



## *Chapter Two*

“Oh man. Look at this one.” Trudy passed a crayon drawing to Mom across the piles in the floor.

Mom smiled as she studied the sketch. “You must’ve been about second grade or so when you drew this. Wasn’t that the year you went ice skating?”

“I think so.” Bitterness nudged at the edges of the memory’s sweetness. Ice skating had been her idea. After that year Dad insisted it not make future lists. His ankles protested for three days.

“What’s this?” Trudy’s sister Katt waved a stack of envelopes from the room’s other corner.

The paper crinkled as Mom accepted it and touched the writing on the front. “Letters.”

“That’s not Dad’s handwriting, is it?” Katt leaned back against the wall.

“No.” Mom smiled and pulled a note from one of the envelopes. “These are from Paul.”

It’d been three days since Trudy took Mark to see Santa, and in that time, she’d forgotten the message she’d promised to pass on. “Paul? Paul Russo?”

Mom’s head snapped up. “How did you know his last name?”

“I met him Friday.” Trudy frowned. “He’s playing Santa down at the toy store. When he heard my last name, he asked if I knew a Connie. He said you were in college together and was sad to hear about Dad.”

Her mom laughed. “He *knew* me all right. We dated for a year and a half.”

“Dated?” Trudy rocked back on her heels.

“Yes. Dated.”

“You know—that thing where people go out, get to know each other, see if they’re suitable for marriage?” Katt shook her head.

Trudy did the responsible thing and stuck her tongue out at her older sister. No need to be snarky.

“How are we just now finding out about Paul?” Katt pulled a photo from the same box. “Is this you and him?”

“Yes. That was at a banquet we attended together.” Mom barked a short laugh and tapped the picture. “I’m glad those bangs are out of style. I worked so hard to get them looking just so back then.”

“So, you’re telling me you dated Santa?” Trudy still couldn’t wrap her brain around this.

“He wasn’t Santa back then.” Mom passed the picture her way. “See?”

The early 80s styles were prominent in the snapshot. Paul was thinner in the photo than he was now, although no telling how thick he was in real life. Many Santas padded their bellies. And his hair had been a light brown instead of the white beard adorning his chin. A brown just a shade different from the chestnut color on Mr. Huffypants. Why was she thinking of *him* again?

“Wasn’t Mark wanting a new toy the other day?” Mom’s change in subject pulled Trudy back to the present.

“Doesn’t Mark want a new toy *every* day?” Katt rolled her eyes. “I’m sure he does. But he doesn’t need anything. Have you seen his room lately? I could start my own toy store.”

“For Christmas. He mentioned wanting something when he was watching that show a few days ago. What was it?” Mom snapped her fingers.

“He was watching a show? What show?” Katt frowned. “You know he doesn’t need that much screen time.”

“Was it the fire truck?” Trudy passed the old picture back to her mom. “He asked Santa for one.”

Mom nodded. “I wonder if they’d have one down at that toy store.”

“Wanting to see what Paul looks like now?” Katt raised an eyebrow.

A shudder ran through Trudy, even though her sister joked. Mom couldn’t possibly be interested in any other man than Dad, right? And definitely not one who liked to dress up as a fat guy in a red suit.

“He was a good friend. I’d love to say *bello* again.”

“Please don’t buy my child tons of toys just to have an excuse to check out your old flame.” Katt tossed a wadded-up piece of paper at Mom.

“Would I do that?” Mom might feign innocence, but there was sure to be a stack of presents under the tree come Christmas, most with Mark’s name on them.

“Mom, seriously.”

“Okay, okay.” Mom pushed off the floor and stretched. “I could use a break.”

“We’ve only been at this for fifteen minutes.” Trudy motioned to all the boxes. “If you hadn’t moved all this junk, you wouldn’t have to go through it now to figure out where to put it. This is what happens when you downsize your house but not your possessions.”

When Mom left the house she’d been in for almost all of Trudy’s twenty-three years, neither girl expected she would simply take everything to the new house without discarding some of it. Now they were stuck sorting boxes that could have been donated or purged beforehand.

