

# **HOLIDAY**

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Thank you, dear friends and family. I have cherry-picked your sweeter, kookier moments and value-packed them in this book series. If you think it's you—even in part—you are correct.

## November, 1992

Just as she did every Thursday night after her parents were in bed, Jessica tiptoed from her bedroom. Fuzzy slippers made for soft footfalls and a barrier against the farmhouse's icy hardwood floors as she crept to the kitchen to retrieve the house phone. With the cord trailing along behind her, she hurried back to her bedroom, gently closed the door, and dialed the number she knew by heart.

"Good evening, Midwest Air. How may I help you?"

"Reservations, please," she whispered into the receiver. Using the blankets of her bed, she formed a tent to help muffle her voice. She aimed her flashlight at a pad of paper and uncapped her pen.

"Hello Jessica. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Mimi."

"The usual?"

"Yes, please." Jessica poised her pen. "Will you start with New York?"

"New York..." She heard the clicking of her keyboard down the phone line. "You turn eleven yet, honey?"

"Not quite yet, Mimi."

"Unaccompanied minor, travelling coach class... Looks like two hundred twenty-six this week."

"Two hundred twenty-six...?" Jessica winced. "Why so high?"

"It's almost holiday time, honey. It's our bread and butter."

"Oh, right." She jotted down the amount. "And Los Angeles?"

"Two hundred-thirty to LA and one-sixty to Chicago." In a more cheerful tone, the operator added, "Specials to the Bahamas this week starting at just one-fifty. Any desire to get out of the snow?"

"No thank you, Mimi."

"Why the interest in only those places?"

"I'm a city girl, Mimi." Jessica twirled the phone cord around her finger. "I belong in a *real* city."

"Of course." She could hear the compassion in Mimi's voice. "Talk to you next Thursday?"

"Sounds good."

"Goodnight, honey."

Jessica hung up the phone and scrambled out of bed. She quickly slid aside the metal grid covering the return air vent and pulled out the sock full of coins hidden inside. As she always did after placing her call, she counted her hard-earned allowance money.

"Twenty-six dollars." She put the money back in her sock, dropped it in the safe place and sighed. "Someday."

Just as they did every week, Jessica's parents lay awake in their own bedroom listening to their daughter's side of the telephone conversation.

"Thursday already?" Doctor Brown tiredly mumbled.

"It is," Susan Brown softly replied. "Go to sleep."

"How can I sleep when our only child is making plans to escape?" His chuckle was muffled against the pillowcase. "Are we so bad?"

“On the contrary,” she whispered. “We’re so good we’ve created a brave, future-oriented young lady.”

Doc Brown rolled over in bed to face his wife. In the bit of moonlight he could be seen squinting. “What were we thinking?”

They stifled small laughter. As it always did, the thought of her daughter made her smile. Doc Brown noticed this, pulled her close to him and whispered, “All this talk about the future. I like the present.”

“I love the present.” She kissed him. “Dr. Brown, one day our daughter is going to be a big deal.”

“The life of a country vet isn’t a big enough deal for you?” he teased. “Maybe if you’d quit telling her that she’s going to be a big deal she would quit plotting to get away from us and we’d get a decent Thursday night’s sleep.”

Susan smiled, whispered, “I’ll never quit telling her.”

## Last New Years Eve

“Somewhere in the madness of one celebration after another, against the festive sounds of department store music, or during the blizzard that pummeled our little town, somewhere along the way the holidays became a memory. As we ready ourselves for the New Year let us explore gratitude. What is it about the past year that has you feeling grateful on this New Year’s Eve? Is it a new child or grandchild? Perhaps you welcomed a new animal friend into your home. Maybe you got a nice raise or finally got around to helping out your favorite charity. Or perhaps you experienced a loss.” Jess Brown’s smooth voice grew even quieter; a habit that further captivated her already mesmerized audience. “Maybe it was a sad event that caused you to discover that the best things in life can’t be measured in dollars and cents. How very true that is.”

Though barely a whisper above five feet tall, Jess was a commanding presence, casting a spell over her faithful listeners in person and over the airways. It was the same brand of vintage whimsy and gratitude she employed during a nightly four-hour radio show that transported listeners back in time to cozy ideals of a kinder, gentler, if not altogether imagined era. On this night, surrounded by townsfolk, the sounds of “Auld Lang Syne” played an accompaniment to her warm narrative.

“Count your blessings, my friends, and count them good. Whether you are spending a quiet night at home by the fire, or surrounded by your friends at a big celebration like we are, know how fortunate you are, how much you are loved, and how very much a part of our community you are.”

Affectionate, grateful sounding murmurs resonated throughout the ballroom, a nice touch for the at home listening audience.

Jess’s voice held a smile. “As we bid a fond farewell to the old calendar, we welcome the New Year and every opportunity it may bring to further enrich our lives. From the Ecklund Plaza Ballroom in Holiday, I’m Jess Brown for KHOL saying be good to each other, and above all, be with the one you love.”

