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BAH! HUMBUG

companion to
**WIN'S
WAR**



A Desert Breeze Publishing Free Read by

Jackie Leigh Allen

Bah! Humbug

By

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Chapter One

Heather Fisher Black slammed the door behind Jerk Number Three, the man she'd thought might be The One. This had been the suckiest year of her life. She glanced at the calendar. One year since her husband, Bobby, had gone to prison for fraud, and her life sank into the toilet. One week until Bonny and Billy would be home all day. Two weeks until Christmas.

Bah, humbug!

The phone rang, and she checked the caller ID. Mom. What now? Gone were the days when Heather could drop the kids with Mom and her sister, Emily, anytime for free babysitting. Now she had to wait for an invitation from her own mother, and Saint Emily was married and in med school. Now Mom would more likely ask a favor from Heather though she didn't know what she could do for her mom.

She picked up the phone before it could go to message. One thing she'd learned this year was putting things off only made them worse in the end.

"Hi, Mom." Heather bit her tongue. She wouldn't complain. She wouldn't let Mom know what a garbage dump life had become.

"Heather, I wanted to talk to you while Bonny and Billy were still in school. Would you like to go Christmas shopping one day next week? We can take the children to see Santa Claus the following week and have a little lunch."

Boy, now didn't that tell you what a boring life she led when lunch with a four year old, a six year old and her mom was the brightest engagement on her calendar. She glanced at the wall again. Yep. Not a single thing penciled in for the evenings the rest of the year. Well, there was the New Year's Eve dinner she'd planned to have with Jerk Number Three when she thought he'd be proposing. She scratched it out so hard she tore the paper.

"Heather?"

"Sorry, Mom, I spaced out for a minute. Sure, we can go Christmas shopping next week." She sighed. "I hope you know I won't be getting you anything big."

"Oh, we don't need anything but your presence for the Christmas feast. Emily and Win will be here. Nat Rodriguez and Juan Estevez are coming. So are Win's grandfather and his new lady friend, Jean."

Oh, great, everyone would be paired off except Heather and her seventeen year old brother who probably had a date for New Year's Eve.

"You're welcome to bring the man you're seeing, what's his name, I forget."

What was Jerk Number Three's name? Oh, yeah, Justin, who'd been anything but just. "I broke up with him."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I guess."

"You don't have to be. He was a jerk. He asked if there wasn't some way I could get rid of my kids for a couple of weeks so we could go on a Christmas cruise to Hawaii. Imagine. He wanted me to be away from Bonny and Billy at Christmas." Heather hoped Mom didn't bring up the fact that until a year ago Heather would have been delighted to sail away leaving her kids with her mom and Emily.

That was the second thing Heather had learned this year. Her children were precious. Irritating sometimes, but she liked being with them, reading stories at bedtime, getting them off to school in the morning, going to the park to play.

She guessed that was the third thing she'd learned. There were a lot of things to do in San Diego that didn't cost money.

"Good riddance, I say," her mom replied.

Mom's right. Why do I pick men like Jerks One, Two and Three? Why don't I look beneath the surface?

They decided on Wednesday for Christmas shopping. The alarm for the time to go down to meet the kids school bus gave a sharp buzz at the same time the phone rang again. She grabbed the cell and left her condo. While she waited for the elevator, she answered without checking the ID.

"Heather, I need you to show a condo right now," her boss, Harvey Schiller said.

"I'm just picking up my kids, Harvey. I'll have to get them settled before I can show the place." She stepped into the elevator where the phone didn't work, giving herself a couple of minutes to make a plan. She couldn't ignore him. Showing condos gave her what little money she had and allowed her to work without paying for child care.

When she exited on the first floor, Harvey screamed into the phone. She walked to the gate with the phone held well away from her ear, opened the gate and stood on the sidewalk waiting for the bus. A cream colored Cadillac stood idling in the circular drive. The prospective clients, she'd bet.

When a moment of silence indicated Harvey had stopped for breath, she said, "I'll get the kids from the bus, settle them with homework and show the condo. Which one is it?"

As she spoke, the window of the Cadillac lowered and a middle aged blonde leaned out. "Are you the one showing the condo?" she asked.

Heather nodded, held up the phone to indicate she had a call and waited for Harvey's answer.

"The penthouse. You can't screw this up. The people will be there any minute."

"I think they're here now." And so were her kids.

Bonny and Billy jumped off the bus and ran to her. She hugged them to her sides as Harvey continued to spew out words.

She walked the kids over to the waiting Cadillac and spoke loudly enough for Harvey to hear, if he was doing any listening.

"Hello. I'm Heather Black, and I'll be delighted to show you the condo as soon as I take my children upstairs."

"Ooh, they're darlings, aren't they, Jim?" The woman turned to her husband.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Can we get through the gate while we wait for you?"

