SHIRLEY JUMP

MIRACLE ON CHRISTMAS EVE

Cherish

Shirley Jump
Miracle On Christmas Eve

Аннотация

Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas is a family… Jessica Patterson has tried to put on a brave face, but she misses the joy that love can bring at Christmastime. Until a handsome stranger in need of a Christmas miracle touches her heart… Single dad C. J. Hamilton has discovered fatherhood is a little harder than bachelorhood!But he's mesmerized by Jessica's enchanting beauty and sincerity. She's perfect with his daughter–is it possible she's perfect for him? It's lucky that Jessica can't resist a plea for help, because C.J. has a twinkle in his blue eyes that suggests her Christmas dreams will come true…

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Miracle On Christmas Eve
Shirley Jump

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To my children, whose wide-eyed wonder makes every Christmas absolutely magical. And, yes, I do have a lot of fun making you two wait to open your presents—but even more fun watching the joy on your faces. I love you guys. You're the only Christmas present I ever need.
And to Bill and Janice Roe, a real-life Mr. and Mrs. Claus, who provided the inspiration for this story.

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CHAPTER ONE

JESSICA PATTERSON was done with Christmas.

No buying of a pine tree that would shed all over her wall-to-wall carpet. No hanging of a festive red-bowed wreath on her front door. And no candy cane cookies on a gaily decorated platter with dancing snowmen who sported goofy stone-created smiles under their little carrot noses.

She'd done enough Christmases. No more, not for her.

"Where's your red suit?" Mindy Newcomb, her best friend for ten years, leaned against the counter of Jessica's toy shop, arms crossed over her chest. "It's December nineteenth and you haven't even taken it out of the attic yet. The town Winterfest is in three days. And you don't have so much as a paper snowflake in the window. What's wrong with you?"

Jessica straightened a display of white teddy bears set up in the center of Santa's Workshop Toys. The pale color was all the rage this year in stuffed pals, so Jessica had made sure to stock up. "I told you, I'm not staying here for Christmas this year. I have a round-trip ticket to Miami Beach, a mega bottle of SPF 45 and a brand-new Speedo. I am not putting on the Mrs. Claus suit because I will not be here."

"I really thought you'd get over this by now."

"What do you mean, over this?"

"This…mood you've been in." Mindy waved a vague hand.

“Come on, Jessica, you love Christmas.”

“I used to love Christmas. I don’t anymore.” The clock chimed ten. Jessica crossed to the door, flipped the sign to Open then headed to the register and checked for the right ratio of quarters and nickels. She knew to start the day with a lot of small change, particularly now that school had let out for Winter Break. The children of Riverbend would be in soon, spending their allowances on the myriad of small items laid out on the dime and quarter table, biding their time until the ho-ho-holiday with super bouncy balls and new sets of jacks.

Mindy slid onto the stool behind the counter. When Jessica joined her, she laid a hand on her friend’s, her eyes welling with sympathy. “I know the holidays have been pretty hard on you since Dennis died.”

Jessica nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. Two years and yet there were days when it felt like yesterday. “Christmas just isn’t the same without him.” She glanced at the pictures on the wall, a collection of images featuring happier days with Mr. and Mrs. Claus—Jessica and Dennis Patterson.

They’d started soon after they’d married fifteen years ago, donning the suits with padding, then as the pounds crept up on Dennis, he hadn’t needed the extra pillows. He’d looked good as he rounded, like a teddy bear she could curl into.

But those very pounds had been his undoing, putting a strain on his heart that it couldn’t handle. Yet he’d kept the doctor’s warnings from her, ignoring the ticking time bomb in his chest

because he loved being Santa. Loved his life. And hated anything that would put a crimp in it. He'd been all about being jolly—and never about anything serious.

She'd loved that about Dennis, until she realized that was the very thing that had cost her the man she loved.

Every year, they'd played the Mr. and Mrs. Santa roles, delighting in the smiles on the children's faces as they'd handed out toys and candy canes, putting on a real show at the annual Riverbend Town Winterfest. They'd posed for pictures, even built a sleigh and set up a little decorated house—a glorified shed, really—in the town park, where children could come and spend a few minutes visiting with Old St. Nick, telling him what they wished to see most under their Christmas tree.

After Dennis had died too soon at forty-eight, leaving Jessica a young widow at thirty-seven, she'd carried on the show for one more year, for the memory of her husband, for the kids they'd loved. But those kids had grown up. And the ones she'd seen in the past couple years hadn't exactly been the Norman Rockwell version of Christmas spirit.

Jessica turned away from the pictures. "The whole thing stopped being fun a long time ago. Besides, I lost my Christmas spirit after Andrew Weston defaced my Frosty."

"He was just a kid, pulling a prank."

"Mindy, he painted him green and hung him from the oak tree in the center of the town lawn. Said he was releasing Frosty into the wild or something. Then that Sarah Hamilton…" Jessica

shook her head. “I try never to think badly of a child, but that girl knows exactly how to get on my nerves.”

“She is a bit of a—”

“Brat,” Jessica finished, then immediately felt bad because Sarah was really only a product of her unconventional upbringing. “And that’s not a word I use lightly.”

“She’s been through a rough time, Jess. She only lost her mom, what, two months ago?”