On cue, revelers blew into plastic horns and unfurled swirls of streamers in a celebration befitting the occasion that was still two hours away. Jess leaned back, basking in the happy sounds. A fog of confetti hung thickly over the crowd, reducing colossal ornate chandeliers to distant glimmering stars. She blinked against the storm, savoring the moment. Though she considered herself to be a city girl, there really was no place like Holiday.

When the last bit of feathery paper had cleared, she stood on tiptoes craning to see her assistant posted across the room. Standing tall above the others, Stan gave her the one-minute signal. Stan was in charge of audio for the radio station; as it was a shoestring operation, he was also in charge of production, promotion and all things engineering. Wearing his usual good-natured grin, he then gave her a thumbs-up.

Minding the silvery flower securing her upswept curls, Jess gently removed her headphones and let them rest at the collar of her pink, sparkling party frock. She accepted the P.A. microphone offered her and flicked bits of colorful paper from her bangs as she prepared to address the crowd. The low platform on which she stood hardly afforded her a proper look at the partygoers, and despite the microphone, she had to shout to be heard over their merrymaking.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for coming together on this special night to benefit our friends at Holiday Animal Rescue, a project I’m very passionate about.”

A smattering of applause and chuckles trickled through the crowd; the entire town was well versed in her love of animals.

Balancing two plastic glasses of champagne, Stan came to stand behind her on the narrow platform. He shook his head like a puppy, causing confetti from his ponytail to rain down on her.

“As always, I’d like to extend a special thanks to my partner in crime, audio man extraordinaire, Mr. Stan Morton.”

He handed her one of the glasses and feigned an air of formality. “Thank you, Ms. Brown.”

“I’d like to propose a toast,” she said, lifting her glass high. “Health and happiness always to you, our beautiful friends, neighbors and loved ones.”

There were echoes of salutations throughout the ballroom as they toasted and sipped. Jess’s gaze flicked to the grand ballroom clock. She handed back the glass, picking up the pace of her goodbye.

“You’re all invited to stay and ring in the real New Year here at the Plaza. A cash bar remains wide open and the band is setting up. It’s Sheriff Palmer’s boy, Tommy, and his band...” Always quick with a name, Stan cupped his hand around her ear and whispered. Jess’s eyes went momentarily wide and she struggled to announce the band without losing herself to a fit of giggles. “Disturbing the Peace.”

Deep in the crowd stood the sheriff wearing his civilian suit and tie, proudly smiling and nodding as those around him made kind acknowledgement. “I’m sure you’re in for a lively treat. Thank you everyone. Enjoy yourselves.”

She turned to Stan. “Happy New Year, my friend.”

“What—? You’re leaving me alone on this night?”

She caught a glimpse of two feisty looking blondes in fancy gowns lingering in the background. Jess shot them a knowing smile. “I don’t think you’ll be alone for long, Stan.”

“You have a hot date or something?” His quizzical expression evolved into a smug grin. “Why Jess Brown, you little sneak.”

“In fact this is a special night.” As she smoothed the rumpled lapel of his vintage velvet tux, she was struck by a memory. “Is this from our prom?”

“Fits like it did fifteen years ago,” he proudly told her before slipping into another one of his offbeat reveries. “I had Amy Ellen on one arm and Luann Nelson on the other.”

“Ah, yes.” The two young blondes edged more closely behind him as Jess patted his purple lapel. “It’s all coming back to me now, Stan. See you on Monday.”

Jess pressed through the thick crowd, exchanging greetings along the way and an occasional kiss or hug. She was rosy cheeked and breathless by the time she reached the coat check counter. The girls there greeted her and quickly retrieved her coat. Pulling on her bulky parka, she tossed thanks and well wishes over her shoulder and hurried down the back hallway. She ducked through the door marked “emergency only” exit, knowing full and well that no alarm would sound, regardless of the posted warning sign.

The door closed heavily behind her, sealing off the party sounds. The air was stagnant, cool, as if she’d just stepped into an enormous vault, and in a way she had. The

unused side of the former hotel was dilapidated, cobwebby and without lights, and would have been outright condemned long ago had it not been attached to such meticulously kept shops, a grand ballroom, and of course, the radio station all housed in the front portion of the otherwise structurally sound building.

She took a slow walk across the well-worn checkerboard floor of the vast lobby and paused at the center. Jess let her gaze drift slowly upward at three floors full of long vacant rooms and willed the enchanted place to haunt her with sights and sounds of guests and residents that had been gone since before she was born. For a moment she swore she could hear faint echoes of Big Band swingers and sentimental crooners coming through a desk radio, an appropriate backdrop to the arrival of supper clubbers, the bustle of bellhops balancing towers of train cases on rolling carts, even the triumphant ping of the front desk bell. The sensation was strong enough to make her momentarily forget that those supper halls were now as silent as the antique bell or that the city inspector had roped off the grand staircase nearly a decade ago.

