

Broken Resolutions

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Books By Linda Steinberg

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BROKEN RESOLUTIONS

“So we’re resolved?” Licking a snowflake off her upper lip, Jan Carter huddled with her roommates outside Chancellor’s bar. “No hook-ups. This year we drink responsibly, watch the ball drop at Times Square, and then go home to cocoa, popcorn and *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”

“Agreed.” Fiona tucked her red curls into her woolen cap. “Last New Year’s Eve I drank my weight in tequila and went home with a dude who looked more like an English sheep dog than his English sheep dog. *Not* doing that again.”

“I’m in too.” Marisol stamped the snow off her feet. “My New Year’s resolution is to be pickier about the men I date. Might as well start tonight.”

Jan nodded. Her last New Year’s nightmare was waking up next to a man who had tattoos over every inch of his body. She winced. *Every* inch. “What are the chances of meeting a decent man on New Year’s Eve anyway? Any guy dateless tonight is either a lust dog or a loser.”

“Amen, sister. We have more respect for ourselves than to hit one of those.” Fiona pulled off a glove and held up her hand. “No hook-ups tonight. Pinky swear.”

“Pinky swear.” The women all linked fingers, then Marisol pushed in the heavy door of the Manhattan bar.

Immediate warmth met Jan’s chilled bones as they entered. She hung her coat on a rack just inside the doorway, then shoved her gloves into the pockets and piled her hat and scarf on top.

In their short black cocktail dresses, she and her roommates joined a sea of similarly dressed women, interspersed with men clad in everything from jackets and ties to jeans and sweatshirts. As it was still early, they were able to snag a high-top table near the roaring fireplace, their space along the wall allowing a view of almost the entire bar.

“He’s cute,” Marisol said, nodding toward a guy chatting up a woman a few feet away, his hand poised to cup her waist.

“Lust dog,” Jan and Fiona said in unison.

“Yeah, but nice to look at.” Marisol’s eyes twinkled appreciatively.

There was definitely no shortage of attractive men. For a moment, Jan considered postponing her New Year’s resolution until the year officially started, tomorrow morning. But at twenty-nine she was getting too old to live every day as if it were a time vacuum. If she ever wanted home and family, she needed to look for deeper, more substantial qualities in a man than his face and bod.

“What’ll you have, ladies?” A thirty-ish young woman with her hair pulled up in a messy bun appeared at their table, looking like she was in a hurry to finish her shift and get home to her kids.

“Strawberry Daiquiri,” Fiona ordered without hesitation.

“Margarita,” Jan said.

“White wine for me.” Marisol tapped her foot on the rung of the barstool as the music amped up to a lively rendition of *New York, New York*. When the waitress sped off to take another order, the three women jumped off their stools and headed to the dance floor.

Or to the extension of the dance floor. The actual wood flooring area was small, with tables crowded around the edge, so Jan and her friends joined to the sea of gyrating revelers between chair backs of seated patrons, in any available space. Even those people who’d started out with actual partners got separated and dispersed across the floor. Jan began dancing next to Fiona and Marisol, but found herself slapping hips with a couple of guys dressed all in leather and a spaced out girl dancing in slow rhythm that probably existed only in her head.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Fiona moaned, as the three friends wound their way back to their table three songs later.

Jan winced as a tasseled paper horn screeched next to her ear. “*You’re* too old?” Her friend had barely cleared twenty-five. “How do you think I feel?”

“You’re never too old to have fun,” Marisol said, but she too, gasped a little for breath. Marisol didn’t believe a woman should define herself by age. Now twenty-six, she’d dated men in their forties, as well as a couple of barely-legal teenagers.

“It’s not only about age.” They settled at their table and Jan sipped her waiting margarita. “I just feel like I’m ready to move on from this stage of life.”

When she’d first moved to the Big Apple, Jan felt like she’d woken up in a fairyland. In the City that Never Sleeps, the fast pace and twinkling lights had pumped up her adrenaline like a drug. But clubbing and drinking didn’t amuse as much anymore.

“To where?” Marisol challenged. “Back home to Muleshoe, Texas?”

