

CHAPTER ONE

"I need a man," Trish Howell said. "Can I borrow your husband?"

Jenny McIntire gawked for a moment then snapped her mouth shut. "What for?"

"For about an hour, maybe less. I wouldn't ask, but I'm pretty desperate." Trish lowered her gaze to Jenny's kitchen table, trying to keep a straight face. "I know Bart has experience. I just hope he's good enough to fake it."

"I doubt he'll have to fake it." Jenny smirked. "And I'd be surprised if it took him an hour."

Trish laughed. "I need him to play Santa for Tyler."

Jenny smiled in response. "Oh. That's okay then. Did Tyler find out about Santa from his friends?"

Trish nodded and took Tyler's letter from her purse. She passed it across the table. The words were branded on her heart.

Dear Santa,
My frends say you arent real, your just a story.
Like my dad. If your you, please wak me up wen
you come to my howse. I want to meet you.
Your frend, Tyler.
Ps. Dont forget I want a reel bike.

Jenny laughed, and Trish leaned forward with a scowl. "What's so funny?"

"Isn't it amazing that kids never add their last names when they write Santa? As though Santa will automatically know which Tyler this is." Jenny's grin melted under the heat of Trish's gaze. "Sorry. I didn't know you were taking this so seriously."

Trish couldn't believe Jenny had missed the point. "Of course I am."

"All kids doubt Santa sooner or later. You'll get through it."

"This is different, Jenny. I can deal with scraped knees or an upset stomach. But this ..."
Trish looked away.

"Ahh." Jenny nodded, her curls bouncing on her shoulders. "Being a single mom is the pits when there's a crisis."

The familiar ache of loneliness swept through Trish. "Having to make every decision by yourself is always the pits."

"And you always handle it perfectly, honey. Just like you will this time. You're the great organizer, the great fixer. I have faith in you."

"Well, I don't want to be 'the great fixer' anymore," Trish said. "I wish I had someone to rely on for a change. It's awful to say, but at times like this, I could almost hate Duke for dying."

"From what you've told me about Duke, I have to wonder how much help he would have been."

"Probably not much." Trish straightened and tucked a strand of unruly red hair behind her ear. "But since he isn't here, I guess I'd better think of something. It's already the week before Thanksgiving. What would you do?"

"Praise Tyler for his spelling? You have to admit, he spells really well for just being in

kindergarten."

"Look closer at the writing, Jen. I think Nick helped him."

"My Nick?" Jenny snatched up the extra-wide-ruled paper and scanned it. "This is atrocious for a second-grader. I can see we'll be sitting down with extra spelling work over Thanksgiving break."

"How old was Nick when he--" Trish dropped her tone to a whisper even though they were the only ones in the house. "Learned about Santa?"

"Ten or eleven, I hope," Jenny whispered in return.

Trish groaned. "He doesn't know yet? I don't want to perpetuate a lie if it's time for Tyler to learn the truth. On the other hand, he is only five. That's awfully young for a kid to lose Santa, too."

"Too?" Jenny paused a moment, searching Trish's expression. "Is it Tyler doubting Santa that's bothering you or the line about his dad just being a story he's heard?"

Trish wrapped her hands around her tea cup and glanced over at Tyler's letter on the table. "That really got to me, Jen."

Jenny squeezed Trish's arm. "Are Duke's parents still giving you a hard time about Tyler?"

"Jock hasn't said anything."

"What did Miriam say?"

Trish grimaced. "I don't want to get into this right now."

"She's so critical about the way you're raising Ty. Every time she mentions her friend, Lucille, getting custody of her granddaughter--" Jenny smacked the table. "I just want to shake her. Can't she see what a wonderful job you're doing?"

Warm gratitude flooded through Trish. "Thank you. Miriam only sees what suits her purposes."

"Why do you put up with her?"

"She's Duke's mother. Even though Duke's been gone for four years, I still think of her and Jock as my in-laws. But whatever our relationship is, they'll always be Ty's grandparents."

"If you don't tell me what she said, I'm going to imagine the worst."

"Same old thing."

Jenny snorted. "Yeah, I can just imagine. You forget. I know the woman. We never get to see Tyler."

Trish smiled as Jenny mimicked Miriam's long-suffering tone.

"You never call," Jen continued. "We feel like we're losing touch with our grandson."

Trish smiled wider but didn't interrupt.

"You work too hard at your store. Poor Tyler is being neglected."

Trish laughed outright. "Were you listening in on our phone conversation?"

"No, I've just seen her martyr act before. Remember Ty's birthday party?"