"Yes. I'll hit the release." Heather took her kids inside the gate, pushed the button for the one that let cars in, and directed the couple to a visitor's parking space.

"I hope there's underground parking," Jim exited his car.

"There are two spaces for each condo," Heather said.

"Mommy, we're having a party. You need to come. You need to bring something." Billy shrugged out of his backpack. "I got the paper here."

"I'll look at it after supper," Heather said.

Since the couple was out of their Cadillac, there was nothing to do but invite them to go up with her and the children. In the elevator she introduced Bonny and Billy while the couple told her their names were Jim and Karen Caldwell. She ushered them into her condo and offered them a seat. She tried to look at the place through the eyes of potential buyers. The brown leather sectional was a bit big for this living room, but comfortable. She'd added pale yellow and green

accents to lighten the area and thought it looked inviting.

Oh, hell, they weren't interested in her decorating ability. "I'll be with you in a moment after I settle the kids in the kitchen."

Jim, a large man, threw himself down on the sofa, but the woman said, "Could I see your kitchen? I like what you've done with the living room though I hope ours will be bigger."

"The unit you're looking at is more spacious." And pricier.

Heather seated the children at the table in the corner of the kitchen by the windows that looked out over the city.

"This is a nice view," the woman said.

"Yes and the penthouse has an even better one." Heather poured a small glass of milk for each child and put four Oreos on a plate. Billy watched the Oreo package return to the top of the refrigerator.

Heather held up two fingers. "Two Oreos for snack. That's it. Deal?"

Billy grinned and held up his own two fingers. "Deal."

"Unpack your backpacks and start on your homework. I'll be back in about half an hour."

"But Mom, we've got all weekend to do our homework," Bonny moaned.

"Yes, but if you get it done tonight we'll have all weekend to play." Just what they'd do, she didn't know, but she'd figure something out.

"Can we go to the movies? I want to see the new Disney show. Morgan got to see it last weekend." Bonny's new friend, Morgan, got to do everything no matter how much it cost.

"We'll see," Heather said.

"That means we can't." Bonny slammed her book on the table.

"I said, we'll see, but not if you have a temper tantrum." Heather stared at Bonny until she looked down and opened her book.

"All right, let's go see the penthouse." Heather gave the woman a bright smile and headed to the desk where she kept the master key.

"Bye, kids," the woman said. "Come on, Jim let's take a look at this place. I sure like the view from the kitchen."

"You plan on spending some time there?" Jim smiled at Heather. "When I retired from the bank, Karen retired from the kitchen."

"Are there good restaurants that deliver around here?" Karen asked.

"Yes, there are." Not that Heather knew from personal experience, but she'd learned early on food delivery was a concern of most people living in these condos, so she'd made up a list and kept it up to date with recommendations from her fellow residents. Her dad had actually praised her initiative.

She took the couple up to the spacious penthouse with three bedrooms and two baths. They seemed impressed, but she'd had others look at it and decide the price was too high. She gave them one of Harvey's cards and got off the elevator at the third floor, hoping the two Oreo rule had been obeyed.

"We're almost done, Mommy," Billy shouted as she went inside their condo.

"I am done," Bonny said in a superior tone.

"I'm writing my name twenty times," Billy said and showed her the paper where he'd printed his name legibly ten times then started squeezing the letters together so he could get the twenty copies on the paper.

Heather could see he'd have to start over, but now wasn't the time. "Put your things away. We'll fix supper then we'll go out to see the Christmas lights."

"We've done that," Bonny said. "I want to see the movie. I'll bet Grandma would take us. I want to call her." She got up from the table.

"Well, I'm sure Grandma would take you, but is calling her while she's fixing supper the best thing to do at this time of year when Santa is making his list?" Heather wasn't proud of herself for invoking Santa, but it bought her some good behavior during a time when her finances were too tight for things like movies or the dozen other things Bonny thought necessary for her happiness.

That was the fourth thing Heather had learned this year. Money didn't buy happiness. She knew most people learned it earlier and easier than she had, and she was determined to pass the lesson on to her kids.

"O-kay." Bonny slumped back into her chair.

"I need someone to put cheese slices on the burgers and someone to pour salad into the bowl," Heather said as she took fixings for cheeseburgers and a bag of salad out of the refrigerator.

"Cheese, please." Billy laughed uproariously at his little joke and grabbed the package of slices.

Bonny got the wooden salad bowl out of the low cupboard and stepped up on the little stool in front of the sink.

Glad the kids were quiet and occupied, Heather put the hamburger patties in the pan to cook.

"Oops," Bonny said as the garbage disposal roared.

Bonny screamed.

Heather turned to see a fountain of stuff coming up from the disposal. She stepped across the room, turned off the switch and the eruption stopped.

She stared at the pile of lettuce and -- plastic? "Did you put the bag down the disposal, Bonny?"

"Maybe." Her daughter stepped down from the stool and edged away.

