



Santa's Pretty Lady

*The Santa Series
Book One*

*Judy Baker
writing as
Anna Sugg*

Santa's Pretty Lady

by

Anna Sugg

Other book by Judy Baker writing as Anna Sugg

Santa's Secret Gift

Mainland Santa

Karibou Magic

Secret Past

Ghost Thunder

Spirit Catcher

<http://judybakerauthor.com>

Santa's Pretty Lady Blurb

Lena Belle tries to reject the love of a man whose only job for the moment is playing Santa for the department store. Yet, he stirs an emotion within her that she has not felt for many years. How could she fall in love with a

homeless Santa? Would he be willing to work for their relationship?

Supporting a man once in a lifetime is enough. She will not be the sole provider and risk another divorce.

Excerpt:

“Ah, gee whiz, lady,” hollered a man down the end of the counter.

LB raised her eyebrows at Santa and turned to see who made the comment.

“You gotta have dinner with Santa.”

“Yeah, you can’t turn down Santa,” joined a man from across the room.

“Yeah,” remarked another listener.

A quick glance around the tables found all eyes glued to them. LB turned back to Santa and from his expressive eyes, she could tell he was thoroughly enjoying the moment.

“Keep it up, guys,” Santa’s deep voice encouraged as he motioned with black gloved hands. “She’s weakening.”

“Hey,” echoed the man from the far end of the counter, “a lady that has *Here come Santa Claus* on her cell phone can’t turn down an invitation from him.”

Then to her shock, the man bellowed out “Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Clause...” and everyone joined him.

Dropping her head in her hands, she couldn't help but laugh. Finally, she threw up her hands toward the crowd and agreed. "Okay, okay, I'll have dinner with him." Turning to Santa, she noted a satisfied expression.

He leaned over, put an arm around her shoulder, and whispered close to her ear, "Meet me at Metish around eight. Will that give you enough time?"

"Yes, but..."

Standing, he turned to the customers and waved. "Thanks guys, it's a date. Ho, ho, ho, and a Merry Christmas to all."

With a twinkle in his eyes, he left her sitting there with a red face, a latte, and everyone clapping their hands.

Santa's Pretty Lady

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Reviews

Santa's Pretty Lady

Formerly Published as *Homeless Santa*

The Romance Studio: 4.5 Hearts

"Ms. Judy Baker has packed a lot of story in this quick-paced story. Ms. Baker has used these two people, who were definitely more than met the eye, and their personalities, to tell an interesting story. The plot is solid and definitely held surprises. Would L.B. allow her heart to rule her life, or would she close herself off from another man who appeared to need support? I recommend this book to anyone who wants to indulge

in a seasonal, upbeat story. You will definitely not be disappointed.” Reviewer: Brenda Talley

The Long and the Short of It: 5 Books

“This is one of the best developed short stories I have read. Lena Belle is a fully developed heroine, with strengths and weakness. Her struggle against falling in love with Daniel is understandable and clearly explained. Sexual tension is built and maintained throughout the story, it is a constant undercurrent but not to the point that LB and Daniel act like hormone crazed teenagers. LB and Daniel are adults trying to work out an adult relationship. Daniel is a sweet hero, whose motives are clear to the reader but hidden from LB. Ms. Baker even manages to weave in several side stories and secondary characters. *Homeless Santa* is definitely a keeper Christmas story, one that I will enjoy year after year. Reviewer: Magnolia

TwoLips Review: 4.5 Lips

“*Judy Baker* tells a delightful short Christmas story that's good for year-round entertainment. *Homeless Santa* is a wonderful, feel-good book that will lift you out of the doldrums! *Homeless Santa* is definitely a keeper in my opinion!” Reviewer: Alisha

Dedication

To
the Sweet Memories
of
Drake Baker
1994-2004



Chapter One

Lena Belle flipped the switch on and stood to her full height, observing each miniature Christmas tree. Their bright color lights flashed throughout the window display.

The quick loud tap on the outside of the window caused her to jump and glance around. A dark bearded man in a tattered worn coat, with a beanie pulled down to his brow, stood there watching her. Before she could react, he pointed to one of the trees. Turning back, she immediately focused on a bare tree branch in need of a dangling ornament. *How'd she miss that?*

She bent down to rummage through a box. Coming up with several gold and red, glass sleigh bell ornaments, within seconds, she dressed the branch and stepped back to observe it. Glancing around, she fixed her gaze on the scruffy looking man. He grinned. *A nice grin. For a dirty homeless man, he certainly has white teeth.* Then, he gave her a thumb's up and walked away. Her hurried glance caught his back before he disappeared around the corner

of the building. From the way he walked, the tall man didn't appear too old.

Huh, that was weird. Creepy too. Probably just some poor homeless man.

She'd never thought of weirdoes watching her. *Maybe she should ask Mr. York for shades to pull down when decorating the windows. Might be a good idea.* Dismissing him, she turned her attention back her display.

Looking good, she thought, raising a hand to comb through her short hair and down to rest on the back of her neck. A happy tired sigh escaped her lips. She had worked hard to put on a show of creative Christmas magic in the store window for Mr. York. Pleasing him was important. After all, he hired her when no one else would.

A forty-year-old divorcee with little experience in the decorating field wasn't exactly on what most companies were willing to take a chance. Stretching her back muscles to rid the kinks from squatting so long, LB could see the displays would be completed in a couple of days. Once finished, Denny Days Department store displays would light up like enchanted Christmas scenes, and they would

be the finest holiday windows in the entire town of White Pigeon, Michigan.

Daniel stepped out of the shower. He wiped the foggy mirror, and then wrapped the towel around his waist. Staring, he studied his reflection. Noticing a few sprinkles of white hair growing from his heavy dark beard, Daniel scanned his long hair. *A few there, too. Time for a haircut.* He combed his fingers through his thick wet hair, and let his thoughts dwell on the woman in the window. He remembered her smile and her short, sexy blonde hair. She could be married. In that case, old boy, nothing gained, nothing lost.

A search around the counter area, made him realize he didn't have any toiletries. Strolling into the bedroom, Daniel picked up the phone and rang the desk. His hand rubbed against his bare abs. *Huh, he'd lost some weight while on the road.* Couldn't imagine how many miles they'd walked. He'd always exercised, kept fit, but walking in every kind of element known to man could challenge even the strongest.

“Yes, Mr. Jackson, what can I do for you?” The voice over the phone brought him back to the present.

“Would you send up a pot of coffee, please? And I’m in direr need of a few toiletries, especially a shaving kit.”

“Right away sir.”

“Thanks,” Daniel hung up and glanced down at his dirty clothes, picked the pile up and dropped them in the wastebasket. Before he discarded the old dirty coat, he searched the pockets and pulled out his cell. Flipping the phone open, he punched number five. Waiting, he strolled to the closet. Mr. York had been nice enough to gather up a few clothes for him before he checked into the hotel.

“Hi Susan. Thanks, me too. How’s things going at the office? Great. Any messages?” Daniel made a mental note of what Susan relayed. “No, I’ll deal with the matter later. You’ve done great while I’ve been gone.” Daniel listened into the receiver, rubbed his bearded jaws, and shook his head. “I’ll give her a call. I’m at the White Pigeon Grand Hotel in suite six hundred-thirty. Call if you need me. Thanks, Susan.”

Before he flipped the cell closed, a knock sounded at the door. Good, can’t wait to get rid of this fuzz. He rubbed

his jaws again, feeling the three-week-old soft growth. Expecting room service, Daniel opened the door to see his mother's smiling face.

"Sweetheart, if I hadn't recognized your blue eyes, I'd have to ask what you did with my son." He watched his mother pucker her lips. "My boy's too good-looking to hide behind a beard."

"Mother, I wasn't exactly in a suite these passed weeks. When did you get here?"

"I know, I know, give your old mother a hug. I arrived last night with your Uncle Jim."

Daniel gave her an affectionate hug and a kiss on the cheek. He detected the worried frown behind her bright smile as she glanced beyond him.

"Your items, sir, and coffee."

Glancing over his mother's head, Daniel noticed the coffee tray in the boy's hands.

"Thanks, I'll take it. Mother, tip the kid, please."

"Here you go, young man." She pulled a bill out from her purse, handed it to the waiter, and then shut the door.

Daniel walked over to the bar for an extra cup and headed to the sofa where his mother had planted herself.

“He isn’t here, mother.” He watched a cloud of sadness blanket her blue eyes.

“Daniel, is he alright?”

“Peter seems content. He’s resourceful, mother. My eyes have been opened these past few weeks.”

“Oh Daniel.” Tears swelled in his mother’s eyes.

He knew how she worried about her sons. “Mother,” he mumbled, circling his arms around her in a quick hug. “He’ll come home one of these days, soon.” He’d make sure.

His mother wiped her eyes, took a sip of coffee, and asked, “What about you dear, did you find it difficult being with him?”

“Not really. I can tell you one thing. Living as a homeless person is humbling. Money doesn’t make happiness.”

“Your dad always told you boys that very thing. What would I do without you, Daniel?”

“I’m not leaving, mother.” When he felt her hand pat his knee, he reached over and kissed her cheek for reassurance.

“Now, dear, have you been to the store?”

“Yes, I talked to Mr. York. He’s one of our best managers, mother. I liked what he’s doing to the store.”

“Good. Now, how long before you head home?”

“End of the week, maybe. I told Mr. York I wanted to be the store Santa for a couple of days.” Daniel raised the cup to his lip, avoiding his mother’s frown.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. She made him feel like a schoolboy, instead of a grown man in his forties.

She laughed. “You remind me of your father. I always knew when he had something up his sleeve. So, what’s up?”

Grinning, he set his cup on the table, relaxed and spread an arm over the back of the sofa. “There’s a woman working at the store—”

“Ahh...now, I understand. Who is she?”

Daniel shook his head, raised an eyebrow and admitted, “I haven’t met her, yet. She’s gorgeous, mother. I’m not sure, but I think I liked the way she smiled at me.”

“What do you mean?”

Daniel combed his fingers through his dark thick hair and leaned up to rest his elbows on his knees. “If you had

gotten here an hour earlier, you would have seen a dirty, smelly clothed son. Yet, she smiled at me. I felt as if she noticed me as a person and not a dollar sign.”

“Oh, Daniel, dear. She probably thought you a dirty beggar.”

“No, I didn’t detect any pity in her smile or look.”

“Why not just meet her without playing Santa?”

“Mother, I want someone to know and love me for who I am and not what I am.” Daniel raised an eyebrow directly at her. “Change of subject. What are you doing here?”

“We’re headed to your Aunt Sherry’s house, and I ... well, I talked your uncle into a side trip. You know me, I can’t help but worry about my sons.”