“Maybe.” Pushing thirty, she was hearing her biological clock ticking louder and faster. Jan loved her job, she loved this life, but visiting with her parents, her brothers, her niece and nephews over Christmas had left a hole in her heart where home should be. New York City was not the best place to raise a family. Or to even meet a man who was interested in living that kind of life.

“Gonna marry Billy Ray or Bobby Joe and pop out half a dozen rug rats?” Fiona teased.

Jan frowned. Most of the guys she’d known in high school were probably married with kids. Some, divorced with kids by now. How would she feel about being the outsider in a ready-made family?

She’d be an outsider, period. Five years after her escape from Muleshoe, even that sleepy town had moved on without her. It was true what that writer said, you couldn’t go home again. Jan didn’t belong in her small town anymore, but so far she hadn’t found a safe home in this big town either.

Was the music getting louder? It seemed to have amped way up to compete with the rising noise from the growing crowd. Jan could barely hear the sleek, dark-haired guy with flat abs and bulging pecs who approached their table and asked, “Any of you ladies care to dance?”

Marisol was on her feet before Fiona or Jan had a chance to respond.

“Not my type,” Fiona said with a sour-grapes smile as their friend waltzed away with Mr. Pecs.

“What is your type?” Jan asked.

“Not so muscular. A bit more serious and brainy.”

“Kind of like him?” She nodded toward a lean, sandy-haired guy wearing glasses and a shy smile heading toward their table.

When Fiona winked at him, the guy took the seat Marisol had vacated. “Sounds like a train station in here, doesn’t it?”

As pick-up lines went, Jan would have rated that a B minus, but Fiona laughed gaily as if that were the funniest thing she’d ever heard.

The man introduced himself as Derek and struck up the usual where-are-you-from, what-do-you-do conversation, speaking with both women but his eyes were fixed on Fiona. Jan told him about her job in advertising but she had a feeling that if she’d said she was a circus performer who rode naked on an elephant while performing cartwheels he would have still said ‘that’s nice’ in exactly the same way.

Eventually, her roommate stood and took Derek’s hand, and led him to the dance floor.

Jan finished her drink and ordered another.

Fiona returned to the table, alone, just as Marisol sashayed back, swinging her hips as if she were still dancing, with Mr. Pecs close behind her.

“Another daiquiri and white wine?” the waitress asked when she brought Jan’s margarita.

“Not right now,” Fiona demurred.

“Nothing for me.” Marisol smiled shyly at Mr. Pecs. “Justin and I are going to check out the bar across the street for a while. Be back in a bit.” Shy smile notwithstanding, she headed purposefully toward the door with her hand firmly clasped in Justin’s.

Jan watched her roommate grab her coat and disappear into the night with Justin Pecs, then turned to Fiona. “You think she’s actually coming back?”

“Maybe.” Fiona shrugged. “Maybe not. She did agree to the pact. On the other hand...”

On the other hand, Marisol had only pledged to be pickier about the men she went home with. And her man of choice was usually whoever she was with at the moment.

When Derek came to claim Fiona for another dance, Jan let her eyes linger on her friend and the guy awkwardly slow dancing at half tempo to a fast tempo song. They seemed comfortable in each others’ arms, and Fiona had that twinkle in her eye that usually preceded a hopeful night with another hapless hero.

Forty minutes later, Marisol was still AWOL. Jan sipped her drink as slowly as she could, trying not to look like a loser. Catching the eye of a hungry hunk leaning against the bar whose gaze was tipsily zeroed in on her, she considered smiling at him and seeing how things went from there. But she reminded herself that any guy she hooked up with on New Year’s Eve would definitely be last year’s fling in the morning.

When she looked out at the dance floor again, she saw neither Fiona nor the soft-spoken guy she’d been dancing with. *Great.* The Girls-only evening was barely an hour old and despite their pledges, both of her friends, apparently, had bailed on her.

Wait ten more minutes. She stretched it to fifteen, then twenty, but neither Fiona nor Marisol reappeared. Jan sighed at her two options. One: find the drunk and leering guy, or some other drunk and leering guy and encourage him to do mindless things to her that she’d regret, once of sound mind, in the morning. Two: leave alone with her virtue intact and go home to an empty apartment to ring in the New Year with only the TV for company.