Trish shuddered. Miriam had cried throughout the entire celebration because Duke would never see Tyler grow up. "If you hadn't kept her in my bedroom, she would have ruined the party for Ty." She sighed. "I've invited her and Jock over for Thanksgiving dinner. I hope that'll help."

"She'll just complain about being usurped as the cook."

"Miriam tends to get more emotional around the holidays. I can understand that. Duke was their only child, and Tyler is their last link to him."

"And they're going to tighten the chain that links them until you choke."

"Now, Jenny." Trish patted her hand. "I appreciate your loyalty, but I don't think it'll be a problem. I've always handled them in the past. This year won't be any different." She grinned. "I'm the great fixer, remember?"

Jenny leaned back in her chair. Her platinum hair swung into place around her thin, heart-shaped face. The color would have been too harsh on another woman, but Jenny's natural warmth radiated from her dark brown eyes. "If you need me to run interference or something, just call."

"Thanks, but I just have to figure out what to tell, or not tell, Tyler."

"Okay, here's what I think. The question isn't whether Tyler's old enough to learn about Santa. The question is what would make both of you happy?"

"I guess I'll need your husband, after all."

"You're welcome to borrow him." Jenny grinned. "But just to play Santa. You're right to worry about him faking it. Ty might recognize Bart under the beard and hat."

"I'm afraid so too." Trish growled with frustration. "This is a no-win situation. I can't bring his father back from the dead anymore than I can get Santa to visit."

She stopped abruptly and sat silent for a moment, staring past Jenny as half-formed ideas swirled in her head. "Well, now, wait a minute. Maybe I can."

Jenny shivered and looked back over her shoulder where Trish's gaze was fixed. "I sure hope you're talking about Santa Claus coming."

"What?" Trish blinked. "I'll hire a Santa to visit Ty."

"Hire who?"

Trish popped up like a champagne cork. She paced quickly around the long kitchen, too excited to sit still. Suddenly the smell of the beef roasting in the oven made her hungry rather

than queasy. "This is great. I can get one of those department store guys. I'll probably have to pay him extra to come over late on Christmas Eve, but it'll be worth it."

"Whoa, girl. Sit down."

Trish spun toward Jenny. "Why? What's the matter?"

"You're not thinking clearly. You can't invite a strange man into your house in the middle of the night."

"Oh." Trish dropped onto the chair, deflated by reality.

"Especially not on Christmas Eve, when you'll have all those presents he could steal, not to mention what he might do to you first."

Trish slouched in her seat.

Jenny gave her a smug smile. "But I have the perfect solution."

Trish cocked her head with wary skepticism. "I'm well-acquainted with the nature of your solutions. They tend to involve my meeting some man."

"Just hear me out."

Trish sighed in resignation. "Who is he?"

Jenny had the grace to blush, but she charged on nevertheless. "Sam Carrow. He's Bart's best friend from high school." She shot Trish an annoyed glare. "The one I've been trying to fix you up with for three months now."

Trish spooned some sugar into her cup, wondering how she could change the subject. She missed the intimacy of marriage, but, as for trusting a man again ... "I'm not ready yet."

"Duke's been dead over four years."

"I'm too busy." She didn't intend to let Jenny make her feel guilty.

"Sure you are." Jenny rolled her eyes. "Okay, we need to plan the fine details of Santa's

visit."

"Why would Bart's friend agree to interrupt his Christmas Eve to play Santa for my son?"

"Because he's a nice guy. Don't you remember me telling you about him?"

Trish evaded her probing stare. She never listened when Jenny played matchmaker. Instead, she frantically searched her mind for an excuse her friend would buy. The only male she could handle right now was a five-year-old bundle of mischief. She'd rather not hear Jen extol the virtues of some "perfect" man. She snatched a bit of Jen's remark from mid-air. "Of course I listen. He's that friend Bart's known so long."

"Right."

Trish released a sigh. Close call.

"He's staying with us for the holidays. And he's not working right now, so I know he'll be free to do it. He's so good with kids, he's sure to make a great Santa."

Trish set her jaw. "Don't start pushing him at me as a daddy candidate."

"What did I say?"

"He's so good with kids," she echoed.

Jenny waved away Trish's annoyance. "If I don't find somebody for you, you'll never be as happy as I am with Bart. You'll never have anyone to rely on at crisis time."

Hearing her own words repeated back to her made Trish wince. "Let's just stick to this guy playing Santa."

"Did I mention he's filling in at the preschool this year instead of Bart?"

"No, you didn't. Are you afraid Heather will recognize her daddy?"

Jenny tossed her head in a haughty manner, a perfect mimicry of her daughter. "Well, she is three and a half now."

