
Chapter 2



C lay pondered Mandy’s problem while he anticipated his fish dinner. Without fail, the filets would be fried perfectly, flaking just the way good catfish should. Somewhere, some fancy restaurant was missing out not having Roxy and Darcy cook for them.

But then there was Mandy. He glanced up, watching her flit from table to table with her tea pitcher and coffee pot. What would it be like to have a family so close, so devoted to one another, that when even one member was out of pocket, it made a world of difference?

He had the spark of an idea, but he wasn’t sure how to go about it. He didn’t want to barge in where he wasn’t welcome.

Mandy’s situation was none of his business. Besides, she would probably think it was strange if he expressed interest in her. Was it strange? Five years wasn’t as much of an age gap as it used to be.

He wasn’t sure where this was coming from, but one thing he did know—he needed to take it slow.

To his knowledge, Mandy wasn’t one to have a boyfriend

hanging around all the time, but then he hadn't been around her since he dated her cousin, Lisa. He looked at his phone, noting the date. Two and a half weeks to Christmas. Twenty days.

That gave him about a week to put together Operation Mandy's Epic Christmas.

MANDY RUBBED her elbow where she whacked it against the counter, stopping at her cousin's knowing grin.

"Slow down, we're in no rush." Lisa laughed. "Don't tell me you got a bit of the Reno klutz gene, too?"

"What?"

"Nothing." Lisa raised her brows.

Wait a minute. Was she blushing? Her face had to be glowing, it was so warm. She couldn't help herself. She glanced toward the table where Clay was sitting, hoping he hadn't seen her awkward moves.

Stop it, Mandy Lou.

She flashed her eyes at her cousin, trying to send her a message telepathically. She was trying to tamp down her freckle-faced blush. "Don't you think it's a little warm in here? The ovens heat the place up better than the heating system."

Apparently, telepathy did not run in the Reno family as much as awkwardness.

Lisa did not get the silent message and arched a brow. "Feels fine to me, but we just came in from the cold." She tilted her head a little, narrowing her eyes. "Seemed pretty cozy with Clay over there."

"Stop it. Clay was just being nice to me." Mandy handed them their menus and glanced over at the gentleman in

question, smiling when he glanced over at her. Now she was self-conscious. Time to change the subject. Quickly.

Nick nodded. “He’s a nice guy.”

“I agree.” Mandy stuck her tongue out at Lisa, then chuckled. Her load was lighter, for sure.

“Better watch it, your face’ll freeze like that!” Lisa shook her head. “I’m sorry about your mom and dad. That’s tough. What did Grandma have to say about them not getting home in time for Christmas?”

“Oh, you know Grandma. She always looks on the bright side. Said we’d make it fine, that she was glad to have some help dragging out the Christmas decorations this year.”

Lisa chuckled. “I’m sure Grandpa is happier about that than Grandma.”

“Right?” Mandy sent her cousin a genuine smile—her first of the day—and then it drooped. “I was looking forward to having them home, and who knows? This may be my last Christmas to live at home.”

“Are you done with your semester?” Nick drained his glass and held it out for more, Mandy filling it before he could say a word.

“I’ve got two papers due at the end of the week, then I should get my grades next week.” She felt a little shiver. “Prepping for the bar exam will be next.”

Lisa shook her head. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m not big on surprises. Shouldn’t you be able to plan for almost any eventuality?”

“Sorry, Mandy. And welcome to the real world.” Lisa elbowed her fiance and chuckled. “I certainly didn’t plan for *this* one to come back into my life, and look at us now.”

“Being a grown-up stinks sometimes.” Mandy twisted her lips, embarrassed. “Grandma called me on it, though.”

Lisa grinned. “What did she say?”

“You know Grandma. She called me Amanda Lou and gave me her sermon in a sentence.”

The two young ladies each straightened their spine, quoting their grandmother verbatim. “We don’t know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future.”

Mandy shrugged. “It’s right up there with ‘pretty is, as pretty does.’ I guess that means it’ll be up to Grandma and me to make Christmas for the rest of the bunch. We’ll be a little smaller group this year anyway since Uncle Tom, Aunt Ginger, and their crew aren’t coming down until New Year’s.”

“Let me know how I can help.” Lisa glanced over at Nick. “Aunt Christine has always been the Christmas elf in the family.”

He laughed. “Oh?”

Mandy nodded. “Really. You’ve heard the phrase, ‘Christmas threw up in here?’”

Nick laughed, and Lisa snorted a little.

“Oh, yeah. Mom can make an over-the-top Christmas out of paper plates and dollar store garland and have it look like something out of *Southern Living*.”

Lisa bounced on her stool. “She’s right. One year, she created a ‘Candyland’ that started at the end of the sidewalk and reached into every room in the house.” She leaned into her fiancé and grabbed his arm. “She even found candy-striped bathroom tissue. TMI?”

“And don’t forget the year of the snowmen.” Mandy’s heart was feeling lighter already. “She had dozens of them. And to top it all off, she had us out there spreading biodegradable fake snow on the grass right before the family arrived. It was seventy-five degrees with a chance of thunderstorms that year, and we had to wait until the last minute to put it out, in case it rained.” She grimaced a little. “Remember the bigger-than-life-sized snowman that greeted everyone at the door?”

Lisa's guffaw came out unexpectedly, and she clapped her hand over her mouth as she looked around at all eyes on her and Nick shaking his head in mirth. "Sorry. I'll try to keep it down. That snowman was just creepy. I haven't felt the same about snowmen, since—and don't get me started on Frosty."

Mandy nodded, matter-of-factly. "You know where I stand on the Frosty issue. Same."

Nick looked from one female Reno to the other. "Frosty?"

The girls exchanged glances and nodded in tandem.

Lisa began. "Have you ever wondered about the trauma those kids were subjected to when a snowman—a *snowman*—came to life?"

"And," Mandy continued, "how selfish little what's-her-name—"

"It was Karen." Lisa turned to Nick. "You can't say we don't know our holiday cartoon characters."

"Noted." Nick shook his head and smiled into his tea glass.

Mandy nodded. "Oh yes. Anyway, how selfish was it for her to expect Frosty to take her into a greenhouse? I always thought it made no sense whatsoever. Hello? Melting?" She snorted. "On top of that, what was she thinking following a snowman that far from home, anyway?"

Nick frowned, scratching his head. "Never really considered evaluating 'Frosty, the Snowman' from a realistic perspective."

"Well, now you have." Lisa leaned on the table toward him. "We take these things very seriously in the Reno family."

"A familial group of critical-thinkers ... Sounds like I'm getting into the right family." Nick chuckled.

"You have no idea. Wait until you hear our analysis of *Gilligan's Island*." Mandy looked up as the sleigh bells chimed once again. "I'll be back in a minute to refill your drinks."

"Thanks, Mandy."

She left Nick and Lisa perusing the menu and waffled over whether to seat the next customers or heed the ding that meant “order up!” It was probably Clay’s order since he was having the special tonight. Her decision was made when Darcy came in and greeted the newcomer.