



Chapter Three

“I can’t believe you’re dragging me with you to see Santa.” Trudy hiked her purse strap higher on her shoulder. “This is ridiculous.”

“I just want to say, ‘Hi.’” Mom pushed open the toy store doors.

Trudy peeked inside before stepping through, making sure no one with a clipboard was in collision range. The coast was clear, so she followed her mother. Her gaze landed on the tree, and she raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t as pitiful today. Granted, it was still sad, but at least the branches seemed to be in the right slots now, so the shape was more natural.

In her decoration perusal, Trudy missed Mom pausing two steps ahead. For the second time in a week, she walked into someone. Trudy straightened and nudged Mom’s shoulder. “What’d you stop for?”

“There’s a line. I should have expected ...” Mom motioned toward the four families waiting to see Santa. “But somehow, I forgot. Now what? I can’t stand in line. We didn’t bring Mark as an excuse.”

“He’s already talked to Santa once.” Trudy shook her head. Considering this was Mom’s idea in the first place, she sure was

flustered. “Let’s go see if they have that toy for Mark while we wait. If it’s like the other day, things will slow down in a bit.”

“Good idea.” Her mother spun and then froze again. “Which way do you think it’ll be?”

Trudy glanced around more fully than she had the last time she’d been here. “*Hmm*. Not many signs, are there?”

“Okay. Let’s just wander until we find what we’re looking for.” Mom meandered toward the back of the store, avoiding the Santa setup. Trudy followed, glancing down aisles. Games and puzzles. Baby toys. Dolls. Toys for playing house. Building sets. Surely, they were getting closer. Super heroes. *Ab. Vehicles.*

“Here, Mom. Let’s try this aisle.” Trudy motioned toward a rack of metal cars and the tracks to go with them.

“Goodness there are a lot of different firetrucks.” Mom ran her finger down the shelves, checking prices and all the extras the boxes claimed each model had. Sirens. Working ladders. Squirted real water. Nothing without a bell or whistle.

“He mentioned a siren and ladder. But keep in mind that Katt has to live with whatever you buy. And she might not be as thrilled with all the noises and lights.” Trudy leaned closer to try and see what made a style near the top shelf special. Were the lights not working? It wasn’t very bright in here.

The bulbs glowed as hard as they could, but the shine didn’t make it past the middle shelves, and the fixtures weren’t sunny to begin with. This place would be happier and could sell more if they’d change those out.

Trudy took note of other things around her. No displays. Everything was packaged tightly away, no test runs allowed.

“I’m going to look around some more, Mom.” Trudy wandered on, curious about the rest of this place.

“Sure, hon.” Mom waved her off without even looking up from all the options.

This place didn’t exude the happiness a person might expect in a toy store. Trudy studied each aisle, and each time came away wanting more. The shelves were almost sterile, boring, despite

the fun encapsulated in the boxes. The music was Christmas-y, but the joy of the tunes couldn't penetrate the gloominess everywhere else. Nothing but grays and off-whites and blacks. Only the toys themselves had bright colors.

"*Oof!*" Trudy turned a corner and ran into someone—again.

"Seriously?" Mr. Huffypants himself straightened his glasses and stepped back. "Is it physically impossible for you to walk through here without running me over?"

"You think I did that on purpose?" Trudy crossed her arms. "If I wanted to run into a guy to catch his attention, it definitely wouldn't be someone like *you*."

His shirt was grey with light blue stripes today. His khakis had creases down the front that could only come from an iron. The only thing out of place on him was his hair, which stood up in all sorts of crazy ways, waving at her like the only friendly thing about him. What did he do? Run his fingers through it over and over again?

What would it feel like to run her fingers through his hair? Where had that rebellious notion come from? Didn't it negate exactly what she'd just said?

"Excuse me, then. Please, carry on with whatever you were doing that was so all-fired important that it kept your attention from such mundane details as noticing other people around." He held out his arm in a gesture to continue walking.