Trish laughed. "I remember Tyler at that age. So independent." She considered the situation. Sam could borrow the costume from the preschool Jenny owned. Ty didn't know him. If Sam agreed, it just might work. "Poor Bart. How's he taking being replaced as Santa?"

Jenny laughed. "You'd think he was one of the kids at my preschool, opening his lunch to discover there's no dessert."

Trish shook her head. "I've never seen anyone enjoy playing a role as much as Bart does being Santa. It's hard to believe he's a lawyer."

"He says it's the one time of the year people actually like him. No one tells vicious Santa jokes."

Trish sipped her tea. Although she had no intention of getting involved with Sam, it was hard not to be curious. "So, Sam is staying with you for the holidays. Where does he live?"

Jenny's eyes brightened, making Trish regret showing any interest. "Here in Cloverdale. He's been working around the area for a long time, going wherever residential development is booming."

Trish nodded. With the economy in such straits, development wasn't "booming" anywhere. That would be rough on a construction worker or carpenter or whatever Sam's specialty was. Too many people were laid off now.

"Bart and I were thrilled when he decided to settle here this summer. I'd never have suggested you meet him if a relationship meant you'd move away."

Trish leveled a look at Jenny. "This Santa thing isn't more matchmaking, is it?"

Jenny's face expressed total innocence. "Who, me?"

"Jenny--"

"Of course it's not. You need a Santa. I have a Santa. What could be simpler?"

Trish rolled her eyes.

"Believe what you will." Jenny crossed her arms piously, her white turtleneck adding to her saintly image.

"Doesn't Sam have family to visit over the holidays?"

"They're not close."

Trish frowned, unsure of her meaning. Was the relationship strained or did his family live far away? "If he lives here, why is he staying with you?"

"Oh, Trish." Jenny reached across the table and clasped her hand. "You should see his place. There are holes in the walls, and some of the flooring is torn up. I doubt if it's safe to walk around over there. There was no way I could enjoy Christmas with Sam living like that. What if he has to turn off his heat for some reason? It may not come back on."

"No heat?" Trish blinked. That was no small matter in central Illinois. Recent newspaper articles reminded readers of last year's tragedies throughout the Midwest and asked for donations of coats and heaters. People froze to death each winter, despite the emergency shelters.

Sam wasn't working. His house sounded positively dangerous, with parts of the floors missing. The poor guy. No job and practically homeless. Trish's heart went out to him. "How long have you known him?"

"I met Sam and Bart at a party Bart's fraternity brothers threw for his birthday. They invited all the sororities." Jenny chuckled and shook her head. "Sam didn't go to school there and sort of crashed the event. Bart's lucky we met before I saw Sam."

Trish grinned. "Oh, now I get it. Since you fell in love with Bart, you want to foist this other guy off on me. I get the loser?"

Again.

The word hung over the table. Trish swallowed hard against the lump that formed in her throat. Was it guilt? Self-pity? Regret? Duke hadn't been a loser, she reasoned. He'd just

lacked ambition, straining their finances, and then straining her patience with his lies. If she ever got involved again--and that was a very big if--it wouldn't be with another user.

Casting blindly for something--anything--to say, Trish heard the words come from her mouth. "I'll take him." Jenny's wide eyes made her add, "For Santa. I'll hire him."

"Hire him?" Jenny frowned, her brow furrowing. "I doubt if he'd take money for this. He'll be insulted if you even offer."

"But he's ... he's ... " Trish gestured vaguely with her hand. She couldn't say "needy." Even needy people had their pride, usually more than their share.

"He's what?"

"He's giving up Christmas Eve."

"Sam won't care. He won't take payment for helping out a friend."

"But I'm a stranger."

"After ten minutes with Sam you won't be."

Trish heard the door to the enclosed back deck being opened, followed by a deep male voice and footsteps.

"The guys are back with the kids," Jenny said. "We'll ask Sam right away."

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Sam Carrow opened the door to the McIntires' kitchen. Little three-year-old Heather rode on his back, her chubby toddler arms clasped around his neck.

Which probably explained why he couldn't breathe when he caught sight of the woman at Jenny's table. She looked like an angel who'd come early for the holidays.

Sam stared at her. Sparkling green eyes dominated her oval face. A nose that could only be described as "pert" topped shiny pink lips. Pale freckles dusted her creamy cheeks. Strands

of pure gold shone through her dark red hair. He stood mesmerized.

Judging by her wide-eyed stare and parted lips, she didn't appear unaffected seeing him.

"Trish!" Heather's shriek pierced Sam's ear. "Let me down, Uncle Sam. Let me down."

The little girl kicked and struggled for freedom while he eased her to the floor. As soon as her toes touched, Heather catapulted across the room.

