paul's.

"I don't want you to think I don't trust you, or don't believe you. It's just..."

"You need to think about us together again. I know, babe." Paul hugged him. "I remember you used to get really pissed at me when I'd push you to do something you weren't ready for. I think I just reverted back to my college jerk days."

"It's okay, Paul. I think...I know I did, too." Lee nuzzled his neck. "Do you think we can get the moment back?"

DECEMBER PROMISE

Paul dipped his head and kissed him. Lee opened his lips, and Paul's tongue licked into his. Unhurried, the kiss deepened, leading them back to passion. He flexed his hips, coaxing his lover to discover the size of his desire. Paul pressed his pelvis against his, hard cock to hard cock.

Lee's fingertips caressed Paul's side, soaking up the texture of the smooth, warm skin covering the ridges of his ribs. He trailed his hand down across Paul's chest, then along the outside of his thigh, finally sliding over the rise of his hip to cup his ass. All the while, Paul echoed his caress, touching him, stroking him.

Lee had missed touch more than sex these last years. It had been the deciding factor in why he'd stopped going out, had given up meeting new men. Time was, the sex was plentiful, but those casual hook-ups left him lonely and ultimately unfulfilled. Being with Paul again changed all that.

He slid out of Paul's embrace to kiss a path over his chest and belly. He teased the tip of Paul's cock with lazy flicks of his tongue. The bed dipped as Paul levered up on his elbow, twisting around. Lee inhaled sharply as his lover teased the head of his prick with the tip of his tongue.

The light pressure against the smooth skin of his glans sent a shiver down into the dark crevice between his buttocks. Paul hummed, sending vibrations through his cock. Lee followed suit. Back and forth they went, following the other's lead to give pleasure and accept it.

Lee tasted the salty drop Paul's body gave up. His groin throbbed as the sensations built. Every breath was laden with Paul's musky, rich scent. Paul teased between his buttocks, massaging the tight right of muscle, then breaching it. Lee released Paul, buried his face in his lover's wiry dark bush, and let the

DECEMBER PROMISE

climax lift him with Paul's soft, warm lips anchoring him as wave after wave of bliss broke over him with every pounding beat of his heart. He dropped back into himself, spent.

A hazy realization formed in the sparkling darkness. Lee roused to lick Paul's thigh as he pushed him over onto his back. His touch light, with his thumb and forefinger he stroked Paul's hard shaft. A pearly drop appeared. Lee lapped it up, moistened his middle finger and eased a hand beneath Paul, who raised his knee to give Lee room to tease him. Lee slipped his finger past the tight right of muscle as he took Paul deep throat. It didn't take long.

Paul's fingers dug into his shoulder, gripping like his life depended on it. Lee wondered fleetingly if he'd bruise, but he didn't care. Paul gasped for breath, jerking with each sucking pull of Lee's lips. He moaned, a long, low sound that blended memories of other times in Lee's mind. He eased the pressure on Paul's cock and shortened his stroke. Paul tensed, then blew out an explosive breath as his dick pulsed beneath Lee's fingers, coming.

Lee swallowed every drop, staying with his lover until he went limp. Still panting, Paul reached for him. Lee twisted around and went into his arms, half sprawled across his body.

Whatever had drawn him to Paul as a boy still lived within him, but it made no difference. At the end of this day, Paul would leave, and he had no choice but to let him go.

CHAPTER 7

Breakfast in bed became a sinful retreat from the looming reality of impending separation. Paul forgot the dedication and the fact he had to catch a flight later in the day. He didn't care if the kitchen staff thought the man in room eight-eighteen had hosted an orgy and now had to feed the participants. Lee had oohed and ahhed over the menu and been unable to make up his mind, so he simply ordered one of each.