“Some side trip, it’s what? Three hundred miles to Aunt Sherry’s from here?”

His mother sheepishly shook her head. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning. I couldn’t wait to hear about your time with Peter. Now, tell me everything.”

“Tommy,” Lena Belle said, looking up at the tall, lanky young man loading the cart with her supplies. “Don’t

forget to put the little mannequins in the other window room. I'll need three."

"You got it, LB. What else?"

She grinned at his use of the acronym. Tommy had everyone in the store calling her LB. "Well, you might as well grab the large box of snowflakes."

"Got it. Okay, I'm headed out," Tommy declared. "By the way, did you know Santa's arrived?"

She shook her head as she pulled out the six-foot ladder from among the boxes and propped it against the door. Turning her attention to the young man, she said, "No, didn't realize Mr. York had hired anyone."

"Yeah, some old geezer from off the street."

"Have you met him?" LB noted Tommy's negative head shake, and frowned. "So, how do you know he's an old geezer that strolled in off the street?"

"Caught a glimpse of him when he came in, and then, later I noticed Mr. York buy some clothes for him." Stacking one more box on the cart, he added, "That's about all I can pile on."

She nodded and sent him off toward the front of the store. To get rid of the dust, she slapped her hands against

her pant legs. *Whew! Good thing she wore her grubby jeans and sweatshirt, anything else would have been ruined.*

The sound of Tommy's low wolf whistle flowed to her ear as he stopped one of the young cosmetic girls. Lena Belle glanced down at her outfit, raked her fingers through her hair, and then shook it out a little. *Boy, I'm a mess. No wonder Tommy started calling her LB. Didn't sound too lady like, but then again her job required getting somewhat dusty and dirty while pulling out boxes.* The thought of stopping by her office to freshen up was instantly dismissed as she felt her fingers curl around the cold metal frame. Dragging the ladder out of the storage room, LB turned and locked the door. *Strain those muscles, woman.*

With a firm grip on the ladder, she took a deep breath, and half carried and half dragged the bulky ladder. *Yuck, heavy.*

“Hey, pretty lady. Need some help?”

Surprised when the weight of the ladder lightened, LB shot an inquisitive look over her shoulder to find Santa's twinkling blue eyes and his wide grin peeking through the curly white mustache and long beard.

“Santa. I could use some muscles. Thanks.”

“Where are we going?” he asked, picking up the ladder as if it didn’t weigh anything.

“Follow me.”

Weaving their way through the store took longer than expected, since kids, wanting Santa’s attention, stopped them several times. With that same twinkle in his eyes, he shrugged a shoulder, patted each kid on the head, and asked what they wanted for Christmas. His jolly deep voice encouraged them to be good, and do what mommy said.

As she waited, LB stood with the ladder leaning against her leg. He was a charming Santa. His easygoing persona and patience seemed natural. Something about the way he – she squinted trying to see more of his face. Oh, my, her eyes widened. He’s the homeless looking man from outside the window, earlier. She recognized those blue eyes. Tommy said Mr. York did hire him off the street.

“Okay, pretty lady, lead the way.”

“Hey, LB.”

Shifting her glance Tommy's way, she noticed the empty cart.

"Your stuff's in the windows and I'm off to get a bite to eat."

"Moving fast today, aren't you, Tommy? Thanks. One more thing, did you get the can of white paint and a brush?"

"Yup."

"You're a good kid. Have a good lunch."

He casually saluted her, shot Santa a grin, and turned just in time to whistle at Suzy, the cosmetic girl.

Laughing, LB picked up her end of the ladder and headed for the window display area. "Ahh...to be young again...not."

"I'd say you're still young, pretty lady."

"Yeah, well, Tommy's around twenty years old, my daughter's age."

Santa's brows drew together in a frown beneath the low red-and-white trimmed hat. His tone questioned, "Daughter?"

"Yea, but she seems so much older."

Still frowning, he searched her hand carrying the ladder. No ring.

Once reaching the destination, Santa offered, “If you’ll step out of the way, pretty lady, I’ll carry it in.” He took the two steps up and through the opening to the window room with LB following.

After leaning the ladder against the wall, he turned his attention to her. His glance touched her, trailing over her shiny blonde hair to her contrasting dark brown eyes. After lingering on her full, soft-looking lips, he quickly scanned her oversized sweatshirt and faded jeans. When his gaze returned to her slightly pink face, he smiled, and asked, “Anything else?”

“No, thank you, you’ve been a lifesaver. I appreciate it. Oh, one other thing.” LB blinked, unable to pull her gaze from his. “You can call me, LB.”

“LB, huh? I think I like Pretty Lady, better.”

Grinning, Santa bounced down the steps and headed for the big Santa chair where kids eagerly awaited his return.

Whew, what was that look? Closing the door, LB knelt down next to the mannequin parts that Tommy had delivered.

Huh, pretty lady...hmm, right, the way she's dressed, with no makeup, hair a mess—she's sure Santa has a vision problem. Someone should tell him he needs glasses over those gorgeous blue eyes. Still, to have a man call her pretty, boosted her ego, even if he happened to be Santa, and most likely a homeless one at that.

“LB, are you in there?”

“Yes, Mr. York.” Turning from her task, LB waited for her boss to step through the door.

He took a glance around, scanning each item, rubbed his chin, puckered his lips, and silently nodded his head. Then he smiled. “Looking good, girl.”

“I’m glad you like it. By the way, Mr. York, you are a saint.”

He chuckled, put his hands on his hips, and asked, “My heavens, what did I do to deserve such a blessing?”

“Why,” she gestured her hand toward the center of the store, “...you hired that homeless man to play Santa, and he’s awesome.”

“Ah...ah,” stuttered Mr. York, his face turning pink.

How odd. She hadn't realized he would be uncomfortable mentioning Santa. Noticing his frown, she dropped the subject. “Was there something else, Mr. York?”

“I, ah...yea, I wanted to ask you about December twentieth. Do you think the date would be too late for the Christmas company party?”

“Not for me. Have you asked the others?”

“No, I had Tommy to ask around, and he said they all okayed it. I wanted to check with you first before I confirm the date.”

“It works for me.” Thinking of her empty social calendar, LB offered her assistance. “Would you like me to organize it and get things rolling?”

A bright smile flashed across Mr. York's face. On his way out the door, he mumbled loud enough for her to hear, “I knew I could count on you.”

What a funny little man. She hadn't meant to embarrass him when she spoke of the homeless man. Oh my, maybe, he isn't homeless, just gives that impression.

Chapter Two

LB stacked the supplies on top of the cart until not another box would fit. She hurried toward the storefront, unloaded, and retraced her steps to the storage room to retrieve more supplies and the bag with all the empty wrapped boxes. She'd spent hours wrapping tiny make believe presents, to place around the village. Once again, with a loaded cart, she headed through the store.

“Ho ho ho, Pretty Lady,” Santa said, waving at her.

She smiled, waved, and noticed the little boy sitting on his lap, grinning from ear to ear. It was hard not to like the flirting Santa.

Forcing her gaze straight ahead, she reminded herself to concentrate on the job and keep her mind off Santa. There were clouds to be painted in the corner of the wall in the second window and a town and train set to putting up.

After unloading the boxes, LB stepped into her window world and lost her thoughts in the little Christmas

village. The decorative holiday train chug-chugged its way through a miniature village with tiny shops and people dressed for the season. The busy Christmas town displayed families shopping for presents, decorating Christmas trees, children running and playing in the schoolyard with their friends and pets, others ice-skating on the frozen pond, and a playground full of kids rolling large snowballs to create a snowman from the fresh fallen snow.

Smiling at the scene that brought back memories of her youth, years of being carefree and happy, LB placed one last evergreen tree near the old-fashioned church house. After sprinkling extra snowflakes everywhere, she stepped back to scan her work. Looking good.

It wouldn't take long to put the remaining train tracks in place, but first she needed to finish the clouds and get rid of the ladder. Squatting, she pried open the lid and loaded the paintbrush with thick white paint. She stepped up the ladder, high enough to swirl the liquid into fluffy clouds in the corner of the wall. Paints were fun. One of these days, she'd love to own a home and be able to paint each room a different color. Bright colors, like her home before the divorce.

Standing firm on the ladder, a few minutes later, she leaned out a tad to view her work when a sultry voice startled her. She jumped and the imbalance of her leaning position sent her down into Santa's arms.

“Whoa, you all right?”

His breath brushed against her neck, sending an unexpected thrill down her back. “Yup, I think so,” her soft voice replied.

Glancing up into his white bearded face, she raised her eyes to the large red hat with white fur trim that covered his forehead. When her gaze returned to his, time seemed to stop as she lost herself in his blue pools, mesmerized, caught in an eddy that wouldn't release her. LB felt her heart pound, drawn to him in a dangerous way.

A demanding knock on the window drew their attention. Several curious grinning faces stared back. Santa gave her a little squeeze against his stuffing beneath the red suit, while his soft, ardent voice whispered near her ear, “I do believe were on stage.”

Laughing and a little embarrassed, she dropped her head against his shoulder, hiding her flushed face.

“What would the boss say?”

“What can he say? Santa saved the pretty lady.”

“Thanks, Santa, you saved me, again, except you’re the reason we’re in this predicament.”

“Is this a predicament?”

“Well, yes. All those people are watching. This is not a stage performance. You can put me down now, Santa.”

“Gee, do I have too. You feel at home in my arms, pretty lady.”

She raised her head to gaze into his face surrounded by the soft white curls. Funny she had thought the same. What was wrong with her? This couldn’t happen. She’d already spent too many years of her life supporting a man. No way was she getting involved with a homeless one.

“Hey Santa, that Mrs. Claus?” hollered a man outside the window. Their little episode had drawn a crowd of curious people.

Another man put his hand to the side of his mouth, and hollered, “Kiss her Santa.”

Grinning, Santa gently lowered her feet to the floor, winked at her, and gave the gathered crowd a big wave. Before he turned to leave, he said, “I came to invite you to have a cup of coffee. Now, I need to get back to the kids.

Maybe later.” After one more glance at the group, he suggested, “Give them one of your gorgeous smiles and wave.”

LB waved and felt the heat rise in her face. Before she hurried to shut the door, she stared at Santa’s red back heading toward the large red velvet chair. Flutters attacked her stomach. *No way, Santa.* Her attraction for him would go no further. She pressed her lips together in a determined expression, dropped to the floor, and set her eyes on the LGB train parts and stacks of train tracks.

Chapter Three

Working diligently, LB pushed a pair of red leather boots on each of the little life-like mannequins, to complement their cute red-and-white sweaters with matching beanies and mittens. Placing each on a stand, she stepped back to check them out. You guys are darling. The red leather boots complimented their outfits.