So, this is Jenny's friend. From what Sam remembered hearing about her drive to succeed with her business, she didn't qualify as an angel. Not in his book. He shrugged off his momentary disappointment.

"Whoa, muffin," Trish said with a laugh.

He watched as she caught Heather in her arms for a tight hug. Trish wrinkled her nose and drew back with wide eyes. Sam grinned, remembering how the little girl had spent her day. When Heather burrowed her face into Trish's chest, Trish rested her cheek on the girl's hair.

His breath snagged in his chest with bittersweet pressure. They looked absolutely beautiful together, like Madonna and Child. Trish obviously loved the girl with the same fierceness Heather showered upon her.

"I dint know you was coming," Heather cried in apparent delight.

Trish drew back and looked at the child with a gentle, teasing smile. "Would you have stayed home if you'd known?"

Heather's hair bounced in a vigorous affirmative. Then her nearly black curls slowly shifted from left to right and back again. "No. Well, most times. But today, I goed out with Uncle Sam. We picked out a tree to be cutted down for our very own."

"My gracious." Trish lifted her face, her solemn expression belied by the humor shining in her bright green eyes. "Hello."

"Hi." Sam stiffened, drawn against his will.

Trish cleared her throat. "Did you get to help choose the tree?"

"Oh, no. Heather and Nick found their tree. But they're going to *let* me help chop it down in three weeks."

"How nice of them." Jenny winked at her daughter. "Uncle Sam does the work, and you kids have the fun."

"Hey, I had a great time at the tree farm," Sam said. "We never had a real tree when I was little, let alone one we got to choose and chop down ourselves."

Heather's eyes grew wide. "You never had a Christmas tree?"

Touched by her concern, Sam smiled gently. "We had a silver one, Heather. It had a light at the bottom with a cover that spun around to make the tree different colors."

"I like just green trees best," the girl said solemnly.

"So do I." He'd hated that tree. Every year he'd worried, sure that Santa would never leave presents under a tree so ugly. His mother loved the tree--no mess, no fuss, no expense.

"Where are Bart and Nick?" Jenny asked.

"They goed to get some milk." Heather flung herself into her mother's arms.

"Phew! What have you gotten into, young lady?"

"I rolled in some hay and stepped in some goat poo."

Trish laughed. "Is that what I smell?"

Jenny leveled a look at Sam. "Goat poo?"

"We cleaned it off," he put in quickly. "The Christmas tree farm also had animals to pet. I can't smell anything but dinner. Is that roast? I'm starving."

"I feeded some goats milk in a baby bottle," Heather went on, spoiling his diversion. "It

spitted up all over me. Then another goat jumped up on me, and I falled on the ground."

Heather laughed, hardly able to catch her breath. "Three goats climbed on top of me, trying to get the bottle before Uncle Sam and Daddy pulled me out."

When Jenny glared at him, Sam choked back his laughter. He shrugged and smiled, hoping it was charming enough to get him off the hook.

Jenny eyed Heather. "No wonder you smell like wild animals."

"No wonder Bart went to the store." Trish's wry comment sparked a chain of laughter.

Her gaiety drew Sam's gaze. She averted her eyes, leaving Sam confused.

"To the tub with you, young lady." Jenny stood and held Heather in front of her at arm's length as the child giggled and squirmed, trying to "get goat smell all over Mommy." At the doorway, she turned back. "Trish Howell, meet Sam Carrow. Sam, Trish. I'll scoot this little one upstairs. You two talk before Nick gets home."

Jenny disappeared, leaving Sam to stare after her. "Why do we have to talk before Nick gets here?" He shrugged off his jacket and stepped out to hang it on the deck. Without the sheepskin jacket, the chill air swept over him. He shut the door quickly so Trish wouldn't get cold.

Taking Jenny's vacant chair across from Trish, he smiled politely, wondering why she seemed uncomfortable now they were alone. She glanced away when he caught her looking at him. "I hope I don't smell like goats, too."

"Were you wrestling them as well?"

"No." Sam's laughter echoed in the room. He pulled in his legs, conscious of his height and bulk compared to Trish's delicate, feminine frame. He hadn't felt this overgrown and awkward since his teen years. He brushed a piece of crumbled leaf from the arm of his white

sweater. "I'll have to ask Jenny if she can get these grass stains out."

Trish wrapped her hands around her cup.

"I've heard so much about you from Bart and Jenny," he said, "I feel I already know you."

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm afraid that's probably true. Jenny does like to talk."

He shrugged. "She likes you. And, while I'm thinking about it, congratulations on your store. Jenny says it's doing very well."