Sharing bites and nibbles of strawberry crepes, apple crumb pie, chocolate croissant, lemon coffee cake, raspberry-cream cheese Danish, orange-cranberry scone with clotted cream, peanut butter muffin, and a fresh pot of Columbian coffee with Lee fulfilled a decadent fantasy he hadn't known he had. And they'd somehow managed to do it without smearing food on various body

DECEMBER PROMISE

parts and licking it off.

Darn it.

He lay back in the wide swath of sunshine that spilled across the bed and rubbed his belly.

“My God, that was good.” He accepted another nibble of the muffin from Lee’s fingertips, chewed and swallowed. “I bet I’ll gain five pounds.”

Lee topped his coffee and handed it to him. “You and me both. I insist you allow me to pay for half of all this. Fifty bucks is a lot, even for this amazing little interlude.”

“Ah, but worth every penny.” He motioned at the carnage of half-eaten foods scattered on the plates and trays at the foot of the bed. “I can actually hear my mother harping on how wasteful all that is.”

“I suspect neither of us does this every day.” Lee settled back on the pillows beside him. “Everyone is allowed a splurge every now and again.”

He grinned. “Splurge? Is that what you call this?”

“Okay. Oink-fest?”

Paul laughed. “Let’s go with splurge.” He patted his stomach again. “I’ll never be able to eat anything at the luncheon.”

“You might surprise yourself.” Lee yawned and stretched. “I need to get to my room, grab a shower, and get dressed.” He pinched his side. “I hope I can snap my pants.”

“Don’t whine, babe.” He scrunched down and rested his head against Lee’s shoulder. These were the last private moments they might have and he didn’t have a sense of what, if anything, Lee hoped would grow from their reunion. Maybe now was the perfect time to mention he could work from any location in the country. Before he could speak, Lee’s cell phone belted out a bluesy ballad.

DECEMBER PROMISE

Lee grinned and answered immediately without looking at the caller id. "Good morning, Jon."

It was impossible not to eavesdrop, but had the call been private, Lee would have scampered off to the bathroom. Paul sipped his coffee and didn't bother to pretend disinterest. It was painfully obvious Lee was close to this Jon. Jealousy reared its ugly head when Lee laughed over something this Jon fellow said.

"Well, I'm happy for you and Cameron. Stay in Belize the extra week and don't worry about a thing. I'll handle the call to the magazine first thing Monday morning." Lee flipped his phone shut, ending the call.

Paul closed his eyes. How juvenile could a man be? He opened his eyes into Lee's unflinching gaze. Yep. He knew. "Sorry. I'm an idiot."

"Your entire body tensed, from your shoulder to your calf. Jon is my client. My only client. He's that important to my employers. I give him my undivided attention when it comes to business."

Paul kissed Lee's bristly cheek. They both needed to shave. "Like I just said. Listen, Lee, I think we need to talk about a few things."

"I'm not sure I want to."

"Me, neither, but since I didn't get the mind-reading gene, I need speech."

Lee rolled toward him, his knee sliding up between Paul's legs until his thigh rested against his balls.

"Maybe we were both wrong, but maybe we were both too young. I think of my twenties as the 'crash and burn' years when it comes to boyfriends."

"Except for me." Paul ran his thumb over Lee's lips. "We did okay."

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Yeah, we did, right up to that December night.”

Paul took a deep breath. The last thing he wanted was for Lee to think he blamed him for his own misunderstanding of the situation. Learning the truth, that Lee’s dad had been so sick, erased everything but his own stupidity.

“One of us has to ask this out loud, babe. What happens now?”

Lee’s gaze gray filled with uncertainty. “I don’t know. A long-distance relationship is a recipe for heartache.”

A dull pain grew in his chest. He’d known Lee would feel that way. But what was his problem? All he had to do was tell Lee he could work from anywhere in the country. He could move—he’d gladly move. Sure, he loved Monterey, but he loved Lee more. They could keep his beach house and vacation there a couple times a year. So why wouldn’t the words leave his mouth?

“Maybe too many years have passed, Paul. It’s wonderful to have this time with you again. I’ll always remember last night.”