Now, for a little light. Squatting near the corner, she switched on the Christmas tree lights and the entire display glowed like Christmas magic. *Done.* Smiling, she decided to see what the window looked like from outside.

Quickly she hurried through the store and stepped out into the cold evening air. Geez, she hadn't realized the sun had gone down. Glancing at her watch, she was surprised to see that in another half hour the store would close.

Finding a spot in front of the window, she stared up into the enchanted scene she'd worked on all day. She smiled, hugged her arms across her middle, and shivered. Leaning her head to the side, she studied the entire display.

The subtle lights shining on the girls, made them appear warm in new winter clothes.

Hmm, something's missing...what? Oh, yea. Turning to head back into the store, LB slammed into the overstuffed, red-suited Santa. Laughing, she threw her hands up against his chest. "Santa, I didn't see you."

"I gathered that," his low sultry voice agreed. Taking hold of her upper arms, he asked, "Where's your coat?"

Glancing down, she laughed. "Didn't think about it, just wanted to check the window scene to make sure I hadn't forgotten something."

"Well, let's take a look." He turned her to face the window, and nonchalantly, his soft velvet arm circled her shoulders.

LB's eyebrows shot up in surprise as she glanced up into his face. His gaze ricocheted off hers before he looked toward the window. "Warm?"

She grinned, astonished to find comfort in his nearness. "You are warm, a little overstuffed, maybe, but warm."

Her gaze touched his even white teeth as he smiled beneath the soft white mustache and beard. Raising her gaze to his, she followed his stare to the window display.

“Wow! Nice job. I like it.”

His comment caused her heart to do a funny little flip-flop. “That settles it. If Santa approves, then it must be okay.” Scanning the scene, she mumbled, “There needs to be one or two more items.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see.” Leaving the warmth of his arm, she scurried back into the store. In a rush, she headed toward the toy department and looked around until she found the right sized stuffed animal. Then she made a mad dash for the window room. Stepping inside, she placed the spotted black-and-white stuffed dog near the little girls in red snow boots. Then, squeezing behind the two mannequins, she carefully placed a large white cat with a huge fluffy tail on the park bench near the lighted trees.

Avoiding knocking over any items, she placed one foot at a time in an empty spot, making her way back to the door, pausing only for a second to glance out the window at Santa. He gave her a thumb’s up.

Grinning, she responded with the same gesture, and then headed outside, again. She hurried along the sidewalk and stopped near Santa. “So, does that add to the setting?”

“Yup. Nice dog. I like dogs. Cats...they’re okay.”

“I like both. I’ve often thought of getting a dog. It’s been several years since our old Brittney Spaniel died.”

“We had a Brittney when I was young.” Santa glanced down at LB, and with that same mysterious twinkle in his eyes, he asked, “What was your dog’s name?”

“Maxine.”

Santa laughed out loud shaking his stuffed belly. He shook his head. “Mine was Max.”

“I heard Max and Maxine were the most popular names for dogs.”

“Must be.”

A snowflake gently touched LB’s face. “Oh, look.” She held out a hand to catch the flakes on her palm. “It’s snowing. I love snow during the Christmas holidays.”

“That’s the only time I like it. I much prefer warm weather.”

“Burr, it is cold. I had better get in.”

Returning to her office, she grabbed her coat and purse, and switched out the office lights. Before leaving, she popped her head in Mr. York's door, where he was sitting at his desk going over paperwork. "Good night, Mr. York, have a good evening. Don't forget to take a look at the window when you leave."

"Are you finished?" he asked, glancing up from his paperwork.

"Not quite, a few more items needed, then hopefully they'll be done by tomorrow night. See what you think."

"Will do LB. Have a good evening."

Leaving the store, Lena Belle hesitated one more time to check out the added creatures. Perfect. She liked it.

"Hey, pretty lady, how 'bout a cup of coffee?"

LB turned to find Santa approaching. Smiling, she shook her head, but felt her heart race with temptation. "Thanks, Santa, but, I'm really tired. Time to go home."

"What if I told you I didn't have a home to go to? How about taking me home with you?"

"I don't think so, Santa." LB laughed, but a sad thought flashed a picture of him sleeping under a viaduct on a cardboard box. Unsettling thought.

“Then, how about dinner another time, or just coffee?”

“Coffee? Sure. I have a long day tomorrow.” She pointed to the dark window that waited its turn to shine like Christmas.

“That you do, so let’s have coffee on your break.”

Without committing to a definite date, she said, “Good night Santa.” She studied him for a second with thoughts of asking his name. Nope, things needed to stay impersonal.

“Until tomorrow, pretty lady.”

LB slammed the door behind her and switched on the lights to her apartment. *Cut it out, woman.* She’d been driving home for the last twenty minutes with thoughts of nothing, except Santa. *Relax. Don’t make a big deal of him.* Flipping another switch, the living room sparkled with the multi-colored Christmas tree lights, spreading warmth throughout the place.

Dropping her coat and purse on the sofa, she covered a yawn. A glass of wine, a hot bath, and bed sounded good. She took the bottle of Merlot from the fridge and grabbed a goblet from the cabinet. Santa had the most stunning eyes

she'd ever seen. Hard to imagine what he really looked like all cleaned up. That first vision was certainly scruffy. Shaking her head, she realized she was doing it again. Thinking of him.

A loud ring stopped her thoughts. When she picked up the phone her daughter's voice flowed through before she could say a word. "Hi Mom."

"Belle! Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"But, it's...what, four in the morning in London?"

"It is, but I tried calling your work all day and you never answered your phone—or, your cell. Mom, are you doing all right?"

"More than all right, Belle. I miss you guys terribly, but I've been so busy. I spent the day working on the Christmas window displays. To be honest, I haven't even looked at my cell phone for messages. Have you been up all night waiting to call me?"

"No, I set the alarm to wake me when you would be home. Ben and I have something to tell you."

"Are you coming home for Christmas?"

“We can’t. Actually, Ben thinks he’ll be transferred back within a year. So you’ll have time to come to London.”

LB paused for the crackling line to clear.

“Mom, can you hear me?”

“Yes, dear.”

“If you can’t make it for Christmas, you’ll have to come later to meet you first grandbaby.”

Speechless LB dropped to the sofa with jumbled thoughts whirling through her mind.

“Mom, Mom, are you there?”

“Belle, I’m going to be a grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, honey, when? And, what?”

“I’m three months along and my due date is June first.”

“Yes, dear, I’m so thrilled for you. Wow. I better buy her, or is it a he – a present for Christmas.”

“Mom, we won’t know for another month or so, but we want you to come for Christmas. We know you don’t have much time off. If you can come, we’d love to show

you London, and then plan to visit us again after the baby's born."

"Belle, I'll have to think about it. Right now, I'm trying to digest the fact that I'm going to be a grandmother."

"We love you Mom. We'll talk later, but in the meantime keep your e-mails coming."

"I will dear. You do the same, and give Ben a big hug and kiss for me. I love you both. Oh, Belle, e-mail pictures as the baby grows. Since I can't be there, I want to see you pregnant. My baby, pregnant, wow." LB hung up, and for several minutes, she stared at the flashing Christmas tree lights.

Heck, she'd be a granny before she turned forty. Well, in fact, she wouldn't be forty until a couple of months after the baby's birth.

Chapter Four

Sitting at Joey's Café counter, LB ordered a latte just as her cell phone rang out the tune to *Here Comes Santa Claus*. *Wow, a little loud*. Turning down the volume, she flipped it open to hear her daughter's greeting.

"Hi, darling. You did? Oh, that's good news. Yea, okay, just keep me posted...love you, bye."

"Your boyfriend, pretty lady?"

She hadn't realized Santa was sitting next her, fully clothed in his bright, red velvet suit. Smiling, she shook her head. "My daughter, Belle. She and her husband are in London. She's just giving me an update on her pregnancy."

"Please tell me you're not married."

"No, I mean, yes, I'm not married. I've been divorce for some time now."

"Whew! So do you have a boyfriend?"

Laughing, LB shook her head. "Not at the moment."

“Good. I propose you consider me your boyfriend tonight and have dinner with me.”

Shaking her head, LB tried to think of an excuse, but couldn't come up with one. “Santa, I truly don't...I'm not dressed –“

“Ahh, gee whiz, lady...” hollered a man down the end of the counter.

LB raised her eyebrows at Santa and turned to see who made the comment.

“You gotta have dinner with Santa.”

“Yea, you can't turn down Santa,” joined a man from across the café room.

“Yea,” remarked another listener.

A quick glance at the tables found all eyes glued to them. LB turned back to Santa and from his expressive eyes, she could tell he was thoroughly enjoying the moment.

“Keep it up, guys,” Santa's deep voice encouraged, as he motioned with black gloved hands, “She's weakening.”

“Hey,” echoed the man from the far end of the counter, “Any lady that has *Here Come Santa Claus* on her cell phone can't turn down an invitation from him.”

Then to her shock, the man bellowed out “Here Comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus-” and everyone joined him.

Dropping her head in her hands, she couldn’t help but laugh. The situation was all so hilarious.

Finally, she threw up her hands toward the crowd and agreed. “Okay, okay, I’ll have dinner with him.” Turning to the big stuffed Santa, she noted his satisfied expression.

He leaned over, put an arm around her shoulder, and whispered close to her ear, “Meet me at Metish around eight. Will that give you enough time to change?”

“Yes, but—“

Standing, he turned to the café customers and waved. “Thanks, guys, it’s a date. Ho, Ho, Ho, and a Merry Christmas to all.”

With a twinkle in his eyes, he left her sitting there with a red face, a latte, and everyone clapping their hands.

Chapter Five

Oh, my gads, you stupid, stupid, stupid, why did you accept a date with him? LB parked her car at the store, deciding she needed to walk the two blocks to the restaurant to screw her head back on straight. Digging in her purse, she checked her money supply. Just in case Santa's wages weren't enough to pay for dinner. *Admit it, you stupid woman. You're attracted to that mysterious face behind all that white fluffy stuff. Stupid. Don't you dare fall for a homeless Santa?*

A snowflake feathered against her eyelash, drawing her gaze upward. Stopping in her tracks, she took in a deep breath and held it, and then slowly released it, trying to relax. *Merry Christmas, Lena Belle. Your first date in many months, and it's with a homeless Santa.*

Even with the snow falling, Metish appeared unusually busy for a weeknight. As she stepped through

the door, she could hear Christmas music in the background.

“Your name, please?” asked the maître d'.

“Oh, I, I don’t think we have reservation.”

“Would it be under your party’s name?”