Heather sighed. "What am I going to do with this mess?"

"Call Snipe," Billy said.

Chapter Two

Call Snipe. The words echoed in Heather's mind. How many times had she done that this year? Snipe had been a godsend once he got his arm prosthesis working. Her father had arranged for Snipe to get the job as maintenance man at the condo building where he'd also bought a condo for Heather. Snipe could fix almost anything or find someone to get it fixed which was just as good. Still, it was Friday night and the man probably had a date. With dark hair, big brown eyes, and a smile that lit up the room, he'd be a hit with the ladies.

"Mom, the burgers are burning," Bonny said.

Heather came out of her thoughts to the smell of burned beef. Just what her budget needed. "Now what will we eat?"

Billy held up a cheese slice. Bonny put the bowl of salad on the table. Heather smiled.

"Cheese sandwiches it is."

"It stinks in here," Bonny said.

"Okay. Cheese sandwiches after we call Snipe."

"He likes cheese," Billy said.

Of course her son knew that. Billy would have followed Snipe eight hours a day if she'd let him. The man was so patient with her son. She hit his number on her phone and sent up a little prayer he hadn't already left for a date.

"What's the problem, Heather?" he answered.

She laughed in relief at sharing her problem. "The disposal."

He laughed, too. "What did the kids put down it this time?"

Oh, he was a nice man. He didn't immediately think the blond ditz had done it. "Bonny accidentally dropped a plastic bag down."

"I'll be right there." He clicked off.

Bonny came and leaned against Heather. "I'm sorry, Mommy."

Heather smoothed her daughter's blond hair. "I know, sweetie. You were in a hurry." Heather didn't want her daughter growing up thinking she was a dumb blond. "It's a mistake anyone could make."

Billy came to her side for a hug, too.

She'd missed out on so much when she'd been running around playing Mrs. Socialite with Bobby, all on other people's money as it turned out. She squeezed them both. "Let's clean up what we can before Snipe gets here." When she opened a window an inch, damp air rushed in and blew away the burned smell.

Snipe came, fixed the problem, and showed her the reset button so she might be able to take care of the next emergency herself.

"Don't hit the button if there's a lot of stuff in there or you'll get the fountain effect," he told her.

"Been there, done that. We cleaned it up before you got here." Heather laughed.

"We're having cheese sandwiches for supper," Billy said. "You like cheese."

"There's an invitation in there somewhere," Heather said. "But you probably have a date tonight."

Snipe shook his head. "I'm not seeing anyone right now." He crouched down to Billy's

height. "I'd be delighted to eat supper with you. I do like cheese."

"It will be a very simple supper since I burned the hamburgers."

"But the company will make up for it," Snipe said with a smile that made her tummy flip in a way it hadn't for a very long time. Certainly not with Jerks One, Two, or Three. Probably not even with Bobby. She felt a little excited and a lot safe with Snipe. That was a new combination for her.

Ten days, nine fights between her two darlings and eight showings of the penthouse to the Caldwells later, Heather woke up to screams from Bonny's bedroom. The kind of screams that meant another fight with her brother, not a serious injury. Thank God the three of them were going shopping with Mom so there would be something to occupy the kids. Maybe Heather could find something inexpensive at the toy store to keep them busy for the rest of school vacation.

Reluctantly, she left the comfort of her flannel sheets. They kept her warm every night unlike her former husband who'd frequently kept the beds of other women warm. She slipped on her quilted silk wrapper, a relic of the days when Bobby had given her exotic gifts to make up for his straying. Why had she thought that was a good bargain? Why had she kept up the façade so long?

"Mo-o-om," Bonny yelled. "Billy kidnapped Barbie."

A frequent occurrence. Heather wondered where Billy had taken Barbie this time. The doll traveled more than Heather did. She went to Billy's room. No sign of him, so she walked to Bonny's door.

Her daughter lay in bed with her arm over her forehead and exclaimed, "My Barbie. Where has he taken her? What will he do to her? Call the police."

Heather hid a grin behind her hand. Life certainly wasn't dull with these two. "Billy's not in his room," she said. "I'll need your help to find him."

Bonny popped out of bed, ran into Billy's room and opened his closet door. He sat there grinning with Barbie on his lap clutched in the arms of G. I. Joe. "Joe needed a date."

"Give her to me," Bonny screamed.

Heather was glad the walls in this building were soundproof enough the drone of planes and the shrieks of small girls couldn't penetrate. That was one of the things she'd touted to the Caldwells. She really hoped they bought the penthouse because she'd get a nice commission that would come in very handy at this time of year.

"Joe needs to let Barbie go," Heather said. "Women don't like to be grabbed. They like to be asked nicely."

Billy frowned at her. TMI.

Heather held out her hand. "It's time for Barbie to go home."

Billy handed her the doll.

Crisis over. For the moment.