His lungs burned with the realization Lee viewed last night as nothing more than a fuck for old time’s sake. It hurt to breathe.

“I’ll always remember it, too. Maybe we can at least email and stay in touch.” It would be better if they didn’t, but he’d take the crumbs and hoard them just to know Lee was out there somewhere.

Lee’s arms came around him, holding him tightly as his husky voice whispered in his ear. “I’d better go get ready for the festivities. It won’t help for me to put it off any longer.”

Paul hugged him back, dreading having to let Lee go, but determined to live through it. “You’re right.”

Paul slanted his lips across Lee’s. The memory of that long ago last kiss knifed through him to reopen a wound that never healed. Too soon, Lee pulled away and didn’t meet his gaze.

“Come by my room for me on your way to the luncheon?”

DECEMBER PROMISE

“Yes.”

Lee rolled away and off the bed. Paul watched silently as he gathered up his clothing, then Paul pulled on his sweatpants and perched on the edge of the mattress while Lee dressed. His hand on the doorknob, Lee paused. “Room six-ten. About an hour?”

“Got it. See you then.”

“Kiss me?”

He stood and walked across the room into Lee’s open arms. Standing inside the ring of his heat and scent, it was easy to kiss him. His lips tasted of cinnamon, coffee, raspberry and lemon, and no flavor in the world would ever compare again. Lee pulled away and looked up at him with dark, enigmatic eyes.

“I’ll be ready when you arrive.”

Paul nodded and opened the door for him, then Lee was gone, slipping through the opening without another word. There was nothing left to do but shower and shave—and kick himself for being a total fool.

And when he finished, he would kick himself again, even harder.

Damn his cowardice! He’d been rejected before and lived through it, but this was Lee. What if Lee said...

Paul let out a howl of frustration. He was not only a coward; he was an idiot. A total fucking idiot. How could a reasonably intelligent man be so stupid as to not see what was right in front of him?

Lee was afraid to say the words, too.

They’d fallen back into old patterns. He led, and out of love and respect, Lee followed.

Instead of dawdling in the moment of realization of his stupidity, he needed to get showered and dressed, and run a fast

DECEMBER PROMISE

errand.

Screw the luncheon. Fuck the ceremony. None of it mattered now.

He'd made choices through the years, and now he made the best one of all.

Lee.

Paul hustled into the shower. The water trickling down over his body caused his traitorous dick to swell in a vain attempt to distract him, but for once he ignored it. It wasn't until his hand shook while shaving that he took a deep breath and slowed down. There was time.

He tossed everything but the jeans and sweater he planned to wear into his suitcase. Dressed, he checked the room one last time for belongings, slipped on his leather jacket, and took his suitcase and garment bag to the rental car. Too bad Lee wouldn't see him in his suit. He cleaned up good, as his grandma used to say.

Completing his errand in record time, he stopped by the front desk and checked out, which he needed to do today regardless of anything else. Heart pounding, he stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for Lee's floor.

If Lee turned him away, he'd simply go to the roof and jump off. Or get drunk. Yeah. Drinking until he passed out was the better choice.

How silly. He was he supposed to be a mature adult, for God's sake. So why was he nervous as a teenager? The door slid open on the sixth floor. Sweat broke out under his arms. Lee had to listen to reason. They belonged together.

Whatever it was that connected two people with that special bond, it still existed between them. Call it lust, pheromones, or even love, how often in life did it happen? They'd be fools to let it

DECEMBER PROMISE

go again. Paul knocked on the door to room six-ten.

The door opened slowly to reveal the drapes pulled tightly to darken the room.

“Lee?”

A hand appeared from behind the door to beckon him forward. He stepped inside and whirled around. His gaze swept Lee’s naked frame from head to toe, and back up again. Goose bumps cooled his damp skin.

“You’re not dressed.”

Lee shook his head. “Noticed that, did you?” His eyebrow raised. “You’re not dressed for the luncheon, either.”