Jessica sighed and sank onto the second stool. “I know. I don’t think she has any family left. She’s been living with her babysitter, which has to be hard on her.” Sarah had taken to hanging around the store after school a lot lately, asking questions, always wanting Jessica’s attention at the busiest possible times. Driving Jessica nuts—and pitching a fit if she didn’t get Jessica’s undivided attention when she wanted it.

“If she had a dad, he’s not around.” Mindy’s lips pursed in annoyance with the missing father who would leave his child stranded like that. “And Kiki never even said who he was.”

“She was an odd duck, wasn’t she?” Jessica thought of Sarah’s mother, who’d waitressed at the downtown diner and had died her hair a different color to suit her different moods. Rough and out-spoken, Kiki had stuck out in Riverbend like a hammerhead shark in a tank full of angel fish.

Having Kiki for a mother explained a lot about Sarah’s behavior. Jessica knew enough about the woman to know the words schedule and discipline weren’t in her vocabulary. For a

woman like Jessica, who'd lived by a schedule for more than three decades, Kiki's life wasn't just unusual—it was crazy.

"Sarah's had a difficult life," Mindy said, "between living with Kiki and now being practically orphaned."

"And normally I'd be all sympathy and cookies." Guilt once again knocked on Jessica, and she vowed not to say another bad word about anyone, and especially a child. "But this year, it's like I've run out of patience. Every time a kid comes in here, I'm tense and annoyed."

"That's not like you."

"I know. Plus, the kids aren't the same, Mindy. They don't believe like they used to. Kids today are…" Jessica threw up her hands.

"Jaded. Angry. Pierced and tattooed."

Jessica laughed, but the laughter wasn't filled with humor, it was dry and bittersweet, touched by longing for the old days. For Dennis's patient touch, his understanding of kids, his year-round love of the holiday season. He was the one who had embodied Christmas, not her. She'd gone on last year, for his sake, his memory, but she hadn't had his ability to create the same magical spell. To pull something out of nothing. "Yeah. Dennis and I always said that when this stopped being fun, that was when it was time to hang up the red suit and white wig."

She slipped her hand into the space beside the register and withdrew the pamphlet she'd picked up at Olive's Outlandish Travel that morning. Even Olive had given her a look of

disappointment as she'd handed over the round-trip ticket and the brochure, but Jessica remained resolute.

"This is where I need to be for Christmas," Jessica said, further cementing her resolve to leave town. "Pristine white sand. Gentle, lapping waves. Hot sun baking on my skin. Cabana boys bringing me drinks with little umbrellas." She pointed at the picture of a Caribbean paradise, then ran a finger along the words printed at the bottom of the resort's advertisement. "And especially this. 'No small children allowed.'"

"But you love kids. You love Christmas."

Jessica shook her head, refusing to be dissuaded from her plan. Next thing she knew, she'd be handing out candy canes and posing for pictures. The adults in Riverbend might miss the extra entertainment at the Winterfest, but Jessica wasn't fooling herself into thinking the children would notice one way or the other. The town seemed to have lost its sparkle—or maybe she had. Either way, playing Mrs. Claus wasn't on her agenda, not this year. Maybe not ever again, especially without a Santa by her side to add that extra spark of magic. "My mind is made up and my bag is packed. I'm leaving tomorrow."

Mindy rolled her eyes. "There's nothing I can do to talk you into staying? To being Mrs. Claus one more time?"

Jessica laid a hand on Mindy's and looked her best friend straight in the eye. "Honey, I wouldn't be Mrs. Claus again if the big guy himself came all the way down from the North Pole and got down on his knees to ask me."

Christopher "C.J." Hamilton had only one purpose for his visit to Riverbend, Indiana—to give his daughter, Sarah, the best damned Christmas ever.

Whether she wanted it or not.

To that end, he'd brought along a whole bunch of presents, and a determination to create a holiday she'd never forget.

Even if he had no idea what he was doing. Holidays weren't his forte. He had about as much experience with Christmas as most people did with camel jockeying. But he had a little girl who needed a miracle and that was motivation enough.

The problem? He barely knew Sarah. She didn't know him at all. The last time she'd seen him, Sarah had been three days old. And C.J. had thought walking away was the best decision.

Actually, the only possible decision. Kiki had sat in her hospital bed and told C.J. with a straight face that he wasn't the father, breaking his heart even as he held Sarah's precious, talc-scented body in his arms, then watched another man walk into Kiki's hospital room and be pronounced Daddy.

He'd been stunned when the lawyer had tracked him down on location in Costa Rica last week, telling him Kiki had died in a car accident…and lied about her child's DNA roots. He was the father, and he was expected to come get his daughter, create instafamily and take one more problem out of the lawyer's hands.

C.J. had started by calling Sarah, thinking he'd ease into the dad thing. She'd refused to come to the phone. He'd tried to call

her twice more on the trip from California to Indiana, and both times, she'd been as mute as a roll of gift wrap.

Then, he'd stopped by to see her at LuAnn's apartment, and Sarah had run and hidden, refusing again to talk. "Maybe pick her up a little present," LuAnn, the babysitter, who lived in the apartment next door to Kiki's and who had taken Sarah in while the lawyers looked for a blood relative, had suggested. "Ease into it. She's really a darling girl."

A darling girl who'd already made it clear she wasn't interested in having C.J. as a dad.

C.J. stopped the truck outside the small toy shop in downtown Riverbend. In the window of Santa's Workshop Toys was a tiny, hand-lettered sign that read Home of Mrs. Claus.

Perfect.