After a breakfast of cold cereal and banana, she laid out dark green corduroy pants and a green red and white striped long sleeved tee for Billy. "Bonny, put on your red-flowered dress."

"I want to wear pants. I'll be cold."

The grey sky and scudding clouds seconded Bonny's opinion of the weather, but Heather knew her mom would want Bonny in the smocked dress. Mom had given it to her at

Thanksgiving with the idea of pictures with Santa in mind.

"You can wear your red tights under it. You'll look fashionable when we go to lunch."

Hearing no more complaints, Heather dressed herself in black slacks and a red silk blouse. Then she got everyone into coats, caps and mittens. Southern California might be warmer than the rest of the country, but the wind still chilled ears and fingers.

When they reached the street, her mom waited as promised. They wanted to get to the mall when it opened so the line for Santa wouldn't be horrendous. Her mom had car seats for the children, so they could go with her, and Heather could save gas money.

At the mall there were already twenty children in line. "I guess we weren't the only ones with this idea," Heather told her mom.

"Why don't I take the children window shopping while you stay in line?" Mom suggested.

"I'll be glad to stand here. Be good for Grandma, kids."

Heather talked with the woman next to her who had a six month old little girl and tried to keep out of the way of the boy behind her who kept kicking her heels. By the time she reached the front of the line, the six month old sobbed in Santa's lap, and there was no sign of Heather's kids. She had just let the kicker take her spot when her mom and the kids showed up. They had big smiles and kept glancing between Mom's sack of wrapped presents and Heather. Her Christmas gifts, no doubt.

After the pictures they went to the toy store where Bonny proclaimed she needed everything new for Barbie, and Billy wanted everything from Sesame Street. While her mother wrote down their requests, promising to relay them to Santa, Heather picked up crayons, paper, glitter, finger paints and a couple of sheets of stickers.

She managed to get her loot into a bag before the kids saw everything.

"How about hamburgers and milkshakes?" Mom asked the kids.

"Hooray," Bonny said. "Mom burned ours the last time she fixed them."

Her mom smiled. "There's a story behind that I'm sure."

Her attitude's changed, or likely it's I've changed so she no longer sees me as someone who always burns the burgers.

Enjoying the picture of herself as competent, Heather placed the children in a booth with Billy beside her and Bonny next to her mom.

After they ordered, Mom asked what had taken her attention off the burgers.

"Well," Heather looked at Bonny who developed a sudden interest in coloring her place mat. "We had a little disaster with the garbage disposal."

Her mom followed her gaze to Bonny and nodded. "These things happen with children."

"So I'm finding out. I never realized how much of a load you and Emily were taking off me when you did all that sitting for me. If I haven't thanked you before, I do now. Even though we'll have fun during the vacation, I can't help wishing for a quiet afternoon when I can read a book and drink a cup of tea without interruptions."

"Why don't I take the children on Wednesday? We can make Christmas cookies."

"I wasn't begging, but I won't turn you down if you're sure it's not too much with getting ready for Christmas dinner."

"Emily and Win are coming in that evening so she can help me start things on Thursday. Turkey's probably the easiest thing in the world to fix anyway."

"Yeah." Heather laughed. "I only had to call the turkey hot line once at Thanksgiving." Heather had hosted her parents that day and been proud of how everything came off even if most

of the menu was either canned or frozen.

After lunch the kids drooped so her mom drove them home, stopping on the way at the Christmas Store to buy the small artificial tree complete with lights Heather had requested for her present from her parents.

"Do you want to come in for a cup of tea?" Heather made the offer not expecting her mother to accept.

"Yes, I'd like that," Mom surprised her by saying. "I have something I'd like to talk to you about."

Uh-oh.

When they stepped onto the elevator with Heather toting the big box full of the tree, she was surprised to find the Caldwells. Peering around the box, she nodded in her mom's direction and introduced her to them.

"We're just moving in. Your daughter did such a good job of answering all our questions we just knew this was the spot for us," Karen Caldwell gushed.

Heather breathed a sigh of relief. That commission might be enough to let her end the year with a cushion.

"She likes living here, and it comes out when she shows a place," Mom said with a proud smile at Heather.

In the apartment Heather put a Disney DVD on for the kids and made a pot of Earl Grey in her grandmother's tea pot with the pink roses swirling over it. She sat down across the table from her mom and waited for The Announcement.

After stirring her tea a dozen times, taking a sip and pronouncing it delicious, her mom looked Heather in the eye. "Since everyone will be paired up on Christmas Day, I thought you should have a date, too."

Heather waited.

"Fred Smart came to church yesterday. He's moved back to town to settle his mother's affairs. I'm sure he'd be delighted to be included in a family Christmas."

Fred Smart, Mr. Smarty-pants, the most obnoxious kid in the fifth grade, and he hadn't gotten any better as he aged. I'm not that desperate.