“I have something more urgent to do.” Paul took a deep breath. “It may be the most important thing I’ll ever do for the rest of my life.” He caressed his lover’s sides, his hands coming to rest at Lee’s hips. “I’m not sure where to start except to say I want my life to be with you. I don’t want to waste any more time.”

Lee’s hands came to rest on his shoulders. “I don’t want to lose you again, Paul. I’ve searched for some echo of you in every man I’ve ever met. What a fool. I should’ve searched for you. But what do we do? Spend our lives grabbing weekends together? We’ll flame out doing that and be worse off than we were a week ago.”

Paul shook his head. “No. You know those job changes I mentioned? I can work from anywhere in the country, even the Hamptons.”

Lee stared at him. “You’d move here? Sell your house in Monterey?”

Paul shook his head again. “Don’t ask me to do that. Do you think we can afford to keep the house for our vacation spot?”

“Absolutely. I’d like that.” Lee cupped his cheek. “Don’t fly out of town tonight, Paul. I need you to stay.”

DECEMBER PROMISE

“I need a place to sleep since I had to check out of my suite.”

“Sleep? Just sleep?”

“I, um...well, no. Unless that’s all you want.”

The look in Lee’s gleaming eyes said sleep was the last thing he wanted.

“So do I get dressed real quick and we go to the luncheon?”

Paul reached into his pocket, pulled out the three-pack of condoms and bottle of lubricant he’d just purchased, and handed them to Lee.

“I think you’ll look best wearing one of these.”

CHAPTER 8

Lee tossed the supplies on the bed, then draped Paul's jacket over the back of the chair. He'd not been sure the man would actually come to his room. Paul was more unsettled than he'd ever seen him. That's why meeting him at the door, naked, was the only thing that made any sense to show him how serious he was. He smiled as his lover came up behind him and pulled him back against his chest. He reached back and gripped Paul's hips.

Paul's hands dipped down across his belly. His pulse quickened, his cock lengthened, hardened, as Paul's fingertips combed his gray bush and gently tugged on a few hairs.

"I like this about you."

He wiggled his ass against Paul's bulging zipper. "Ha. Wait until it happens to you, Racy Macy."

DECEMBER PROMISE

Soft lips teased the tender skin where his neck blended into his shoulder. Warm fingers closed around his hard shaft and eased the foreskin back, exposing the glans. "I like this, too."

"You have too many clothes on, lover."

Paul chuckled, his voice low in Lee's ear. "Compared to you, I'm way overdressed."

His fingers grazed Lee's ass as he worked down his zipper. Lee turned and yanked his shirt over his head. Paul's jeans dropped to pool around his ankles. He struggled to toe off his shoes and gave up. Lee smacked his ass as he hobbled to the bed and collapsed on the edge. Lee knelt in front of him, pulled his shoes off, and tossed them over his shoulders. Paul tried to shake his feet free of his pants.

"Stop it before you pull a muscle." Lee tugged the jeans over Paul's ankles and tossed them onto the chair as Paul groused at him.

"Well, hurry up, will ya!"

Lee stood and pushed him flat to the mattress. Paul made one attempt to scoot up on the bed, but Lee grabbed his knees and dragged him back. Paul grinned up at him.

"Are you gonna fuck me right here?"

The bed was just about the perfect height. He could make it work. "Yep."

Paul batted his eyelashes at him. "But you haven't even kissed me."

Busy rolling on a condom, Lee grunted. He'd kiss Paul until his lips were raw later. "Lube."

Paul took the opportunity to roll away and shove bedding out of the way. Lee pounced on him. "Foreplay next time, Macy. Give me the damn bottle."

DECEMBER PROMISE

He didn't struggle as Paul wrapped his legs around him and, with easy strength, rolled Lee beneath him. Paul lowered his mouth to his. Heat exploded in his groin at the first touch of those hot lips. Paul's tongue licked into his, driving him onto a field of mock battle where surrender was the true victory.