This place, he'd been told, was where the heart of Christmas lay—and not to mention had become a favorite hangout of Sarah's. "You talk to Jessica Patterson," LuAnn, a lifelong resident of Riverbend, had told him, "and you'll get your Christmas. She is Christmas in Riverbend."

C.J. was counting on it. His experience with the holiday was about nil. He needed an expert.

C.J. got out of the Ford F-250, then went inside the shop. The bell overhead let out a soft peal announcing his arrival.

Once his eyes adjusted to the interior, he stopped and gaped. The toy shop had to be every child's dream. Stocked floor to ceiling with bright, colorful dolls, trucks, blocks, games

and every imaginable plaything, it sported a rainbow of decor, hanging mobiles of planes and animals, and had a Santa's workshop theme running throughout, with little elves perched on the shelves and an entire North Pole village painted on the far wall. It looked…magical.

His Hollywood trained eye admired the care in the details, the imagination in the design. No wonder Sarah loved the place. If C.J. had been twenty years younger, he'd have spent all day here, too.

"I'm just about to close up," said a voice in the back.

C.J. paused among a bunch of Slinkies and rubber dice. He toyed with a gyroscope, spinning the little wheel. "I'm not here to buy anything," he called back. "I'm looking for Jessica Patterson."

"You've found her."

He looked up. Hoo-boy. If this was Mrs. Claus, then he definitely needed to revisit a few of those Christmas tales. Jessica Patterson was tall, with long blond hair and green eyes that seemed to dance with light. She had a lush, red mouth and a curvy figure that redefined the word hourglass.

She was, in other words, very hot for someone who was supposedly hailing from the most northern region of the world.

"You're Mrs. Claus?"

"Only at Christmas," she said, laughing, and putting out her hand to shake his. "And not anymore."

He took her palm with his own, feeling her warm skin against

his own and decided that there was nothing cold at all about this woman. “What do you mean, not anymore?”

“I am officially hanging up my Mrs. Claus suit this year. But if you need a stuffed bear or a jack-in-the-box or—”

“No. I need you.” C.J. looked around the shop and realized a toy—hell, a whole truckload of toys—wasn’t going to do it. To win Sarah over, he needed something big. Really big. And according to LuAnn, there was nothing bigger than Mrs. Claus, at least in Riverbend.

She dropped his hand and moved back. Wariness filled her features, dimmed the friendly light in her eyes. He might as well have stamped his forehead with Serial Killer. “You need me?”

“In a purely professional sense. As Mrs. Claus.”

“Sorry, but I can’t—”

“You have to. I’ve got a reindeer on order and everything.” Okay, now he really was sounding crazy. C.J. drew in a breath. “Let me start over. My name is Christopher Hamilton. Also known as C.J. the Set Construction Wizard.” He turned and pointed out the window at the bright-red script written across the door of his pickup truck, saying the same thing along with a California address.

“And what does a set construction wizard want with a Mrs. Claus? Because I don’t do movies, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, I’m not here for work. I’m here for my daughter. I need to give her an incredible Christmas.”

“So take her to a mall, put her on Santa’s lap. Listen to her

tell him what she wants, then put whatever that item is under the tree." Jessica turned away and busied herself with straightening a shelf of board games.

C.J. didn't have time for her to get the Scrabbles sorted out from the Monopolys. "I've heard you are the person to see for Christmas. And, lady, believe me, I need a Christmas." Right now, because he had a short time frame, an impossible daughter to win over and a major life change to deal with. He didn't want to wait on a board game.

"You can find that anywhere, Mr…. What did you say your name was?"

"Hamilton."

She paused, a checkers game halfway to its proper place on the shelf. "You're Sarah's father? But I thought…"

She didn't finish the sentence and he didn't blame her. Most people he'd run into since arriving in town—from the gas station attendant who'd given him directions to the building super who had let him into Kiki's apartment—had looked at him, added two and two and automatically labeled him as a bad paternal figure. "I'm here for Sarah now, and that's what counts. Isn't it?"

"Yes, yes. Of course."

"The only thing she wants—and what she deserves this year more than anything—is a good Christmas." He didn't mention that he had zero parenting experience, had yet to get his daughter to talk to him, that LuAnn had told him the girl's melancholy increased every day, or that he was counting on Christmas to help

him build a bridge to a six-year-old stranger. A miracle on so many fronts, even he had lost count. “She never really had one. Will you help me give her one or not?”

The woman before him hesitated, smoothing a hand over the game’s black-and-red cover, avoiding his gaze. But most of all, the question.

Jessica Patterson was right. He could take Sarah to a mall. To another town. He could, indeed, find his Christmas anywhere. But he wanted to create those happy memories here, in the town where his daughter had had so many unhappy ones. He wanted to turn the tide for her, to show her that there was, indeed, a rainbow behind all those clouds.

And if he could pull off that miracle, then maybe, just maybe, there was hope that he could be the dad he needed to be for the years ahead.

Because he hadn’t been much of one up until now. And he had a lot of ground to cover between here and December twenty-fifth.

For that, C.J. suspected, he was going to need a lot more than a reluctant blonde in a red suit.

CHAPTER TWO

JESSICA TUCKED the striped one-piece bathing suit into her bag, did a final visual check, then shut the suitcase with a click. Her clothes were ready to go, albeit two days early. Mentally she'd been ready to leave for weeks.

