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Christmas Mom
Tryouts

A CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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Samantha St. James

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1

Jason needed a wife.

He eyed his children sitting around the table eating supper. The three oldest were creating catapults out of stainless steel forks. Soon peas would be hurtling across the table. The three youngest slapped mounds of mashed potatoes with their spoons and giggled like lunatics as spud projectiles fanned into the air like creamy fireworks.

Their mother had been gone only a year, and his happy home had slipped into chaos and disarray.

He shuddered. He needed to break the news to this rowdy brood, but he was more terrified of his children today than he'd been when he'd fallen off the roof at thirteen. On his way down, he'd been sure he was about to die. How many times had his mother drilled into him that he was "gonna fall and break his neck"? That day he'd thought her words were prophetic.

Facing his six children with this latest news was far worse than facing the fast-approaching hedgerow that lined his childhood front-room window.

A ball of flying mashed potato drew his attention and he watched it splat on the wall.

This had to stop. He had to do it soon. Tell his kids. Christmas was fast approaching, and he didn't think he could face it alone.

Sure, his mother could help some, but he couldn't

impose on her too much. With his two youngest brothers still at home and his three sisters and their kids coming this year, Christmas would be busy at his mom's, too.

Maybe he could forego all the Christmas preps here and just descend on his parents, six kids in tow. He stared hard at his children. No, he couldn't do that. No Christmas tree, no decorations, no lights, no stockings here? Much as he dreaded the holiday, he couldn't go that far.

His progeny would probably shoot him—if they knew how. He looked at them again. Yep, they knew how to shoot things. He vaguely recalled a stuffed bear that had committed some wartime misdeed when the boys were playing and then was duly executed for his crime. In a flash of inspiration, and because of the wailing of the owner of the stuffed bear, Jason had been able to give the bear a full pardon for dereliction of duty, just as Abraham Lincoln had done for his son.

But knowing his kids, his own demise would be more likely to involve fire and blowing up stuff.

He shook his head free of irrelevant things. He was avoiding making the announcement. When had he become such a pushover?

"Stop," he didn't speak loud.

The kids immediately set down their utensils and gave him their undivided attention. They hadn't quite forgotten their manners; evidently they'd just put them on hold.

Now, how could he break this to them gently?

He glanced around the table. Six pairs of eyes, bright, intelligent, and terrifyingly astute, waited expectantly. Even three-year-old Adam gave him a look that scared him right down to his bones—as if

Adam knew what Jason was about to announce.

He'd just have to dive in, no equivocating, no trying to make it sound better than it might be.

"We need a mom. I've put an ad online looking for one, and the first applicants should be contacting me soon."

"What?" Stone, Larissa, and Joe shrieked it together.

"You advertised for a mom without telling us?" Ten-year-old Larissa was ready to cry; he recognized that look.

"Dad, why'd you do that?" The fourteen-year-old tried to be mature. Stone took the role of oldest brother seriously.

"Because of my job. They've held off having me travel out of courtesy over your mom's death. As much as I love being with you guys all the time, traveling is a necessary part of my job, and I need to do it." *And I need help. I can't do this on my own*, he added silently. Raising kids alone was hard. Raising kids alone while missing your wife so much it felt as if your heart was littered with buckshot, was almost impossible. Half the time he thought he'd die of grief and loneliness. The other half of the time, he thought he'd just go crazy. "And you all need manners and...and stuff," He added. "And we just need a mom here...to do...mom things with you." He sounded lame.

"So we can stay with Grammie and Grandpop when you travel. We don't need no mom." His twelve-year-old set his mouth in a stubborn line. "They can take us to school and stuff."

"Grammie and Grandpop would gladly take you, Joe, but I want you to have a real mom, one who loves you and helps you with homework—not to replace

your real mom, of course," he quickly clarified, "Just someone who *feels* like a mom."

"And cooks and cleans and does laundry? You know that's called a maid, right?" Larissa, his budding little feminist, gave him a look that reminded him of his late wife...the look that said he'd done something sexist, and he'd better right it soon.

"I will help do all three, too. I don't expect the poor woman to be dumped on you all without some help from me. But I don't want a maid who looks at this as a temporary job. I want a woman who will come to love you and stick around for the long haul."

"OK." Larissa settled back, mollified.

"You should have asked us, Dad. What if she's a raving lunatic or she does...drugs or something?"

"That's why I mentioned they'd get to try out for the job, first."

"Tryouts?" Larissa squeaked, sitting up straight and giving him the death glare again. "Dad, a mom job isn't like trying out for cheerleaders or the football team!"