The sound of his pulse pounded in his ears, but he heard the low growling deep in Paul's throat. Out of his memory came other times he'd made those wanting sounds, and he knew how to turn those growls into moans of pleasure. He hooked his ankle behind Paul's knee and rolled them over.

Lee kissed his way down to Paul's chest, sucking each flat brown nipple into a tiny peak before licking his way down to Paul's leaking cock. He flicked his tongue to the slit, lapping up the pre-cum as a prelude to taking him, deep throat. Paul's hips thrust up, his fingers fisted in Lee's hair. Lee laved the head, swirling his tongue around the sensitive rim until Paul's body gave up another salty drop. He leaked inside the condom, aware of sudden warmth that quickly cooled. The upside down bottle of lube appeared in his range of vision, a stream of gel filling Paul's belly button. Even with depleted blood flow to the brain, he could take a hint. He released Paul's cock with a little pop and dipped his fingers into the liquid.

By his own admission, Paul hadn't made love in a while, and Lee would bet the farm no matter when that had been, he hadn't bottomed. With great care, he drew slick fingers across the tight, puckered bud. Paul jerked as he pushed his middle finger past the tight right of muscle. Lee waited for the moment of relaxation, then inserted a second finger.

Determined to go slowly, Lee ignored the ache in his balls to concentrate on licking Paul's. He vibrated with an urgent

DECEMBER PROMISE

eagerness, but in this he would not hurry. He waited until Paul's body gripped at his fingers before he withdrew and rose to kneel between those muscled thighs. Paul pulled his knees into his chest, then rested them on Lee's shoulders.

Lee came forward and planted a kiss on Paul's lips as the blunt tip of his sheathed cock pressed for entrance. The head slipped that first bit inside. Paul grunted.

"Tell me, Paul, if I need to stop. I swear I will."

"Hurry up."

He shook his head and pushed farther, the distance of a sigh. Then another, and another. Paul's body opened, and he held himself tightly to his lover, fully seated. He tried to be still, to give Paul a few moments to adjust to his invasion, but need crawled hotly along his nerve endings, silencing his good intentions. Paul fisted his cock with his right hand and stroked.

"I can't wait, Lee!"

Lee withdrew, then sank deep, the pleasure screaming through him. Paul moaned, and instinct took over. His hips thrust rhythmically, moving his cock over his lover's sweet spot. Desperate, breathless sounds rolled out of Paul.

"I...can't..."

He couldn't either. Lee pounded into Paul, once, and again. The air clawed its way out of his lungs. His balls drew up. The room hazed black in his vision as something hot burst within him, then spilled out of him into his lover. Paul groaned, a low, intense sound of welcome relief. The musky scent of completion surrounded them.

Lee eased out, drawing a last groan from Paul as the head slid free. Gently, he lowered his lover's trembling legs to the bed, then went down into Paul's arms and into a breathless kiss that held a

DECEMBER PROMISE

lifetime of promise in a mere second.

He didn't want to move—wasn't sure he could—but he needed to toss the condom. Lee slid from Paul's embrace and padded to the bathroom. Paul came in behind him and turned on the water in the shower. Steam quickly rose around them.

Paul adjusted the water temperature and stepped under the spray. Lee squeezed in behind him, wrapped his arms around his waist, and rested his forehead on Paul's shoulder.

"You okay?"

"I'm amazed I could stand and walk." Paul soaped a washcloth and handed it to him. Lee dutifully washed his back, then went lower. Paul turned to face him.

"Keep doing that, and you'll really like it when I get my second wind."

"I'm counting on it." Lee rested his hand on Paul's soapy chest. "Don't take that flight today. Stay another night."

Paul nodded as he rinsed. "I don't want to leave, but sooner or later I have to go home and take care of everything and get my stuff." He paused. "That is what we're saying, right?"

Clean enough, Lee reached behind him and shut off the water. He handed Paul a towel, then stepped out of the small shower stall so they could both dry off.