Lena Belle stared at the man, realizing she had no idea what Santa’s name would be. “Ah, do you have Santa Claus’s name down?”

The man never flinched, but glanced over his list. “Sorry, I don’t have that name.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just wait over here.” Stepping to the side, she searched the crowd. *Would she recognize him? No big red suits. Of course not. What would he be wearing?*

Several minutes later, she glanced at her watch, after eight. *Okay, that’s it, get home.* She shouldn’t be here, anyway. She didn’t even know his name, or what he looked like. *This wasn’t a good idea. Get home.*

Lena Belle turned to leave, when suddenly a hand took hold of her arm.

“You weren’t thinking of leaving before dinner, were you?”

Looking up, she immediately recognized the charming twinkle in his eyes. Wow, she hadn't known what to expect, but certainly not this long, lean, and sexy guy standing before her. She couldn't pull her eyes from him. After all, the only image she had of him was that first day, and since then, he had been in a Santa suit. *Watch it LB.*

“This way, our table's over here.”

She felt his palms on her shoulders, guiding her across the room to a private table in the corner. Without any hesitation, he pulled out her chair, waited for her to be seated, and then, took a seat opposite her just as the waiter ask if Mr. Jackson would like to order a bottle of wine.

“Yes, please. How about a bottle of *Clos du Val* Chardonnay, if it's okay with you, pretty lady?”

“Ah...oh, please.” She had no idea what he had ordered, for she kept noticing things, like the waiter called him Mr. Jackson, his manners were explicit for a homeless man, and he appeared confident and relaxed in a public sitting.

“Are you all right?”

“I...I think so.”

“You’re staring.”

Blinking a couple of times, LB glanced down at her napkin, grabbed it, and intentionally spread it over her lap, smoothing out the edges.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m so accustomed to talking to you with the Santa suit and beard and not looking so—“

“So what?”

“Cleaned up. I mean, you clean up nicely.” *Oh my.* LB drew her hand up and rubbed her forehead.

He laughed. “I’m glad you noticed. Now, relax. I’m still Santa, the same with or without the suit.”

Folding her hands on her lap, she nodded, pressed her lips together, and drew in a deep breath. She sat back, watched the maître d’ pour their wine, and tried to slow down the thoughts running through her brain.

Santa lifted his glass and waited for her to do the same. “To you, Pretty Lady, Merry Christmas.”

“And to you, Merry Christmas, Santa.” LB took a quick sip. “So, you do have a name besides Santa. The waiter called you Mr. Jackson.”

“Daniel Jackson.”

LB smiled and raised her glass to him. “Daniel, it’s nice to meet you face to face.”

Chuckling, Daniel’s hand stroked along his jawline and over his chin. His pool of blue eyes stared back. “You’re right, I hadn’t thought about it. We’ve really only talked when I’ve been suited up. I’m glad you decided to have dinner with me. After that crowd at the café, I wasn’t sure you’d show up.”

“Yea, well, what could a girl do when Santa has a room full of people rooting for him? They were all on Santa’s side.”

“Now, you know my name. How about yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why does everyone call you LB?”

She shrugged her shoulder and glanced down at her glass of wine. “Mr. York picked it up from Tommy and the nickname spread throughout the store.”

“Do the initials stand for something?”

“Lena Belle.”

“Lena Belle.” Daniel leaned his elbows on the table, and rested his chin in his cupped hand. His gaze locked with hers.

Mesmerized, LB stared back, feeling her heart quicken until his voice broke the spell.

“I like it. Sounds southern.”

Blinking, she pulled her gaze from his, circled her hands around the wine glass, and replied, “My Tennessee grandmother’s name.” *Get a grip, LB.* She couldn’t stare at him all night. *Relax.*

“Ahh. Tennessee, is that where you’re originally from?”

Glancing back, she shook her head. “Born and raised here. Actually, I’ve never been to Tennessee. Never had the opportunity.”

“It’s a beautiful state. A northern girl with a southern name.”

“True. I faced lots of teasing all the way through school. The high school boys were the worst. My family mostly calls me Lena Belle, but my friends call me just plain Lena.”

“Nothing plain about you Lena Belle,” he said, resting his gaze on her lips as they parted for a bite of salad. “Your daughter’s name is Belle, correct?”

“Hmm.” she nodded, feeling more like a Lena Belle instead of an LB. Slowly, she picked up her napkin and wiped her mouth. Before she could change the conversation to focus on him, he spoke, drawing her gaze.

“You mentioned she’s having a baby. When is your due date as a grandmother?”

Lena Belle smiled. Pride building within. “June first,” she replied, skirting her gaze over his face. His eyes were even more stunning against his dark hair.

“Does that mean you’re going to London?”

“I’d like too. I’m not sure. I really can’t afford to take off work. Besides, I’m hoping the baby won’t be but a couple of months old by the time Ben is transferred back to the states.” She tilted her head, looked him straight in the eyes, and asked, “Are you married? Kids?” Without a flinch, he scanned her face, and gave her a smile that sent her heart pumping.

“A long time ago. The one good thing from the marriage was my son.”

“Do you get to see much of him?”

“No, at the present he’s a Marine and stationed in Iraq.”

Lena Belle's eyes widened, as she pressed her hand against her heart. "Oh, that's got to be a concern. You must be proud of him."

Daniel nodded, picked up his goblet, and took a sip without taking his gaze from her. "His mother spoiled him terribly, gave him everything he wanted except discipline. I think the Marines have helped him mature. We haven't had a close relationship, not like you seem to have with your daughter, but I'm working on that."

"Are you from around here? I mean, you mentioned that you didn't have a home here."

"I've spent most of my time in Savanna, living in the south, mostly."

Lena Belle took a bite of salad and studied his face. Letting curiosity get the best of her, she asked, "So, what brought you here to upper state Michigan, where the weather's freezing?"

Before he could answer, the waiter interrupted with their main course and refilled their goblets. While she waited for her glass to be filled, Lena Belle listened to the soft romantic music, feeling warm and content. "Oh,

Daniel, listen. The music they're playing is one of my favorite albums, *Misteriosa Venezia*."

Daniel raised his glass to her to toast to their music. Her previous question forgotten, they fell into a discussion of favorite pieces of music and movies. Before she knew how it happened, she was no longer nervous and found their conversations flowed from one topic to another with being aware of time.

To her disappointment, dinner ended all too soon. Much to her surprise, she didn't want the evening to come to a close. When they stepped outside the restaurant, Lena Belle stopped, turned, and found herself standing toe-to-toe with him. Feeling somewhat tongue-tied, she glanced up to lock her gaze into his sexy, satiated look.

He took her hand, gave it a little squeeze as if to say he too felt the connection. "Come, I'll walk you to your car."

Biting her lower lip, she glance down the street, and confessed, "It's at the store, two blocks away."

"Good, that means I have you in my possession for a little longer."

“I love walking in the snow. What’s Christmas without snow?”

“How about, Christmas in the sand and walking barefooted along the edge of the ocean.”

“Hmm, I’ve not done that.”

“Have you ever been sailing?”

“No, sounds fun. I much prefer warm weather over cold, but there’s something about cold and snow around the Christmas holidays.”

“I’ve always wanted to sail down the eastern coast to the Bahamas during the holidays. So far, that opportunity hasn’t come my way. Have you ever been to the Bahamas?”

“No.” Lena Belle shook her head, flipped a snowflake off her eyelash, and admitted, “I’ve never really been anywhere.”

“Not even when you were married?”

The warmth of Daniel’s hand, the enchanting snowfall, and the magic of Christmas filled her heart. She smiled and shook her head. “That’s the reason. I met John in college, married, had Belle right away and then he went to medical school. The bills were horrendous. Most of our

married life, I worked odd jobs to stay on top of the bills and financial loans to get him through med school. After that, he decided to specialize—one thing after another. Once he started his practice, he found a nurse with whom he had more in common. We divorced. There you go, my life in a nutshell.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not. I have Belle, and soon to be a nana.”

Digging through her purse, Lena Belle pulled out the car keys and clicked the lock button. When Daniel opened the car door, she gripped the hard cold door metal and looked up into his face. She moistened her cold lips, letting her gaze slide to his.

Before saying a word, he raised his hand, touched her cheek, and whispered, “Pretty lady.”

She froze when he leaned forward and touched his lips to her cheek, lingering for moment. Then, he brought his lips slowly, ever so slowly to hers. Anticipation played havoc with her senses. Finally, his soft, sinuous lips stirred her to the very core, making her skin simmer beneath the cold night air, until he pulled away.

“Goodnight,” his low sexy voice whispered.

Dazed, she forced her body to move. Without saying a word, she smiled, got in the car, and started the engine. Unable to resist, she glanced at him in her rearview mirror. With his hands shoved in his pockets, he turned and walked away. To where, she had no idea.

Entering her tiny apartment, LB flipped on the tree lights, slid out of her long grey wool coat, and dropped down to the sofa to pull off her boots. Too restless to go to bed, she switched on the TV and checked her DVR. Her automatic timer had recorded Stargate SG-1. Now, she was three episodes behind. Before the program began, she hit the pause button, strolled into the bedroom to change into a pair of warm cotton pjs.

Standing at the bathroom mirror, she touched her lips. *Wow, his kiss was more than expected.* The touch of his lips would not soon be forgotten. Santa, Santa, Santa, why couldn't he be a typical man with a regular job and not a drifter. *LB you're falling...don't.*

God help her. LB shook her head and strolled into the kitchen. She leaned against the counter waiting for the cup of water to heat. That kiss should never have happened.

She couldn't fall for Santa. This whole attraction thing could prove dangerous.

When the microwave beeped, LB jumped. Retrieving the cup, she dunked a tea bag in the steamy water. Once again, she allowed her mind to speculate about the handsome Santa named Daniel Jackson. She felt a bond growing. How could she afford to let herself get involved with a man whose only job, at the moment, was being a Santa?

Settling on the sofa, LB hit the play button and took a sip of tea. At the very second, Colonel Jack O'Neill stepped out of the Stargate, a knock sounded on her door. Startled, she hit the pause, glanced at the time, and waited. *Midnight. Who could be knocking on her door at this hour?*

Tiptoeing to the peephole, she peeked through. Stepping back, she hesitated. Biting her bottom lip, LB slowly opened her door to Daniel.

“Look, I know it's late, but...”

“Yes, it is late, but since you're here, how about a cup of hot tea?”

A relieved grin spread across his sexy face. “I won’t stay long, I promise.”

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll fix your hot tea.”

“Were you watching *Stargate SG-1*?”

“I must confess I’m a scifi nut.”

“Believe it or not, I am, too. I haven’t seen many episodes of *Stargate* – not around a TV very much, but I would if I could.”