“Yeah, yeah.” Mom sat back down. “Who’s the mom here anyway?”

Katt laughed. “So, should I be on the lookout for other old letters from boyfriends? Maybe one from the Easter bunny?”

“You’re so funny.” Mom tucked the letters into a *keep* box. “Just wait until you get a bit older. See how all your old boyfriends turn out.”

“She had plenty. She could end up with one for every holiday.” Trudy lobbed the tease across the room even though her heart wasn’t completely in it. It was hard enough that Mom was moving past the life she’d built with Dad. Seeing her happy and thinking about other men was nigh on excruciating.

“Well, at least I was willing to go out and try to have a relationship. I’d much rather have lots of old boyfriends than never have any.” Katt tossed something else toward Trudy, but Trudy ducked at the last second.

“Okay girls. Enough.” The Mom voice was back. Even though they were both adults, the stern tone still came out every now and then when their mother thought they needed a reminder of how to behave.

They settled back into their rhythm, moving things from the boxes in front of them to either a *keep* stack, a trash bag, or a *donate* pile. No wonder her mom hadn’t wanted to go through all these items before. There was a lot.

Containers were full of things their dad had stuck back at one time or another, most for an indiscernible reason. Computer parts, old CDs, pieces of paper with scribbles in a technical language no one in the house spoke anymore, and other paraphernalia from random jobs Dad had worked through the years would probably all be tossed.

The way Mom talked a little while ago, it was as if they were tossing Dad out too. Sure, he was gone. Nothing could change that or bring him back. The heart attack almost five years ago hadn’t killed him, but the car accident it caused had. And the

circumstances couldn't be reversed. But did they have to move on so completely?



"I'm sorry I can't give you better news. Especially this time of year. But there's no other way to say it. We can't afford another year like this." Nick leaned over the conference table and met the eyes of his dad and two uncles, trying to drive home the situation's gravity.

"We can't close." Dad pounded his fist lightly on the stack of figures before him. "We can't. I won't see Dad's hard work go down the drain like that."

"Nick's not saying he wants to close the store, James." Paul patted his brother's shoulder. "He simply wants us to know the truth of the situation. And the truth is, we need more customers."

"Have you tried putting out ads?" Uncle Andy flipped his paper's edges with one hand while stroking his beard with the other. "Newspaper ads used to help."

"We've run various ads, including one for Black Friday. We have notices up all over the place about our Santa, which usually brings more people." Nick shook his head. "But it's not working this year. If anything, we're getting less traffic."

"No offense to you, Paul." Dad chuckled. "I'm sure it's not your Santa."

"See if you make the nice list this year." Paul shook a finger at him, but mirth danced in his eyes. "We can turn things around. We only need some fresh ideas. Tons of other small businesses in town are being revitalized and brought back to life. This is a great era for Temple."

"I'm open to new ideas. But where are we going to find them?" Nick ran a hand through his hair. His mother would cringe, because it always left strands sticking up every which way, but he was past

caring. His uncles and dad had hired him to run this store for them, and instead he was letting them down, losing all the hard work they and their dad had put into the Emporium over the last four decades.

“There’s got to be a way.” Paul tapped a pencil eraser against his stack. “I’m praying about it. It’s too early to give up the fight. I mean, a herd of last-minute Christmas shoppers could turn things around, and this will all be a moot point.”

“They’d have to buy almost all our inventory to make a dent in the numbers. We don’t just need holiday shoppers. We need them all year long. Sure, that would help us stay in the black this year, but what about next year ... or the next?” Nick paced the length of the room. It wasn’t long enough, only five steps each way.

“There aren’t any other toy stores in town, right? We’re the only one?” Andy scratched his head.

“The big box stores carry a bunch of everything. But no other places have *only* toys.” Nick stopped and tapped his fingers against his thigh. “Our competition is probably online.”

“So, how’s our website doing?” Dad scribbled notes along the margins of the pages Nick had carefully prepared last night.

“I don’t know. I hardly have time to look at it, to say nothing of updating things. I have something on there about Santa. And a list of our specials each week this month.” Nick paced again.

