

One New Year's Eve

Erin Nicholas

As he looked up at the Happy New Year banner in the ballroom of the Plaza Hotel, he hoped the coming year would be better than the last.

Dean Winston had worked his ass off in 2016 and he still wasn't sure what he'd accomplished. Frankly, he'd kind of hated 2016. Well, except for the forty-eight Friday nights when he'd flirted with the girl in red.

And yes, she'd worn red every single Friday night of 2016. Of course, it was a part of her uniform so she hadn't really had a choice but it worked. Her name was Holly. Holly Perkins. And now whenever he saw the color red he thought of her.

He turned away from the banner and lifted his glass of champagne, surveying the room. The New Year's Eve party was typical in just about every way. The men were in tuxedos, the women were in evening gowns, and there were gold and silver decorations everywhere. Champagne flowed, waiters with trays of tiny hors d'oeuvres circulated throughout the room and music and laughter filled the air.

Dean drained his glass and reached for another. It was Friday night. He should be up in his office, working after hours. And waiting for her. Not out on the town, bringing in the New Year with the people he worked with and their significant others. It was ridiculous to be thinking about her. She was a part of the cleaning crew that took care of the building. She was going to grad school, and she was working part-time for her step-mother's cleaning service in exchange for the woman letting her live with her rent free. Her father had passed away about ten years ago and her step-mother had reluctantly let her stay in the home she'd grown up in, but only if Holly worked for her.

He knew all of this because he was completely unable to leave her alone while she worked. He'd tried. He didn't want to be some creepy stalker guy. But after she'd gotten over her initial surprise that he wanted to have a conversation while she dusted his shelves and polished his windows and vacuumed his floor, she'd answered his questions, even asked him a few of her own, and given him sweet, if slightly shy smiles.

Unfortunately, it took her only about ten minutes to clean his office and then she had to move on to the other offices in the suite. He hadn't followed her around. Well, no more than twice. Because that had felt stalker-ish.

But he'd started working late every Friday.

He'd worked late many other nights during the week as well, hoping to see her more than every seven days. But Fridays were the only nights she worked.

At least that meant she wasn't out on a date.

"Dean!"

Dean focused on the man coming toward him. Howard Morgan, his father's right-hand man and the guy who would be angling to keep his job when Dean took over. "Hi, Howard."

"Enjoying the party?"

Not even a little. "Of course."

"You didn't bring a date?" Howard asked.

Dean shook his head. "All on my own tonight."

"A good-looking, successful young guy like you alone on New Year's? You should have a date with you," the much older man declared.

Dean lifted a shoulder. "I'm not dating anyone right now and all of my female friends had plans tonight." The full truth was that he hadn't been able to come up with one single woman he wanted to be there when 2017 started. Except Holly.

But she'd said no when he'd asked her. It wasn't the first time he'd suggested seeing each other outside of the office, outside of the ten minutes he got to spend with her once a week. He'd asked her out for coffee. He'd asked her to dinner. He'd asked for her phone number so they could just talk for more than a few minutes at a time. He'd asked her to spend a week on Maui with him. But she'd always laughed, as if he was kidding and said no.

He hadn't been kidding. Any of those times.

"I've known your dad for a long time," Howard replied. "I know you've never been without female company for long."

Yeah. That was true. But that was... before. Before he was working fourteen hour days and trying to prove to his father that he was ready to take over the company when he wasn't even sure he'd proved that to himself yet. Before he'd realized that he was finally

going to get his chance to be the man his father had always believed he could be. Before he'd realized it was time to get serious. Really serious.

Before he found a woman who knew nothing about him but his name, what his pencil holder looked like, and what he tossed into the trashcan under his desk.

Which was, actually, a strangely intimate thing. He thought about it, her, every time he tossed something in there on Fridays. At first, he'd been careful not to put much in there. He tossed his lunch garbage in the can in the break room, he laid off on the Snicker bars on Fridays, he stuffed the notes that said *Your mom called. She loves you and will see you Sunday for dinner* in his desk drawer. He stuffed the notes that said *Cecelia called and she misses you and wants to know when you'll be back in Atlanta next* in his pockets. And he stuffed the notes that said *Anastasia called and has sent you a new video. She said to be sure to turn up the volume* in the shredder. He'd gotten videos from Anastasia before. And he not only didn't want Holly to know about the naked I-love-you-here's-what-you're-missing videos, he didn't want to see them anymore either.