Trudy forced her jaw to relax ... at least a little. This guy must work here—he definitely fit the unwelcoming atmosphere. But that didn't mean she had to give in to the ugly retorts wanting to escape her own lips and tell him exactly what she thought of his store.

"I'm actually going this way." She turned on her heel to walk in the opposite direction she'd been wandering earlier.

"Which is why you ran into me when I was coming from that direction?" He hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

"I didn't mean to run into you." She huffed out a sigh. "Either time. And the other day, you were as much to blame as I was."

You had your eyes fixed on that clipboard instead of where you were headed.”

“I wasn’t expecting someone to go from a complete stop to moving at ninety miles an hour in a split second right as I passed her.”

She brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek where it had escaped her braid. “Obviously, you’ve never had a nephew tugging you along then.”

“No. I don’t have nephews.” He straightened. “Your nephew?”

“What? You thought he was my son?” She ran a hand down her denim skirt. “No. I’m not old enough—I mean, I *am* old enough, but ... He’s my older sister’s little boy. I’m not married. Not even seeing anyone.”

And why on earth had she added in that last part? He didn’t need to know—or probably even care—about the state of her love life.

What was that look that crossed his face? It was only there for a split second. Then his mask was back in place, frustration and stress settling into his features as if they were right at home.

“Trudy!” Mom’s voice had her turning on her heel again.

Santa followed Mom at a clip faster than she expected from someone so large. He grinned from ear to ear and waved. Was the motion for her or the man behind her?

“We’ve just been talking and came up with the best plan.” Mom grasped Trudy’s arm and squeezed. “Paul here is one of the owners of the store and is looking to hire someone to help revamp it and give it new life. I told him you were perfect for the job.”

“You *what?*”

Trudy glanced over her shoulder. Mr. Huffypants had said the exact same thing at the same time she had.

His look of incredulity must be mirrored in her own expression, but she couldn’t think about that now. Other things

were at stake. Like the fact that she wasn't planning to stay here that long.

"Mom, I'm not looking for a job in Temple. I live in Austin."

"It's just for a little while. And you mentioned staying here until after Christmas." Her mom flipped her hand back and forth in the air as if waving away a pesky mosquito.

"Because I was joking it would take us that long to go through all your boxes." Trudy pressed her fingers against her pounding forehead.

"Trudy, just hear Paul out. I really think you're exactly what he's looking for."



Nick needed to hear his uncle out too. He specifically remembered telling him they couldn't afford to hire anyone right now. Definitely not someone who couldn't even walk through a store without running into the manager ... and then acted like it was his fault instead of hers.

"Temple is really being revitalized right now. Stores left and right are updating and coming back to life after being in slumps for years—especially independently owned stores. My brothers and I are looking for someone who can introduce innovative ideas—bring new life to the Emporium. Your mom tells me you have the skills we need." His uncle sure trusted this lady Nick had never seen before.

"Uncle Paul, a word?" Nick motioned his head to the side. Maybe he could quickly talk some sense into his uncle before this situation worsened.

"Excuse us just one moment, won't you, Connie?" Paul squeezed the lady's hand and followed Nick down the dress-up clothes aisle. "What's wrong, Nick? You said yourself we needed fresh ideas."

"I told you we couldn't afford to pay someone what they'd deserve for such ideas." Nick thrust his fingers through his

hair. *Ugh*. Every strand stuck straight up. How messy had it been earlier? So much for making any kind of good first impression. Or second impression. Not that he wanted to impress Trudy.

“I’ll pay her salary from my own bank account. Don’t worry about that.” Paul turned.

“Uncle Paul.” Nick caught his sleeve and waited until his uncle faced him once more. “Why are you so sure *she’s* the one we need? How do you even know these people?”

“Remember what I told you the other day? I dated Connie for a year and a half in college. Even though I haven’t seen her since then doesn’t mean I don’t know her anymore.” Paul’s smile reached all the way to his ears. “And if Trudy is anything like her mom, she’s *exactly* what we need.”