As she had since childhood, she found a particular low spot in the floor and made a quick pirouette in the center of the lobby. The brief trip back in time made her smile. The pleasant sounds faded and the crumbling plaster ceilings and peeling, faded wallpaper rematerialized as Jess slowly resumed her pace. Pushing through yet another unauthorized exit, she entered the frosty night.

Cold winds blasted her as she scurried across the street toward the tiniest, most impractical car in the lot. Numb fingers fumbled to unlock the door of her old Mercury Capri convertible and when she got inside, her bottom barely made a dent against the frozen, brittle vinyl seat. She batted down the poufy organza skirting on her dress, then turned the key, praying as always that the motor wouldn't fail. It sputtered in protest.

"C'mon, I get it—you hate the weather. We won't be here forever." It was the same gentle coaxing she'd employed for a few years since returning home from Phoenix. The motor finally turned over and she let out the deep breath she'd been holding. She patted the car's dash. "There we go, thatta girl."

Tires spun in place before gaining purchase on the icy blacktop. She carefully drove to the outskirts of town until she reached the snow packed county roads. From there, a slow two-mile drive had the car alternately sliding and coasting down a winding country road leading to the driveway of her father's farm. A low light glowed from the windows of the barn. She threw the car in park and made a run for the house, ditching her heels in the foyer. She shimmied out of the fancy netted slip, pulled jeans over her silky tights and a heavy sweatshirt right over her dress. She grabbed a stocking cap, slipped on insulated boots then hurried back outside. Heavy boots punched holes in the fresh blanket of snow leading to the barn.

Guarding the door from the gusting winds, she slipped inside and slammed it shut. Breathing hard from her hurry, she turned and squinted into the dim light at her father standing near the far corner stall with Sparky, his faithful little dog.

"She ready?"

Doc Edgar Brown waved at her. "Close. Come have a look."

Jess's boots thudded across straw strewn concrete floors, past a menagerie of animals that stood quietly at attention, as if they understood something big was about to happen. She approached the last stall where her father had set up temporary birthing

quarters. The pen was lined with fresh, clean straw and it was warmer, thanks to heat that radiated from an ancient potbellied stove.

The retired country vet leaned against the stall gate peering down at a restless, very pregnant llama named Lucy. “She’s humming. It can’t be long now.”

“Whew. I was worried I’d miss out.”

Lucy gave a weary wail, prompting sympathy from Jess who pushed open the gate and cautiously approached the animal. “It’s okay, girl.” She glanced at her father. “You ever delivered a llama?”

“Never.” Ever patient, Doc Brown only chuckled. “You’ve thrown me a few curveballs over the years, but this is a new one, Jess, I admit.”

“You’re a saint, Pop.” She returned her attention to the mother-to-be, stroking wiry fur and speaking soothingly. “Almost there now.”

“She’ll pretty much do all the work,” her father explained. “I’m just around for the after party.” He caught a peek of the sparkling dress poking just below her coat.

“Speaking of which, isn’t there someplace better you could be?”

“I did my part,” she said, coming out of the stall and back to her father’s side. “The New Year will arrive with or without me. I want to be here.

“You’re a funny kid.” He sauntered to a nearby shelf, turned the tuning knob on the old transistor radio until a rather crackly rendition of Ella Fitzgerald’s “What Are You Doing New Year’s Eve” wafted from the speaker. He picked up his thermos, gave it a shake. “Hot chocolate?”

“Yes, please.” She watched him give the thermos lid a spin and in moments he handed her a steaming cup. She took a grateful sip. “Mmm, just like Mom used to make.”

“Not quite that good.” His lips flexed into small smile. “So, let’s make some resolutions.”

She shot him an odd look. “You don’t like that kind of stuff.”

He turned to face her, his expression suddenly serious. “Why don’t you get out of this place—get back to the city and a real radio job like you had.”

“That’s not a resolution,” she gently scolded. “Besides, I happen to like being here.”

“Holiday isn’t going anywhere and neither am I.”

As it usually did during such conversations with her father, a pang of sadness from the loss of her mother hit her squarely in the chest, nearly taking away her breath. She knew by now that life was funny, unpredictable. She attempted to look casual about it as she refocused her attention on the expectant mother.

“I know I always told you I hoped you’d want to stick around this farm, make it your home one day.” He shook his head as he made the recollection. “But that was a selfish, outdated idea of mine.”

“I love this farm.” Her firm tone indicated it was fact. “I love it.”

“Jess, you can’t keep looking out for your old man. And this,” —he glanced at the heavy llama and the other animals silently standing by— “this is certainly no place to start the New Year.”

“I’m right where I want to be,” she quickly defended.