There was only one woman he wanted to see like that.

It was ridiculous how smitten he was with Holly.

And when he'd told her that, she said it was just because she was a mystery. And because she was something he couldn't have and he was a guy who always got what he wanted. And because women never said no to him and he saw her as a challenge. She'd given him all of those reasons at different times when he said he was crazy about her and wanted to spend more time with her and get to know her better.

The biggest problem with the whole thing-- besides her affection for the word "no" when it came to him-- was that he wasn't sure she was wrong.

He did always get what he wanted. He did love a challenge and a mystery.

So he wanted to spend more time with her, get to know her, see if they could have a conversation— and a flirtation— that lasted longer than ten minutes.

See if they could have a kiss that lasted longer than ten seconds.

At the Christmas party last week, his father, well-known for being a generous, happy guy, had invited everyone who'd had anything to do with the company's success in 2016 to the party. That included the contractors who had remodeled the office space, the

advertising firm who had launched their big campaign, their legal team and even the cleaning company.

Holly hadn't been there. Dean remembered being stunned by how disappointed he was in that. Her step-mother had been in attendance, however. And he'd asked about Holly. Her stepmother, Amanda, had been surprised and suspicious about his question, but she'd looked him up and down, realized who he was— the CEO's son— and she'd simply said that Holly hadn't been able to make it. Then she'd pulled another daughter, Megan, forward and introduced them. Megan had asked him to dance, and he'd found himself unable to shake her until nearly nine. He'd made his way up to his office, desperate to escape the party. And Holly had been there. She'd been working while her step-mother and step-sisters were at the party.

He'd been thrilled to see her. And pissed off because her step-mom was making her work while Amanda enjoyed the party downstairs. His protective instincts had reared up, and he'd insisted she stop working and join him for a mini-Christmas party. And since he was kind-of the boss, he'd pushed until she said yes. He'd poured them both a glass of soda and made a toast, he'd insisted she dance with him to I'll Be Home for Christmas from his iPod, and he'd made sure they ended the dance under the mistletoe that he'd hung over his office doorway for the next time she was in his office dusting.

That kiss had cemented everything he'd believed about their chemistry.

He wanted her. She wanted him. And he was going to keep asking her for more than a clean office until she said yes.

But she'd pulled back, put her fingers against her lips as she stared up at him, then turned and ran, dropping her dust rag on the carpet.

He'd debated going after her. But as he'd bent to pick up the dusting cloth, he knew he couldn't chase her. Not literally anyway.

That had been a week ago. Tonight was Friday again, and he wondered if she was at his office. This stupid party was across town though. He couldn't just sneak upstairs and see if she was there.

But most importantly, perhaps, was that she wasn't here. And he was thinking about ducking out before midnight because there was just something about being here tonight that didn't feel right. He was inexplicably antsy or impatient.

2016 had been stressful. His father had set some huge goals for the company, he'd moved Dean up to a VP position and he'd announced to the family that he was starting his own wind-down toward retirement. In two years, he wanted to step down and turn the company over to Dean. But 2016 was a test-run so that they could see where they needed to strengthen within the company, what outside support they needed, and what Dean needed to learn.

Dean had worked nearly non-stop.

He desperately wanted 2017 to be more relaxed, more fun, more full of good things and less angst and stress.

And he really wanted all of that to start with kissing Holly again.

"Dean?"

He shook himself and focused on Howard again. "Sorry Howard, what did you say?"

"I said, once you're head of the company things will get serious for you quickly. You won't have as much time for messing around and you'll have the company's reputation to think of."

Yeah. Exactly. This past year had been full of serious. Full of responsibility. It had all been dumped in his lap at once and he knew why—his father wanted to see if he would sink or swim. So far he was treading water. But his legs were getting tired.

"I'm ready, Howard," he said with more confidence than he felt. But he had to be ready. He had to convince his father he was ready to take over his business, what he'd built from the ground up, what he'd devoted his life to and hung his reputation on.

"I hope so Dean." Howard clapped him on the shoulder. "Your dad is counting on you."