"I hope you haven't invited him, because I have a date." Heather crossed her fingers under the table that Snipe would be able to come.

"Oh, that's good." Mom stared at her, waiting for a name no doubt, but Heather wasn't going to commit herself.

Her mom finished her tea and gathered her things. When they went through the living room the two kids were asleep on the sofa. As soon as her mom was out the door, Heather punched in Snipe's number.

"Hi, Heather, I hope that disposal isn't giving you trouble again."

"No, I don't have a problem with that. My mom was just here making plans for Christmas, and I wondered if you'd like to come to dinner. Win and Nat and Juan are going to be there." She waited through the pause getting antsy by the second.

"I'm sorry Heather, I've accepted another invitation."

"And I'm sorry I waited so long."

Now what am I going to do?

Chapter Three

Four days until Christmas. Three days to find a man to accompany her. Two days to make six calendars as presents after she got the photos printed.

The next morning Heather called a man she'd met at church. He was at least ten years older than she, but he was presentable, and he'd shown some interest in her even though he knew she had two kids. "Bob, I know it's late, but I wondered if you were going to be alone for Christmas and if you'd like to come to my folks' house. They're having a big gang over."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'd love to have Christmas with you, but I'm going up to L.A. to be with my sister. I'll call you when I get back."

"Sure. Well, Merry Christmas."

Bah humbug! Now she didn't have a date for Christmas, and she'd have to go out at least once with Bob to let him down easy.

On Wednesday after her Pilates class in the complex gym Heather asked Mike, the instructor if he'd be interested in Christmas dinner at her folks. She knew he was gay, but he wasn't effeminate, and maybe her family wouldn't catch on. "I just can't show up without a date," she said.

"I'm sorry, Heather, I know exactly how you feel. I've taken a woman to family Christmases for years, but at Thanksgiving I finally told my family I was gay." He gave a killer smile. "So this Christmas I'm taking Stan with me."

"I'm glad for you. I hope you and Stan have a Merry Christmas." She meant it, too. Mike was a nice guy and a great instructor. He pushed but not too hard.

That afternoon Heather picked up the photos and began the process of making calendars. The kids *helped* by sprinkling glitter on every page and most of the kitchen floor. She'd protected the table with newspapers, but she hadn't thought about the floor. So after the kids went to bed that night, she scrubbed the kitchen floor.

Exhausted, she pulled on a flannel nightgown printed with polar bears that she'd bought to keep warm now that she slept alone.

Christmas Eve morning dawned bright and sunny. The phone woke her and the kids.

"Hi, Mom, is everything all right?"

"Everything's wonderful. I just wanted to let you know I invited Fred anyway. There would have been thirteen at table without him, and while I'm not superstitious, fourteen's a nice number."

And her mom wouldn't want even Smarty-pants to be alone on Christmas.

"That's fine. Do you want to say hi to the kids while I start the coffee?" Heather handed the phone to Bonny who stood with her hand outstretched.

"Me, too," Billy said.

Darn. The kids were as high as if Christmas had already come. Good thing she'd planned a full day to keep them busy. She went into the kitchen to start the coffee, always the first order of the day, and no water came out of the faucet.

"I want pancakes for breakfast," Bonny announced as she entered the kitchen.

"Pancakes," Billy echoed.

"Something's wrong with the water," Heather told them. "You can have cereal now or

you can wait until we get the water fixed for pancakes." She waited. Bonny's lip came out in a pout. "Or," Heather suggested, "you could have cereal for breakfast and we could have Mickey Mouse pancakes for lunch."

"Yeah," Billy said and headed for the cupboard where she stored the cereal.

Heather took the cereal out, put bowls on the table, helped Billy pour cereal into his bowl, then added sliced banana and milk to each bowl. That task out of the way she punched in Snipe's number.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "The water's shut off. I tried to call you earlier, but your line was busy."

"How long is it going to be off? I'm desperate for coffee."

"That I can help with. I'll be right up."

No time to dress. Heather ran into her bedroom, put on her silk cover-up, and combed her hair, thankful for the new short cut, before the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Bonny yelled and beat Heather to the door. She started to unlock it when Heather put her hand on the door. "Remember, we need to know who it is before you open it."

"Who's there?" Bonny called.

"Santa Claus," Snipe said.

Bonny's eyes got big.

Heather grinned. "Isn't that funny? Santa sounds just like Snipe."

"I bring gifts," he said.

Bonny yanked open the door.

Snipe stood in the doorway with a red Santa hat on. In his real hand he held a tray of Starbuck's coffee. In his claw he held a plastic bag out of which peeped a white stuffed kitten and a black stuffed dog.

"For me?" Bonny asked reaching for the bag.

"Be polite," Heather said.

Bonny's hand stopped, but she continued to give Snipe a pleading look. Billy ran in. "Hi, Snipe. Whatcha got?"

"Presents," Bonny answered.