She handed Daniel his cup, thinking if he were moving around so often and didn’t have a real home, how could he.

Daniel glanced around her apartment, taking in the warm welcoming feeling and the Christmas tree in the corner of the room. “You’ve done a beautiful job decorating the tree.” When he fixed his gaze on her, he flashed a smile and scanned her face, as if touching her.

“Lena Belle, Lena Belle, Lena Belle. Sounds like a song, doesn’t it?”

“The way you say it, it does.” Slowly raising her cup, she took a sip and stared back, feeling her heart thump in her throat.

Unexpectedly, he sat his cup down on the coffee table, moved next to her, took her cup, and placed it next to his. When he circled his arm around her shoulder, he buried his lips into her short hair next to her ear, and whispered, “If you don’t tell me to leave now, I’m going to kiss you.”

The thought of his lips on hers, again, shot adrenaline through her veins. *Oh Lena Belle, you’re in trouble.* She lifted her gaze to his and lost all control. No longer LB, but Lena Belle, wanting a man who desired her.

When she sighed in surrender, his lips met hers like a magnet. She responded in a way that surprised her, creating sensations that she hadn’t known for so long. She tasted his sweetness and wanted more.

Daniel broke the kiss to hug her against him. She squeezed her eyes shut, aware of the satisfying tingle stretching over her skin.

His fingers spread through her soft thick hair, and then he cradled her head in his hand and moved her slightly away to gaze deep into her dark brown eyes.

“This can’t be real,” he whispered. “We’ve just met, and yet, I feel like we belong together.” He pressed her head against his forehead. “Can I see you again?”

Powerful emotions pounded in her chest, and in a daze, she looked up at him and to her surprise said, “Tomorrow night?”

“That would be tonight, my pretty lady. Now, I better go. Otherwise, we both may lose control of our senses.”

Chapter Six

“Coffee time.” Daniel’s voice echoed through the window display door.

LB turned the doorknob and peered out to find the large stuffed, Santa standing with a latte in his hand.

“Hi.” Good grief, she sounded like a teenager. A quick glance around warned her two small girls were in eardrop. “Santa, you read my thoughts. I needed a break.” Her gaze met his, and then slipped to his lips, a reminder of their sweet passion shared the night before. Glancing down at the steamy cup, she accepted it, and sat on the step making room for him.

“Dinner tonight?” he asked.

LB couldn’t stop the heat creeping into her face as his gaze scanned her head of short blonde hair, her face, traveled down her neck, taking in her jeans, and even the

way she sat. He must have liked what he observed for what he took in seemed to bring a smile to his lips.

His trailing look made her feel as though he touched every inch of her body. Self-consciously, she took a sip of coffee, and then smiled. She felt a strong urge to put her arms around him and kiss those twinkling eyes surrounded by the soft white mustache and long white curly hair, covered with the red Santa's hat.

“Dinner?”

His sultry voice flowed to her senses, sending exciting chills down her back. She nodded. How could he afford to keep taking her to dinner? Clearing her throat, she pressed her lips together and made a quick decision. “How about dinner at my place tonight?”

“It's a date. Now, I had better get back to my big chair before the boss comes looking for me.”

LB looked up into his bearded face. He hesitated, as if wanting to say something more, but instead, he winked, touched her cheek, and whispered, “Can't wait.” She hugged her hands around the hot mug, desperately trying to slow her heartbeat. The problem being, she couldn't wait either.

She raised the cup to her lips, took a sip of latte and closed her eyes. His touch felt like a caress. His lips...hmm, nice. She definitely could use a lot more kissing from that Santa. *Oh, you foolish, foolish woman.*

LB hurried through the store to her office without glancing Daniel's way. *Control yourself, or you'll be sorry.* Once settled at her computer, she forced her mind to focus on organizing the Christmas party. Taking longer than expected, she completed the list and began checking items off after making arrangements on the phone. Now, to see what decorations they have in the storage room. Maybe some would be worth using.

After several minutes of searching through the boxes labeled Christmas party decorations, she heard the door open and shut. "Tommy, is that you?" LB stood and peeked around the stack of supplies to find Santa standing in front of the closed door.

"Santa? Did you need something?"

Without saying a word, she watched him pull the Santa hat, wig, and beard from his head, and step toward

her. He stopped several feet away. His seductive gaze looked deep into hers, and then lingered on her lips.

“Lena Belle, I’ve been thinking about you—”

“Daniel—”

“Do you need a kiss as badly as I do?”

Her eyes widened at his direct question and stared into his captivating eyes, darkened, serious blue eyes. “Daniel, we can’t—”

“I know...its crazy, huh.”

“Daniel—”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he stated with a raised brow, closing the space between them.

All he needed to hear was that little whimper from her throat for him to claim her lips, bringing yet another whimper of surrender. Her whole body melted into his, radiating heat that demanded more.

Pulling away, his ragged voice whispered, “Lena Belle, my pretty lady, I don’t think you know what you’re doing to me.”

“Hey, LB, are you in—ah, yup, you are, oops, sorry guys.”

They both turned to watch an embarrassed Tommy back out the door, pulling it shut.

Daniel turned back to LB, grinning. “We’ve been caught.”

“Looks that a way. We’re lucky Mr. York didn’t discover us.”

She spread her palms against his red stuffed suit. He reached up and traced her lips with his finger. Her lips parted. Her heart quickened. Suddenly, she pushed him an arm’s length away. Grinning, Daniel dropped his arm.

“You better go before someone else walks in and we’re the talk of the store.”

LB switched off the computer and stood. If Mr. York gave her permission, she’d leave early and stop at the store. She looked forward to preparing a lovely dinner for Daniel. They’d talk. Then, maybe, she’d understand why she was drawn to him in such a dangerous way.

Slipping into her coat, she headed toward Mr. York’s office. After a slight knock on the door, she popped her head in. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. York, I...I needed to ask you something, but I didn’t realize you were busy.” She

glanced at Daniel, standing in front of her boss's table. Daniel turned toward her. He smiled at her, but didn't say a word.

"Ah...ah, LB, what did you want?"

"I just wondered if you would mind if I left a little early, today."

"Yes, yes, that's fine."

"Thank you." A short, quick glance at Daniel told her she had interrupted their conversation. Backing out, she shut the door.

LB grabbed the forks, picked up the salad bowls, and glanced at Daniel. His gaze had been fixed on her since he arrived, causing little quivers through her body.

He filled the kitchen with his nearness, standing there, leaning against her counter in his blue shirt and snug-fitting jeans. He was beyond a doubt, the epitome of masculine sexuality. Even his boots appeared new and shiny. Wherever he got his clothes, they fit him perfectly, almost like custom fit. Probably the homeless shelter. She knew such places received nice, and many times, expensive clothing donations. "Shall we eat?"

Straightening to his full height, Daniel took the salad bowl, touched his lips to her cheek, and said, “Did I mention how beautiful you look tonight?”

“Why, Santa, are you flirting with me?”

Daniel, stared into her round brown eyes reflecting the candlelight flickering on the table. “Santa admits he’s flirting with the pretty lady. Santa’s not normally a flirt, but he’s very much attracted to the lady.”

“Now,” he pulled his gaze from hers and passed the salad bowl to her. “Change of subject-”

“Good idea,” she whispered, helping herself to the salad.

“You seem to enjoy your job at Denny Day’s. How long have you worked there?”

“It’s a great job. One that I can, sort of put my degree in practice.”

“And what degree would that be?” He gave her a curious glance and then helped himself to a buttered roll.

“Interior decorating. In my younger years, I had dreamed of owning my own shop one day.”

“And is that still a dream?”

“No, I gave that up long time ago.” LB placed her hand on the bottle of wine, and asked, “More?”

“Please. So, in truth, you’re saying you sacrificed your career to help a husband get through medical school.”

“Yes, but,” LB shook her head and stated, “Daniel Santa Claus, that’s in the past, and I don’t live in the past.”

“Healthy attitude, pretty lady.”

“So, what about the department store do you like?”

“Everything. I love Mr. York for being a terrific boss, and as you know, yourself, he is a very generous man. I also have to give some credit to the owner of the company.”

“How come?” he asked, eying her closely?

“Well, word is, he lives somewhere in New York City, never goes anywhere, has no family or friends, and that his chain of Denny Days numbers to eight stores along the eastern coastline, and that, he took over his grandfather’s dream at a very young age. Can’t imagine how much he’s worth. They say—”

“And, who are *they*?” Daniel interrupted with an amused expression flowing from his eyes to her lips.

She took a bite of potatoes and thought for a moment. “Oh, it’s all hearsay. I’ve never met the man, and I probably shouldn’t say another word.”

“No, please keep going, I’m interested, like to know what people are saying about the company.”

Looking into his eyes, she studied his expression for a moment. Maybe he’s considered asking Mr. York for a more permanent job. That could have been what she had interrupted earlier. He sat there returning her intense gaze, with his elbows on the table, holding his glass of wine.

LB got the impression he was more interested in observing her, than in their conversation. “Well, from what I understand, the owner’s a recluse, but no one knows much about him, except he gives generously to charities. Poor man, I have the impression he must be lonely. The one thing I know for sure, the man is good to his employees. The company is an exceptional place to work, Daniel. If I ever have the opportunity to thank him, I will.”

When he didn’t comment, LB decided to change the subject. “Coffee?”

“Sure. Here let me help clear the table.” He picked up his plate as he stood and followed her to the kitchen.

“You’ve done a great job decorating the apartment. Puts me in the holiday spirit.”

“Christmas is my favorite holiday. It makes me feel good. The music is relaxing, peaceful. It’s just warm fuzzy feelings I have during the holidays.”

“That’s cool.” Daniel handed his plate to LB for her to place in the sink along with the other dishes. “Is your daughter coming home for Christmas?”

Regretfully, LB shook her head. “No. This will be the second Christmas without her.”

“And, yet Christmas is still your favorite holiday, even if you are alone.”

LB glanced up into his sexy face. She noted the lines around the corners of his twinkling eyes, evidence of his smiles. “I must admit, it is, but then again, I enjoy my own company. Last year, I didn’t spend it alone. I spent Christmas Day down at St. Joseph’s Cathedral, helping feed the homeless.” Hesitating, she paused for a moment, poured him a cup of coffee, waiting for him to admit that he had been there as a recipient of the Christmas turkey. Instead, he puckered his brow, turned, walked into the living room, and sat on the sofa.

She followed him, aware of his sad expression. *Not a good topic.* She led the conversation back to her daughter. “Belle’s invited me to London to spend Christmas Day with them. I thought about it, but it’s not a good time to take off work.”

“That’s too bad, you’d like London.”

Surprised, she blinked. “Oh, have you been there?”