"I don't particularly want you to leave, either." He stilled Paul's hands. "Do you really want to move here? I feel like I'm asking too much."

"Did you ask me? I don't remember that. I remember the only thing I don't want to do is sell the beach house."

"You know what I mean." Lee flipped his towel over the shower curtain rod. "There's a couple of sodas in the fridge. Want one?"

DECEMBER PROMISE

"I'd love one." Paul grasped his forearms. "Listen, babe. Here's the truth. When the invitation to come to the dedication arrived, it's like I sorta froze in time or something."

Lee leaned in and kissed him, a long, slow, lingering caress that passed unspoken secrets between them. He ran his thumb over Paul's lower lip.

"I know what you mean. I came here this weekend for one reason and one reason only. I hoped to see you. Just say hello. Something. Anything. It's like I had to see you one more time before I could make even the smallest decision."

Paul guided Lee toward the bed. "Exactly. I didn't know what to expect, and it didn't matter. I had to know. Hey!"

Lee spun him around and overbalanced him onto the bed, then grinned down at him as he sprawled on the sheet and glared up at him. "Fix the pillows."

He opened the small refrigerator tucked under the desk and got the sodas. Paul dutifully beat the pillows fluffy, then scooted over to the center of the bed and lifted his arm so Lee could slip in under it.

Lee closed his eyes, suffused with contentment, as Paul's arm came around him. This is where he belonged. He had a second chance with the man he'd never been able to forget. He opened the bottle, took a drink, and set it aside.

"So the weekend is working out pretty good, but it's not the same as living together."

Paul brushed a kiss to his temple. "I know. Maybe that's the real reason I want to keep the beach house."

"I respect that, Paul." He really did. Besides, Paul having that escape route meant less guilt if things didn't work out.

But they would work out. Lee knew it as surely as he knew the

DECEMBER PROMISE

sun set in the west. How he knew it didn't matter. He simply did.

It was an awesome and scary thing.

"Lee, it'll take me at least a month to take care of everything. I'll have to notify my employers I'm relocating, plus pack what I need and ship it. It'll be December until we'll be completely settled in at your place."

A month spent mostly apart, one filled with questions. Were they doing the right thing? Were they just two lonely men grasping to hold on to something of their youth? Lee didn't believe that, but the dark, empty nights until Paul came back would be challenging.

Whether recognized or not, everyone's life was full of bridges that linked the past to the present, and the present to the future. What were a few more nights alone except a bridge to cross to his—their—future?

"I can work my schedule to fly out and spend two weeks so I can give you hand. A little vacation time so we can get reacquainted the right way." Lee nudged his ribs with his elbow. "I'll let you do me on the beach."

Paul chuckled softly. "Is that a promise?"

"I won't ever promise you anything I can't deliver, you know."

"I know." Paul kissed him. "And that's promise enough."

KC KENDRICKS

Best-selling author KC Kendrick makes her home in Maryland. A 2008 Amber Heat Wave Winner, and a 2008 CAPA nominee, KC writes contemporary gay romances that while are adult in nature, celebrate love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a pseudonym, the author is a two-time EPPIE Finalist, and a 2005 CAPA nominee. With one contemporary title a #1 bestseller, several other top-ten list titles, and a few more recommended reads, the author has established herself as a storyteller that delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope, and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

* * *

**Don't miss *Netting Neptune*
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Theron Bowman is in the throes of a mid-life crisis. At forty, he needs to make some serious decisions about his future. He splurges on a two-week vacation in the Caribbean, and like everything else in his life, things go horribly awry and he ends up working to pay for his room.

Forced by his father to break ties with his family, Colby Denton came to rest on St. Lucia and opened an exclusive resort called The Southern Cross. To celebrate his tenth year on the island, and his birthday, Colby arranges for a series of festive beachside parties. When a sexy sea god swims out of the ocean in front of him, Colby has a brand new plan—netting Neptune.

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