“Someone to update the internet site would probably help more than anything, right? Aren’t we supposed to be on all that social media now?” Paul leaned back and patted his belly, a bit slimmer out of his red suit.

“Yes, but I don’t have time. I’m too busy trying to keep up with the brick-and-mortar part of our store.”

“Our store isn’t made of brick.” Andy frowned. “Maybe that’s your problem.” Andy was the oldest of the three brothers and not always up on the current terminology.

“It’s just a phrase. I meant the physical store itself instead of its online presence.” Nick sighed. “Feel free to do some research

or try any ideas you might have as long as they're not outrageous or expensive. I know how much this place means to you all."

There was nothing else Nick had to say, so he gathered his things and headed back to his office, leaving the brothers discussing ... or at least talking in circles. He held little hope they'd come up with anything new.

They'd taken over when Grandpa Russo retired. When Nick graduated from college five years ago, he'd been granted the manager position. He'd discovered not much had changed since Grandpa started selling toys here forty years earlier. Nick updated things as much as he knew how, but his two marketing courses hadn't prepared him for a mess like this. He'd majored in accounting and business, thinking those subjects would be more helpful.

"How do you feel about this place?"

The question caught Nick off guard. He turned from his computer to face Dad, who leaned in the doorway. Nick shrugged.

"It doesn't seem like you really love this store the way your grandpa did." Dad moved a pile and slid into the chair in front of Nick's desk.

"I don't know that I *feel* anything more than loyalty to this place. Grandpa was passionate, but I never understood his zeal for toys. I do want to make it work to carry on his legacy."

"He wouldn't have wanted it to become a burden though." Dad leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. "And he wasn't passionate about the toys so much as he was about making children happy. There was nothing he loved more than God and your grandma, but seeing a child's face light up with joy came a close third. That's why he wanted to own a toy store."

What could Nick say to that? Sure, it was fun to make a kid happy, but he had also witnessed children throwing fits, screaming until they got whatever they wanted, or getting tugged around by their moms for walking too slow. Too often

families had to tell their children, 'No.' Those weren't as much fun as the first part. How had his grandfather felt about that?

"Mom wants to know if you're bringing anyone to Christmas dinner." Dad glanced around the office instead of meeting Nick's eyes.

"Not planning on it." Nick tapped his pen against his desk. "Any reason?"

"She mentioned someone's daughter who wasn't married and ... short story is, the moms think you two would be just perfect for each other." Dad smirked. "I told her you're a grown man who can make decisions for yourself."

"Thanks. Can you also tell her to quit worrying about me?" Nick ran his fingers through his hair again. "I'm doing okay. Maybe I'll settle down someday, but I want to have a way to provide for a girl. And right now ..."

"I know. And I feel like this is partly my fault." Dad blew out a deep breath. "When you took over as manager, all of us stepped into semi-retirement as though it were the best thing ever. We forgot the part about it being *semi*- and left you to deal with a lot of this alone. That's not how it should've gone down."

"I'm the manager. I'm supposed to be able to manage the store so you don't have to worry about it."

"But you're also my son. And this store is still one third mine. So, I'm going to do all I can to help you pull it back into shape."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You bet." Dad stood and brushed off his pants. "I better get home and give your mom the bad news."

Nick frowned. "You're going to tell her the store is in the red?"

"No. I'm going to tell her you want her to butt out of your love life." Dad winked.

Nick shook his head. One more worry in his life. Just what he needed. Sure, it wasn't a huge problem to have a mom who wanted to set him up with a friend's daughter, but if he wanted a



date, he could get his own. Couldn't he? It'd been a while since he'd even tried.

If he were going to look for someone, she'd have to be level-headed, understanding of his long hours, and maybe even a blonde. A memory of a brunette girl tugging a little boy through the store three days before ran through his head, the scent of her floral perfume clinging to his thoughts. Why had she popped up in these musings? She was nothing like what he wanted.

He blinked a few times before opening their website. Was there anything else he could do to make it bring in customers? Because unless they saved this store, he couldn't afford to date anyone. Not even absent-minded klutzes who wore flowery perfume.