“Yes, it’s been awhile. When you’re in London, it takes you back in time, centuries. You should visit there before your family comes home.”

“Daniel...” LB hesitated, again, and stared down into the coffee cup in her hand. “In the kitchen...I must have said something that upset you? If I’ve reminded you of something unpleasant, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, I’ll tell you one day, but right now I want to focus on us.”

“Okay, what do you mean?” LB hugged her hands around the coffee mug. Her heart drummed against her chest. Not daring to glance at him, she stared over at the Christmas tree, flashing all its bright colors. Trying to calm her nerves, she didn’t hear him move.

An arm circled around her shoulder, while his other hand took the cup from her to place it on the table, and then, he tilted up her chin. LB raised her gaze to his eyes to find them dark, seductive, and wanting. Warning alarms rang in her brain, yet her heart pounded with excitement.

“Pretty lady, I’m not sure what you’re doing to me, but it’s driving me crazy.” Before she could speak, he claimed her lips in a soft kiss that lingered.

She whimpered.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close.

Returning his caresses, she raked fingers through his thick dark hair, touching his soft, freshly shaven jaws. Breathless, she became lost in the need of a more-sated intimacy.

“Daniel.” Barely above a whisper, she pleaded, “Daniel...please, maybe it’s time you left. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep resisting you without—”

“This goes deeper than we’re admitting, my darling Lena.”

She looked up into his face wanting to take it into her hands to tell him that she had fallen for him, but that couldn’t happen.

Gathering all the strength she could muster up, she straightened, stood, and walked to the door. “Daniel, we’re moving way too fast. Please, I need you to go.” She watched him take in a deep breath, comb his fingers through his hair, and rise from the sofa. Without taking his eyes off her, he stepped to the door.

“Lena Belle, think about me, long and hard tonight.” His eyes narrowed. “We have some talking to do. I’m too old to play games, I want you, and I know you feel something for me, too.”

Biting her lower lip, she looked him straight in the eyes, shut the door, and let her love shine. “You’re right. Let’s talk.”

Daniel reached out to take her hand. But she pulled back. “No touching, we’re just talking. Deal?”

Grinning, he raised three fingers. “Scout’s honor, unless of course you give me permission otherwise.”

Lena Belle slowly stepped to the Christmas tree to put some distance between them. For several minutes, she stared at the glittering lights.

“Lena...”

Clearing her throat and avoiding eye contact, she mumbled, "I'll get us some coffee." Then gathered the cups and headed for the kitchen for refills. Taking her time, she tried to sort out her feelings toward the man. When she returned, she found Daniel in front of the Christmas tree where she had stood moments ago.

Her entire body stiffened. She didn't trust herself to be too near him. One thing she knew for certain was their strong physical attraction toward each other. He was right...she sensed her feelings went deeper. Breathing in a persuasive breath of willpower, she headed for the chair opposite the sofa. A strong urge to wrap her arms around him and confess her love made her bite her bottom lip to keep from speaking. The way he made her feel wanted and complete went beyond all understanding. It just happened. She had fallen in love with a homeless Santa.

She stared at his back. It wasn't easy to stay glued to the chair. *Oh, my goodness. How in the world had it happened?*

His sudden movement caused her to jump. When he turned to face her, his serious expression made her wish

she hadn't stopped him from leaving. He sat on the sofa, rested his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together.

Before he spoke, he scanned her whole being and took a deep breath. "Lena, Lena, Lena Belle, you've stolen my heart. Do you know that?"

Her jaws tightened, she pressed her lips together, felt the thumping of her heart, and admitted. "And, you mine."

He dropped his head into his hands and didn't move.

This couldn't be good. Now what?

Daniel slowly raised his head and gazed upon her.

Electric sparks flew from his seductive expression into hers.

"Lena, I'm forty-five years old, and I'm too old to play a catching game. I want you, and I don't want to wait six months or six weeks. I love you and I think you love me, let's move ahead in life, together. I want you to marry me."

Whoa...she hadn't seen that coming! Her mind whirled in confusion. Biting her lower lip, unable to sit still, she stood and stepped across the room. The multi-colored lights on her Christmas tree twinkled, hypnotically. *Be honest, LB.*

“Daniel, I can’t.”

“But, why? This has to be right. I feel it.”

With a wrinkled brow, LB turned to face him, and then silently, she sat down beside him. She reached out and covered his hands with hers. “Daniel, I never thought I could love again, but you’ve proved me wrong. It happened so fast. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“That’s a good thing in my mind.”

“Daniel, I spent a large amount of my life supporting a man who walked out on me. I can’t do that again.”

“But Lena—”

She raised a hand and placed her fingers over his mouth to keep him from speaking. “Let me finish.” Unable to resist, Lena Belle traced her fingers over his lips, feeling desire swell within. *Oh my, what are you thinking? What are you saying? What are you doing? You’re crazy.*

Pushing aside her emotional wants, she dropped her hand, glanced up into his worried brow, and with a determined voice, she stated, “If you truly love me, then I need you to prove it.”

Daniel cupped her face in his hand, drew her to him, and kissed her tenderly on her lips. “What can I do to prove my love is real?”

“Get a permanent, stable job for the next year, Daniel, and I will spend the rest of my life with you.”

Daniel sat back against the sofa, caught a small chuckle on the verge of escape, when he noticed how serious her expression stayed. Raising his eyebrows, he frowned. He combed his fingers through his hair, and down his neck. “That’s it?”

She nodded, her heart pounding.

Standing, he pulled her to her feet, held her hand, and led her to the door. Daniel rested his other hand on the doorknob and paused, searched her eyes, and then smiled. When he hugged her, he buried his face in her neck and felt relieved when she circled her arms around him and held on tightly. He whispered, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter Seven

LB flipped the Christmas tree switch off, on, and then off again, and stepped back. This little one had been giving her trouble, twice, now. *Okay, let's see if there's another bad fuse, or just plain old burned out bulbs.*

She drew in a deep sigh, aware of being unable to concentrate all morning. Daniel plagued her mind. Glancing at her watch, she wondered why he hadn't arrived. He was late. Please, Mr. York don't get upset with him. Daniel, Daniel, are you willing to work for our relationship?

When a soft knock sounded on the window, LB jumped. Her heart skipped a beat when she glanced around, then melted at the sight of Daniel's smile. Heaven help her, she loved the way he made her feel.

Just as she started to wave, a man walked up behind him, drawing his attention. Then to her surprised, they hugged each other. LB didn't want to stare, but curiosity got the best of her. He reminded her of Daniel on that first

day outside her window. This man, older and shorter than Daniel, wore a tattered coat, oversized pants, and his hands wore gloves that had the fingers worn off from the knuckles. His long dirty hair hung down his back in a ponytail. A thought flashed through her mind, wondering if his sole possessions were inside the faded blue backpack hung over his shoulder.

When he looked up into the window, LB's gaze caught his. *Oh my, he had the same blue eyes as Daniel, except his didn't twinkle.* The man turned back to Daniel and shoved a piece of paper in Daniel's hand. Daniel pulled out a wad of bills, but the man pushed it away. Then, he reached up and gave Daniel a hug. LB discerned sadness in Daniel's stance while he watched the guy walk away. All of a sudden, Daniel ran after him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she observed Daniel's hand resting on the older man's shoulder. They seemed to be discussing something important. Daniel appeared to be trying to convince the older man who stood shaking his head as if disagreeing. A few minutes later Daniel turned and headed for the department store. The man stood there with his hands in his pockets, as if waiting.

Not wanting to appear snoopy, LB turned back to the tree and tried to look as if she were concentrating on the lights. *Who could he be? A homeless friend?*

“Hi, pretty lady.” Daniel’s smiling face peered around the door. A smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. She felt nervous, sensing something was about to change. A chill ran down her back.

“Daniel.” She forced a smile. You don’t have your Santa suit on, yet.”

“No, I’ve got to leave for a while.” Daniel glanced out the window toward the man outside, standing, waiting. He moved inside the window area, made sure he didn’t step on any tiny village people, and reached out for her. Pulling her to his chest, he wrapped his arms around her.

Frowning, she raised her head to his face. Before she could say a word, his lips began to softly play with hers, causing her to forget they were standing in a fishbowl. Needing more, she whimpered for him to possess her lips, deepening the kiss into a passionate, hunger that left them both breathless.

Breaking away, he drank in the sight of her, and whispered, “I have to go, Lena Belle, I love you.”

“Go...why? Daniel...”

He closed the door, leaving her surrounded in a Christmas magic that, for the first time, she didn't feel. LB turned in time to see Daniel approach the homeless man, who put his arm around him as they walked away.

Several days turned into a couple of weeks since she had seen or heard from Daniel. In an effort to put him out of her mind, she tried her best to center all her energy on organizing the company Christmas party. Glancing around, LB decided she had done a superb job, even though her heart felt as if it was in mourning.

Christmas music echoed throughout the room, putting all the employees and their spouses in the holiday mood. The multi-colored Christmas lights and the gigantic red and white balls dangling from the ceiling, added to the festive appearance of the room. Mr. York had pacified her by letting her decorate a huge Christmas tree. He liked LB's suggestion that once the party ended, the tree could be donated to an employee, who was a single mother. He had taken up a collection to purchase an electric Christmas

train set to put around the tree, knowing the person getting the tree had a young son.

“Hey, LB, the food’s delicious, great choice.”

“Thanks,” she hollered above the loud music, laughter and merry chatting.

“LB, you did it again. Fantastic job. Even the punch is tasty without the added punch.” Mr. York laughed, holding up his glass. “No pun intended. Now, relax, enjoy the party, you’re done. The cleanup crew will take over afterward, and you don’t have to lift a finger.”

“That’s a deal. I’d rather get the festivities on track than to clean up any day. Thanks, Mr. York.”

“You’re worth a million, lady.”

If she didn’t know better, she would have suspected Mr. York of dipping into the punch one glass too many. The only thing, was, she hadn’t put in alcohol. *Hmm, someone might have.*

Chapter Eight

LB stepped out of the store and turned toward the parking lot. Well ahead of her schedule for the spring displays, she had taken off a half a day for Christmas Eve. Why, she wasn't sure. Gritting her teeth and pressing her lips together, she had decided to quit feeling sorry for herself. She loved Christmas and she was determined to act like it. Suddenly an idea popped into her head. She stopped, did an about face and headed in the opposite direction toward the market.

Taking in a deep breath of cold air, she wrapped a scarf around her neck and resolved to have a nice Christmas dinner tomorrow. She had so much to be thankful for, especially, now that she was going to be a grandmother. She loved her job, her boss, and everyone who worked there. They all kept complimenting her on the terrific job she'd done on organizing the Christmas party.

