

1 SOMETHING'S WRONG



“Look out!” twelve-year-old Moses shouted from the passenger seat as his brother hit the brakes. The truck tires squealed, barely avoiding two men in animated conversation.

“They appeared out of nowhere,” Mitch complained.

Maddie nodded. “Oh! That’s Mr. Gibson, talking to someone I don’t recognize. Looks like they’re done now.”

Mitch whipped into a parking place just vacated at Sunflower’s grocery store, and they ran after their friend. “Mr. Gibson! Mr. Gibson! Wait,” they shouted.

They caught up with Mr. Gibson, but the other man had disappeared. Moses blurted, “Sorry we almost hit you and the guy you were talking to.”

“I didn’t notice ya,” Mr. Gibson muttered.

“We’ve been praying a lot for you,” Moses continued.

Mr. Gibson was silent, so Mitch laid a hand on his arm. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Life jist goes from bad to worse.” Mr. Gibson shook his head. “First, my Fay is gone, and now that guy. Everyone in town will know ‘fore too long. This is gonna be some Christmas. Oh, I ‘spose there is one thing. I need yer help fixin’ a kennel.”

“I’ll come tomorrow,” promised Mitch, and Mr. Gibson disappeared into the store.

Mitch shrugged and glanced at Maddie. “You and Moses can do the shopping, and I’ll run over to the hardware store. Try to be done in fifteen minutes. We need to be at church by seven.”

“Sure thing,” Maddie tucked a curl behind her ear and shivered. “Brrr. It *does* feel like it could snow!”

“Thirteen inches by noon tomorrow!” Moses exclaimed. “I can’t wait!” They walked inside, and Moses got the second-to-last cart. “The wheels have a bit of an issue,” he observed.

“We’ll be okay without one,” Maddie said. “We don’t have a big list.”

“But, we’ll be more efficient with one.” Moses’ grin told Maddie he had something up his sleeve.

The comforting smell of fresh bread enveloped the bakery area, and “Deck the Halls” rang over the speakers. “First item: butter,” Maddie read to Moses from their shopping list. He dashed down the aisle between a walk and a run slightly tipping their cart to make the corner at that pace. “Excuse me, and Merry Christmas!” he said, while shoppers cleared the area.

When Maddie finally caught up with Moses, he grinned. “See what great progress we make when I lead!” He stood nearly eye to eye with her since growing several inches over the past year; Moses felt gratified.

“So that’s why you wanted the cart,” Maddie laughed.

“When the store’s this crowded, and you go with speed, people give you extra space.”

Moses waited while Maddie picked out items in the dairy section and thought about Mr. Gibson. They’d met him years ago when he was the city’s animal catcher. Now, he was retired and ran his own dog boarding business. His wife died just six weeks ago, and he was taking it very hard.

Moses heard a familiar voice and saw Maddie talking with Faith Parker. It seemed they always ran into people they knew at the store. Faith nodded at Moses. “As I was saying, Mom and I are sending out cookie boxes to our older relatives. So, we needed to get ingredients.”

“Good for you,” Maddie said. “That will be a great surprise for them.”

“We hope so,” Faith responded. “I’ve had fun watching everyone stock up for the storm, or I suppose that’s what they’re doing. They all seem to be getting milk.”

Maddie laughed. “You wouldn’t want to run out of milk in a snowstorm! Can you imagine having to eat dry cereal? Are you coming to prayer meeting?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Great, then I’ll talk to you later.”

Moses took off, with Maddie right behind. As they rounded a corner, a tall man exclaimed, “Excuuuusseeeee you.”

After they got out of earshot, Moses said, “Apparently he’s not in the Christmas mood! I was at least four feet away.”

“Or more. He had plenty of room,” Maddie agreed. “Okay, we need noodles and crackers, and Mom just texted asking us to pick up white chocolate chips for Lissa’s baking.”

“I’ll get the white chocolate chips—doesn’t that sound strange—white chocolate—and meet you at the checkout!” Moses said.

Moses took the corner with more caution this time, since he didn’t want to spoil anyone else’s evening. He found the chocolate chips and then stopped to watch two employees set up a holiday display using soda cartons.

One worker handed red Coke cartons up to a man on a ladder, who stacked them in a column. Moses recognized the ladder guy as Roger, a fellow Christian who usually worked the produce section. The store’s loudspeakers weren’t playing any music at the moment, so Roger sang “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and snapped in time while waiting for the next carton. He noticed Moses. “Guess what we’re building?”

“I’m not sure,” Moses honestly replied. “But it looks interesting!”

“C’mon. Can’t you tell what it is? Try it from that angle.” Roger pointed, but never stopped singing and snapping. “Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere’—hey, that sounds good. Maybe I should ask for tips.”

The other employee laughed at the idea, which Roger seemed to appreciate. Then, the employee quipped, “You’re not paying attention to what you are doing. Turn that carton around. And then the stack next to it should be the gray diet Coke cartons, to look like the fireplace lining.”

“Hey, you ruined it!” Roger groaned. “I was letting this young man guess.”