In a little more than forty-eight hours, she'd be on a beach in Florida soaking up the sun. Far from the cold and snow, she could forget about Dennis, the town that had started to take her for granted and the time of year that had lost its meaning somewhere between the stocking stuffers and the bargain hunters.

Her doorbell rang, and Bandit, her German short-haired pointer, scrambled to his feet, bounding down the stairs at Greyhound speed, his tail a friendly whip against his hindquarters. To hedge his bets, he let out a few ferocious barks, but everyone in Riverbend knew Bandit had less guard dog in him than a stuffed frog.

She opened the door, expecting Mindy. "You can't talk me out—" The sentence died in her throat when she saw the tall, lean figure of C. J. Hamilton on her front porch. "It's you. Again."

"I'm not a man who gives up easily."

He had the kind of voice that sent a woman's pulse racing. Deep and thorough, he seemed to coat every syllable with a smoky accent.

Regardless of his voice or the way his dark hair swept one

stubborn lock across his brow or how his jeans hugged his hips, she couldn't give him what he wanted. Christmas and Jessica Patterson were no longer operating hand in hand. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hamilton, but I thought I made this clear earlier. I will not be participating in any Christmas activities this year. Maybe I could refer you to one of my colleagues. There's even a network of Santa performers that are available for malls and private parties, if you—"

"It has to be here. And that means it has to be you."

"I'm leaving in two days. I won't even be here for Christmas, or even the Winterfest. I can't help you." She started to shut the door.

He was already digging in his back pocket, pulling out a leather billfold, flipping it open. His foot wedged in the door, preventing her from shutting him out. "I'll pay you. Name your price, Mrs. Patterson."

"I don't want your money."

"Name a charity you want me to support. A home for retired Santas you want me to build. Anything."

The laughter burst out of Jessica before she could stop it. "There's no such thing."

He answered her with a grin that took over his face, lighting his blue eyes, taking them from the color of a sluggish river to a sparkling ocean on a sunny day.

Oh, damn. She always had been a sucker for eyes like that. And especially a pair surrounded by deep lines of

worry, shoulders hunched with the heaviness of sorrow and responsibility. Sarah Hamilton had, indeed, been through a lot, and so had her father, Jessica was sure.

She sighed. "Why don't you come in and have a cup of coffee? I won't be your Mrs. Claus—" at that she felt her face color, and saw him arch a brow, reading the slight innuendo, too "—but maybe I can help you find a solution to your…problem."

Some of the weight seemed to lift from him. "A cup of coffee would be great. Really great."

She invited him in, all the while wondering what she was thinking. She wanted to get away from reminders of Christmas, not open up her house to the season—or to a man who made her pulse race and clearly came attached to a whole set of problems.

C.J. stepped inside and glanced around her house. "Guess you weren't kidding about the no-Christmas thing. You don't have so much as a pine branch on your mantel."

"I didn't see the point in decorating if I was going to be out of town." Jessica chastised herself. The man could be a serial killer, a burglar or a Frosty thief. And she'd just broadcast that her house would be empty over the holidays.

Bandit had already warmed up to the newcomer, his wiry body pressed to C.J.'s jeans, tail wagging so hard it beat a pattern against Bandit's rump, his head under C.J.'s palm for a little TLC. C.J. had apparently passed Bandit's criminal background check.

"Bandit, leave him alone."

"He's fine," C.J. said, stroking Bandit's ears and sending the

dog into hyper-puppy joy. “I work with a lot of animals on the set, too, and don’t mind a dog. In fact, I’d have a dog myself if—”

He cut off the sentence. Jessica was intrigued—but not enough to ask. Her sole purpose of inviting C.J. Hamilton into the house was to make it clear she had no intentions of being part of a Christmas celebration—not the town’s and not his.

The kitchen was right off the entryway, all in keeping with the small cottage-style house she had lived in since she’d married Dennis. Five rooms for two people. More than enough space.

Yet, somehow with C. J. Hamilton behind her as she led the way to the coffeepot, it seemed as if the house had shrunk, making her all too aware of the stranger in town.

“Cream or sugar?” she asked, crossing to the counter to pour coffee into a plain white mug. On any other year, she’d have the special Santa mugs out, with the dancing reindeer ringing the base. But not this year.

“Nothing, thanks.” He accepted the mug from her, then took a seat at the table. “I bet your kids really love the toy store.”

Jessica paused, took in a breath. A simple question, catching her off guard. She’d gone from pouring coffee to feeling as if she was going to cry.

It had to be the holiday that had her feeling so melancholy, so empty, so…

Alone.

“I don’t have any children,” she said, taking the opposite seat. She exhaled, erasing the subject from her memory, trying to

refocus on C.J. and not on what might be lacking from her own life. The choices she had made. “Now, back to your Santa problem.”

“I don’t have a Santa problem, exactly. More a daughter problem. Sarah refuses to talk to me, and I’m sure she absolutely won’t go back to California with me. I’d rather not drag her kicking and screaming. Even I know that’s not the best way to build a new relationship.” He threw up his hands. “I’m at a loss as to what to do.”

“Did you ask LuAnn?” LuAnn Rivers was a decent woman, good with kids and generous to a fault. A frequent shopper at Santa’s Workshop Toys, she often brought a few of the children who went to her day care center along with her, buying them a toy because LuAnn knew money was tight at home or the child had had a bad day.

LuAnn had brought in Sarah more than once, which had Jessica tucking an extra special something into Sarah’s bag—a new card game, a small stuffed animal—something that would cheer the girl. Jessica had never seen her smile and had often wondered how living with the chaotic Kiki must have been for Sarah.