"Well, I didn't want some woman coming here and just staying if we don't like her or she doesn't like us. Tryouts, a temporary timeframe, seemed the best idea."

Larissa rolled her eyes, gave him a disgusted look, and dropped her napkin on the table. "Well, don't expect me to show her how to do everything. She'd better know stuff, because I won't be a slave around here."

"I'll make sure you're not slaving." The sarcasm was lost on Jason's oldest daughter.

She glared.

OK, maybe it wasn't.

Emily and Adam, at three and four, didn't quite understand what was going on, but seven-year-old Anna's face scrunched up and her lower lip trembled. "Will this new Mommy play princess and read to us?"

"I will make sure that she does." Jason was getting a headache, and it'd only been five minutes. "You can give me a list of requirements, and I can give it to the candidates. The one who comes closest to meeting them will be the new Mommy, OK?"

"She'll have to like fireworks," Joe's tone was ominous.

"And she better like dogs." Anna piped up.

"And know how to sword fight." Stone's look was mischievous.

"And wide a wunicycle." Emily was fascinated with unicycles for some strange reason. Maybe his four-year-old understood more of this mommy-getting business than he'd thought.

"Will she be here for Christmas?" Joe's favorite time of year was always on his mind. He loved helping with the decorations, the cookie baking, everything. He'd even helped Jason and Stone put up the lights in the freezing cold last year. He planned his allowance around the Christmas gifts he bought throughout the year and squirreled away in a secret hiding place he refused to share with his siblings, much to their dismay.

"I don't know if she'll stay until Christmas. If we...hit it off, she might be here for the holiday, too."

"And she has to...has to love us." Larissa's eyes were bright with tears.

"And we have to love her, too." Stone's voice held sorrow. He'd been close to his mom, as the oldest, her death had hit him hardest.

Oh, boy.

Well, Jason couldn't take anything back now. The ad for a wife was already on CHUMS and that was that. The Christian dating site claimed it could unite anyone with the proper mate. CHristians United with Mates Scientifically or some other ridiculous and contrived phrase that was the basis for the equally ridiculous anagram was how it got its name, but if it got him a wife who could settle in before Christmas, he didn't really care what the name of the site was. That said, he wasn't sure *hope* was in his vocabulary at this point. If CHUMS did match him scientifically to the perfect mate, any woman who responded, would probably be stark, raving crazy. His kids would be traumatized for life. He eyed his kids again. Or she would be.

2

Natalie read the ad again. This guy had to be joking.

Father of six kids looking for wife, between ages 25 – 35. I want someone who will love my children, ages 3 to 14. Loving me is not necessary, although I will expect mutual respect. Your role will be traditional, you will not work outside the home. You will cook, clean, and help with homework. So will I. We attend a non-denominational church regularly and the children go to Sunday school. Tryouts will begin for three weeks each on November 1. The marriage will occur within the year.

“Tryouts. For a mom?” Natalie wondered where the kids’ mother was—dead, or just took off when she couldn’t stand this guy’s outdated notions anymore? *So why am I even considering answering this ad?* But she knew.

All five of her sisters were happily married, and the nieces and nephews were arriving with alarming regularity. Her parents and her sisters didn’t say anything, but she’d seen a pitying look or two.

At twenty-eight...almost twenty-nine, she didn’t even have a viable boyfriend. Her chances of a large, happy family like the one she’d grown up in, something she’d dreamed of since she was a child, were just about nil.

She had a few readymade nieces and nephews, two of her sisters had married men who already had

children. But an entire, readymade family? Could this Jason guy's six kids love her whole family, too? That was a lot of people to spring on unsuspecting children who'd lost their mother.

She moved on, reading more ads for men looking for blondes, brunettes, redheads, skinny women, pleasingly plump women, women with no kids, women—one child OK, women who wanted fun times, women who hiked, women who liked gaming...

But her mind kept going back to that poor, beleaguered father and his six motherless children, pining for a woman's touch and someone who loved them unconditionally.

Of course, the children could be hooligans. Nah, she didn't think so.

The father was probably overwhelmed with grief, his stipulation that they only needed to respect one another indicated that.

But could she cope with a loveless marriage? And he'd not said so, but would it be a marriage of convenience? She loved her nieces and nephews, and having her own kids would simply be a bonus, not a deal-breaker. Of course, with six children already, maybe this guy didn't want any more.

Still and all, a few of her previous boyfriends had run long and far when they'd been introduced to her five sisters, their spouses, the numerous progeny, and her proud parents, who looked on increasing the family as a gift from God, and acted accordingly. Hints of getting married and producing more children had scared off most of the men she'd met. That she was willing to have a slew of kids and loved being part of a large family seemed to terrify them.

