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A Date with Santa



SPHERE

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CHAPTER ONE



"Mom, you're asking the impossible." Sage Madison held the phone away from her ear, certain she'd misunderstood her mother. Her shoulder-length brown hair fell across her cheeks as she bowed her head. "This isn't a good time for me." Sage sincerely wanted to help her sister. The timing, however, couldn't be worse. Sage was vying for the manager position with Park Marketing. She'd worked toward this goal for years, almost from the moment she'd been hired by the well-known and respected agency. Bringing her five-year-old nephew into her home and life would put that promotion in jeopardy.

"Saffron needs your help," Rosemary Madison insisted.

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Surely there was someone more suited to this than Sage. She knew next to nothing about children. She closed her eyes, desperately seeking a way to help her sister without putting her own career at risk. She had no idea how she'd be able to manage Ricky's care plus work the ridiculous hours she did. Sage was a corporate woman through and through, with limited maternal instincts. If ever there was a time when this precious little boy needed mothering, it was now.

"Mom, I understand Saffron didn't expect to be deployed. Seriously, what did she think when she signed up for the Army Reserve?" Sage loved her sister, she truly did. Saffron, however, was impulsive to a fault. During her first year of college she ended up eloping with Rick O'Brien. A month later she was pregnant with little Ricky. Then Sage's brother-in-law had died in a freak accident two years ago, when he'd fallen on the ice and suffered a catastrophic head injury. He died almost immediately. There had been no life insurance.

Then, earlier in the year, Saffron had signed up for the Army Reserve for the benefits and to supplement her income while she finished her schooling. Apparently, Sage's sister had never taken into account that her services would be called upon.

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"Of course, your father and I could always cancel our fortieth-wedding-anniversary cruise."

Oh boy, here it came. The guilt. Sage closed her eyes and groaned, accepting that she really didn't have any options. "You can't do that," she insisted. Her parents had been planning this monthlong cruise for more than a year. It was the trip of a lifetime.

It seemed Sage was always the one to step in when Saffron did something foolish. Up to this point, all the military had required of her sister was one weekend a month for training. It was as though Saffron assumed her parents would step in to care for Ricky if she was asked to serve. And if her parents were unavailable, the duty apparently fell to Sage.

Yet again, Sage was expected to rescue her sister, even when it was the worst possible time.

"How long will Saffron be away?" Sage asked, giving in. She hoped it was for a week, two at the most. Any longer was out of the question.

Her mother's hesitation said it all. "Saffron's commanding officer said she should be prepared to be away for the entire month of December."

"A month?" Sage bellowed. "Mom, I can't."

"There's no other option," her mother continued.

There had to be.

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"Ricky loves you."

"And I love him, but he barely knows me."

"Not true. The two of you had a great time together over Thanksgiving."

They'd had fun. Ricky was a delightful little boy. They'd put together a jigsaw puzzle and watched a movie. Sage did her best to be a good aunt, and it was fine for an hour or two, but that was her limit. By the time the movie was over, Sage had been exhausted answering Ricky's thousand questions. Like his mother, Ricky was a curious child. He wanted to know why Sage lived so far away. Did she have a boyfriend? What was it like in Seattle? Did she watch football games? By Ricky's bedtime, Sage's head was swimming.

Sage didn't like to be reminded why she'd left Chicago. She'd accepted the Seattle position to mend a broken heart. The man she loved all through college had decided he wanted to play the field. They'd been together so long, Mark explained. He felt he should date others to be sure they were right for each other before they married. Sage should have known then that something was up. That something was someone. Within three months of their college graduation, Mark was engaged to Annalisa, a good friend of Sage's. Seeing the two of them together was

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hard, and after a couple years of making excuses to avoid social events, Sage decided to look elsewhere for employment. Being dedicated and a hard worker, she had no trouble finding a position in Seattle.

"There isn't anyone else," her mother continued, breaking into Sage's tortured thoughts. "Ricky knows his mother will be away for a while. Having him come to you is the obvious choice."

There had to be someone more qualified.

What about a friend?

A neighbor?

Someone who wasn't her.

If only Rick's side of the family lived closer. Unfortunately, they weren't an option. His parents and two siblings all lived in Australia, and sending Ricky to be with them wasn't a viable alternative.

"Ricky's such a good little boy," her mother continued. "You'll hardly know he's there."

The insinuation was downright laughable. "Mom, I work long hours. How am I going to take care of a five-year-old when I . . ." She paused and drew in a deep, calming breath. She'd spent years working toward becoming the Seattle-based manager of Park Marketing. The promotion was within her sight. If ever there was a time she needed to focus on her career, it was now.

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"I . . . I've barely spent any time with Ricky," she added lamely. Clearly her mother wasn't concerned about the ramifications to Sage's career if she agreed to do this.

"This is your chance to become better acquainted," her mother countered.

"You realize I don't cook, right?"

"Then this will be a good time to learn. Microwave dinners aren't healthy. Besides, Ricky would be happy with peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches."

Sage made a mental note to add both to her shopping list. The most familiar part of the grocery store was the frozen food section. Uber Eats and DoorDash were her mainstays.

"Your sister is most comfortable leaving Ricky with family," her mother insisted. Of course, Saffron would want Ricky to be with Sage.

Sage released a deep sigh. It didn't escape her notice that Saffron had asked her mother to plead her case. She wanted to help, she really did. It was understandable that her sister couldn't ask anyone else to watch her son for an entire month. Sage agreed that it needed to be family. Ricky had already lost his father. Learning that his mother was going away for an extended time was sure to raise all kinds of anxieties in the poor kid.

