
Chapter 3



Clay observed as Mandy talked to Lisa and Nick. She seemed to be feeling better if her laughter was any indication. He knew Mandy and her cousin were close.

He scrolled through his phone, deleting junk emails containing sales for items he'd never buy because he didn't have anyone to shop for outside his small family.

But the idea he'd had earlier was beginning to gel. He closed his email app and opened up his Internet app, punching "*The Twelve Days of Christmas*" lyrics into the search bar to remind himself of the items on the traditional list of gifts.

There was no way he could replicate that. He saw it done on a television sitcom, and it was hilarious but destructive. Who wants six geese a-layin' for Christmas?

Maybe there would be an alternative. He'd have to think about that. He wasn't sure how long he'd been looking at his phone, but suddenly, there was Mandy with a tray laden with all the fixings of a Fried Catfish Dinner.

"Looks like Roxy has outdone herself." Clay rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“She cooks the best fish in the area, I think.” Mandy arranged the dishes in front of him and then stood back, surveying her work. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Maybe dessert later?”

Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, which was an improvement on her expression, earlier, and he was glad. “I’ll check on you in a little bit. Tea holding out okay?”

“I’m good. Thanks, Mandy.”

“You’re welcome, Clay.”

She picked up a pitcher of tea and sashayed between the tables, more confident than earlier. Watching her, Clay resolved, then and there, that Mandy would have a Christmas she would never forget.

Instantly, niggling doubts threatened to make him change his mind. Could he pull it off? What would she think when she learned it was him? Was it a bad idea? Would the attention make her uncomfortable? Would she, and the community in general, take it the wrong way? It wasn’t like he had any designs on her.

Did he?

Thrusting the negative self-talk away, he decided it was time for him to take a few chances. *You only live once.*

The next customer that came through the door gave him pause. He didn’t think he’d ever seen him before. Glancing at Mandy, he saw her pale.

Clay was on high alert.

WHAT WAS THOMAS DOING HERE?

Maybe he hadn’t seen her.

Mandy slid behind the counter, where Darcy was filling some glasses.

“Are you okay?” Darcy’s brows gathered as she looked at Mandy.

Mandy glanced over at the new customer. “I think so, but could you wait on table seven?”

“Sure thing.” Darcy looked over at the table in question, then back at Mandy, a question in her eyes. “Do you know that guy?”

Mandy nodded. “We dated some in college before I went to Lexington. He showed up back in the summer.”

“Not someone you want to be with?”

“Not at all.” Mandy took a deep breath. “Let’s just say he has a wandering eye. But for some reason decided *he* could wander all he wanted but became a jealous lunatic when I talked to another guy or wanted to plan something with my friends.” She glanced toward the table he occupied. “He has a mean streak.”

Darcy frowned. “That took ‘let’s just say’ to a whole ‘nother level.”

“I know. Lawyers can be a wordy breed. Even future ones.” Mandy sighed. “I thought the last time he came up here, I made it clear it was over.”

“I dated a guy like that once.” Darcy looked at her closely. “Be careful. It’s not a big jump from nuisance to stalking, and from stalking to assault.”

Mandy nodded. “I’ll try to avoid him if you can wait on that side of the dining room.”

Darcy put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “Be glad to.” She looked toward Clay. “Might not be a bad idea to show him you’re friends with law enforcement.” With a raised eyebrow, she said, “Looks like Clay could use some more tea.”

Feeling her lips twitch suddenly Mandy felt lighter. Thomas might scare her a little, but as long as Clay was here? With Clay here, she could slay dragons.

And if not? She had a feeling he would slay them for her. She couldn't decide if that image calmed her or excited her, or both.

Either way, his tea glass wasn't going to fill itself.