Again a tug of sympathy pulled at Jessica’s heart, urging her to stay in town. To believe in one more Christmas miracle.

No, she told herself. Those didn’t happen anymore, and she was going to celebrate her Christmas on a beach this year, with a mai tai and a suntan.

“I did talk to LuAnn, but…” C.J. sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s really important that I find my own way to connect with Sarah, rather than relying on LuAnn. After all, LuAnn won’t be with us in California, so I have to figure out how to do this.”

“Well, there’s plenty of time until Christmas and you can—”

“I don’t have plenty of time,” he said, cutting her off. “I have until December twenty-sixth before I have to head back to California for work. Soon as we get there, I’m packing to go to Colorado for a shoot, then the crew and I are off to—”

“Whoa, whoa. You can’t just do that. You can’t take that girl globe-trotting. She needs stability at a time like this,” Jessica said, though she had never been a parent and hadn’t any idea what the right thing was. “And especially not a world-wide tour for your—” she waved a hand, searching for the right words “—set stuff.”

“For your information, this is not globe-trotting. I’m staying within the continental U.S.A. And that ‘set stuff’ is my job. If I don’t keep that, Sarah won’t have a roof over her head.”

Steam rose in Jessica. How dare this man do something like that to Sarah? Then, just as quickly, guilt washed over her. Hadn’t she herself called the child—

Oh, boy…a brat?

That alone was a sign that Jessica needed to get out of town, take a moment to remind herself why she’d gone into the toy business. Why she’d donned the Mrs. Claus outfit in the first

place.

But at least she was acknowledging—okay, just to herself—but still, acknowledging that she'd rushed to judgment too fast, forgotten that Sarah was only six and was mostly a product of a mother who indulged her child's whims but provided about as much structure as a sand castle.

And now it turned out Sarah's father was just as bad.

"You came here, expecting me to help you create an instant bond with your daughter?" Jessica rose. "That's impossible. And selfish, if you ask me."

"I have more reasons than work bringing me back to California." C.J.'s eyes glittered with unspent frustration. "Reasons I don't care to share with you or anyone else in this town. All I want is a great Christmas for my daughter."

"And then what? You'll sort out the rest as you go along? Or keep flooding her with gifts?"

"I don't intend to do that." He glared at her, clearly angry she'd suggest such a thing. "I just need this particular gift-giving holiday to help me build a little camaraderie."

Typical, Jessica thought. Looking to first dump his problems on her, then expecting Jessica to provide a quick fix, a Band-Aid over the issues at heart with Sarah, so he could hurry and return to his life. Instead of dealing with the fallout from Kiki's unpredictable lifestyle.

He didn't appreciate the amazing gift he had been given, a gift Jessica would have done anything to have if things had been

different. If only—

But she'd been right to be cautious, to accept the hand fate had dealt her. Look where she had ended up. A widow, alone. Raising a child and running a business would have meant sacrificing too much, and undoubtedly the child would have been the loser in that equation.

Now here came C. J. Hamilton, unwilling to see where his priorities should lie, when to Jessica the entire equation was simple arithmetic.

"You are exactly the kind of parent I'm trying to avoid this year. You can't buy and sell the affections of a child, like they're some kind of tech stock." She put her cup in the sink, then wheeled on him. "Invest time, Mr. Hamilton, not money, and you'll get better results."

He rose, facing her now, his frustration level clearly raised a few notches. "Listen, Mrs. Claus, you—"

"Patterson."

"You don't know my story, so quit trying to tell me the end. Twenty-four hours ago, I was a childless bachelor. Now I'm an instant father, and it's not going so well. I can't afford the time to hang around this dinky little town, hoping for a miracle breakthrough. I have to get back to work."

Jessica shook her head. Why had she ever found this man attractive? He was clearly all frosting and no substance. "That's the most selfish thing I've ever heard. A good father—"

"Don't tell me about good fathers," C.J. interrupted. "I know

all about bad ones, and in my opinion, the best way to be a good one is to do the exact opposite of a bad father."

He didn't get it and she didn't have time to do pop psychology in her kitchen. Another wave of sympathy for Sarah ran through Jessica, urging her to stay in town, to go along with C.J.'s plan, if only for the sake of the child.

No. She would not be dissuaded. She'd pack up a box of wrapped toys and send them over to LuAnn's house, with a little note saying "Merry Christmas from Mrs. Claus." That way she avoided C.J. Hamilton and his crazy ideas about parenting but still brought a little special something to Sarah's holiday.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you." She took his coffee mug and put it in the sink, hoping he'd get the hint and just leave. "What you need, Mr. Hamilton, is a counselor, a mediator. Not me."

C.J. crossed to her, and she instantly became aware of his cologne. Slightly musky, with a hint of pine. He could have been a Christmas present himself—if only what was inside the box was as nice as the outside. "I need you and I need a miracle. Everyone I've talked to says you're the woman who can make that happen. What'll it take to convince you?"

She searched his gaze. "You being serious about being a father."

"I am serious."

"Then prove it. And hang around in Riverbend until Sarah is ready leave. Give her some time to grieve, to get used to you and to this new situation. Then take her to California. Give the girl a

little stability before you yank her out of her world."

"I have a job—"

"Yes, you do. And it's called Father. Everything else takes a backseat." Oh, how she wanted to slug him, to shake him. Anything to make him see what a precious gift he'd been given and how he was blowing it already.