Shaking her head, she agreed the party went off without a hitch. The only thing wrong, she had felt lonely.

All evening she'd kept expecting Daniel to pop in as Santa, but she had forced a smiley face when the Santa turned out to be a stranger.

Not a word from him. He'd rather be homeless than have her. *Stupid woman, you let yourself fall, even when you warned yourself.* Embarrassed by her foolishness, she didn't dare ask Mr. York about him.

Glancing through a pet store window, she stopped, drawn to a sad-eyed Dalmatian sitting in the corner of the cage. He stared back, with large brown eyes that spoke to her. He appeared as heartbroken as she felt. That wasn't good, not on Christmas Eve. *Poor baby, would you like a home this Christmas?*

LB walked into the shop and turned toward the cage. "Hello, fellow."

That's all it took for him to jump up, wagging his tail. "Oh poor baby." LB put her hand flat against the cage window and his black nose touched the other side.

"Looking for a Christmas present?"

She turned to the short, plump sales clerk, smiling. "No...I hadn't intended...maybe, he just caught my eye as I passed.

“He’s a good dog. The owners said he’s only a year old. Come on, meet him.” She held open the door to the room filled with cages.

LB stepped inside at the same time the woman unlatched the Dalmatian’s cage. Without hesitating, the dog ran toward her. She couldn’t help but notice that he looked as if he were grinning. Squatting, LB said, “Sit.” Immediately the dog sat.

“Good dog.”

When he lifted his paw to her, she couldn’t resist. Taking it, she asked, “Wanna go home with me?” His long pink tongue came out and licked her face in one sweeping move before she had a chance to stop him.

Laughing, LB almost lost her balance. “I guess that’s a yes.”

The clerk laughed. “You won’t be sorry, he’s even been house trained. The only reason the couple had to give him up was because they were transferred to England.”

The woman, cocked her head, and with a hand on her hip, inquired, “If you don’t mind me asking. Do you live in a house?”

LB stared at the dog. “No, an apartment. But that’s okay, animals are allowed.” Patting the dog on the head, LB stood, and looked down at him. “We’ll just have to get into a walking routine and make a habit of visiting the park. Won’t we, boy?”

Who would have ever thought she’d walk into a pet shop and out with a Dalmatian on a leash? Not like her to be impulsive. In a manner of speaking, she’d just bought her very own Christmas present.

The dog turned his head upward as if smiling. “Okay, boy, what am I going to name you? Hmm...it’s Christmas, how about Chris...Herby, hmm, oh, I know. Nick for St. Nicholas. That’s it. Nick. Do you like that?” When the dog let out a short woof sound, LB laughed, and said, “Okay, Nick it is.”

Nick’s moist black nose sniffed at her apartment door, patiently waiting for his master to open it. When she did, he led her in. “Okay, Nick, this is your new home, but that doesn’t mean you have permission to mark everything. Understood? You and I will get to know each other and I promise I’ll have you into a walking routine before you

know it. Ahh...maybe it'll be the other way around...you'll train me."

LB bent down to unhook the leash and stared into his soft brown eyes. She couldn't believe she'd bought a dog? There's a lot of care involved in having a dog. Too late now. "Nick, you're a lucky dog. Huh, lucky me, too."

She reached up and flipped the switch to the Christmas tree lights to let the subtle glow illuminate throughout the room. To add to the ambiance, she flipped on a Christmas CD. The rich saxophone melody levitated out to embrace the dancing beams flashing from the tree. The tone filled her apartment with the holiday spirit.

"It's just you and me for Christmas, little boy. We're a family, okay. Wait 'til you meet your sister, she'll love you. I hope you like kids because she's having a baby. How about a few candles?" Nick sat and watched her move from the coffee table to the mantle, lighting several Christmas candles.

When she finished, she turned to the new love in her life. "How's that? Oh, poor boy, you're just not sure about your new home, or me. I promise to love and take care of you, and spoil you rotten. Deal?"

Her somber gaze stared back at the tree lights. “Tomorrow’s Christmas Day, Nick. I’m not going anywhere. Could have, but at the time, I thought Santa would be here. You would have liked Santa.” With a hard head shake, she turned to her dog and said, “Okay, enough of that...that’s the past, and you’re the present. Anyway, it’s just you and me, so we’ll have Christmas dinner with ham and the works. How does that sound?” She’d even bought a bottle of white wine.

No matter, she’d still set a beautiful holiday table and enjoy it. LB opened a box of wrapping paper and pulled out a soft red ribbon. Popping down on the floor by Nick, she tied it around his neck, leaned her head sideways and studied the dog’s eyes. He stared back with a human-like expression.

His ears pricked up, and then he tilted his head. “Wow, you’re a beautiful animal. The red against your white and black fur makes you an extremely attractive guy, do you know that?” Smiling at the dog, she gave him a hug, patted his head, and then jumped to her feet.

“I need a glass of wine, Nick, and I better get a water dish out for you. We’ll have one little glass of wine, and then, I’ll change my clothes.”

When she sat on the sofa, Nick jumped up to curl up against her. “Hey, who gave you permission, little boy?” One glance at his white face with a black dot over each eye, LB relinquished all claim to being the boss in the house. “I’m so glad you’re part of me now. You’re the best present I could have this Christmas.” Only one other thing could have made it a perfect Christmas.

Resting her head back against the sofa, she absently, rubbed Nick’s smooth slick coat, sipped the wine, and closed her eyes.

Kenny G blew into his sax, transmitting the soothing cadence of *Winter Wonderland*. The tone wafted throughout the apartment, and before she could stop it, her mind had summoned up an image of Santa. Only, it wasn’t just any Santa, but Daniel.

He could melt her heart with the way he looked at her ... his lips linked to hers, tingled her insides. He knew how to transport her into the soaring heights of no return. *Oh, Daniel, if we had made love...*

Suddenly, LB shot straight up, spilling wine from the glass, and startling her dog into a quick jump off the sofa. Biting her lower lip, she stared at Nick. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Come here.” She patted the sofa for Nick to return. He obeyed. She couldn’t let her thoughts go in that direction.

“That’s it—I’ve got to think of something else. Did I tell you that I’m a grandmother? Well, she’s not arriving until June. Did I say she? That remains to be known, as of yet. After the holidays, we’ll have to go shopping. I’m thinking she’ll need all kinds of cute clothes. Maybe we should buy her a stroller. When they move home, we can go on long walks with her or him. Wonder how much strollers cost these days. Geez, Nick, I forgot.”

LB had stuffed her bonus check inside her purse during the company party and had completely forgotten about it. Curious to know how much it was, she reached over the arm of the sofa, and grabbed her purse off the floor. Digging inside she pulled it out.

“Whoa...Mr. York.” LB’s eyes widened when they focused on the dollar amount. Laughing, she sipped her wine. *You go girl, take the check and run.*

“Look at this, Nick, Mr. York blew it this time. He’s added way too many zeroes—six to be exact. Boy, what a girl couldn’t do with this.” LB dropped the check on the coffee table. Standing, she smiled at the bogus piece of paper. *Mr. York you are a dear employer, but even you can’t be that generous.*

“Would you look at this, Nick, he forgot to sign it. We’ll call him tomorrow and tell him how much we appreciate his Christmas present.”

Changing into soft velour white pajamas, LB once again had to force her thoughts away from the tall, blue-eyed man that just disappeared from her life, as fast as he had entered it. Helping herself to another glass of wine, she strolled over to the sofa and just before she plopped down next to Nick, a knock sounded at her door.

Nick’s head came up and a small growl escape his throat. Stepping to the door, LB’s eye zoomed through the peephole, she quickly stepped back and bit down on her bottom lip.

Another slight knock.

After a quick deep breath to calm her jitters, she turned the doorknob. He stood there all dressed in his red

suit and long white beard. Their gaze connected. Every muscle in her body tightened. A dominant force over her emotional needs kept her from running into his arms. Her brain cells ignited warning signals entwined with stimulating currents rippling through her heart.

Santa's twinkling gaze lingered on her with sharp caressing pupils before making their slow glide over her whole being. An intoxicating experience. Spellbound, LB couldn't move, or speak. The moment Nick bounced over to greet his guest, Santa released her from his locked gaze.

“Hey, puppy. Did another Santa bring you to Lena Belle?”

“Ah...no, Daniel, where—”

“Aren't you going to ask me in, my pretty lady?”

Without saying a word LB stepped aside to let the twinkling-eyed Santa enter, much to Nick's delight.

He silently stepped in, hesitated, and then bent down, and touched his lips to hers.

It happened so fast, she couldn't react. Then he strolled over to the sofa, swung a big, brown duffel bag off his shoulder and without saying a word, pulled out several large brightly wrapped boxes. Next, a bottle of champagne

appeared. Grinning, as if he had a secret, he raised it to her, and then set it on the coffee table. Reaching deep into the bag again, he extracted a tiny box wrapped in white satin paper with a huge red sparkling ribbon.

Daniel glanced at Lena Belle again, waiting for her reaction to his being there. She still held the door open. He wasn't sure if she would ask him to leave. He'd hoped she'd receive Santa with open arms, but he'd been gone longer than expected. Without taking his gaze from her, he pulled the Santa hat and beard off his head, and combed his fingers through his thick dark hair.

Daniel spoke softly, "We should talk." His brows wrinkled together, sending an intense stare her way. She stood there barefooted, with polished red toenails, looking all warm and soft in her white pajamas. He needed to explain so many things, but he was uncertain where to begin.

LB's heart cried out. He stood there, like a little boy, unsure of what she wanted. His sudden appearance was a little disconcerting when she had thought him gone for

good. Yet, he stood there letting her drink in the sight of him. No denying, she was hopelessly, head-over-heels in love with this homeless man.

A need to keep a calm expression, LB slowly shut the door, took a few steps closer to him, but not near enough for him to touch her. Her low voice finally spoke, “Talk is good.”

“I’ve missed you.”

“Daniel—”

“Lena—”

“Daniel—”

“I need to explain some things—”

“Coffee?” Turning, she headed for the kitchen. *She had to think. Think, without looking at him.*

Filling the pot with water, she occupied her thoughts with what to say. Could she be sure? Would she love him for the rest of her life if she had to be the sole provider? Wouldn’t this situation eventually cause problems? *God help her.* While carefully measuring out the grounds, she decided to be bold and first to speak. Acknowledge how she felt, admit the foolish ultimatum she had given was insignificant, compared to the love she had for him.

Chapter Nine

LB handed Daniel a Christmas mug filled with hot steaming coffee and sat across from him. Nick rested his head on her lap. Absently, she stroked the dog's head, feeling her nerves scramble down her back. Waiting for him to speak, she kept her focus on Nick and away from Daniel, for security. She bent and kissed the dog on the head.