Maybe it *was* time to move back to Muleshoe.

Leaving enough money on the table to cover Fiona and Marisol’s drinks as well as her own, plus tip, she nodded toward the waitress and vacated her seat.

The table was promptly grabbed by a quartet of revelers sporting silly party hats and armed with children’s birthday party blowers.

After texting her both her roommates a terse *I'm done*, Jan marched across the bar, grabbed her coat, hat and scarf from the rack, and pushed her way out of the bar. It had probably been a mistake to go out tonight. If she'd known she'd end up alone, she would have just stretched out on the sofa in her wrap-around-blanket-robe and watched old black and white movies in comfort.

Instead, she was fighting wind gusts and swallowing snowflakes as she edged past heavy-coated bodies toward Times Square and the subway station. Some wore ski masks on their heads, some wore inane party hats, and some wore silly party hats on top of their warm headgear. Deanna jumped at the sound of an exploding firecracker zooming above her head.

It would be hard to find two places as opposite as quiet Muleshoe, Texas, and Times Square, New York City, on New Year's Eve. At home, even on New Year's Eve, everything except a few dingy bars closed by ten o'clock while the good, quiet people of the town stayed home and watched Dick Clark on TV.

Here, the noise was deafening, almost painful to her ears as she approached the square. Drunken "Happy New Year" shouts were punctuated by a cacophony of horns and noisemakers. Though it was still more than an hour before midnight, the bodies were pressed in so close together, Jan couldn't imagine how any late arrivals would manage to find a place to stand, or a clear space above to look up and watch the ball drop.

The view was better on TV anyway.

It took twenty minutes to inch her way across the square to the subway station on the other side, threading a zigzag path between lovers and friends hugging and embracing and drunken revelers toasting the approaching New Year with raised beer bottles and paper cups which probably held wine or something stronger. Firecrackers popped intermittently from all directions. The sidewalk reeked of booze and stale urine.

As she stepped up onto a curb, a big man with beer breath jostled against her, loosening her purse from her shoulder. When she grabbed for it, she heard the crash of shattering glass and felt liquid splash her chin and dribble down her coat. She turned to see the man kicking the shards of his broken beer bottle as close as possible to the curb.

"Happy New Year," he said sheepishly.

She glared at him silently and pushed her way toward the subway entrance. As she descended into the city's underground, the deafening roar of inebriated voices followed behind her like a swarm of insects.

Damn. She dabbed at the liquid inching down her coat with her glove, which only served to spread the stain and drive the odor into the fabric. *Life in the Big Apple.* Jan tried to remember why she'd been so eager to make a place for herself here.

The subway platform was almost deserted. A couple of derelicts and pan-handlers. The few travelers alighting from trains hurried up the stairs Jan had just walked down. *Good luck finding a spot in the square.* Despite her intent to escape, she couldn't help feeling she was hustling in the wrong direction.

The train to Brooklyn pulled up and stopped with a screech of air brakes. Half a dozen passengers pushed out of the doors. Jan stepped across the narrow space into an almost empty car. There was a teenage boy and his girlfriend, an older man who clasped what was probably all his worldly belongings between his legs, and a thirty-ish man with a touch of rough beard wearing jeans and a hooded parka.

Jan sat opposite the thirty-something man and pulled out her cell phone. It was unwise to make eye contact with anyone in the subway, especially with so few people in the car. In Texas

she might have introduced herself to the other passengers, maybe even struck up a conversation, but speaking to a stranger here was considered creepy. And dangerous.

After checking her email and playing three games of solitaire, she looked up. The young unshaven man, breaking the first rule of subway etiquette, was staring at her. Jan glanced away quickly but when she risked another peek, he was still focused on her stiletto heels and the edges of the black cocktail dress peeking below her coat.

“Been to a party?”

Nodding vaguely, she looked down at her phone again.

“Must have been a wild one.”

Jan bristled. Spitting out *None of your damned business* might have invited more unwelcome attention. She shouldn't encourage him. Even if he did have a deep, sensuous voice and clear brown eyes that seemed more amused than leering.

When she didn't respond, the man shrugged and took out his own phone, apparently accepting the brush off.