But there was little point in arguing; her father knew very well how happy she’d been to flee her hometown for a high profile radio job in the big city and its nice accompanying salary, all of which she’d given up to come home just before her mother’s death five years ago. He was prepared to drive the point home when the llama wailed.

Jess and her father set aside their mugs and their momentary differences and entered the stall.

“Watch her now,” her father warned as they circled around the animal. “Expectant mothers are a bit unpredictable.”

Jess gingerly approached the llama. “You ready, Lucy?”

“She’ll want to stand to deliver.” He came around to his daughter’s side. “I reckon any time now.”

“Poor thing,” Jess cooed. She heard her father chuckling. “What’s so funny?”

“Look at this place, would you?”

Jess followed her father’s line of sight to a pair of horses, Moses and Shakespeare. The animals chewed straw, stared right back at them. In the next stall was a sow named Sweet Pea, a series of goats and a donkey. Across the barn and well away from the others, a skittish ostrich named Olivia paced her enormous, high fenced pen. Nathan, an aging bloodhound, loudly sighed from the doorway, and near the llama’s makeshift birthing center, Sparky, a smug West Highland Terrier with a height complex, sat perched and perfectly balanced on a tall stool, silently overseeing events as if he were in charge. There were still more animals in the smaller rooms of the barn. The place was hardly a farm, but more like a zoo comprised of misfits. Jess smiled, even laughed, as she mentally inventoried her surroundings.

“Pop, I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she quietly said, her eyes shining. At that moment, the llama cried out, snapping her out of her funny, sweet daze.

Doc Brown felt the llama’s underbelly as Lucy attempted to get to her feet. He looked at his daughter, nodded. “Get a towel and some iodine for the cord.”

She retrieved the requested items and returned to her father’s side as Lucy gave a good wail. Within moments, a tiny hoof emerged.

“Come on, gal,” her gently coaxed her. He glanced behind him at his daughter. “She’s been at it so long I worry she’ll be breach.”

Jess looked worried. “And if that happens?”

“It might get a bit tricky.” Sensing Lucy’s struggle, he reached for the hoof, gave it a gentle tug. “We’ll know better in a few seconds.”

“What a tiny leg,” Jess whispered, awestruck. She watched her father as he continued to administer patient assistance in sync with Lucy’s own rhythm. When the baby’s head appeared next, both father and daughter sighed with relief. With a bit of encouragement and a few careful tugs, the tiny animal plopped down onto the bed of soft hay.

Doc Brown glanced at his watch as “Auld Lang Syne” came through the old radio speaker. “Well, how about that? He’s just in time for the celebration.”

“Happy New Year, Pop.” Jess knelt down beside the gangly, awkward baby llama. The tiny animal flopped his head from side to side, trying to find his bearings in his big, new world. Jess pulled him close and gently wiped him clean with a towel. The goats could be heard bleating in their shared stall. Moses the Horse whinnied and the old bloodhound, Nathan, let out a sort of celebratory howl. Sparky barked twice and wagged, and it seemed the baby had been officially welcome to the big old barn. Jess also smiled, pressed a kiss onto the llama’s soft, damp head. “Happy birthday to you, little boy.”

## Valentine's Day

"Afternoon, Jess." Mr. Morton's jovial voice boomed across Mort's Gas Mart. As he always did, he asked, "You keeping warm?"

"Sure trying, Mort." She flashed him a smile before continuing her perusal of the ever-expanding shelf of coffee dispensers. There was caramel, salted caramel, caramel mocha, mocha banana, mint chip and a half a dozen fruit flavors. Despite the sign outdoors boasting hand crafted coffees, every hot beverage available in the shop could only be acquired through the press of a button and a subsequent noisy manufacturing process. She squinted to read the small printed descriptions, but even the simplest blend appeared to have some funky additive.

"Looking for anything special young lady?" It was question number two on his usual conversational lineup. "We got everything, you know."

"Looking for plain old coffee."

"I quit carrying it. No market for it." He came around the corner, sauntered down the line of dispensers. "Flavors, now that's what they want."

She furrowed her brow. "Even the old guys?"

"Especially the old guys." Mort made a low whistle. "They get one taste of Seattle Heavenly Hash or Caramel by the Salted Sea and they're in heaven. Like nothing they've ever tasted."

"Imagine that," she said, though she really could not. She pressed the button on Country's Best Mocha Hazelnut and stood back as the machine rumbled and dispensed.

"Same thing with the pizza. Nobody would dream of touching a regular old slice after getting a hold of my Chicago pie." He waved his arm across a rack of pre-packaged bagels with the flair of a magician. "And you can't touch a bagel around here like my New York bagels."

She looked at Mort in his coveralls and Tractor Supply cap as he stood beneath a large sign emblazoned with the claim, *Donuts larger than the state of Texas*, asked, "You ever even been out of Holiday, Mort?"

"Why should I?" He innocently shrugged. "The best stuff in the world is right here."