Something in Paul’s statement sent Nick’s heart into a staccato rhythm. Was there more than one meaning to those words? He didn’t have time to find out, because Paul was already back to the women. Nick took a steadying breath and followed. No point in staying here and having no say in the matter. If he had to work with this klutz, he wanted to be sure the terms were clear.

“Okay. Let’s get down to business and see if you’re amenable to helping me.” Paul rubbed his hands together.

“Shouldn’t you be talking to little kids right now?” Nick pointed back toward the Santa station.

“I put up a sign that said I’d be back in fifteen minutes. So, let’s talk fast.” Paul turned to Trudy again.

“I’m sorry. I’m really not interested. I only came up here to help Mom get settled in her new house. I have a roommate in Austin, and several job leads there.” Trudy shot a dirty look at her mom—again.

“You wouldn’t be working fulltime.” Her mom piped in. “Paul said it would be a ‘when-you-could’ basis. He knows it’s the holidays. And that you’re helping me. But he figured maybe you’d have a few spare hours each day to help them implement

some new ideas. Maybe update their website. A few things like that.”

“I can’t exactly snap my fingers and update a website.” Trudy snapped, adding emphasis to her words. “It takes time. Everything has to make sense and be easy to navigate. And I don’t know what kind of ideas he’s looking for in here either. I know it needs help, but why me?”

Paul pointed at Connie. “Your mom said you majored in design.”

“Yes. But this is bigger than design, isn’t it? Sounds like you need to change things to bring in more money.” Trudy sent a glance Nick’s way.

Had she heard his conversation with Uncle Paul?

“I’m not going to lie. The store needs help.” Paul shook his head. “My brothers and I had no head for business, so we simply kept doing what our father had done. Since Nick started here, he’s been fighting basically to keep things afloat. And done a good job. But we need more.”

“How about you?” Trudy directed the question to Nick. “Thoughts? Feelings?”

“Me? I’m just the manager. I take orders from Uncle Paul, Uncle Andy, and Dad.” Nick shrugged, caught off guard by her question. Why did she care how he felt?

“You said this place needs help too. What do you mean?” Paul leaned toward Trudy, as if ready to soak in whatever she might say.

“Everything is dark and dingy. The place doesn’t come across as joyful. It’s hard to find things. There are no signs to tell customers where dolls are versus blocks. Your Christmas display is awful. And your manager keeps running into me.” Trudy ticked each point off on her fingers, a gleam in her eye as she spouted the last one.

Paul raised an eyebrow Nick’s way. “Running into you?”

“My fault as much as his.” Trudy held up her hands with a grin. “Neither of us was paying attention.”

“Speak for yourself.” Nick muttered.

“I usually do.” Trudy winked at him.

The nerve!

“And I agree your website needs work. I tried to find out when I could bring Mark to see Santa and couldn’t find anything. I finally asked the neighbors, who recommended this place.”

“Will you at least help us with that, then?” Paul asked. “I promise to pay whatever you quote, even if it’s double due to the holidays.”

“I don’t care about that.” She waved her hand in the air.

She didn’t? Nick would’ve pegged her as the type to soak up this time of year and relish every moment, considering she’d brought her nephew in to see Santa the day after Thanksgiving. Had something set her against Christmas? Surely not the stress of meeting financial deadlines that had hardened his own heart toward it.

“Let me think about it. If I can swing it, I’ll stop by tomorrow to work out details.”

“Great.” Paul grabbed her hand and pumped it up and down. “See you tomorrow, then.”

Trudy shook her head. “I said I’d think about it.”

“I know. But I can tell a Christmas miracle when it walks in my store.” Paul winked.

“I’m not a Christmas miracle or any other.” Trudy shook her head. “If anything, I’m probably bad luck around the holidays.”

“How can anyone who helped me find Connie again be bad luck?”

Trudy took a step back.

She looked warily from Uncle Paul to her mom and back. Were they thinking the same thing?

No way.