"Why don't I take that coffee off your hands while you deal with my two?" Heather held her hands out for the tray. "You two remember your manners." She walked toward the kitchen with the coffee, inhaling its life-giving scent. "And let Snipe get all the way in so you can close the door."

She set the coffee on the kitchen table and stood in the door watching as Snipe crouched down in front of her children. He handed the kitten to Bonny and the dog to Billy.

"Thank you, Mr. Snipe," Bonny said, snuggling the kitten under her chin.

"Thanks." Billy ran across the room to show Heather his present. "Look, it's a dog. I'm gonna' call him Blackie."

"That's a good name. Could you two play with your new pets while I talk to Snipe?"

Bonny sat on the sofa with the kitten in her lap petting it while Billy ran around the room pretending he was chasing Blackie.

Heather went back into the kitchen. "Thank you for bringing presents. You're really good with the kids. Do you have younger brothers or sisters?"

"No, but I have a nephew and niece."

She held up the package of Oreos, and he nodded. "Is that who you're spending Christmas with?"

"No, they live in North Dakota, and I have no desire to go up there this time of year."

"Is that where you're from?" She realized she didn't know much about Snipe even though he'd been an important part of her life for this last year. She sat at the table across from him.

"Yeah. I was a country boy, and frankly I'd had enough of it. That's why I joined the Marines."

"Are you sorry?" Heather shook her head. "I shouldn't have asked that." She opened her coffee, took a sip and smiled at him. "Hot and dark. Just what I like."

She watched his eyes widen and his cheeks redden. *I could have been talking about him with his dark brown brush cut, brown eyes and broad shoulders. He's hot, too, in the best way. I wouldn't mind cuddling up to him.*

Heather pulled her thoughts back to water problems or tried to. "What happened to the plumbing?" The question came out okay, but her thoughts continued to circle around the idea that here was a really good man who'd been right in front of her, and she'd ignored him.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask you to Christmas dinner sooner," she blurted out. "I really wanted you to go as my date."

"You did?" He blinked. "I'm sorry, too. I'd like to have gone with you." He cleared his throat. "As to the plumbing, there's a leak in the garage. The guy's here working on it and says we should have water, soon."

"How did you happen to have Starbuck's at the ready?"

His cheeks reddened again. "I know you like your coffee, so after I called everyone I made a trip for some. I planned to call you again, but you beat me to it."

Heather's cheeks heated as well as her heart. "What a special Christmas gift."

"It's just a cup of coffee."

"I meant the thought." She stared into his eyes for a moment. He edged his hand across the table toward hers. Then his cell rang. He answered and smiled. "Thanks, and Merry Christmas." He closed the phone. "Water's back on. I need to go call everyone." He picked up his half-drunk coffee and glanced at the Oreos. "Mind if I take a couple. I haven't had time for breakfast."

Heather laughed. "I'd give you the whole bag, but that's going to be my breakfast, too. Don't tell the kids."

He joined her laughter, stuck two cookies in his pocket and went into the living room. "Bye Bonny and Billy. Merry Christmas."

Bonny jumped off the couch and ran to Snipe. "Thank you for my kitten. I'll call her Snow White, and I'll sleep with her every night. Can we give Mr. Snipe one of our calendars, Mommy?"

"Yes, we have enough. Let's see if they're dry." Heather went to the desk, found a calendar that wasn't sticky and handed it to Bonny.

"I helped make it, too," Billy said.

"Thank you both." Snipe took the calendar from Bonny. He glanced at it. The picture on the front was of Heather and the two children in the doorway of their condo. "I'll enjoy looking at this." He gave Heather a look that told her he really would and departed.

She probably would have let the date thing go if her mom hadn't invited Smarty-pants. The thought of being paired with him gave her brain freeze. She knew one more man who might agree to go, especially since the Cardwells had bought the penthouse -- Harvey. He was Jewish, but he was divorced and didn't seem very religious. Maybe he'd help her out. Her family would know it wasn't a real date, but Fred wouldn't.

Before she could chicken out, she punched Harvey's number.

"Hi, doll, good job with the Cardwells. You'll have a nice bonus for Christmas."

"Thanks, Harvey, I, uh, have a request. It might sound kind of strange, but I wondered if you'd like to have Christmas dinner with my family. I know you're Jewish, but I thought you might be alone since you're divorced and all." Heather made herself stop talking.

"A year ago, doll, I'd have jumped at it, but I have a Christmas present, too. Sheila and I are getting back together. She's a Christian, so we celebrated Hanukkah last week with my family, and we're celebrating Christmas this week with hers. Both of our families thought we were crazy when we divorced, and they're happy now.

"That's great, Harvey, I'm happy for you. Merry Christmas."

"You, too, doll."

So now she was back to being paired with Smarty-pants.

Bah humbug!