With six kids of his own, this Jason guy obviously

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wasn't frightened by a large family.

She would answer the ad. She had to be stark, raving crazy and she'd probably be traumatized for life. She glanced at the ad again. Or they would be.

3

The address was outside city limits, but Natalie knew it well. A former horse breeding farm, the place featured a white railed fence all the way around two hundred acres of rolling pastures. A tree-lined driveway and a huge house with an upper front deck, plenty of gables, pillars, and a chandelier hanging from the porch ceiling in front of the door, completed an enchanted pastoral setting. She'd always gawked at the place as her school bus had passed the property with the horses grazing in the fields. Although no longer a horse breeding farm, one of her sisters had said that the current owner did board horses for others.

Natalie drove up the driveway, almost certain she'd glimpsed something in the trees. Bright flashes of color, hidden so quickly she wasn't sure if they were cardinals or blue jays.

A flesh-colored arm poked out of one tree. Not birds. Those were the kids, playing in the trees and spying on whoever came down the drive. Typical kids.

She hoped they'd not done something like tossing nails down to flatten tires because they didn't want a new mom. No, of course not. She shouldn't be judging her future children so harshly. Her kids were well-behaved. *Right!* She snorted, remembering some of her own antics.

Something cracked on her car.

She pulled to a stop, got out and looked. A bit of

egg dripped down her driver's door. She looked up in the trees, got back in the car, and floored it. Dust flew up behind her. Nothing else smacked the car, so she slowed down to a crawl.

They wouldn't have time to run to the next tree, climb it, and egg her car again. And they probably got a mouthful of dust, although as high as they were in the trees, she doubted that. Natalie continued on.

Life-sized, naked cherubs were frozen in the spray of water from the center fountain that graced the circular drive. Quite suddenly, a naked cherub dashed through the mist and in front of her car, another streaming behind as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Natalie slammed on the brakes as her heart clutched. She'd nearly killed two of her future children. She willed her heart to start beating again.

What kind of man didn't know his kids were playing in the fountain as naked as the day they were born?

Natalie had answered the right ad. This family needed her help.

"She's here! The first mom tryout is here!" A girlish voice announced Natalie's presence as she got out of the car.

"Emily, where are your clothes?" A rich baritone, sounding frazzled and perplexed, echoed from inside the doorway.

"Me an' Adam didn't need any. We was pwaying in the watah. Stone said we could."

"Stone said you...I'll deal with Stone later. You and Adam go put some clothes on right now."

"O-tay."

The patter of little feet faded.

Jason McLane stepped off the front porch. His short, dark hair waved a bit. A trim, muscular body was clothed in jeans and a button down, dark green fleece shirt. Piercing, deep blue eyes with luscious, long dark lashes met her gaze. His chiseled jaw and perfect mouth stretched into a lightly dimpled smile. Jason McLane was one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen.

"Hi there." He came forward, reaching out a hand to take her bag. "I'm Jason. The two naked children you almost ran over are the youngest ones, Emily and Adam. Ages four and three, respectively."

"I wouldn't have run over them." Natalie couldn't keep her tone from sounding prissy.

"Never thought you would. May I commend you on your reflexes." He mumbled something else.

Natalie was almost certain she'd heard, "you're gonna need 'em."

"Isn't it a little too cool outside for the children to be swimming?"

"The fountain water is heated. The former owners didn't want the ducks' feet to freeze. Or something like that." Jason seemed unconcerned. "And Larissa, over there, was keeping an eye on them."

A young girl, hidden under a portico, was reading a book. Or pretending to, anyway. She sat very relaxed, as if she didn't have a care in the world, but was eyeing Natalie like a nasty specimen in a lab.

"Hi, Larissa." Natalie waved, walked around to her trunk and opened it, reaching in for the small black-handled box and her larger suitcase.

"Stone...oh, there you are," Jason called. "Take this smaller case. We'll be putting Miss Calloway in the bl...green room. Miss Calloway, this is my oldest son,

Stone. He's fourteen."

"Oh, call me Natalie." Natalie reached out and shook Stone's hand, while secretly marveling that they had a green room. It sounded so Victorian.

"Nice to meet you...Natalie." Stone did not appear as enthused. He shook her hand and took the smaller case. "What's this?"

"That's Betsy." Natalie didn't elaborate. Two could play the game, and she'd be darned if a fourteen-year-old would get the best of her.

"A doll?" Disgust dripped like molasses, slow and thick.

"A sewing machine. An old one. She's my favorite."

"What do you need that for?"

"I work as a seamstress. I sew things for other people, and I've made a few quilts, too. I've won several awards for my quilts." She didn't mention the cash that came with the awards, or the companies that had paid a lot of money to have a unique quilt made for corporate offices or homes.