C.J. ran a hand through his hair again, something which only seemed to make him more attractive rather than less. He spun away from her, paced a few steps to the sink, then back. "You're right. I'll stay in Riverbend as long as I can, but on one condition." He approached her, his gaze holding a hint of a dare.

Desire tightened in Jessica's gut. A crazy feeling. She barely knew this man, had nothing in common with him, and five seconds ago had been on the brink of slugging him. Her attraction to him was nothing more than misplaced wanderlust.

"What do you mean, one condition?" she asked.

"You give something back."

"You can't bargain with me. I'm just giving you some advice."

He took another step closer. She inhaled the scent of his cologne again, watched his blue eyes. Wondered for a fleeting second what it would be like to kiss him. To have a man hold her again, love her, wrap her against his chest and make her feel safe. Fill that empty space in her bed, her heart, her life.

"This town needs you," C.J. said, "and I need you. I'll stay in Riverbend, but only if you do, too."

"I'm sorry," she said, backing up a step, away from those

eyes, from their nearly hypnotic power that dimmed her common sense. She backed up until she hit the solid, sane, ordinary edge of the table. “I’ve already bought my ticket and I’m going, whether you or anyone else likes it.”

“Didn’t you just say that children should come first?”

“Well, yes, but I meant your own.”

“From what I’ve heard, the people around here consider you a Christmas staple for their children. You give them the magic, that little extra something in the season. Without Mrs. Claus, they say, Christmas in Riverbend just won’t be the same. So I’m asking you to hang up that bikini—” he paused long enough to take a breath, and she wondered if he was picturing her in said swimsuit, and what kind of image he was seeing “—and get out your red suit.”

“If you can prove to me that there is one ounce of Christmas spirit left in this town, then—” she drew in a breath, knowing she was crazy for even letting this thought pass by her lips but letting it go anyway because some tiny part of her still had hope, in the children, the people of Riverbend “—then I’ll consider staying.”

“Thank you,” C.J. said, the relief so clear she could almost see the weight of stress lift from his shoulders. “You’ve just—”

“Don’t thank me yet.” She held up a finger. “Because if I do stay, and that’s a big if, there’s one other thing Riverbend is going to need to make this Christmas perfect.”

“If it’s a reindeer, I have one on its way. If you want a twelve-foot tree, I’ll call the arborist tomorrow. A giant—”

“No, none of those.” Jessica drew in a breath. It was about time she quit the solo act. And besides, she had no doubt Mr. Get-Out-of-Town-Fast C. J. Hamilton would turn her down before the first snowflake fell on Riverbend. “What we really need in this town is a new Mr. Claus.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE WIDE BLUE EYES regarded C.J. with suspicion. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course I do. Done it a hundred times." He picked up one of the—what the heck were they called anyway?—multicolored doohickeys on the table and hoped his daughter couldn't tell he was lying through his teeth.

Normally he wasn't a man given to lying, but then again, he wasn't normally a man used to being a father, either. He'd hoped to show up in town, get Jessica Patterson's help and then wham-bam, win over his daughter, thereby starting his new vocation off on the right foot, making the rest a piece of cake.

Clearly, he'd seen Little Orphan Annie one too many times.

Thus far, Jessica had refused to cooperate—okay maybe his idea had been a little crazy—and had thrown out her own crazy idea about him playing the big jolly Mr. to her Mrs., then herded him out of her house, telling him to go see his daughter.

Which he was doing. Unsuccessfully.

"I don't think you do," Sarah said, shaking her head. They were standing in the guest room LuAnn Rivers had set up as a temporary bedroom for Sarah—a bedroom which was quickly becoming permanent, mainly because his daughter still refused to go back to Kiki's apartment with C.J., clearly regarding him more as a kidnapper than a father. LuAnn had left the two of

them here alone, saying she figured they would bond while Sarah got ready for a birthday party.

So far they'd bonded about as well as two pieces of wet tape.

Sarah had started talking to him—sort of—but only after a stern lecture from LuAnn, and only in monosyllabic words and eye rolls.

"I tied the bow on your dress for you, didn't I?" C.J. chanced a glance at the lopsided, twisted mess he'd made of the pink satin ribbon. Maybe not the best testament to his fashion skills. Good thing Sarah didn't have eyes at the back of her head. If she could see what he'd done to the sash, she'd never let him wield a brush near her curly locks.

Sarah gave him another dubious look. "I want Kiki to do it."

Kiki. Her mother. C.J. didn't find it in the least surprising that Kiki wouldn't have wanted to be called Mommy.

"Kiki can't do it, honey," C.J. said, bending down to Sarah's level. As he did, the movement brought back another conversation, a memory of his own, slamming into him with a tidal force, nearly rocking him back on his heels. Someone telling him that he was about to be let down again—by the one person who was supposed to always be there. C.J. swiped the image away, focused again on Sarah's wide blue eyes. "She's…gone."

Sarah pouted, arms tight against her chest. "Everyone keeps telling me that. But I don't want her to be gone."

C.J. bit back a sigh. So far he was striking out as a father. He needed a "Dummies" manual. A crash course. A miracle.

“Listen, Sarah, why don’t I—”

“No! I don’t want you to do it. Kiki does it right. You’re a boy. Boys don’t know how to do girl hair.”

She had a point.