She selected a plastic lid and snapped it onto the top of her Styrofoam cup. "Maybe you could work on getting some environmentally friendly cups so we can hold onto the best stuff a little while longer."

"What? They didn't have Styrofoam in the big city?"

As residents of Holiday tended to do, he often mentioned her brief foray into city living. At first she'd found this to be annoying; then she came to understand that most of the town's residents simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else. It was just one more thing that set her apart from the rest.

She paid for the drink, stepped outside and made a little jump over a lagoon of melted snow. Pulling her jacket lapels tightly together, she hadn't taken two steps when Woody, the parcel post delivery driver, honked twice and veered his truck dangerously in front of her. Guarding her red suede Mary Jane shoes from the slush, she skittered toward him. Woody disappeared into the back of the truck and reemerged with three boxes of varying size.

"Glad I caught you. I was just taking these to the radio station."

She looked at the load he was holding and then looked at her coffee. Woody made a rosy-cheeked grin and thrust them at her. She lurched to catch the bulky packs, nearly sinking into the snow beneath their combined weight, something Woody seemed genuinely not to notice. He merrily chattered on. "You gearing up for the big show tonight?"

"I'm trying to..." She nearly dropped her bag. "Wait. Can you get my—"

"Got it," he cut her short, shifting her bag around so that she could wear it like a backpack. She wondered why he could be sympathetic to that need but not to the fact that he'd just burdened her with cumbersome packages. He even took the coffee out of her hand and set it squarely on top of the boxes. "There you go—service with a smile."

"Wait, this is too much..." But he was back in his truck before she could begin her protest. With another blast of his horn, he waved and spun out of the small parking lot, causing her to jump aside or be soaked by mud splash. She spit a lock of hair away from her lips and slowly tiptoed across the parking lot. "Thankfully I can't see what this muck is doing to my shoes."

After what seemed like an eternity, she arrived safely on the shoveled walkway, but as she crossed the storefront of Standard Radiator Repair, the door swung wide open, hitting the packages, sending them flying into the snow bank. For a moment it seemed she might follow suit.

"Whoa!"

She heard the exclamation and had braced for icy impact only to find herself in the arms of the town's carpenter, Sam Bloom. He quickly righted her and gave her the once over.

"Are you okay? I am so incredibly sorry about that."

"I'm fine." Her words held a biting tone. She gazed up at concerned grey eyes, and his dark, now slightly disheveled chestnut hair and the bit of matching scruff on his chiseled chin. She hazily blinked, found her nicer, softer voice, and tried again. "I'm fine."

At once they both seemed to notice he was still clutching her arm and he quickly released her. She took a backward step, readjusted her pink fuzzy beret and straightened the thin sleeve of her jacket.

Sam glanced backward at the door from which he'd just come.

"I will try and convince Mr. Sanders to get a glass door for his shop. Not much to prevent that sort of thing from happening again, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, I suppose not." She motioned at something that looked like a telescope. "You dropped your—"

"Drawings," he finished for her. Sam quickly retrieved the tube, slung the strap over his shoulder. "For some work I'm doing."

"Oh yeah?" But her attention quickly shifted to the packages sinking in the snow. She took a tentative step one direction, then the other, trying to figure how to best navigate the snowy mountain without completely ruining her shoes. She shot him an exasperated look. "Would you mind? Your arms are longer."

"Certainly. Of course," he said, plucking the packages out of the mess. He shook off one of the heavy envelopes. "Good as new. Of course your coffee is a goner." He picked up the empty cup and gave it a dubious sniff. "Was that actually coffee?"

"The country's best, according to Mort."

“Did he specify which country?” Sam collected the lid and discarded them in a nearby trash receptacle almost buried in the snow bank. With the packages firmly in his hold, he nodded in the direction of the radio station. “Shall we? It’s the least I can do.”

Without waiting for the protest she would surely stage, he started walking toward the old Ecklund building. “I can’t believe they didn’t deliver these to the station. The streets aren’t that bad.”

“Woody’s a sweet guy, but a bit on the dim side.” She shook her head. “So, what kind of work you doing for Old Man Sanders?”

“He wants to spiff up the place a bit, new woodwork in the waiting area, that sort of thing.” Sam shot her a grin. “You know, give the place a little pizzazz. All that business about a possible new shopping mall has got him worried about competition.”

“Yeah. I’m sure lots of people are thinking the same thing.” As it was becoming late afternoon, the full chill of the weather was quickly setting in. Without the prospect of coffee to warm her, she tried to put the cold out of her mind. “Why doesn’t he just change the name?”

“Beg pardon?”

Jess pointed to the tired looking sign over Sanders’ shop.

“You don’t aim to get new business if your name says your service is standard.” Against the evening sky, little misty puffs emerged from her lips. “Might as well call yourself Subpar Radiator, or Average Radiator.”