"Thanks." Trish beamed. "I've worked very hard there."

The familiar dread settled heavy in his chest. *Not another one.* Career-driven women gravitated to him like termites to a wood pile. "You have a son, too, if I remember right. What do you do with him while you're working?"

"He's in kindergarten now, so I have more freedom."

Sam winced inwardly. Did Trish consider her son a burden, keeping her from doing the things she wanted to do? Sam thought of his mother. Déjà vu all over again.

"My assistant, Candy, used to babysit Tyler in the back of the store, in what's now our lunch room. We still keep an area for him to work on his school papers."

A sour tasted invaded Sam's mouth. He could imagine Trish parceling out her time, playing with her child until the bell over the door rang, announcing more customers.

"I should get going." She stood and pushed her chair under the table.

"It was nice meeting you," he lied. Meeting her had stirred unwanted memories of his neglectful mother and the pain of his childhood. No matter how pretty Trish was, he wouldn't go down that path again.

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Fifteen minutes later, Trish slammed the door to her house, glad Tyler was staying

overnight at Candy's. Well, great. No doubt, Jenny would ask Sam to play Santa for Tyler. Her son's doubts would be erased, at least until next year.

That was what she'd wanted, right?

A too-handsome, too-likeable, too-sexy man coming over late on Christmas Eve, after Tyler was in bed.

She flung her purse at the couch, picturing Sam Carrow's thick, dark blond hair and those marvelous navy-blue eyes. She pressed her fist against her lips, recalling how she'd wanted Sam to kiss her, how she'd repeatedly pulled her gaze from his beautiful mouth. The man was more tempting than a pan of fudge, and just as bad for her.

Dammit.

Sam seemed perfectly happy to be living with Jenny and Bart, letting someone else take care of him. All her compassion for an unemployed man living in a house ready to be condemned had evaporated as Sam joked about Jenny feeding him and washing his clothes. He was a user, a taker. She couldn't be attracted to a man like that. Not again.

She wouldn't be.

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"Where did Trish go?" Jenny asked, standing in the doorway of the guest room.

Sam glanced up from unpacking a duffle bag. He'd brought a few more things from his house so sawdust and plaster wouldn't settle into the creases of everything he'd need in the next few weeks. "Home, I guess."

She crossed the room and leaned against the wall by the dresser. "What did you think of her?"

He shrugged and slid some underwear in a drawer. Jenny's nonchalant pose didn't fool

him. The woman was in attack mode.

"I'd hoped you'd like each other."

Sam grimaced. "So I gathered."

"Don't give me that look. I'm entitled to set up my friends. I want you to have the happiness Bart and I have found."

"And you thought Trish was the right woman for me?" He shook his head.

"Okay, putting that aside, there's something else. She needs someone to play Santa for her son. Tyler has doubts, and we think he's too young to lose faith in Santa. I suggested you."

Sam met her gaze levelly. "I'm not interested in her or in being Santa Claus for her. Don't try fixing us up, Jen."

Jenny didn't appear a bit ashamed for matchmaking. "Trish is really nice. We've been friends for three years, when she enrolled Tyler in my preschool."

Sam turned away but said nothing. He wouldn't fault a woman for putting her son in preschool, learning to play with others and get ready for school. Yet he wondered if Trish had jumped at the chance to get Tyler someplace so she could concentrate on her business. Freedom, she'd called it.

"She's been alone too long," Jenny continued as he grabbed another shirt from the bag, "raising her son on her own. She's struggled to make her store a success and put bread on the table."

"So she needs a rich husband?"

"Frankly, yes. It would solve a lot of her problems if she were to marry a wealthy man next time."

Sam drew in a quiet breath, hurt. "I thought better of you, Jenny."

"She doesn't need just the rich part, Sam. She needs someone to take care of her for a change. She's a really nice woman, if you'd just give her a chance."

"I'm not in the market for a gold-digger."

Laying a hand on his forearm, Jenny met his gaze and held it. "Not all women are like Sherry."

An image of his ex-girlfriend came unbidden to his mind. Sleek. Beautiful. Cold. Living together suited Sherry. She liked being seen at the places he'd taken her. Until he'd proposed.

She'd refused, stating that planning a wedding would sidetrack her from getting ahead in the corporation. She'd have been satisfied with continuing her relationship as it stood, but she needed to concentrate on her career.

Sam had declined and moved to Cloverdale.

He wouldn't get mixed up with another woman who put her career before her family, no matter if she was Jenny's best friend. His mother and Sherry had been lessons enough. He would find the ideal woman someday, but it wasn't Trish Howell.

"Tell her to look elsewhere for Santa *and* for a husband."