Mostly relieved, she lowered her head again and sniffed wet fur. And realized the reason for the man's presumptuous comment. She smelled like she'd taken a bath in a vat of beer.

“It's not my beer,” she said shrugging out of her coat. “I got drenched by some drunk on my way to the subway.”

“You were walking alone?”

Alarm bells sounded in Jan's head and she thought about moving to another car. But somehow his question didn't sound threatening.

“Not hitting on you,” he said quickly. “Just concerned about a lady out alone on New Year's Eve. You do know there are a lot of drunks and crackheads out tonight, don't you?”

Did she have Country Bumpkin stamped on her forehead? “Thanks for your concern, but I'm fine.” She looked down at her phone, then back up at him. His face wasn't unattractive. Wide eyes, strong cheekbones, dark wavy hair nestling into the fur hood of his parka. Two winking dimples that seemed totally out of place with his grunge attire. “Why are you alone on New Year's Eve?” Jan asked without thinking first. *Don't encourage him.*

“Just got off work.”

“That sucks.”

Awkward silence.

Jan lowered her eyes to her phone and pretended to check her email but something drew her gaze back to his, “You live in Brooklyn?”

“Yeah. And I work in the city.” He grinned. “Two hours a day on the subway.”

“Me too.” Funny that she'd never seen him before. But of course, they didn't work the same hours. She started to ask what he did for a living but her voice was drowned out by the screech of brakes as the train lurched to a stop.

The doors opened and three oversized young men who looked to be in their late teens got on, stumbling and laughing, obviously high.

The guy with the sensuous voice lifted a wary brow. The teenage boy at the end of the car put an arm around his girlfriend and pulled her close. The old man locked his legs tighter around his belongings.

Jan shrank into her seat as the new arrivals shuffled past her. The first two swaggered ahead, elbowing and pushing each other. The third grabbed the pole just past her and then swung around to face her. “Heyyyyyy.”

She looked down at her phone, suddenly conscious of her slinky black cocktail dress which lifted her cleavage, now uncomfortably exposed since she'd taken off her coat.

"Hey, Gorgeous, I'm talking to you."

Jan looked up.

The guy in the seat across from her stiffened and leaned forward.

Stay calm. Don't show fear. Stealthily she unzipped a pocket of her purse and slipped her fingers inside. "Well, you're wasting your breath, because I'm not talking to you."

The leer turned into a sneer. "Well, don't you think you're hot stuff." He leaned toward her, exhaling stale breath into her face.

Jan reached for the pepper spray at the exact second he reached for her hair. And aimed it at his eyes the same second the guy across from her sprang from his seat and grabbed the punk's arm.

"Yow!" The punk and the nice guy yelled in chorus.

Omigod, she'd pepper sprayed her would-be protector.

Pushing and shoving ensued. The punk flailed blindly, swinging and missing. Mr. Nice guy blinked furiously but still managed to elbow the guy away from Jan and into his two friends, who grabbed his arms and dragged him away.

When the train stopped abruptly, Mr. Nice Guy stumbled and pitched forward. Jan caught his belt lock and helped him onto the seat next to her as the punks pushed their way out onto the subway platform, shooting the third finger salute in her direction.

"I am sooo sorry," she began as the man rubbed his eyes. "I had no idea you were going to get into that. Is there something I can do?" She fished in her purse. "Moist towelette, tissue?"

"Tissues might help." He took the travel pack she handed him and dabbed a handful at his eyes.

The sound of an airbrake whooshed. The old guy clutching his belongings between his knees jerked his head up suddenly, glanced out at the station sign, and quickly exited the car just as the doors were closing. Jan glanced at the young couple at the end of the car. They were ensconced in each other's arms, sucking face, oblivious to the altercation and its aftermath.

She looked back earnestly at the man she'd half-blinded. "Are you going to be okay? Should I take you to an emergency room?"

He grabbed another handful of tissues, coughed violently, then shook his head. "Fortunately you just got me in one eye. Probably not severe enough to get time off work." He tried for a wink but winced in pain, slapping a hand over his eye. Blinking and breathing out congestion, he settled back into the seat and stretched out his legs,

"What do you do?" Jan asked when he seemed to have recovered.