"I thought your name was familiar." Stone pointed at a wall in the foyer as they walked in. "Your name is on the back."

Blaze of Glory, her quilt depicting the Ascent of Christ, was hanging on the large wall opposite the door.

"The former owners said it was made specifically for that wall." Jason nodded. "It's a beautiful piece of art and we...my...wife and I loved...love it. I bought it from them so we could keep it. I didn't know it was your work. Uh, Stone, how do you know her name is on the back?"

The boy gulped. "Umm...me and Joe climbed up

there to look, once.”

“That is hanging at least fourteen feet up, how did you...?” Jason turned to look at his son.

Stone gave his father a sheepish look. “We just wanted to see it...a breeze blew it up once and we could see the writing. So we thought we’d take a look.” He straightened. “So, we need to put...Natalie in the blue room?”

“No, the green room. The blue room is for the other lady who is coming to try out.”

Stunned, Natalie could only stare. Two shocks in one day. Three, if one counted nearly running over two of her charges. That quilt had sold in the five digits several years ago. And another woman was arriving, competition for the mom tryouts that would commence on this day. And her oldest, future son seemed confused, by colors, of all things.

4

Jason was delighted.

Natalie Calloway wasn't spooked by his kids running naked through the fountain spray or climbing up the walls. She'd even gently chastised him for not watching the little ones, so she obviously cared. She seemed not the least bit perturbed by their antics.

She was also pretty, a bonus in his mind. The kids would be more cooperative if their new tryout mom was pleasant looking. Who was he kidding? He liked her looks, too.

She had long, honey-colored hair with hints of red, tied in a ponytail, big green eyes, and a mouth that looked as if it smiled often. She was taller than he expected, about five-eight, dressed in jeans and a striped shirt over a tank top. Bright sneakers, made for running, were on her feet. She'd apparently understood she'd need to run after the little kids.

He followed Stone and Natalie up the stairs, depositing her suitcase in the green room. Jason had intended to put her in the blue room, but some fanciful notion took hold of him, and he'd told Stone to put her luggage in the green room. It suited her coloring perfectly.

Stone set the sewing machine case on the dresser.

His son seemed a little upset. Had he taken an immediate dislike to Natalie?

Jason was sure to hear about it eventually. He'd get Natalie settled and then go downstairs to greet the

other woman who would be arriving shortly, what was her name? Rose...something.

The doorbell rang.

"Oops the other lady is here now. Be right back."

Jason loped down the stairs.

Rose Jenkins looked older than thirty-five, but she had a nice smile, although her face was too pale. Her dark, mascara-covered lashes looked stiff, as if she'd coated them several times to make them look longer. She was dressed in a flowing skirt, with a large top over it, hiding much of her figure. Her hair was coiffed into a short, black bob. Ugly, plastic clogs were on her feet.

Jason's heart sank, even while he chastised himself for judging too quickly. Rose looked and acted as if she couldn't move fast, a requirement where his kids were concerned.

Stone skidded to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, Natalie right behind on the third step.

"Rose Jenkins, right?" Jason asked, holding out his hand.

"Right. And you're Jason McLane." Her eyes slitted when she saw Natalie, but then her smile returned.

Perhaps he should have told the two women they'd be here together, a contingency he'd decided upon to protect their reputations. He had no intention of intimacy until marriage, and by mentioning church in the ad, he hoped they'd understood that.

It wouldn't do for his children to hear anyone gossiping about a woman staying in the house during the mom tryouts. By having two women here at a time, they'd chaperone each other.

He hoped. Perhaps he'd been wrong, though.

5

Natalie had seen the glare in Rose's eyes. Why had Jason not informed them both that there'd be another woman competing for the job in the same timeframe? Surely he wasn't one of those men who liked women fighting over him? Or worse, wanted more than one woman at a time. Surely that wasn't it. He'd advertised for a wife, not a girlfriend, and last she'd known, polygamy was illegal.

Natalie put her disappointment on the back burner. The job had specifically stated she was there to love the children, not him.

"Stone, show Miss Jenkins up to the blue room." Jason's voice broke through Natalie's musings.

"Thank you." Rose Jenkins gave Natalie another odd look as she mounted the steps.

Jason carried Miss Jenkins's suitcase up the stairs.

Natalie followed, unsure if her duties would start right away.



"We'll let you two get settled, unpack your things and do whatever you need to do to...freshen up." Jason spoke to both ladies on the upper landing.

"Thank you," Miss Jenkins murmured as she made a beeline for her room.

Natalie turned to her own door and slipped inside.