Chapter Four

Heather got the children dressed warmly and headed off to the Christmas Eve service at church in a most un-Christmasy mood. As she nodded and smiled hello and exchanged Merry Christmases with her friends, her spirits lifted. Singing the beautiful old Christmas hymns filled her with delight, and when they ended the service with the Halleluiah Chorus her heart soared.

Thank you God for sending your Son.

She and the kids sang Silent Night all the way home and just as they reached their door bells from one of the churches rang out.

"Oh, this is such a special night."

"We should celebrate with hot chocolate," Bonny said with a fake shiver.

Heather laughed at the unsubtle suggestion. "Good idea. You two take off your coats and hang them up while I make the chocolate." As she headed for the kitchen, the phone rang. Who would be calling this late on Christmas Eve? Had something gone wrong at her parents' house? Had Emily and Win been in an accident? She answered without glancing at the caller ID. "Hello. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I hope." Snipe's voice had a smile in it.

"Oh, I was afraid something had happened at my folks. I thought they'd be the ones calling at this time."

"Is this too late? I'm sorry."

"No, no, we just got home from church, and I'm making hot chocolate."

"No, you're not," Bonny said with a pout of her lip.

"I'll make the chocolate in a minute, Bonny, as soon as I talk to Snipe."

Bonny's pout disappeared. "I want to talk to Mr. Snipe. I want to tell him how good Snow White acts."

"Me, too," Billy said.

"You've made a friend for life with those toys, Snipe," Heather told him.

"I'm glad they're enjoying them, but I'm hoping to make another friend in your family."

He must mean me!

"I was able to get out of the invitation I accepted from someone at church. They were just being kind and were happy to hear I'd been invited to eat with a beautiful woman."

All her glib talk deserted her. "Uh, so, that means you're going with me tomorrow?"

"I'd love to."

"Oh, Snipe. You've made my Christmas very merry."

"I feel the same."

They arranged a time to leave the next day, and Heather went into the kitchen humming.

"What's that song?" Bonny asked.

Heather had to think for a minute then laughed. "It's an old song I heard on the radio today. *I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus.*"

Christmas morning dawned bright, sunny, and cool. Just right for wearing the red sweater

that showed off her curves and the red skirt that showed off her legs. Maybe not the most religious thoughts for the day, but happy ones because she dressed for a new man in her life. Well, not new, but newly noticed as hot and dark, just the way she liked her man.

Snipe rang the doorbell at eleven as agreed on. Bonny ran to the door, put her hand on the knob then snatched it away. "Who is it?" she called.

"Santa Snipe."

Bonny unlocked the door to let him in. He looked fine in a black suit, white shirt, and red tie printed with Santa Snoopys dancing. Heather's happy feet did a little Snoopy dance at the sight.

"Get your coats kids," Heather told them, glad she hadn't put her own on yet when Snipe's dark gaze swept from her red toes up her legs over her breasts and stopped at her eyes.

He took a deep breath as if he needed air all of a sudden. "You look great."

"Thanks. I'll get my coat."

"Just a minute." He held out a small box. "I wanted to give you this here."

"I-I didn't get you anything. I'm sorry."

"The gift of your company today is all I need."

"I feel the same." She looked at the box and smiled. "But I won't say no to your present."

She started to open the box as Bonny and Billy came up in their coats. "What's that?" Bonny demanded.

"My Christmas present from Snipe." She couldn't keep calling him that, but she didn't know his real name. Inside the box nestled a crocheted Santa Claus pin with a puffy white beard. "You crochet?"

Snipe laughed. "No. A woman was selling them at the grocery yesterday to benefit the Disabled American Veterans. How could I refuse?" He held up his hook.

"Thanks. I'll wear it with pride knowing that background." She pinned it on her sweater, put on her coat and they left for the Fisher house with Snipe driving. On the way she said, "I can't keep calling you Snipe. What's your real name?"

He grimaced. "Dick Stark. I much prefer Snipe."

"How about Rich?"

He stopped at a red light and turned to her. "If it's you doing the calling, that would be great."

She basked in his hot stare that more than made up for the cool day until Bonny called, "Green light, Mr. Snipe."

When they entered her parents' home, Heather took a deep breath of the scent of real Christmas tree, turkey roasting in the oven and something cinnamon in the air. Home. She hadn't appreciated it enough when she lived there. She looked at Bonny and Billy who had shed their coats, hugged their grandfather and were busy scoping out the packages under the tree with the help of her brother, Adam, Jr. She hoped they would have good memories of their home when they grew up.

Win stood from his seat on the sofa and gave Snipe, er Rich, a man hug. "Glad to see you." He glanced at Heather with a raised eyebrow. "You, too, Sis."

So he still thought of her as a lightweight. She'd deserved it in the past, but she'd changed this year.

Juan Estevez joined the two other former Marines. "You're looking good Snipe, especially with a pretty lady on your arm. I see you finally found a prosthesis that works."