"I'm a firefighter."

That brought up images of the World Trade Center, the flames shooting out of buildings, the horrid spectacle of people jumping to their deaths. Jan hadn't lived in New York then but as a ten year old child she'd watched the horrifying footage on TV, over and over. Unable to sleep without nightmares for days. She could imagine how strong that memory must still be for people who'd actually lived through it. "You joined up after 9-11?"

"Not immediately after. I was only twelve when it happened. But I lived not far from the financial district. And I'll never forget it." He turned to face her and offered his hand. "I'm Steve. Steve Gianelli."

"Jan Carter. Nice to meet you." His hand was calloused but his shake was warm and firm. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

“Apparently you didn’t need my help,” He eyed the pepper spray as she put it back into her purse. “You use that thing often?”

“First time.”

“New to the city?”

“I moved here a couple of years ago.” She wondered if she should put her coat back on, if the black cocktail dress might be advertising something she wasn’t selling. But she supposed it was too late to put that genie back in the bottle.

“Where from?”

“Texas. A little town called Muleshoe.” She met his eyes. “Yes there really is a place by that name.”

Steve chuckled. “I’m picturing a saloon with swinging doors, horses tied up outside, a swaggering sheriff bellying up to the bar.”

She rolled her eyes. “That would be High Noon.” Or almost any other western from the Fifties. “Funny how most people think Texas is all sprawling ranches, horses and cattle roaming everywhere, an oil well in everyone’s back yard.”

“It’s not?” His teasing smile enticed one from her. Those dimples and Steve’s expressive lips made a dangerous combo.

“Houston and Dallas are like a mini-Manhattan, just spread out a little more. Muleshoe is like any small town anywhere.” She studied his unshaven face, even less threatening now that he’d lowered the hood of his parka. “Ever been to Texas?”

He shook his head. “Never been south of Pennsylvania. Or west of Ohio.”

“You must be one of those people who think New York City is the be-all and end-all, and the rest of the country just a bread basket to feed its millions of people.”

He grinned. “Now who’s stereotyping?”

“Busted.” She smiled. “But it’s true, isn’t it?”

Steve crossed one jean-clad leg over the other. “New York City is like every place in the country. Every place in the world. Walk a few steps from Little Italy and you’re in Chinatown. On any street in Manhattan you can hear conversations in Korean, Mandarin, or Swahili.” His face beamed.

“You love this city, don’t you?”

“I do.” He smiled. “Not that I wouldn’t mind visiting the rest of the country. ‘I’ve always wanted to see the Grand Canyon. And Texas, of course.’”

He’d probably just said that for her benefit but Jan didn’t ask him to expound. Her slumping shoulder touched his, but he made no comment. So she leaned in, replacing the warmth of her beer-stained coat with his thick parka, breathing in the same rhythm as his in contented silence.

Which made Jan realize that their conversation had been the only sound in the car. The, clacking of wheels on tracks and screeching of trains rushing past was totally absent. “Are we stopped?”

“Looks that way.” Steve peered out the window. “Still at Canal Street station.”

An announcement came over the speaker, notifying passengers of ‘technical difficulties.’ “The train should be on its way shortly.”

“Shortly.” Steve harrumphed. “That’s what they say at the doctor’s office at the beginning of a two or three hour wait.”

“That’s one good thing about living in a small town.” Jan smiled. “No long waits for the doctor. On the other hand,” she admitted, “if you need to see a specialist, you might need to drive a hundred miles.”

“I guess there are advantages and disadvantages to everywhere,” he conceded. “Depends on what you get used to. Where your home is.”

Home usually meant people. Jan glanced down at the fourth finger of his left hand. No ring. “You have family?”

“Yeah, my parents are in Brooklyn. My younger brother and sister still live at home with them. My older sisters are both married but they live nearby.”

“You have your own place?”

He made a *sort of* gesture with his palm. “I have a roommate. You?”

“Two roommates. In a two bedroom apartment.”

“Who gets the single?”

“I do. Fiona and Marisol’s room is big enough for two beds, but mine is the size of a closet, so I get the whole eight by eight space to myself.”

