

The Holiday Chronicles

Part Three: Auld Lang Syne

By Elaine Calloway

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Many thanks to the “characters” of New York City who stirred this story in my imagination many
years ago...

Fresco opened his eyes to a gigantic nose sniffing his face. Groaning, he half-petted his black Labrador and mumbled, “Go back to sleep.”

As with all human communication in sleep mode, his directions seemed to convince Nith to do exactly the opposite. Nith placed his paw on top of Fresco’s head and began to whimper.

Incessantly.

“C’mon, boy. Late night last night.”

Why couldn’t pets tell time? Fresco couldn’t risk Nith making a ton of noise in this studio apartment. For anyone not raking in millions per year on Wall Street, New York apartments were thin walls and angry neighbors.

Another paw tap, and another whimper from Nith.

“Ok. You win,” Fresco said. He wiped his eyes. Ugh. The sleepiness was enough to make his eyelids especially heavy, but the daily silver makeup also irritated the hell out of his skin. “I can’t keep up the makeup act much longer, boy. Maybe in the new year I’ll change over to juggling or playing guitar.”

Nith’s audible sniffing had gone into surround sound by now. He wanted out. He wanted up. Fresco grinned. If only he could bottle such energy and sell it. Then he’d be able to afford soundproof walls.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he said, ensuring his footing as he stumbled across the floor to get dressed. Sitting on an entry table was a champagne flute. Fresco scratched his head, his memory foggy for a few seconds until the events of last night returned. He’d ridden his bike home and swiped the glass right out of some medical guy’s hand because the guy looked like he was ready to hit him with it.

Fresco made a mental note to return the glass, but for now, he needed to let Nith outside.

Nith raced across the tile floor, his nails clacking with excitement at going outside.

Fresco tugged on jeans and a sweatshirt and then pulled his wavy hair into a ponytail. Then he clipped the leash and opened the door.

Nith practically raced down the hallway and out the side door, where they were greeted by dense fog. The kind of fog where the streetlights’ red and green lights looked like ornaments on a Christmas tree as opposed to ways to signal traffic.

As they rounded a corner, Fresco saw her.

The fog surrounded him, and the air resembled an invisibility cloak, but her window was immune to the gray despairing weather. It was as if her window had peered out like a kid, and nothing was going to stop her happiness.

Fresco tugged on the leash, keeping Nith nearby despite Nith's need to go investigate some flowers. Maggie unhooked ornaments from the tree in her window, smiling at her efforts. She was the most beautiful woman Fresco had ever seen. It had taken him weeks just to ask for her name, and even then, he'd only done it when he was covered in silver makeup with silver sunglasses. She hadn't ever seen him in plain dress, without his façade.

Would she even notice him if she did see him?

Nith yanked on the leash, determined to investigate a bunch of marigolds.

Fresco relented, trying to come up with a plan. How could he possibly have any chance with someone as lovely as Maggie?

She had seemed interested in his disguise, his routine of pulling flowers out of the ether had made her laugh. That contagious, happy-filled laughter had been his prize.

What could he do now that would impress her?

Nith pawed at him.

"You wanted outside, now you want back inside?"

Nith barked twice.

"Not sure what difference the scenery will make," Fresco said, then opened his eyes wide. Of course! He knew what he needed to do, a way to impress Maggie and hopefully gain her heart for New Year's Eve.

Hours later, as the sun began to descend, Fresco dressed in his retro-style suit and reached for the champagne flute and a mini bottle of champagne.

Treading carefully around the corner, he waited a few minutes to see if he could see her pass by the window. Once he saw her, and he'd calmed down his racing heart, he forced his feet to go step by step, all the way up to her front door.

Knocking felt like he was in a punching match with a world-class athlete, for his arm and fist felt that heavy. But he had to try. The worst she could do was say no, and he could always approach her at a later time dressed up in silver again.

The knock he rapped on her door seemed to echo on for hours, though he'd only been standing there for less than twenty seconds.

A few steps and sounds came from inside, and the door swung open.

