



MARY ANN STEINKE-MOORE

*Mandy's
Song*

**Her gift can offer him a
second chance, but what
will he choose?**

Mandy's Song

Mary Ann
Steinke-Moore

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Watershed Edition, 2020

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0274-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

In loving memory of Michael J. Grembowicz.

I could not have completed the marathon of writing and revising this novel without the support, guidance and encouragement of these people: My Taleblazers critique group: Peggy Archer, Karen Kulinski, Peggy Reiff Miller, Katie Mitschelen, Judith Roth, Fred Longenecker and Sharon Biggs Waller. Revision help and encouragement from Donna Streufert and Doris Holik Kelly. The teacher/writers of the Hoosier Writing Project, Advanced Institute North, especially Kathy Higgs Coulthard and Mary Nicolini. Highlights for Children Foundation members, for awarding me scholarships to the week at Chautauqua and to Rich Wallace's Young Adult Novel workshop. Jama Kehoe Bigger and Dennis Hensley for the encouragement and revision assistance of the Midwest Writers Workshop fellowship. Neal Porter, for liking the first ten pages sent for a critique at Valiska Gregory's Children's Literature Conference, convincing me that publishing Mandy's Song might be possible. Nicola Martinez, for believing in Mandy's Song enough to publish it. The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, especially the Indiana and Michigan chapters, for helpful workshops and networking events. My husband, Richard, and daughters Katherine and Lauren, for supporting me through the highs and lows of this journey.

1

It's funny how life-changing events can start with something so small. Something as insignificant as a doodle in the margin of a calculus notebook.

My stomach was already swirling at the thought of the after-school *Cinderella* audition when I reached third-hour Calc. Erik had gotten there first and sprawled at the desk behind mine, drawing in his spiral notebook. The dark curls on his forehead and the unguarded look on his face combined to make my insides churn like a blender switched to High.

After a cleansing breath and some mental coaching—*Calm down, Mandy!*—I made it to my desk.

Erik folded his long legs so I could get into my seat. "Today is it, right? The big audition?" He did a pencil drum roll. "Riverwood's very own high school musical."

Even with my queasy stomach, I couldn't help laughing. I twisted to face him. "Yeah, it's my dramatic moment. Will she or won't she win a lead senior year? Tune in on Tuesday." My shoulders relaxed. He was so good at breaking up tension. One of the many likeable things about him.

His open notebook caught my attention. I always enjoyed checking out the aliens or birds or trees he drew in the margins.

This sketch was different—disturbing. A fine line at the bottom fractured a peaceful country scene, then got darker and wider with branching cracks as it moved up, ending as a chasm with boulders crumbling in from separate cliffs. An earthquake. Weird. Here in northern Indiana we didn't worry much about them. I leaned in to see it closer.

Erik closed the notebook.

I'm not always smart about keeping my mouth shut when I'm concerned, so I tugged my hair a second then said, "That's dark. Are you illustrating for Stephen King?"

Anger sparked in his blue eyes, but behind that, I sensed...sadness. "Just doodling," he said. It didn't take psychic skill to know that meant *Mind your own business*. He continued. "I heard about that earthquake in Mexico and was thinking about fault lines and fissures."

"You should get together with my dad. He can lecture on that stuff for hours." Some brash part of me urged, *Say it, Mandy. Ask him to dinner to talk geology with your dad.* The rest of me answered, *Right. As if I have the guts to do that. Besides, he's mad at me for snooping at his notebook. And he's not shy. If he was interested, he'd have made a move by now. Hope I haven't been friend zoned.*

I was too busy obsessing about dating him to stop and wonder what was bothering him.

The bell rang. Mr. Wilson pushed up his half-lens glasses and raised his bushy white eyebrows to start lecturing on derivatives.

Class was low-key enough that my stomach settled, mostly. Sensing Erik behind me kept a small quiver going.

He tapped my shoulder as the class wrote equations, and I turned around.

"Excuse me," Erik said, with a lopsided smile. He nodded toward my hair, which was spread over the pages of his notebook, kind of like auburn seaweed. He gently gathered the strands and handed them to me.

"Sorry." I tucked them around the front of my neck, feeling a quiet thrill that he'd touched my hair, along with relief that he wasn't ticked at me anymore. Minutes passed before I could concentrate on calculus.

When class ended, Erik rapped my desk in passing. "Break a leg this afternoon."