“That’s nice.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I mean...I didn’t mean I was...” He blushed, the color giving his taut face a rosy glow. “Honestly Jan, I was just being polite.”

What else was there to do besides exchange polite pleasantries? The train hadn’t moved in thirty minutes. “What if we’re stopped here all night?”

He shrugged. “At least we’re not stuck between stations. I’ve had that happen a few times.”

The teenage boy at the end of the car peeled himself off his girlfriend and seemed to notice for the first time that they weren’t moving. He spoke to the girl in some Asian language, then the two of them banged on the door, and when it opened, jumped onto the platform.

“Should we get off too?” Jan looked after them nervously. An Uber ride home from here would be expensive, but at least she wouldn’t be sitting on a train all night.

Steve made a face. “This is probably not the best neighborhood to go roaming around in. I’d wait it out a while longer.” He slipped his arms out of his parka and set it beside him, revealing a black NYFD tee shirt that showed off six-pack abs. “You’re free to do as you wish, of course.” He took out his phone.

Of course. There was no reason to assume that they’d depart together. They were just two random strangers thrown together by fate. Still, if she did have to disembark somewhere far from her stop, it would be nice to have Steve’s comforting presence beside her. Not to mention his firm, hot body.

Her phone buzzed with a text. From Marisol. *Where R U? When I got back to Chancellor’s bar you were gone.*

So Marisol had returned after all. But why hadn’t she called or texted? Jan checked her Missed Calls screen. Two from Marisol. And one from Fiona. They must have come in while she was navigating across Times Square.

She started to respond to the text, when one came in from Fiona.

Jan, are you okay? Marisol and I waited and waited.

So neither of them had broken their resolutions. Which gave Jan absolutely no excuse to break hers. She glanced at Steve sitting beside her as comfortably as if they were old friends, squelching thoughts of sliding into his lap and painting his expressive lips with hers.

She typed. *I’m fine. Stuck on the subway. Should be home shortly.*

‘Shortly’ really was a useful word. It could mean twenty minutes or a whole night. She shoved that thought to the back of her mind.

We’re heading out to grab something to eat, Fiona texted. See you soon.

Jan sent a thumb's up emoji and shoved her phone into her purse.

"Everything okay?" Steve glanced up from his phone.

"Yes. Just my roommates worried about me. We got separated in the city earlier."

"So that's why you were alone. You could have said when I first asked."

"I didn't want to encourage you," she admitted.

He grinned. "Did I look that dangerous to you?"

Not as dangerous as he did now, with those muscled, tattooed forearms and that killer smile.

"Everyone looks dangerous to me. Small town girl, remember?"

"Yet you're talking to me now."

"Like I have a choice."

He stood, grabbed his parka, and walked across the car to the seat he'd occupied before.

"No, please. I didn't mean that." She offered a penitent look. "Please come back. I do like talking to you."

"Why?"

Why? The simple question stumped her. "Because you seem nice, and interesting, and talking is more fun than playing mindless games on my phone." She glanced out the window at the same station they'd been parked at for almost an hour. "And we don't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon."

"Gotta admit you make a compelling argument."

"Besides, I still have the pepper spray." She winked.

"I'll try to stay out of your line of fire." Steve stood, grabbed the pole between them and swung himself back to her side. "So. Why did you move to New York?"

If Jan had been asked that once, the question had been sprung a hundred times. But talking was good. It kept Jan from imagining what it would be like kiss him, touch him, and do other delicious things she shouldn't be thinking about. Especially since they were alone in the car now. "The same reason most people do, I guess. To experience the big city and realize my full potential."

"Doing what?" When her nose wrinkled, he added, "You never said what you do for a living."

"I work in advertising. Account executive. I talk to the clients, translate their ideas, and try to make them happy when things go to sh—pieces."

Steve chuckled. "So we both work at putting out fires." He patted her hand.

Instinctively, she jerked it back. And immediately regretted it. "I'd hardly compare playing corporate games to what you do."

He placed his hand in his lap. Not everybody has to be Mother Theresa."

"But you are." Sitting next to this man who risked his life to save others every day while she sat in an office pecking on a computer, Jan felt unworthy.

"You think I'd look good in a sari and sandals?" he teased.