“How’s this for a motto? Somewhat Acceptable, Never Exceptional.”

“You’re good.”

“So, I saw you at the New Year’s Eve bash.”

Surprised, she asked, “You were there?”

“Why not, right? Watch that ice.” He nodded toward a particularly shiny spot and watched as she jogged around it. “Anyway, I looked for you afterward, but you were gone. Your coach threaten to turn into a pumpkin or something?”

“No, just a llama in labor.”

He craned around the side of the packages to see if she was serious. It appeared she was. “Not something you hear every day. I don’t remember seeing a llama out at your place.”

Sam had accompanied his son Justin’s grade school class on multiple field trips to the farm.

“Lucy only came to us in November,” Jess explained. “Did you know it’s a big trend to have a llama at a wedding?”

“Is it?”

“Good luck, they say.” She rolled her eyes. “In the end, the couple wanted to get rid of the Llama of Love due to her bad temperament. Turns out she wasn’t mean, she was just pregnant.”

He laughed. “She was even more full of love than they knew.”

“Exactly. And now we’ve got a baby, Guy Llamabardo.”

“Guy Llamabardo...?” He wore a puzzled look.

“Born right at midnight,” Jess explained.

“New Years. Got it.” He grinned. “You’re a very unusual woman.”

“So I’ve been told.” They reached the radio station steps and she glanced behind her at the rounded glass vestibule and multicolored neon crowns that encircled the radio

tower and incrementally climbed skyward. She motioned toward the oversized marquee complete with KHOL call letters and prominent lightning bolts. “My stop.”

“I’ll follow you in.”

“No need.” But he was already headed up the entrance ramp. She hurried ahead of him and held the door wide open for him to enter. Over her shoulder, she called to the station receptionist. “I’m back and I’ve brought Sam Bloom.”

“Mr. Bloom, how are you?” Roberta all but sprang out of her chair. In her mid-60s, her clothes were typically as pink as her cheeks, and only a shade off her elaborate strawberry up-do. On this day, her red-rimmed eyes and rosy nose also matched and she quickly launched into a sneezing fit that sounded more like a series of high pitched squeaks. After thanking him for his multiple bless-yous, she put on a wide, warm smile. “Well, it’s the town’s most gifted carpenter and eligible bachelor. How are you, Mr. Bloom?”

He smiled, sputtered, “I’m pretty sure I’m the town’s only carpenter, Ms. Rose.”

“Please, I’ve told you—call me Roberta.” As if only seeing the packages for the first time, she chastised Jess. “Take those packages from our guest. Can’t you see he’s got an armload?”

“What was I thinking?” Her playful sarcasm went unnoticed by Roberta, who was already chattering away. Jess peeled the beret from her head and smoothed the bit of static electricity the action had ignited. She took the boxes from him and stacked them along the wall.

“Now, we have all sorts of goodies, so what would you like?” Roberta led him toward three card tables lined up along the wall practically overflowing with baked treats, largely heart-shaped and covered in red frosting. “As you can see, there’s a bit of everything.”

“Wow, all this for Valentine’s Day?” Sam asked.

“One of our biggest advertising days at the station. We are very into happy hearts around here.” She caught a look at Jess removing her coat, unveiling a heart-patterned dress that matched her red shoes and dangling hearts earrings. Despite Roberta’s own gaudy attire, she muttered, “Some of us clearly more than others.”

Sam grinned and looked back at the Valentine spread. “So, what do you recommend?”

“Most everything comes from the Ecklund Building shops or nearby. We’ve got walnut biscotti sent over by Tony Esnick, our florist, fake pink sparkling wine from Holy Spirits, sweet bread from Van Hemert Bakery, Wisconsin Apple Muffins from Mort’s. Of course there are the usual cupcakes from Dubinsky’s Cupcakery.” Roberta dipped her chin and lowered her voice when speaking of the Widow Dubinsky, a woman who operated one of the few small businesses housed in the Ecklund Building and who also happened to be Roberta’s biggest competitor in the annual Harvest Bakeoff. “They’re a little dry for my taste, but it’s rude to turn anything away.”

Roberta continued the food tour levying criticisms against or extolling praise for the selections before arriving at her own piece de resistance. “Finally, there are my delicious cookies.”

“Wait—these the same cookies you served at the bed and breakfast?”

“One and the same,” she said blushing, clearly pleased that her cookies had proven to be memorable. Roberta was owner of a grand Victorian house that doubled as the

town's only inn, for which there was little call. Sam's relocation to Holiday had required a brief stay, thereby making Roberta Sam's first official acquaintance. His courtesy and charm had earned him every good word Roberta had to say about him. She practically shoved the platter of goodies in his face. "I call them Granny's Homemade Oatmeal Pecan and Chocolate Chip cookies."

Sam made an appreciative grin. "Well, that's certainly a lot to put on a recipe card."