"Thanks!" His support meant more than he knew. When I left for school this morning Dad was packing for a research trip to Wyoming while my brother Ryan bugged him for cash, and Mom was struggling to get my toddler sister, Tabitha, dressed. Neither Mom nor Dad mentioned my audition. I know, I know, they were busy. But it was special that Erik remembered.

After class I met my best friend, Shelby, in the lunchroom, one of the few times I can catch her during marching band season.

"How's the Whitacre piece coming?" I asked, after we arranged our trays and sat in our usual corner. She was first chair oboe and had a solo in the next month's fall concert.

"Making progress." She crunched into her taco. "Some of the high notes are still pretty screechy. 'October' has a sweet melody, though, so that helps." She gulped her milk and then waved the glass toward my plate. "Not hungry on tryout day, huh?"

She caught me building a green log cabin from celery sticks. I nodded, and was starting to tell her about Erik's encouragement, when Cait blew through

the door beside us, panicking. Uh-oh. Cait had an angelic voice, but she got even more wired than I did for performances. Her nervousness crackled like a sparkler.

"Hay fever!" she shrieked. "How can I audition like this?" She blew her nose. "I took my meds but they aren't doing anything."

I pointed to an open seat. "Here, Cait. Sit down a minute." I pictured sending turquoise waves of calm her way. We'd been in choir together since freshman year, and she'd reacted like this for every solo or audition, making everyone else jumpy, too. "Let me get you some water. 'Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!' That's what Mrs. Gilman says when I have sinus-y stuff."

Cait perched on the edge of the seat while I hurried to the drink counter and brought back a glass. Water sloshed as she took it out of my hand. "I can't mess up this chance. I've got to get a lead, or I won't have a shot at a music scholarship." She patted her hand with a napkin and sipped.

"What part are you hoping for?" Shelby asked.

"Of course I'd love to get Cinderella, but we know Bates'll give that to Lyndsey." Another sip.

I smirked. "Just because she was Eliza in *My Fair Lady* and Laurey in *Oklahoma*?"

Cait shook her head. Mr. Bates' favoritism was a standard beef among choir members. "Well, the fairy godmother has a good song, but the stepsisters are funny." She drained the glass.

I nibbled a celery stick. "Really, since the stepsisters are comical, having a scratchy voice might not matter. You could ham it up, make it your own."

"Great idea!" Cait rose so fast her chair teetered.

"I'm going to practice 'The Stepsisters' Lament.'" And she flew off as fast as she'd arrived.

"Don't look yet," Shelby instructed in a stage whisper, "but you're being watched. I'd say he approves."

Erik was a couple tables over. Our eyes met for a second before he turned away. His had a softness I'd never seen before. I set the half-eaten celery stick back on my plate.

Shelby wrinkled her nose. "Hey, weren't you trying out for one of the stepsisters? And don't you need a big part for music school applications, too? Why're you helping the competition?"

"Sheesh, she was even more nerve-fried than I am. Had to calm her down before she started twitching." I scooted my chair back. "Besides, there are *two* stepsisters, as well as the godmother. Might be a win-win for us both."

We cleared our trash and returned our trays, and I went to my afternoon classes—wasted effort since my brain was absent.

~*~

The sign on the choir room door read:

Cinderella Auditions
Monday, Sept.10th
3:10 p.m.

Time to face my doom. I breathed deeply—from the *abdomen*, as Mrs. Gilman always said—and pushed open the door. Why was I getting so worked up over this? As Erik said, it was just a high school musical. I'd

been through auditions before. But lately it felt as if the music inside me was bursting to escape, as though it was time to stretch my butterfly wings and shed the chrysalis that had closed me in so long.

I crossed to the choir chairs and scanned the risers for an open seat. Cait waved me over, and I climbed to the second row and plopped down beside her.

In the middle of the front row, one of Lyndsey Van Buren's groupies braided a strand of Lyndsey's hair while they waited for the auditions to start.

Mr. Bates straightened his tie and then brought Lyndsey her music. "Are you rehearsing for Lady-in-Waiting?" he asked the braider.

She did her suck-up-to-the-teacher laugh.

Give me a break.

Bates left to set the stack of sheet music for everyone else on the piano.

"You doing OK?" I asked Cait.

"Better," she said. "I'll be glad when it's over, though."

"Yeah, wish we'd get started. This gives too much time for jitters." I jumped up and sprinted to the piano for our sheet music, just to be moving.

Lyndsey's delicate braid was done, and she was studying the notes. I always thought her carefully-trained voice lacked an inner spark, but had to admit she worked hard and danced well. The Cinderella role did have several dance sequences. Maybe Bates was right that she could handle the part. Maybe. But maybe someone new could do it, too.