"You don't have to joke about it. You're a real hero."

"Aw shucks, ma'am." He dug his thumbs into his front pockets. "Just doing my job."

His attempt at a Texas accent was comical but Jan did her best not to laugh. "Did you put out any fires tonight?"

"Nope. Spent most of my night parked near Times Square in case somebody set off a firecracker or had a heart attack waiting for the ball to drop."

It was interesting to think their paths might have crossed earlier tonight. But of course, she never would have picked him out in that crowd. And she doubted Steve Gianelli hung out in bars much.

Gianelli. "Are you Italian?"

"My family is. I'm American."

"So you're first generation?"

"Second. Both my parents were born here. But they're so steeped in the traditional foods and customs, they might as well have just stepped off the boat from the old country."

"You don't like Italian food?"

"I love it. But every once in a while I wish Mama would ditch the spaghetti and meatballs and serve Thai food, or Mexican, or Indian for Sunday dinner."

Their backgrounds were so different, but Jan could totally relate. "My family came over on the Mayflower." She grinned. "Not really, but there have been Carters in my part of Texas for generations." She pictured eighteen of her closest relatives spread around the huge dining table. "Our Sunday dinners are always fried chicken, beans and greens, and of course, cornbread."

"Stop. You're making me hungry."

Steve looked like he didn't worry about putting on a couple of pounds. Nor did he need to. In his line of work, those carbs probably converted immediately into muscle. At Jan's height, barely clearing four feet eleven inches, every calorie was the enemy, and every day a struggle not to surrender.

She stood and paced to the end of the car and back. "This is getting ridiculous. What time is it now?"

He checked his watch. "Eleven forty-eight."

"Maybe we should have stayed in the city. At least we could have watched the ball drop."

Steve yawned dramatically. "Been there done that. Many times."

"Jaded New Yorker."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Everyone wants to come to the Big Apple and 'suck the marrow' out of it, but honestly, just chilling here with you has been one of my better New Year's Eves."

An unexpected tingle warmed her senses. "My evening wasn't going so well, either," she admitted. She told him about bar-hopping with Fiona and Marisol, the 'celibacy' pledge, and the loneliness she'd felt when she'd thought both her roommates broke it.

"I'm sure you didn't have to sit there alone," he said kindly. "Cute girl like you, lots of guys would jump at the chance to be with you."

Lots of guys did. But..."You don't meet a lot of nice guys in bars."

"Where do you meet them?" His dark eyes twinkled.

"I don't know. Any suggestions? She'd be darned if she'd answer *in the subway*."

He didn't press it. Instead, he glanced at his watch. "It's two minutes till midnight," he announced.

Their eyes met. Of all the places to be on New Year's Eve, the last Jan expected was to be stuck in the subway. But if she were in Times Square, she probably couldn't see past people's heads to even see the ball drop. The two of them alone in this car felt like they were the only two people in the world.

"Ten," he said. "Nine."

"Eight," She joined him in the countdown, When they got to one, she raised a pretend glass and prepared to say "Happy New Year!" But before she could get the words out, Steve grabbed

her under the arms, lifted her to her feet, and planted an unexpected but totally awesome kiss on her lips.

The earth moved. Literally. Jan grabbed a pole and Steve grabbed her as the train suddenly lurched forward. Steve held her steady against him as the car slowly gained speed until it was like a bullet over the tracks. The lights in the car went out as the train, streaked into the tunnel, showering them in darkness,

“Happy New Year, Jan.” She could barely see his face but his arms were tight around her, his voice reassuring as his lips moved close to hers. “If I’d known this was what it would take to get this train moving, I would have kissed you an hour ago.”

* * *

Wow. Steve had only meant to give Jan a chaste, polite kiss. It was a long-held New Year’s tradition, wasn’t it, to kiss the person you were with at midnight? And even though he wasn’t officially ‘with’ her, she was the only other person in the subway car.

From the way his body had responded to that kiss, she might have been the only other person in the world.

“Happy New Year, Steve.” She leaned her back against the pole, her arms around his waist. Her tongue licked the outline of his mouth, probing until his lips caught it and sucked it inside. She tasted like margarita and pretzels. Their mouths melted together, their bodies as close as they could get with their clothes on.