He nodded. What was he going to say to that? "Happy New Year, Howard."

"You too, Dean."

Howard moved off into the crowd and Dean took a deep breath. It was eleven fifty-six and he suddenly couldn't wait to get out of this place. He was not going to ring the new year in here. He needed something that was actually new, something he was excited about, something that felt fresh and like... possibility.

He needed something that felt like a choice.

He'd always known he'd take over the company and clearly his father had just assumed it as well. Dean had spent the entire year trying to prove himself. And he was no closer to feeling confident that he was the right guy to head this company than he had on January first of 2016.

He needed Holly.

He didn't know how he knew that. He didn't know why it was her that had gotten under his skin and made him itch, but it was and she had. Period. He was done second-guessing. He was done questioning every decision. He was done over-thinking everything.

That had been 2016. 2017 was going to be the year he followed his gut, his heart, his ambitions and ideas. And where he felt confident in that. Where the people around him felt confident in that.

Dean started for the elevators.

He was a charming, smart, motivated, creative guy. He knew what he wanted, and he was going to go after it. This was going to be his year. And his father wasn't the first person he was going to convince of all of that.

Holly Perkins was.

She wouldn't be at the office, he didn't have her phone number or address, and it would be long past midnight before he could get to her. But his first act of the new year was finding that woman, laying another amazing kiss on her, and convincing her to have a damned cup of coffee with him.

They'd talk about Maui after she was well- caffeinated.

Dean punched the button for the elevator, adrenaline pumping through his veins, excitement and optimism filling his chest for the first time in months.

The idea of taking Holly for coffee made him more excited than any of the work projects over the past year. That was probably something he should spend more time thinking about.

Later.

After coffee. And kissing.

Definitely after kissing.

He punched the button again. Fucking elevators. Didn't they know he had somewhere to be? He needed to get his life going. He needed to plunge into 2017 with purpose.

Finally, the bell dinged signaling the elevator's arrival, and the doors swished open. Dean lifted his foot to take the first step toward his destiny... and froze.

A gorgeous woman was similarly posed on the other side of the doors. Her foot was off the floor, her eyes wide, her mouth open in a surprised O.

Then the doors began to close again, and they both lunged to keep them open. Her hand hit the door first, Dean's covered it and again they both froze for a moment, simply staring.

It was Holly.

And she was dressed for a fancy New Year's Eve party at the downtown Plaza hotel. Her long blonde hair was swept up into an elaborate twist. Her wide green eyes were even wider tonight with the charcoal liner around them. Her eyelashes were twice as long as usual— and yes, he'd noticed how long her eyelashes were before this. Her lips were a sexy siren red. And her dress... it hugged her body, falling all the way to the floor, sparkling under the lights as she moved. And it was red.

Holly red.

There was no question she was here on purpose.

He just really needed to hear what that purpose was. And if it wasn't him, he was going to kick some other guy's ass.

The door lurched under their hands, attempting to close. They both pushed against it, forcing it open.

"I can happily stand here and stare at you all night," he finally said. "But maybe you should step out here."

There was a heartbeat of silence. Then she wet her lips, then said, "Maybe you should step in here."

Her voice— that soft, sweet huskiness that haunted his dreams as he imagined her saying things like yes, Dean and right there and harder. And I love you.

Yeah, his dirty dreams about her always included sweet talk as well. He didn't get it. But he'd accepted it nearly eight months ago when he realized there was no getting rid of

the sweet stuff no matter how hard he concentrated on the dirty. And strangely, the sweet seemed to make the dirty better. Even in his dreams.

“If I step in there, I’m going to kiss you,” he said. “And there won’t be anywhere to run this time.”

Behind him, he heard the crowd begin counting down. It was almost midnight.

Ten, nine, eight.

“Holly,” he said, looking directly into her eyes. “Tell me what to do.”

Seven, six, five.

“In or out?” he asked.

Four, three, two.

She reached out, grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him into the elevator.

One. Happy New Year!

The doors slid shut as Dean took Holly’s face in his hands and lowered his head. Their lips touched softly. For just a few seconds. Just a sweet New Year’s Eve kiss. Like probably a dozen others they’d each had.

But by second number six, Holly’s arms went around his neck, he moved his hands to her hips, she sighed, he groaned, and their mouths opened.