That wouldn't be me. With lots of practice, I could get through chorus dance numbers—preferably hidden in the back. My seventh grade ballet recital flashed through my mind. What a disaster. Hot-faced

mortification, both from exertion and embarrassment. Lifting chunky legs and arms, and trying to keep up with the petite gymnasts. Struggling to fit my motions into the rhythm. An elephant among gazelles.

No, dancing wasn't my gift. Even getting taller and slimmer didn't magically bestow coordination. *Fairy Godmother, make me graceful, please.*

Hmmm. The fairy godmother. If I remembered right, the godmother only had one simple dance with Cinderella. With practice, I could manage that. And what fun to be a superhero character who swooped in to help.

The room filled with hopeful performers. Mr. Bates led us through "Ten Minutes Ago," then assigned numbers for audition times. Lyndsey was the third to sing and made no technical mistakes in her performance. She waved goodbye to her group and swept out.

Cait was number 9. After a slightly shaky start, her full, clear voice came through. Soon she loosened up enough to widen her eyes and fold her hands over her heart in a funny exaggeration that drew chuckles from the crowd. Once she finished she raised her eyebrows, questioning, and I gave her thumbs up.

I was twenty-fourth and heard "Ten Minutes Ago" a lot. The current auditioner's warm alto reminded me of the "date" Dad and I took to a Chicago theater when I was eleven. When the lead singer had filled the auditorium with her rich, low voice, an excitement glowed inside me. A feeling of unexpected spring, of waking. *This* was what I wanted to do: to open my heart and sing it out to others. Like that alto. Loudly. On a stage! I'd started voice lessons with Mrs. Gilman the following fall.

"Next," Mr. Bates said, for the twenty-second time, bringing me back to the half-empty choir room. He openly yawned.

Make it fresh, I coached myself, as Number 23 droned on. Don't they say that on T.V. competitions? Make the songs fresh, no matter how many times you've heard them.

"Next."

I stepped in front of the piano. *Ready or not. Let's go for it.* During the introduction I let my shoulders relax, then filled my lungs and sang. For once, I didn't have a cold on tryout day, and my voice soared to the high notes and vibrated on the low ones. I felt Cinderella's rush of surprise when the prince asked her to dance, her joy at getting to know him. The melody surged through me, surprising me with its power, echoing against the back wall. When the last tone drifted away, I grinned, a little dizzy, as if I had been twirling with the prince. So that was what the "zone" felt like. I floated on the cheers of the remaining auditioners. For a minute.

Mr. Bates, his tie loosened, was chatting with the drama teacher. Since they were chuckling, I hoped they weren't discussing my audition.

Some trace of leftover energy charged my voice. "Excuse me, Mr. Bates, but I'd like to repeat the song when you're listening to it." *Did I say that? Out loud?*

He frowned. "After three years, I'm quite familiar with your voice, Ms. Thorpe. You're excused. Next?"

What a jerk. One would have thought I was Oliver, asking for more gruel.

I set the music on the piano and strode out, head high. No matter who Bates chose, I knew I'd nailed that performance.

As soon as I started down the hall, a familiar voice reached me.

"Hey, girl, how'd it go?" Shelby swatted damp curls out of her eyes.

"You're done with marching band already? We *were* in there a long time." I opened my locker and grabbed my backpack. "I did great. Maybe fantastic." I slammed the locker door. "And the jerk wasn't even listening. He and Mrs. Talbott had more important things to jaw about." I tugged my hair free of the backpack straps and then stomped toward the front door.

"Just a sec," Shelby said. "I've got something that might take your mind off the evil Bates."

"What?" I turned and saw smile lines around Shelby's eyes.

"I just spotted He Whose Name I Have Heard Too Often out in the parking lot. Maybe he's waiting for *someone* to finish her audition."

"Quit messing with me, woman!" I jostled her elbow with my backpack. "Catch you later." I flew out the side door.

Erik faced away from me in the school lot, watching a hawk circle above the river. Birds. What was it with him and birds?

My stomach flipped over—again. I crossed the pavement, savoring the tilt of his head, the slope of his shoulders, his long, blue-jeaned legs.

The wind stirred his dark curls, and he turned, as if he sensed me watching him. He nodded toward the sky. "You ever thought how free hawks are? Floating way up in the open air, above the trees." A frown shadowed his eyes, reminding me of melancholy photos in a history text.