“We could wait for LuAnn to come back,” C.J. said. Why had LuAnn left? What was she thinking? He had no clue how to handle this. And what if Sarah started crying? Or pitched a fit?

He was so far over his head, it was a wonder he could see daylight.

“She’s at the hairdresser’s.” When Sarah said the word, it came out hare-testers. “That takes lots of time ’cuz they gotta put the colors in it and make it all curly again.”

C.J. cursed himself for ever telling LuAnn he could do this on his own. Clearly, the visit to Jessica Patterson’s house had left him on edge. With that feeling of unfinished business between them.

But she’d been right, damn it. He was hoping for the quick fix, so that he could just add Sarah into his life, like she was a potted plant.

It wasn’t going to work that way. And the sooner C.J. figured out a way to muddle through this new “normal,” the better. He’d start with the hair doohickeys and move forward from there.

Sarah glared at him. “I’m gonna be late. And then Cassidy will never talk to me again ’cuz I missed her party and it’s all your fault. And Kiki’s.” She plopped onto her bed and turned away. One of her dozen stuffed unicorns fell off the twin and tumbled

to the floor, little sparkles dusting the dark-blue carpet.

C.J. fumbled for the brush, but the doohickey ponytail things caught on his fingers, the little round balls click-clacking together, giving him an extra quartet of thumbs. The brush slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor, bonking Mr. Unicorn on the head.

He looked at Sarah, hoping she would laugh at his hapless attempt. He even held up his multicolored thumbs. She ignored him, instead bending to pick up the brush and then putting it on her nightstand. She gave him an I-told-you-so sigh and retreated to her pillows again.

Beside him, he heard a sniffle, then a catch, then a full-out sob. Oh, damn. Now she was crying. C.J. hadn't the foggiest idea what to do.

Give him a knot in a piece of wood, and he could coax the best side out of the hard oak. Throw him together with an ego-driven director, a penny-pinching producer and a movie star terrified the lighting might show her true age and latest face-lift, and he'd find a way to make everyone happy with a slight shifting of a plant here, a building there, a wall here. Put a complicated set design in front him with an insane deadline, and he'd thrive under the pressure, rise to the challenge, and never break a sweat, while his crew would fret and pace, sure the impossible could not be accomplished.

But a crying first-grader?

There wasn't any course in film school for that. And nothing

he'd seen in the books he'd read in the past few days to cover ponytails, birthday party emergencies and clueless dads.

Should he get her a tissue? Tell her to stop? Call for backup?

LuAnn was gone, probably for hours. That left one other female solution.

"I know who can do this hair stuff, Sarah," C.J. said. "And she'll probably throw in a Slinky for all your trouble, too."

Sarah rolled over, and C.J. could see the stain of tears running down her cheeks, doubling his guilt and feelings of inadequacy. Oh, man, he really needed a better parenting manual. "Who?"

Another tear brimmed in the corner of Sarah's eye, and C.J. reached forward, plucked tissues one-two-three-four from the box on her nightstand and handed them to her in a big wad. "You know the toy shop downtown? The one owned by—"

"Mrs. Claus?"

"How do you know that?"

Sarah rolled her eyes at him. "Everyone knows that, even though it's s'pposed to be a secret, 'cuz she works at Santa's toy store. Only she doesn't have her suit on." Sarah's eyes brightened, then dimmed. She looked down at the ball of white in her palms and started shredding the paper. "Only I hear she won't be Mrs. Claus this year, 'cuz she's going to Florida or something. Maybe she doesn't like kids anymore."

"Oh, no, she likes kids. Loves 'em. She told me so." She hadn't said any such thing, but heck, C.J. was already on a lying streak, might as well keep it up. Besides, the mention of Jessica—Mrs.

Claus—seemed to have opened up a direct line to Sarah's voice box, increasing C.J.'s reasons for getting the woman involved. He handed Sarah more tissues, hoping it would head off any subsequent tears. "And she's really good at doing hair, too."

Liar, liar.

"She can do my hair 'fore I have to go to Cassidy's party?"

"Certainly." If she hasn't left for her flight yet. If she's still talking to me. If a hundred other ifs haven't gone wrong. He put out his hand, but Sarah didn't take it. "Do you want to see if she can fix your hair?"

"Okay." Sarah still looked unconvinced, but she slipped down off her bed and grabbed her party shoes off the floor, dropping the tissues into a puffy white pile in their place.

She did a half turn, then caught her reflection in the mirror that hung over her dresser. She put one hand on her hip and cast another I-told-you-so glance at her newly minted father. "I sure hope Mrs. Claus knows how to tie a bow, too, 'cuz you're making a mess of things."

Sarah didn't how right she was.

C. J. Hamilton was on her doorstep for the second time in the space of a day. Jessica didn't know whether to be flattered or to take out a restraining order.

She glanced at her suitcase, sitting beside the door. Soon enough she'd be on her way, far from Riverbend. Christmas and all the memories that holiday conjured would be out of mind and

out of sight.

Less than forty-eight hours. That was all, and she'd be gone. She'd purposely booked the trip for the night of the Winterfest, to give her an excuse to miss the event and get out of her Mrs. Claus duties. And yet, here was C. J. Hamilton like a rebounding ball, determined to get her into that silly red suit.

"Mr. Hamilton," she said as she pulled open the door. "Again."