Snipe again. I guess I'll save Rich for when the two of us are alone together. If that ever

happens.

"Or I finally found the guts to stick to the program long enough to learn to use it," Snipe replied.

"Good man," Win's grandfather said from the sofa where he sat with an attractive white haired woman.

Heather stepped over to them. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Johnston." She smiled at the woman. "I'm Heather Fisher Black, Emily's sister."

The woman returned her smile. "I'm Jean Stark."

"Soon to be Jean Johnston," Win's grandfather took her hand and beamed at her.

"So everybody's paired off, boy-girl, boy-girl." The comment came from Fred Smarty-pants Sharp.

"All except you and me, Fred." her brother said. He stood and hugged her. "Hi, Sis, glad to see you didn't bring your latest sleeze along."

Win snorted.

I can always trust Adam not to sugarcoat anything. "Jerk Number Three is a thing of the past."

"I'm glad to hear that," her father said with an approving glance at Snipe.

Subtle, Dad. I hope everyone thinks the heat in my cheeks is because I still have my coat on. She shrugged out it.

Snipe grinned at her. "Too hot?" He took the coat, and Heather fled to the kitchen.

"Hi." Emily looked up from the stove where she stirred gravy. "Where are the kids?"

"Shaking all the presents."

Emily, Mom, and a small dark woman with excellent posture laughed.

"You must be Nat, Juan's date," Heather held out her hand.

The woman shook once sharply. "I'm Nat, but I'm not Juan's date. He just happened to be in town for some follow up at the hospital and couldn't get home. Or said he couldn't." Nat grinned. "I think he broke up with his latest girlfriend and didn't want to face his family."

"They liked her better than him?" Heather asked.

"Something like that. Of course, Juan's always talked a big game about the ladies, so it's hard to tell what really happened."

At least my family rated me higher than the jerks I've been dating. I should have paid more attention when they turned thumbs down on Bobby.

"You go on into the living room, Heather," Mom said. "You're not really dressed for the kitchen."

"Who are you dressed for?" Emily asked.

Time for me to take a chance. "Snipe came with us today. He's doing a wonderful job at the complex. He saved me the other day when the garbage disposal went berserk. He --" Heather ground to a stop when she noticed all three of the women in the kitchen grinned at her. She joined their smiles. "He's great."

"I'm glad you found someone solid, honey," her mom said.

"I'm glad Snipe found someone who appreciates him even though he's lost an arm," Nat said.

Emily turned off the burner under the gravy and walked to Heather. "I'm glad the two of you found each other when you were both in the right place for a loving relationship." She hugged Heather.

Thank you, God. This is turning out to be anything but a bah, humbug Christmas.

The women followed her into the living room.

"Would you like to open presents before dinner?" her mom asked Bonny and Billy.

"Yes," they both shrieked.

Bonny grabbed a package with her name on it and tore the paper off. "Barbie!"

Heather's brother handed a package to Billy. He imitated Bonny's search and destroy method of disposing of wrapping paper. "Elmo." Billy hugged the stuffed character and took it around for everyone to admire.

Not to be outdone Bonny showed off Barbie.

There were small presents for all the adults, even Smarty-pants who looked so grateful for the book of Sudoku puzzles that Heather felt sorry for her mental nickname.

When the festive meal drew to a close with pumpkin pie and whipped cream, Win said, "Have you all heard about Project Homecoming?"

"Have you talked about anything else when you phone?" Snipe laughed. "This is wonderful pie, Mrs. Fisher."

"I'm glad you like it, Snipe. What is Project Homecoming, Win?"

"We work with veterans who have disabilities, both physical and mental, to help them through the maze of red tape so they can access all the programs the government has for them. We also help them find jobs."

"Is that all veterans as in male and female?" Nat asked.

Win grinned. "You'd have to take that up with the project head, Dr. Brian O'Neill."

"Believe me, I will."

"Like anyone would doubt you," Juan said.

Dr. Fisher raised his cup of coffee. "Let's drink to a new year, new careers, and new relationships." He looked around the table.

Heather couldn't resist glancing at Snipe who sat two spaces down from her with Bonny and Billy between them. He lifted his coffee cup and stared into her eyes. "To life!"

"To life!" the group echoed.

About Jackie Leigh Allen

Jackie Leigh Allen is finally a published author. After collecting numerous rejection letters, AN OFFICER AND A GIGOLO piqued the attention of Desert Breeze Publishing and debuted in April 2011. NINA'S NICHE, the first book of a trilogy based in the mountain town of Julian, California, will be out in November 2011.

NINA'S NICHE features Romano's as a romantic setting for dinner. CAROL'S CHOICE to be out in May 2012 will feature a special gift from the Falcon gift shop. SHERRY'S SUCCESS to be out in November 2012 will feature the Julian Tea & Cottage Arts for a delicious afternoon tea.