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"Sage?" Her mother spoke after several moments of stilted silence.

"Tell me what you need me to do," Sage said, capitulating. She might as well kiss this promotion good-bye. The minute Troy, her main competition, got wind of this, he was sure to use this distraction to his advantage. It wasn't beneath him to pull every trick in the book to put her in a bad light.

Her mother's voice showed her relief. "Thank you, Sage. I know this isn't a good time. I wouldn't ask if there was anyone else."

Sage heard mumblings from the other end of the line. "Hold on a minute," her mother said. "Saffron is here and wants to talk to you."

"Hey," Sage said as soon as her sister was on the phone. "How's it going?" She did her best to hide her feelings.

Her sister returned with a weak laugh. "Mom says you'll be able to keep Ricky. Thank you, sis."

"How could I refuse?" Sage said. It wasn't like she had a choice. "How does Ricky feel about all this?" Sage's heart went out to the little boy. For one so young, he'd had enough upheaval in his life. She could only imagine how he must be feeling with the news that his mother was going away.

"He understands better than I expected. He's

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used to me being away for short periods of time over the weekends I'm training and the like. I explained that people need help after the hurricane. He thinks it's cool that he can come live with you while I'm away."

"Are you sure you'll be needed a full month?" She hated the desperate plea in her voice.

"The hurricane damage was severe. I'm sure you heard about it?"

"Of course." Florida had been hit with two Category 5 event hurricanes. Homes were destroyed. An entire town had been wiped out. The National Guard and Army Reserve had been deployed from all over the United States to help people rebuild their lives.

"I'm hoping I'll be back before Christmas. My Sergeant said it was a possibility, but I shouldn't count on it."

Well, that was that. Sage had to accept that she would likely have Ricky all of December.

"Can I ask a favor of you?"

"Another one, you mean?"

Her sister ignored the sarcasm. "This is probably the last year Ricky will believe in Santa. Do your best to make sure he gets a chance to see Santa."

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"Of course," Sage agreed, feeling petty for her earlier comment.

"Thank you again," Saffron added. "I leave in the morning. Mom has already booked her flight. She'll deliver Ricky to you Saturday afternoon and will fly out Sunday morning."

"When is their cruise?" Sage should know this, but her mind was whirling with all she'd need to prepare for her nephew's arrival.

"Their flight is Wednesday. They are flying into Hawaii for a couple days before boarding the ship for Asia."

A week. Sage realized she had only a few days to prepare to bring a five-year-old into her life.

Her mother was back on the phone. "I don't know what your plans were for Christmas," she said, "but I'd plan for Ricky to be with you. Be sure and don't build up his hopes that Saffron will be back."

"Got it."

Sage decided it would be best to make holiday plans with Ricky now. Already her mind worked on what she would need to do to make this time away from all that was familiar as comfortable for her nephew as possible. She'd need to get a Christmas

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tree. She'd never gone to the trouble before. She had nothing when it came to decorations. Her head buzzed as a sinking feeling took root in her stomach.

Her sister was back on the phone. "I'll do my best to keep in touch. As it is, I'm unsure what to expect. I don't know what cell service is like yet. I promise to call as often as I can."

"That'll be good."

"Ricky's excited to fly," Saffron continued, oblivious to what she was asking of her sister. But then Saffron rarely was. She took Sage's help for granted the way she always had.

"I'll be sure to be ready for him when he arrives," Sage said, and then wondered what all that would entail.

"Ricky won't be any trouble," her sister assured her. "Think of this time with him like when we went to summer camp."

"Summer camp," Sage repeated weakly. Her memories of camp included swimming out to the middle of the lake after Saffron lost the oar to her kayak and screamed for help. She'd taken the kayak without permission. Or the year Saffron had gotten lost in the woods after leaving the group when she followed a fawn and his mother to take photos. It

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seemed every year Sage had been called upon to rescue her sister for one reason or another. "Let us hope Ricky's time here isn't anything like our camping experience."

"Why not?" Saffron asked. "We had a lot of fun at summer camp."

Maybe Saffron had, but not so much for Sage. "Never mind," she mumbled. No need to drag up old memories.

"You and Ricky will do great," her sister said with all the confidence in the world.

Sage wasn't nearly as convinced. Her mind flooded with questions about how she was possibly going to entertain her nephew and be the stable, loving aunt he needed. *And* at the same time work toward putting together a huge media campaign.

The current manager of Park Marketing, Stanley Mowrey, had pitted Troy Whitehall and Sage against each other. They were each to present a marketing campaign for a new soft drink called Buzz to the client. The person who created the campaign the Hudson Group chose would be awarded the position as the Seattle branch manager.

"Sage, are you there?" her mother asked, taking the phone back from Saffron.

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"I'm here."

"It will all work out," her mother said.

Sage had to believe it would.

Okay, she said talking to herself. *It's you and me, Ricky, and whatever the future holds.*

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CHAPTER TWO



As was her habit, Sage arrived early at the office. She was sipping her second cup of coffee by the time Erica Leeman, her assistant and friend, arrived. Sleep had eluded her all night as she fretted and worried about what having Ricky with her would mean to her work schedule, and her life.

"How's it going?" Erica asked. She brought in a miniature snow globe and placed it on her desk. Erica loved Christmas and did her best to make the office as festive as possible.

"My five-year-old nephew is coming to live with me for December. It all depends on my sister's deployment," Sage blurted out, desperately needing