"No recipe cards in my family." Roberta tapped her index finger against her temple, whispered, "Keep it right up here. Fort Knox."

Having overheard her last words, Bob Shalen, the station's owner, marched into the lobby, his arms flapping against his side of his wide plaid sport coat. "That the same Fort Knox where you put the combination to the safe?" He shook his head, gave their guest a look. "I haven't seen the inside of my safe since 1978."

"Why do you need to?" Roberta chided. "This station makes no money."

It was a dig that Jess couldn't help but take personally. Having put her heart and soul into a place that ran on old equipment and duct tape, she hated to be reminded that the station would never truly be profitable. That reminded her of another matter that did directly affect her: she would never make much money working at KHOL in Holiday.

"What about the cash drawer? We can't store it for safekeeping." He smugly folded his arms in front of him. "What if we get robbed, huh?"

"Oh, nobody wants your fifteen dollars." Roberta launched into another fit of mouse squeak sneezes. She dabbed her nose and eyes, shooting the boss a distasteful look. "I'm allergic to your cynicism, Mr. Shalen."

"You're allergic to this building." The thinning-haired owner aimed his exasperated expression at Jess, who was attempting to slink out of the room unnoticed. "Oh no, young lady. What have you brought into this place now?"

"Nothing. Not really." But her expression betrayed her tone and she immediately confessed. "A teeny, tiny, very little lamb brought to me just a little bit ago."

"Jess—"

"Please, Mr. Shalen—I'm trying to get a hold of my father to come get the little fellow. The problem will be out of your hair within half an hour, I promise."

"As long as you are working here, the problem will never be out of my hair." But it was clear Mr. Shalen couldn't stay angry with her for long. He shook his head, took out a handkerchief and mopped his nose as he walked toward the reception counter. He addressed Sam as he went. "You see this? Two fish bowls we have here—one filled with candy, the other with Benadryl. That young woman is going to be the death of us all, I swear. If she wasn't our best talent, why I'd—"

"It's...just one tiny lamb." Desperate to appease her boss, Jess reiterated, "Very tiny."

"One tiny lamb, one little calf, one miniature pig..." Mr. Shalen walked back toward the back offices. "You've turned the sales office into a livery. There are smells that will never come out of the carpet and I ask myself, what will she bring us tomorrow?"

"We'll probably find out tomorrow," Roberta assured him. She turned her attention to Jess after the boss had stormed out. She significantly lowered her volume. "But honey, I'm at the end of my allergy meds on this one. Can't you get your father to come get the poor thing?"

Gnawing her lip, Jess turned to face Sam. “Could you do me a favor?”

“Does it involve mutton transport?”

“Wait right here?” She didn’t give him a chance to refuse before she flounced through the swinging door. In seconds she returned carrying a small black lamb. “Where are you parked? I’ll walk you out.”

The tiny lamb bleated against a blast of cold outside air.

“Just how did you come to acquire this lamb?” Sam tried to conceal his smile as they walked down the sidewalk toward the lot. But like the rest of the town, he was familiar with her love for animals as well as her absolute inability to say no to a castoff. She spoke frequently about her wide range of adoptees on her nightly radio show. “Or should I ask?”

“Weeks back, I did a dedication for a young woman trying to make amends with her mother-in-law. She sounded sincere enough, even if her song selection was a bit ambitious—it was Sister Sledge.”

He nodded. “We Are Family. A classic.”

“M-hmm.” Jess sighed, pulling the lamb closer to her for warmth. “Apparently it didn’t take. Mother-in-law sent her a message to let her know exactly what she’d always be.”

“How Mafioso.” He chuckled and motioned toward his late model truck. “Surely that caller wasn’t mad at you—you were only doing your job.”

“Oh she wasn’t mad, but she was desperate to place her newly acquired lamb. She lives in one of those new condos—no pets or...livestock. So this afternoon she brought him to me, but of course.” She watched him begin to unlatch the tailgate and stopped him. “Um, he has to ride inside with you. He’s a baby.”

As if to underscore his helplessness, the lamb let out a pathetic sounding bleat that seemed to barely penetrate the frosty air. He quickly nuzzled his fuzzy face against Jess’s sweater dress for warmth. She snuggled him more closely.

“I hope you’re not going to ask me to let him sit in my lap.”

“No, but do you have a blanket?”

“A blanket?”

“Or a rug or...” She nervously eyed his nice insulated work jacket. “Coat?”

“You’re serious?” He studied her a moment, but she didn’t even blink. “You are serious.”

Sam closed the gate and pressed the remote button to unlock the cab. He then unbuttoned, unzipped and shrugged off his jacket and handed it to her. “Goodbye, clean coat and probably my clean upholstery too, huh?”

“It’s not too long a ride and you can drive fast.” She wrapped the lamb in the warm coat and gave him a scratch under his chin before handing the animal off to Sam. She glanced at her watch. “Show starts in ten minutes. I’ll thank you on the air, okay?”