"I have a problem." He held up his hand, gaily decorated with ponytail holders, then gestured toward Sarah, who Jessica now noticed was standing next to him, arms crossed over her chest, face screwed up in disapproval. Her hair was a jumble of curls on her head, her dress a crinkled mess, the bow haphazardly tied and tilted at an odd angle. The gift in her hands had been wrapped either by C.J. himself or by a barrel of monkeys.

Jessica bit back a laugh. "I can see that."

"He tried to help me," Sarah said, her tone grumpy, face sullen. "He's not very good at it."

Jessica bent down, a burst of sympathy running through her for the motherless girl. How she wanted to just pull Sarah into her arms and fill her with cookies and hugs. But Sarah wasn't her daughter and Jessica reminded herself to keep her distance, guard her emotions. "I can see that," she repeated, softly, just for Sarah.

"Hey, I'm new at this." C.J. took Jessica's hand and dumped the ponytail holders into her palm. "Here. You do it."

Jessica stared at the multicolored elastics with their jaunty

rainbow of balls. He expected her to just know how to do this? "What about LuAnn?"

"She had an appointment. And Sarah has a birthday party to get to."

Jessica thought a second. "Cassidy Rendell's seventh birthday, am I right?"

"Yeah," Sarah said, surprise arching her brows. "How'd you know?" Her expression perked up when Bandit wriggled his body between them and inserted a friendly doggy nose against her hip.

Jessica put a finger beside her nose, the familiar gesture she and Dennis had used to imply a Santa-only secret. Only she wasn't playing Mrs. Claus this year. So she couldn't very well pretend she had any secrets or magic. She lowered her hand and tried to ignore the whisper of wistfulness that ran through her. "Mrs. Klein and Tammy were in the store yesterday, talking about it," she said, naming one of the other first-graders in Sarah and Cassidy's class.

"Did they buy her a doctor Barbie? 'Cuz that's what I got her and I told Cassidy nobody else better bring one, 'cuz I want my present to be the most special one."

"No, they didn't. I think your gift—" she gestured toward the badly taped and wrapped box, then looked at C.J., who gave her another what-do-I-know, hands-up gesture "—is going to be perfect."

Sarah beamed and gave Bandit extra pats.

"I told Sarah you'd know how to do her hair. Tie her bow.

That kind of girl stuff."

"Because I'm a girl, is that it? I must come prewired to do all this?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

She grabbed his palm and put the ponytails back into his grasp. "I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Hamilton, but my personal résumé doesn't include small children."

"But you're ah, you know, her," C.J. said, the implied meaning, that Santa's wife should know all things child related. "You own a toy store. You work with small children every day."

"That doesn't mean I know how to—" She cut off her words when she noticed Sarah watching the entire exchange. "I thought someone said something about not wanting any help?"

"I didn't know that meant being Bill Blass and Vidal Sassoon at the same time." He gestured to Sarah's mess of a bow and unkempt hair. "Will you please help me?"

She should say no. Be firm with C. J. Hamilton, wish him well and get back to—

To what? She had nothing to occupy her evening. She could go back to the toy shop, put in a few more hours, but she had a capable staff running the operation—a staff that would be surprised to see the boss back right after she'd left for the day.

There was no one waiting for her in the kitchen, no one expecting a dinner, a conversation by the fireplace. Nothing but an empty house, a dog whose affections were easily swayed and a packed suitcase.

And here was a child, a motherless child, who needed help.

Jessica bent down to Sarah's level. The little girl's face was tearstained, her eyes red rimmed. Whatever temper tantrums Sarah might have pitched in the toy store before were forgotten, as Jessica's heart opened up to this near-orphaned girl who just wanted to get to a party, see her friends and pretend her upside-down life was normal.

That Jessica could understand. And was powerless to close her door against. "Why don't you come in," she said, to Sarah and then to C.J. "And we'll see what we can do about getting you ready for Cassidy's party."

Fifteen minutes later, Jessica had managed to corral Sarah's curly locks into two neat ponytails, then straighten the bow on her dress. "Thank you," Sarah said, spinning on the kitchen floor, admiring what she could see of her sash from over her shoulder. "I was starting to get a little worried, there."

"You were?" Jessica said, biting back laughter at the nearly adult tone in Sarah's voice. "Why?"

Sarah paused in her twirling and leaned to whisper in Jessica's ear. "Because he—" at that, she thumbed toward C.J. "—doesn't know what he's doing."

Jessica bit back another laugh, and saw C.J. doing the same. "I think he'll figure it out as you two go along, don't you?"

Sarah shrugged. "Maybe." She grabbed her present off the table and clutched it to her chest, like a shield, as if she was trying

to keep her distance. To keep from warming up to this stranger who was her father. “Can I go to my party now?”

“Sure, sure,” C.J. said. “Cassidy’s house, right?” He fished his keys out of his pocket but stayed where he was in the kitchen, another lost, blank look on his face.

A second wave of sympathy ran through Jessica. At this rate, she’d be writing greeting cards for the man. She needed to quit being such a softie. “Do you know where Cassidy lives?”

“I didn’t think to ask,” C.J. said. “I guess I thought…”

“A six-year-old could give you directions?”

“I know where Cassidy lives,” Sarah put in. “She’s got a big green house and a small blue car and she has a flag in her yard. And a dog named Boo and a cat named Wink. And her street is really pretty, and it has this big yellow house next door that looks kinda scary but isn’t ’cuz I trick-or-treated there one time and the lady was nice and gave me a Snickers. A big one, too. Not those baby candies.”

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