Maggie stood there, wearing a deep-red sweater and slacks. She was more beautiful than any Christmas tree or ornament he'd ever seen.

"Hi," she said, the trepidation evident in her voice. "Can I help you?"

Fresco hated that he'd never shown her his real self, sans makeup and persona. She'd come to like a different version of him, but now he wanted to peel away the curtain and show her something...more.

"Maggie," he said. *Keep it together.* "You may not recognize me, but I've met you—"

"You're the silver man!" Her eyes widened and she now wore a smile. "I remember your voice."

Fresco breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad. The last thing I'd want to do is frighten you."

"Anyway, so...what are you doing here?"

He adjusted his weight, trying not to appear nervous. "I wanted to share something with you, but now that I'm here, in the moment, I don't want it to sound corny."

There. He'd put his little toe into the water. Now to see her response, and whether to keep going or retreat into his costume forever and ever.

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

Her eyebrows remained at their level, not rising as to question his sanity or narrowing to distrust him. She didn't know it yet, but she had just offered him a safety branch back to himself.

Here it goes.

Trying to be elaborate just like when he wore the silver, he tucked his hand into his suit jacket and pulled out the champagne flute. Then he reached into the other pocket and pulled out the tiny bottle of champagne.

"Just in time for New Year's Eve," she said, and her eyes gleamed and reflected the full moon.

He nodded, handing the champagne flute to her. "Do you know what *auld lang syne* means?"

She grinned wide. "Actually, no, but I've sung it every year at this time."

Good. He had the chance to impress her without his makeup.

"The words mean 'days gone by' and they thought that leaving the old days behind and starting anew was the best thing to do," he said. "So it's the perfect New Year's Eve song."

"Interesting."

Tiny snowflakes began to fall, though the ground remained white from the previous night's weather. Still, in this light, seeing her, right here and right now, he could die happy if he needed to.

She stepped outside and glanced up. "I love the snow at this time of year. Don't you?"

"I do now," he whispered, taking the metal casing off the champagne bottle cork and then popping the cork off and across the yard.

Offering a warm smile, she drew closer to him. His pulse raced and he was determined to keep his hand steady as he poured the champagne into the flute for her.

“But, you don’t have a glass,” she said, frowning. “Let me run back inside and get you one.”

He hadn’t thought of bringing one for himself. Honestly, he’d have taken a sip from a tin can if it meant he could be near Maggie tonight. But she did bring up a good point, and considering she didn’t know him well, he wasn’t about to make her feel awkward about sharing. Germs and such, though he always considered New Yorkers to be immune to germs. After all, there were enough germs just living in the air of such a city.

But yes, he would respect the newness of their meeting. It was the right thing to do.

Seconds later, she returned with a small wine glass. “I don’t have any champagne flutes.”

Fresco took the glass and could feel the heat rising in his face. If only she knew. Before last night, he’d never had a flute on hand either.

“I’d be fine with a paper cup, but I appreciate you getting a glass for me,” he said. Then he poured the bubbling liquid into her flute before pouring just a bit for himself.

Maggie looked up, seeming like a kid who’d seen snow for the first time. Her eyes almost radiated the entire celebratory night, if that was even possible.

“What should we toast to, other than the upcoming year?” she asked.

He held her gaze for a long moment. Then, softly, he offered up a toast. “To new beginnings, new year’s, and new friends.”

Her lips curled up slightly as if to question his use of the word friends. Perhaps she’d wished for another word, but there would be plenty of time for this small seed to bloom.

For now, in this precious moment, he would accept the situation for what it is—without expectation, demands, or presumption. As she raised the champagne flute to his glass and they clinked together, he knew things would work out.

She’d seen him without his silver façade. She’d welcomed him to participate in a toast. Whatever happened from here would be fine by him.

Much like that champagne flute, no matter where it goes, it winds up in the right place at the right time.

Fireworks popped several blocks away and they both looked up to admire the various colors splashing across the night sky.

“Happy New Year,” he whispered, knowing in his heart that it would be.