

mama dated
Santa

A Novel By
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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

For my mother-in-love, Carlynn. She loved all things Santa. And unknowingly dated a boy in college who grew up to BE Santa, inadvertently inspiring this story. We miss her every day.



Chapter One

“ Aunt Tootie, aren’t we going to go see Santa?”

Only Mark could make Trudy McNamara enter a toy store on Black Friday.

And he was barely enough force to bring her past the threshold. Maybe in a minute. After she swallowed the grief that practically drowned her around this time of year. It shouldn’t be *her* bringing Mark.

“Of course, Mark. Sorry.” Trudy forced a smile for the young boy.

But before she could take a step, the door bumped her from behind as other customers tried to come through. She’d stopped closer than she realized.

Any other day, she could’ve kept her equilibrium and the nudge at her back wouldn’t have been a problem. Today she held the hand of her four-year-old nephew and wore new boots. On this slick linoleum floor, it was a rotten combination. Her widened step to keep from falling on Mark aimed her shoulder directly into the man walking toward them, his focus completely on the clipboard in his hands.

“*Oof!*”

“I’m so sorry.” Trudy quickly straightened and stepped back,

untangling her scarf from the pen that had been in the man's hand. "I seem to have caused a bit of a traffic hold-up."

"More like traffic accident." He jerked the pen from her fingers, pushed his glasses straight on his nose, and marched off without another word.

"Well, then. Bah humbug to him too." Trudy grinned at her nephew and motioned him on to the goal. Though, the idea of getting closer made her stomach curdle.

No. Truth be told, she wasn't in the Christmas spirit either. Hadn't been in five years. But she'd do anything for Mark. Even bring him to a toy store so he could talk to the man in the red suit.

A glance to the right showed Mr. Huffypants heading through a door marked *Office*. Must be a manager of some sort. Not very friendly. How could someone surrounded by toys and children all day be so grumpy? He proved it was possible. Or maybe he was having a rough day. One run-in with a man didn't show his full character, especially if he was as busy as he acted.

The glasses and stiff, button-down shirt gave a diligent and hard-working appearance. Nerds had a way of coming across as always doing something important, even if they weren't. She brushed that idea away too. That was just as judgmental as calling him Mr. Huffypants.

"Aunt Tootie, isn't that the most beautiful tree?" Mark tugged Trudy's hand, pulling her back to the reason they'd come.

She focused where he pointed ... and blinked.

The crooked artificial pine had branches angling in all directions. Three kinds of lights wound in and out of the greenery—two thirds of which flashed on and off in conflicting rhythms. Tinsel dripped in clumps. Old Styrofoam balls, whose silk thread had frayed, leaving gaps in the color covering the orbs, dangled from all the limbs that didn't already hold a plastic snowflake, and several flakes were missing points.

At the top, slightly leaning to the right, an old star with four of its five points still covered in silvery-blue garland, stood with

as much state as possible. And from somewhere in the monstrosity, a tinny tune played, adding to the general cacophony of the toy store, yet conflicting with the “Jingle Bells” blaring from the speakers overhead.

None of this bothered Santa. He sat in a green wingback chair to the left of the tree, chuckling as he handed a squalling baby back to her mother. *This* was what everyone in town told her sister was a must-do? This was the best Temple, Texas, could offer?

“And who do we have here?” Santa’s voice was jolly, full of the expected laughter. He motioned with his white-gloved hands for Mark to join him, and her nephew eagerly released her fingers to do so.

The line was non-existent. Not counting the pause in the doorway, they hadn’t waited more than five minutes. Trudy had expected a snaking line across half the floor and then doubled back again. Maybe it was just early in the season. Although with today being Black Friday, most people were beginning their frenetic scurry to do all the Christmas things. For that matter, the store was relatively empty, considering it was Thanksgiving weekend.

Sale signs dotted the shelves, but no one had to push to reach the items. There were no mad scrambles for building sets, car tracks, video games, or the latest dolls to go with the movie releasing next week. Were the deals in this store pitiful compared to others, or was there a bigger problem?

Trudy shook her head and focused back on her nephew’s conversation with the jolly elf. This shop wasn’t her concern. When she returned to Austin in a few weeks, she could find businesses there who needed her services. For now, she was getting Mom settled in her new place and enjoying some time with family, including the precious boy in front of her.

“And I haven’t been bad this year. Well, Mommy said sometimes I do bad things, but I don’t mean to. Does that count?” Mark raised his eyebrows.

“That definitely counts.” Santa nodded very seriously. “So, what’s on your wish list this year?”

“I want my Nana and my Aunt Tootie to be happy again.” Mark glanced her way.

Trudy swallowed a lump in her throat. Her suit of armor evidently had cracks. How had he seen through her smiles and laughter?

“Maybe Aunt Tootie needs to come tell me her wish list, huh?” Santa winked at her.

“Sure.”

Santa returned his attention to Mark. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“I want a real firetruck that makes sirens and lights up and everything. Maybe even with a ladder and hose.” Mark motioned with his hands to show how tall the toy should reach. “And a puppy.”

“I can only bring puppies if your mommy and daddy sign the permission slip, okay? I’ll talk to them about it between now and the big day. How’s that sound?” Santa tickled Mark’s side, sending a peal of giggles through the area, loud enough to drown out the awful music. “Want to take your picture now?”

They both grinned at the photographer, and then Mark gladly accepted the proffered candy cane. “Look Aunt Tootie!”

“Great, Mark.” Trudy held her purse open. “Why don’t you put it in here to save for after lunch, okay?”

“Don’t you want to talk to Santa too?” Mark faced her, his head cocked to the side.