The next few minutes after that were spent with Holly’s back against the wall of the elevator, Dean’s hands on her ass, her hands under his tux jacket and dress shirt and up against bare skin, their tongues stroking hot and hard.

When the elevator finally hit the first floor and the bell dinged and the doors swished open, Dean leaned over and hit the button for the top floor again.

“We’re going back to the party?”

She was breathless, her lips swollen, her lipstick smeared, and she looked like she had finally been fully and properly kissed.

“I’m just not ready to have you outside of a contained space. Without a firm surface behind you,” he said, giving her a slow grin.

She blushed slightly but smiled back. “I’m not running anymore.”

“No?” He loved the sound of that, but needed to know what she meant exactly.

"I've been thinking about the kiss in your office constantly," she admitted. "It was just a kiss. It was unexpected and short and..." She trailed off, her gaze dropping to his mouth.

"Hotter than anything I've ever experienced before," he filled in, describing the kiss they'd just shared and letting her hear in his voice how much she affected him as well as see it in his eyes.

Her nodded. "Yeah. I can't stop thinking about it."

"So you came to see if it was fluke or something?" he asked.

She shook her head, meeting his gaze. "I knew it wasn't a fluke. That's why I ran."

"I scared you."

"My feelings scared me."

Oh, he liked that. This already felt far more serious, far more intense than anything he'd ever had with another woman and he barely knew her. But he was done second-guessing. "But you came tonight," he pointed out. "You got over being scared?"

"I saw the invitation on your desk tonight when I was there to clean," she said.

He scowled at that. "You were working tonight?"

"Yes."

Dammit. He was done with her having to work for her step-mother. And he hated thinking he could have been at the office, with her, instead of at the damned office party.

"No more," he said. "No more working for her."

Holly smiled. "I don't mind."

"You don't need her. I'll give you anything you need. I'll pay for school. I'll get you an apartment. Whatever you want."

Her eyes widened. "And what will you get in exchange?"

He gave her a wolfish smile. "I have some ideas."

She laughed. "So you're asking me to be your mistress? Exchange sex for school?"

God even hearing her say the word *sex* made his fly feel a little tighter. "First, I'm asking you to be my girlfriend. Second, I would want you to exchange sex for sex. Third, school can be in exchange for working for my company for a year after you graduate."

"You want me to work for you after I graduate?"

He nodded. Why hadn't he thought of this before? "We have a scholarship program where we pay for a degree in exchange for working for us for a period of time."

"I'm majoring in art history."

He paused at that. "Why would you major in art history? What will you do with that degree?"

She laughed. "I hope to work for a museum. But I don't think your company has much need for an art history major."

"I'll figure something out."

"You can't just make up a position."

"I can. I have an in with the CEO. And I'll be the CEO soon enough." He felt a twinge in his chest at the thought. Dammit. He really didn't want to be the CEO of his father's company. The company that had supported him all his life. That had paid for him to study in London for a semester. That had bought him his first car. That had put him through school.

"You don't want to be the CEO," she said softly.

Dean stared down at her. "How do you know that?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. But I do. Just like I know that you really do want me to be your girlfriend. It's strange. I can read you."

It was strange. But it didn't feel strange. "I can read you too." He lifted a finger and dragged it over her jaw. "Like I know that you really like the idea of being my girlfriend."

She smiled up at him. "It seems like we hardly know each other, like this is too fast, or like maybe it's just..."

"That you're a mystery or a challenge?" he teased.

"I was going to say that it's just sex."

He groaned softly. "Hearing you say that word..."

She seemed to sway closer to him. "I don't even know how it can feel like it's just sex since we only kissed for the first time last week. And we haven't talked about sex. Not really."

"I love talking to you. I look forward to seeing you and our conversations every week," he told her. "But I'd be a damned liar if I said I hadn't been thinking about sex with you since the first time I saw you."

She smiled up at him, looking sweet and seductive at the same time. "Really?"

"You were in my office, dusting the lower shelves of my bookcase. I didn't know you were in there and I walked through the door and was treated to the sight of this sweet ass," he said, moving his hands over the firm curve.

"And you instantly thought of sex?" she asked.

He laughed. "Oh, yeah."

"Wow."