“I could use one of those.”

Raising her head, she met his gaze, sending her insides into a flutter. Nevertheless, she couldn't go there, not yet, anyway. “Daniel—”

“I know. I know we need to talk.”

Her mind searched for words to explain her feelings. “Daniel—”

“Lena Belle?”

Smiling, she said, “Let me go first.” Her voice sounded more confident than she felt.

Sitting back, Daniel crossed a leg over the other, spread an arm on the back of the sofa, and took a sip of coffee, giving her his full attention.

He looked so sexy, making it difficult for her to continue. After a short quick breath, she pressed her lips together, fixed her eyes on his, and said, “Remember when I asked you to spend a year working to prove you could love and support me?” *Of course, he remembers, stupid.*

Daniel nodded. The twinkle in his eyes never wavered.

“Then, you disappeared for a few weeks, and I thought you had decided you couldn’t do it, that maybe working in one place was too hard.” Nervously, LB prattled out the words so fast, she couldn’t be sure Daniel caught it all. When he started to speak, she raised her hand to stop him.

“I need to say this, Daniel. I love you. I do. My job at the department store is a great job. The money isn’t a huge amount, but it’s enough to support both of us without waiting out the year.”

She stood, but before she should take a step, she looked him straight in the eyes.

Suddenly, she dropped back into the chair, rested her arms on her legs, clasped her hands together, and leaned forward. She took a deep breath, and slowly said, “I’m not sure I grasp the reasons why you’re homeless, but if you will give me a chance I’d like to understand. You’ve come into my life, swept me off my feet, and made me fall in love with you. Daniel, don’t you think I deserve some explanation?”

“Yes, you do.” Daniel straightened, slid to the edge of the sofa, placed his elbows on his knees and returned her gaze.

“What gave you the idea I was homeless?”

He gave her an adorable smile that melted her heart.

LB shrugged a shoulder, and said, “Several things. For one, you appeared homeless that first day you knocked on the window.”

“Ah...my outfit, and several days of not shaving. You’re right I had been.”

“You *had been*?”

Daniel nodded and stared at the Santa on the Christmas mug. “In a manner of speaking...yes.”

“Daniel, you even mentioned that you had moved around, especially in the warmer states. When I asked Mr. York about you—”

“You asked Mr. York about me?” he asked, a knowing flicker escaped his gaze.

“Well, he didn’t deny hiring a homeless man. Even Tommy told me you were homeless.”

Grinning, Daniel stood, stepped over to her, took her hand, and pulled her to her feet. Taking her cup, he set it on the coffee table and his deep, soothing voice said, “My pretty lady. Without a doubt, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” A gentle finger went up to move a string of her hair that had slid down over her brow. His gaze returned to hers. “You’re everything I’ve wanted and waited for in such a long time. Would you be willing to marry a man that’s homeless, but will always love you?”

She looked up, breathless. When his hand caressed her cheek, she couldn’t believe her weak shaky legs held her up. The moment he drew her into his arms, she clung, holding him tightly. Dropping her head against his chest, she breathed in his scent, surrendering. They would deal with whatever the future had in store.

“My LB, my Lena Belle, and my pretty lady...will you marry me.

LB’s wide eyes shot up to his, her heart pounded against his chest. “Oh Daniel, God help me, yes, because I love you, too. But—”

Daniel placed a finger over her lips. “Let me tell you who I am.”

Chapter Ten

Daniel pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead, took her hand, and led her to the sofa. Sitting, he picked up the tiny white box with the big red ribbon and handed it to her. “Merry Christmas.”

Adrenaline rushed through Lena Belle’s veins. She stared at the package, and whispered, “But, Daniel, I don’t have a present for you.”

Daniel pointed to the package held in her hand. “There’s only one present I want from you, and it’s *that* on your finger, and you as my wife.”

Lena Belle’s fingers trembled when she ripped the paper from the box. When the letters on the box flashed before her eyes, she gasped. Blue Nile Signature Collection. Slowly, she slid the lid open. Never had she expected this. A three-carat round diamond sparkled back at her. Speechless, she pulled her gaze from the beautiful ring with a questioning expression.

Daniel gently took the box, lifted the engagement ring from its case, and slipped it on her finger. Then, he reached

for the company check she had left on the coffee table, and asked, “Do you have a pen?”

Stunned, and unable to comprehend much of anything so far, she leaned over the arm of the sofa, grabbed her purse, and pulled out a pen. In silence, she handed it to him, raising her gaze to his. That same knowing light flickered in his eyes, again.

He leaned over and rubbed his lips against hers until she felt as if she’d burst into flames. Then, he moved back, bent down, and signed the check Mr. York had given her.

Shocked, she mumbled, “Daniel, what are you doing. We can’t—”

“I can.” He picked up the check, turned to face her, took her hand, and placed the check in her palm. “Lena Belle, I am Denny Day Department stores.”

“But, you’re homeless.”

“No, I’m not and never have been.”

“You just said you were...and, that man...the one you left with three weeks ago.”

Daniel combed his fingers through his thick dark hair, stretched his back straight, and lifted his head to stare at the ceiling. Relaxing, he turned to her.

A sad smile covered his warm masculine face. “He’s my brother.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He is homeless. He prefers to be homeless...right now anyway. I thought by spending time with him, I could get him to come home. But, after several weeks of traveling with him, he convinced me that he needed time to deal with issues that he was faced with after coming home from Iraq. He did promise to come home in a few months. I’ll tell you about him later.”

She wasn’t sure what to say. She could tell he loved his brother, and now, she understood why he had seemed so sad that day he left. He hadn’t been leaving *her*, but trying to comfort his brother. Sucking in a deep breath, she glanced down at the huge radiant ring on her finger, trying to grasp the reality of it all.

Daniel’s large hand covered hers. “Lena Belle, you caught my eye that day in the window. I knew then, I would marry you. Don’t ask me how, I just knew.”

“But, you looked so—”

“Homeless? I had just spent several weeks with my brother, living with him, moving around with him, trying

to get to know him, and persuade him to return home. Mr. York had expected me to arrive two days before, but it's not easy traveling as a homeless person."

"But, why didn't you tell me?"

"Each year, I go to one of the department stores – unannounced, except for the manager, and he's sworn not to tell. I only stay a couple of days to observe. Working just like another employee gets me in the midst of things without people being apprehensive." Daniel paused, picked up his coffee cup, and took a sip before he continued.

"People are quick to accept another employee and open to discussions. Would you have ever spent time with me on the window floor eating lunch, and having coffee, if you had known? I'm sure you would have never called me a recluse, weird private man to my face, or—"

"Stop right there, Daniel. That's not fair."

Laughing, Daniel gave LB a tight hug, and mumbled in her ear, "Would you have taken the opportunity to get to know me and fall in love with me?"

Taking a second to consider his words, she pulled back, and squinted at him. Yea, in all probability, she

would have been intimidated by his status. “Don’t you think that’s a little deceitful?”

“Maybe, but I was honest with you about my name. It is Daniel Jackson.”

“I didn’t make the connection.”

“I found that out when you asked me to get a job.”

“Lena Belle, you don’t have to worry, I can support you, and that check is for you to start you own business. I want to make your dream come true.” Taking her hand, Daniel turned it over and kissed her palm.

Goosebumps popped over her entire body.

“I love and adore you, unconditionally. Well, maybe with one condition.” Taking her face in his hands, he smothered her with soothing kisses.

“Daniel...I, Daniel, I can’t think.”

“You don’t need to think, just kiss me.”

When he claimed her lips, her mind whirled with his taste. The thrill of his kisses and the happy sensations pumping adrenaline through her veins wouldn’t allow her to sit still. Catching her breath, she looked at him. “What condition would that be?”

Laughing, he gave her a quick hug, and once again, took her hand. “Living in Savanna. I have a beautiful home there, one that even Nick would love.”

“Whoa, Daniel...Daniel, this is too much.”

Daniel sat back, looked at her with a scowl on his face, and asked, “Does my money make a difference? LB, you were following your heart when you thought I was a homeless Santa. Can’t you now, even though I’m well off and can support you in so many ways?” His warm hand reached out and covered hers. “Lena, go with your heart.”

Unable to hold back any longer, she laughed with delight. Bubbling with contentment, LB threw up her arms, grabbed Daniel around the neck, knocking him back on the sofa. She released all the pent-up energy in the kiss she gave him, letting him know she was his forever.

A deep, pleasant chuckle rolled from Daniel’s throat. “You’re a delight, and I will enjoy being your husband for the rest of our lives.”

Sitting up, Daniel’s blue eyes twinkled at her. “You need to open one of those presents.”

Clapping her hands together, she grinned, feeling like a schoolgirl in love. “Why, what is it?”

“A ticket to London to spend New Year’s Eve with your daughter.”

“Oh Daniel that so sweet of you. I can’t. I can’t leave you.”

Pleased she thought of him first, he stated, “You won’t, I’m going too. I expect that ring to stay on your finger and the *I Do* said before we go. What do you say?”

Raising her hands, she pressed her palms against his jaws, pulled him to her, and gently kissed his lips. “Yes, yes, yes, I’ll marry you. I must be the luckiest woman on earth to have met my homeless Santa.”

~The End~

Dear Reader,

I truly hope you enjoyed *SANTA'S PRETTY LADY*. Christmas is my favorite holiday and writing the three Santa series was a joy.

So please tell me what you liked about *Santa's Pretty Lady*, or what you didn't like, what you loved, and even hated. If you're so inclined, please write a review of *Santa's Pretty Lady*, and let me know if you loved it, hated it – anything, I'd enjoy your feedback.

You can visit me on the website at <http://judybakerauthor.com> and go to contact and write me a note.

You may or may not know that reviews are tough to come by these days. You, as a reader, have the power to make or break a book. So, if you have the time, here's a link to my author page on Amazon. You can find all of my books here: <http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B0052Y8KPQ>

Thank you so much for reading *Santa's Pretty Lady*, and for spending time in reading this letter of appreciation.

Judy Baker / Anna Sugg

By the way, when you read *Santa's Pretty Lady*, did you wonder about Daniel Jackson's brother, Peter? Find out why he wanted to live as a homeless man in *Santa's Secret Gift*, now available. Also Available: Story of Maddie's daughter, Brianna Sanford in *Mainland Santa*.

Judy Baker writing as Anna Sugg

When not writing the stories that fill Anna's head, she loves the outdoors. Her favorite thing to do is read while enjoying the surroundings of her wildflower garden. Anna's also an avid stargazer with three telescopes.

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Still Moments Magazine



Santa's Pretty Lady