“I think he’d rather talk to the kids that are waiting right now, Mark-o. I can write him a letter, okay?”

Mark pointed behind her. “But Aunt Tootie, there aren’t any other kids waiting.”

Why couldn’t this toy store be normal at this time of year? And Santa was no help, either, as his lips twitched with mirth behind that stupid beard of his.

“Come on. I’ll go with you. He’s really nice.” Mark tugged her hand.

“Anything for Mark” was coming back to bite her. She followed him to the green chair, but there was no way she was sitting on some strange guy’s knee. No way.

Santa held out a hand to shake. “Tootie?”

“Trudy McNamara, actually.” She shrugged. “Mark couldn’t pronounce *R*’s at first.”

“Ah. Got it.” Santa nodded. “McNamara, huh? You wouldn’t happen to know a Connie, would you?”

“My mom’s name is Connie. Do you know her?” Trudy frowned. Mom had only moved to town the week before.

“Well, I mean, Santa knows everyone, right?” Santa laughed. “But yes. Tell her ...” He glanced Mark’s way and then back. “Tell her an old college friend, Paul Russo, says, ‘Hi,’ would you? He and I are ... *close*. I was real sad to hear about Derek.”

Trudy swallowed again. These emotional boulders building in her throat were going to choke her before all was said and done. “Thanks. We all miss him.”

“Miss him” was an understatement if ever she’d uttered one. But Santa didn’t need to know how hard the last five years had been—especially around this time of year when the man who had made Christmas the best was no longer around.

“You be good, and maybe I’ll find a way to fill your nephew’s Christmas wish for you.” Santa handed her a candy cane.

“Thanks.”

Santa waved as Trudy tugged Mark to pull him away from the tree. “Merry Christmas!”

“Bye.” Trudy couldn’t wish anyone merry this time of year. Not when she didn’t feel it herself. Would she ever be happy at Christmas again?

She stopped short as Mr. Huffypants stalked in front of them, heading the opposite way he’d come earlier. He didn’t even glance up. Maybe the collision hadn’t been completely her fault.

He paid so little attention, it was a wonder other customers weren't getting run into as well.



Something wasn't right. Had Nick dropped a page when he collided with that woman? He shook his head. No, she'd bumped into him. What had she been staring at before? The tree?

The Christmas area was definitely a ... sight. Last year the tree had been preserved in cling wrap for storage. Unfortunately, when Aunt Bett cleaned things out over the summer, the tree fell off the ledge, and chaos ensued. It lived on in the mess of the hastily-thrown-back-together monstrosity standing next to Uncle Paul. Nick made a mental note to have one of the teenage clerks work on that this afternoon before the season really picked up pace.

His eyes scanned the linoleum as he retraced his steps through the store. A jerky movement out of the corner of his eye alerted him to a second close call. By the scent of the perfume that wafted his way, it was the same woman. Go figure. Maybe if he avoided eye contact, she'd walk out of the store and not come back.

That was no way to bring in more money. And the store needed income. The fourth quarter was predicted to be the best fiscally, but his records weren't showing any evidence of it.

Ab. There. He leaned over and jerked the missing sheet out from under a rack of bikes. Maybe this would help his numbers match better.

He glanced out the door as he passed. The clumsy woman buckled her little boy in the back seat. Hopefully the straps on that booster seat were nice and tight. And she drove better than she walked.

Uncle Paul joined him at the window. "Know who that is?"

"No idea." Nick's fingers tightened around the paper in his hand. Inventory was supposed to have been completed an hour

ago. Running behind made him antsy, but Paul was in Santa mode right now. That meant he was more concerned with keeping the children happy than worrying over deadlines or making sure records matched actual stock.

“Trudy McNamara. I dated her mom back in college.”

“You dated someone besides Aunt Addie?” Nick frowned.

“Look, Buster.” Uncle Paul poked Nick in the upper arm. “Just because you don’t date doesn’t mean the rest of us didn’t go out with a few girls before we found the right one. And, honestly, I think Connie could’ve been the right one in another time. But we couldn’t figure out how to make it work back then.”

“Sounds romantic.” Nick rolled his eyes. “And when would I have time to date? I’m too busy managing your store.”

“You’re working too hard. When your grandpa opened this store, he managed it by himself and still found time for family.”

“Well, until the numbers look better, I’m going to have to keep working too hard.” Nick waved the now-wrinkly paper in the air. “I’ve got to finish inventory so I can move on and get other things done this afternoon.”

Paul followed him as he walked toward the office. “Why don’t you hire someone to help you?”

“Do you know someone with skills who’d work for the pittance we could pay?” Nick shook his head. “I’m just hoping Christmas sales will pick up soon. This needs to be one of our best Christmases ever or we might not see another one here.”

“Santa evidently has his work cut out for him this year.” Paul turned a thoughtful expression back to the front door.

Nick shook his head and shut the office door behind him. His uncle might be taking this Santa thing too seriously. Either way, if these numbers didn’t help the ones in the computer look better, the store might not make it through this holiday season, to say nothing of the next. He took a deep breath and slid down into his leather chair.

He input the last digit and hit enter. *Whew!* The numbers added up for one more week. Things were holding even today,

but how long could they stay afloat? For this being the busiest shopping season, the store was practically empty. Did kids not want toys for Christmas anymore? What else could he do?

It might be time to call an owners' meeting. Getting knocked down by that woman earlier would've hurt less than letting his dad and uncles know they'd have to give up this business. Grandpa started it when they were just boys.

Uncle Paul better get busy on that Christmas miracle. Because that's what it was going to take.