"I take it you didn't have the same reaction to me?"

Her cheeks got a little pink again.

"Wait, what's this?" he said, leaning in. "Maybe you did."

"It wasn't the very instant I saw you," she said.

"When was it?"

"When you took your tie off."

He shook his head. "I don't remember that."

"I know. But it was that first night we met. You kind of sat on the corner of your desk while we were talking as I worked. I looked over and you were unknitting your tie. You pulled it off and tossed it on the desk and unbuttoned the top two buttons of your shirt. And all I could think was that I wanted you to keep going and--"

Dean grinned at the hot flush on her cheeks now. "And what?"

"Nothing."

"No way. You have to tell me the and."

She took a deep breath. "I thought that your desk is always so clean and it's so big that we would have plenty of room on top of it to... you know."

He certainly did. And he was delighted— and tortured— thinking that she'd been thinking that. He cleared his throat. "Why do you think I keep it so clean?" he asked.

She laughed at that. "Because of me? Just in case?"

He didn't laugh. He pinned her with a serious look. "Because of you. Just in case."

Her smile died. "Wow," she said softly. "You're really good at this."

"At what?"

"Seduction."

"Am I seducing you?"

She wet her lips again and nodded. "But I think it started on February tenth."

The day they'd first met. He nodded too. "It did."

The elevator reached the top floor and started to open. Dean jammed a finger into the Door Close button. Then he hit floor one again.

"Back down?" she asked.

"And this time we're getting off."

"And where are we going?"

He knew she expected him to say his place. And his body was screaming at him to say his place.

But he had a better idea. Because she did like the idea of being his girlfriend. And it was a new year. A new start. He was going with his gut and his heart this year.

"I'm going to take you out for coffee."

She laughed softly. "Okay, fine already. Let's have coffee. I suppose it will be on the way to the airport?"

"Don't mess with me, Holly," he warned. "I'll take your pretty ass to Maui tonight in a heartbeat. And I'll talk you into nude sunbathing and having sex on the beach— for real, not in a glass— and I'll make you never want to come back."

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him.

He couldn't help his smile. "What are you thinking?"

"Just that your plan sounds like it would fit in perfectly with a decision I made right before heading over here."

"Oh?"

"I saw the invitation to the party on your desk and suddenly just had to come. It's New Year's Eve and I was hit by this intense desire to just go for it. To go after all the things I really want this year. So I called a friend of mine for help with the dress— she owns a boutique— and another friend rushed over to do my hair and makeup and then suddenly I was standing in the lobby of the Plaza feeling like I was about to make the biggest decision of my life."

Dean didn't know what to say. They'd had the same thought, on the same night, and they'd acted on it. And it had brought them here, to each other.

“And how does Maui fit in?” he asked, already calculating how to get to the airport and get the tickets bought. He’d buy them both new clothes on the island. Or they could just be naked together for a solid week. Or two.

“I’m just going to do what feels right. Coming here to you felt right. Kissing you felt right. So I’m in for Maui.”

He was going to take her to Maui. She wanted to go, he could tell. And she needed to learn right away in their relationship that he didn’t screw around with things like the chance to have her naked on a beach.

“You can miss work and school?” he asked.

“School is on break and... I quit tonight,” she said.

He grinned. “Thank God.”

“Of course, now I’m homeless.”

“I can fix that.”

“That’s not why I came to you,” she said quickly.

“I know.” And he did. She’d come to him because this was where she was supposed to be.

She suddenly rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. It was a sweet kiss, full of promise.

“Happy New Year, Dean.”

“I’m going to do everything I can to keep it that way, Holly,” he told her.

“Well, you’ve done a kickass job on the first fifteen minutes.”

And he spent the next several completely ruining her lipstick in the elevator, the cab, the airport ticket line, first class, and on the sands of Maui.

2017 was going to be the best year ever.

Erin Nicholas is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over thirty sexy contemporary romances. Her stories have been described as toe-curling, enchanting, steamy and fun. She loves to write about reluctant heroes, imperfect heroines and happily ever afters. She lives in the Midwest with her husband who only wants to read the sex scenes in her books, her kids who will never read the sex scenes in her books, and family and friends who say they're shocked by the sex scenes in her books (yeah, right!).

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