“Almost makes up for the lamb do-do in my clean truck.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Just go. Have a good show.” He smiled as he climbed inside the truck and started it up. She hurried off, turning around in time to see the lamb nose-printing the truck’s spotless windows.

Jess ran all the way back to the station and hurriedly stepped inside. Through the studio window, she could see Annie dancing around. She spotted Jess, smiled and waved.

Annie was a high school student, and more importantly, Bob's Shalen's niece, hired to help pull music, beds and commercials on especially busy nights like this one.

Jess pushed through the studio door and made a slow spin, nodding admiringly. "Nice work, Annie. Mood lights, candy hearts, I love it."

"And these fine items." Annie produced two headbands from behind her back, both with bobbing, blinking heart lights. It was no secret that Annie idolized Jess and emulated her funky dress style. In fact her own Valentine attire was only a half step off what Jess herself was wearing.

"This is fantastic." Jess beamed with appreciation. "You know me too well."

"Well, nothing is too good for the Queen of Corn and Cheese."

It was a title given to her by a local newsman who loved to do profiles on people he considered to be celebrities. For one glorious day she'd been the lead story the town's four-page newspaper.

Jess grinned and exchanged high-fives with Annie on her way out the door to the switchboard.

The large front facing window had its curtain drawn on this night, which suited her fine. Though she had an appreciation for the quirky building's architecture, the rounded vestibule designed to showcase the radio station was a feature Jess could easily live without. Given that her father was a semi-retired country vet, her show was often interrupted by folks with health questions pertaining to pets and livestock, and more than a few times she'd been the recipient of an animal drop off, just as with the little lamb. She was pretty sure Clayton Prentiss Ecklund, designer and original owner of the building, had not had such things in mind when he added the unique looking radio station to the building in 1926. As stated in an ages-old newspaper article, the innovative fellow's ideals were geared toward the community experiencing the miracle of radio broadcast, a relatively new concept at the time of the addition. Certainly old Clayton could not have imagined that the place would one day become a drive-by lamb drop.

On this particular night it would be far too cold for listeners to stop by for a quick listen or animal-anything, and though there was little hope the curtain would keep the cold from infiltrating the seal of the drafty old window, just blocking the view of the icy street helped her to feel a little warmer.

Jess looked through a smaller window leading to the lobby and saw that Annie was hard at work screening callers and coaching them about the importance of on-air brevity. She was excellent company, knew her role well, and she was great with all manner of callers. Given any semblance of budget, Jess would have her on the schedule every night.

"Someday," she muttered to an empty room. But different thoughts quickly swept up behind that one, as they usually did. Thoughts about getting on with life and getting back to her career—a real career—which would mean putting Holiday and the no-budget radio station firmly in her rearview mirror. Staying couldn't possibly satisfy her; she was a city girl. She'd worked hard to leave the small town in the first place...

Her thoughts were interrupted by Annie's shout over the intercom system.

"World's best proposal for you, in cue right now."

"Great!" Jess gave her a thumbs-up. She gazed over the blinking phone panel knowing it would be a typically busy Valentine's request show. Clearing her throat a few times, she first put on her headphones then carefully situated the blinking heart headband over them. "It's show time."

Four hours later, after fielding dozens of romantic requests, soothing sad or worried hearts, and celebrating two marriage proposals, another successful Valentine's Day Love Show had come to a close. Jess flicked a switch to start the last song—Burt Bacharach's What the World Needs Now—then leaned back in her old chair and rested her suede heels in front of the console. The main overhead light had been turned out, leaving the studio lit only by blinking pink and red lights. It felt sweet, and despite her personal lack of romance, it was even romantic.

Annie entered the room holding a bottle of fake sparkling wine and two paper cups.

"That second proposal was over the top." Annie set the cups down on the side table and poured their drinks. "A big top wedding? Amazing. That's sure to make the news."

"I know, right?" Jess flicked little bits of Cheetos residue off her dress before accepting the cup.

"My only hope is that if they hire me to sing, I won't have to wear a tutu." Annie's gaze flicked toward the ceiling. "I wore a hoop skirt at a *Gone With the Wind*-themed wedding last week. Try hitting a high note while wearing a corset. Ugh."

Jess giggled at the vision of the songstress in full Southern Belle attire. In Holiday, when people thought of weddings, they naturally thought of Annie's lovely voice, just as when people thought of animals, they thought of Jess. She suddenly frowned at the notion of all the things that could go wrong with a big top themed ceremony. "My only hope is that the happy couple doesn't bring me an elephant after the honeymoon."

Annie nodded and then raised her cup high for a toast.

"Here's to you. Another successful Valentine's Day show is in the can. Cheers, little boss."

"Corn and cheese, baby." Jess smiled as they clinked paper cups. "Corn and cheese."