Wow. Just wow.

They held each other, swaying to the train’s rhythm, Jan’s cheek plastered against his. She was half a foot shorter than he was, but they fit well together in this standing position. Which made him wonder how they would fit in other positions.

The train slowed to a stop. “Maybe we’d better sit.” If he didn’t slow this down, he might find himself in an embarrassing position.

Too late for that. He grabbed his jacket and laid it across his lap. Jan pretended not to notice, but her cheeks flushed and her eyes hid a smile.

“Sorry about that.” What was he supposed to say or do now? She hadn’t even wanted him to touch her hand.

Although the way she’d kissed him back was a strong indication that she had changed her mind.

She took his hand, threaded her fingers through his, and squeezed. “This was one of my best New Year’s Eves too.”

Past tense. Which could have just meant the departure of the old year and the beginning of a new one. Or it could mean *Thanks for the diversion and the company and I’m going on with my life now.*

Just his luck. After a dozen disastrous fix-ups by his mother and sisters, he’d finally met a woman he connected with, someone he was anxious to spend more time with and get to know better. But despite their obvious attraction, he didn’t have a clue as to how she felt about him. If he came on too strong now, she’d label him as just another jerk who took advantage of a situation.

The train rolled into Brooklyn with what seemed like unusual speed, his window of opportunity closing with every passing mile. He almost wished they’d gotten stuck in the subway all night.

* * *

The train was almost to her stop. Jan reached for her coat and reluctantly slipped it on. She had just a few minutes to determine how she was going to say goodbye to a man she'd been talking to for hours, kissing for minutes that seemed like nanoseconds. Stirring feelings that awoke every part of her and made the act of separating from him physically painful.

What if she didn't say goodbye? What if she asked him to come home with her? Right, to eat popcorn and watch TV with her roommates?

The train brakes screeched as it approached the station. "This is me," she said,

"Seriously?" Steve threw on his parka and zipped it up. "You're not stalking me, are you? Because I may not be armed with pepper spray but I do know how to defend myself." He walked with her to the door and waited for it to open.

Jan didn't know whether to laugh or give him a playful punch. "You're kidding, right? This is *not* your stop."

"I live three blocks that way." He pointed to the east. "You?"

"Six blocks the other direction."

The doors opened and they walked onto the platform together. "I'll walk you home," he said.

"That's not necessary." Maybe a little too late, her normal good sense rose to the fore. Her roommates might not be home yet. And even if they were, she'd told Steve she had her own bedroom. And even if he was just being a gentleman, and intended to only see her to her door, she wasn't sure she could fight the urges that might compel her to drag him inside and make him do his job. Putting out the fire he'd started inside her. She took out her can of pepper spray and held it up. "I'll be fine."

He must have noticed the change shoot over her face, the wariness dart into her eyes. "On second thought," he said, "all that talking about food made me hungry. You know that all-night deli on Brent street?"

She did. She and her roommates often walked there for a late night snack.

"I could sure get into one of their waffle eggs and bacon breakfasts." He held out his hand without touching her. "You up for joining me?"

His eyes told her he wasn't just interested in breakfast. But his mouth told he wouldn't try to push her into something she wasn't ready for. And his heart...well, she couldn't yet know what was inside his heart. But she wanted to.

"Actually, I am pretty hungry." In the distance the sounds of firecrackers popped. Colored lights filled the skies. She touched Steve's elbow and linked her arm through his. "Here's to the start of a beautiful breakfast."

His lips brushed her face. "And a beautiful year."

* * *

Want more holiday romance? Read about the Valentine adventures of Jan's roommate Fiona, an aspiring Broadway singer, in *Smitten by the Valentine Bear*. [Amazon](#)

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MEET LINDA

Writing has been a passion for as long as Linda Steinberg can remember. She started writing her first novel when she was living in Lagos, Nigeria, in longhand on school tablets, the only available writing paper, and hasn't stopped since. She writes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, and women's fiction featuring strong heroines with real problems and heroes who sizzle their way into readers' hearts. A retired accountant, Linda now lives in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, with her second time around sweetheart and enjoys reading, travel, family and friends.

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