Did he expect an answer? Clouds dawdled through the hazy blue. "They must have a great view from there, seeing the ground laid out below." I made a face. "Though it's kinda harsh for the little critters they see." I met his eyes, remembering the hint of sadness in them during Calculus. "You OK?"

He straightened his shoulders. "Sure. I'm fine. So, how was the big audition?"

"I think I did all right." I shrugged. "Too bad Bates was too busy gabbing to notice."

Erik's dark eyebrows almost met. "That stinks! Why's he teaching if he doesn't want to do the job right?"

"Definitely not for the pay." I did an evil villain laugh. "Must be for—the *power!*" We cracked up. "Hey, speaking of jobs," I added, "don't you usually work at the nursing home on Mondays?"

"Excuse me. Woodhaven is not a *nursing home.*" He smirked, deepening his dimples. "It's a *rehabilitation unit and residential care facility.* Anyway, I subbed yesterday and got today off. Want a ride home?"

"Sure!" Inwardly, I was bouncing like my baby sister Tabitha. *Yes, yes, yes! I get to ride in Erik's car! Could Shelby be right that he was waiting for me?* But to him I said, in an amazingly normal voice, "I'm not up to a hike in this heat. Thanks." Maybe I am a good actress. I plunked my backpack on the floor of his rusty car, and climbed in next to the CD holder on his front seat. A hint of his aftershave wafted over, and I was briefly stunned.

A humid haze blurred the trees on the riverbank as we passed the park. Something like the haze that blurred my brain as I sat beside him... We'd ridden to quiz bowl events together, with parents driving, but

this was the first time he'd driven me anywhere. I felt safe riding with him. He stopped and started smoothly at traffic lights, wasn't erratic like some guys.

"What does your brother think of high school?" Erik asked, turning onto my street.

"You know Ryan. Fits right in. Made the soccer team already." I shook my head. "As big a pain as ever."

After parking under the old hickory in front of my house, Erik switched off the car. He cleared his throat. "On Saturday some of us are heading to Lake Michigan. Tower Hill. Sort of a 'goodbye summer' trip to the dunes."

Wait a minute. Was he going to? After all this time?

His long fingers drummed the steering wheel. "Want to come?"

He did. He asked me out! *Get a hold of yourself. Breathe. No puking.* "S-sure, I'd love to."

He stopped drumming. "OK. We're leaving around nine. I'll pick you up." He flipped through his CDs and chose one. "See you at school, then. Good luck with the musical."

Somehow, I opened the car door, hauled up my backpack, and climbed out. The CD he'd chosen echoed a song into the air as I stumbled to the front porch and sank onto the steps. For the second time that afternoon I floated, dizzy, into the zone.

2

By Tuesday morning, I'd chewed off my nails. So much for not caring about Bates' decision....

In Calc, Mr. Wilson stepped out to take a phone call. I glanced at the equation I was supposed to be working on and then turned to Erik. "Did you finish that *Tale of Two Cities* assignment for English?" Though we didn't have English the same hour, we had the same teacher. I'd been too distracted about the audition to write the essay.

"Not yet." He scribbled in the margin of his notebook, and then grinned. "Guess we'd better learn to quit procrastinating, with college next year."

"Yeah, no Mom and Dad to nag us about homework, then."

We joked around until Mr. Wilson returned.

At lunch, the cafeteria's steamy smell almost made me barf, so I slipped outside and paced around the track. Would I finally get a part? Had Bates heard any of my performance? Surely he couldn't have tuned out my whole audition.

When the 3:00 bell finally clanged, I made myself walk, not run, to the choir room. I squeezed through the cluster of hopefuls and scanned the list:

Female Chorus

...

Jennifer Severns
Emily Taylor
Amanda Thorpe....

Not again! My chewed fingernails dug into my palms. Unbelievable.

I didn't need psychic skills to know whose name matched up with Cinderella's. I double-checked the other parts. Cait did get her lead as a stepsister.

"So, Mandy, what did he give you? The godmother?" Erik's friend, Brian Keller, elbowed through the group at the choir door.

I shook my head and choked out, "Chorus. Again."

Brian frowned and started to say something, but got drowned out when Lyndsey's crowd began shrieking.

I didn't feel like talking, anyway, so I waved to Brian and escaped to my locker. I hurried outside before Shelby or anyone could ask me about it. Trudging along the sidewalk, I silently repeated: *I am 17 years old. I will not cry.* Though the September leaves were still green, they were a dusty, tired green. I crossed the footbridge over the creek in the park, pausing to stroke the sun-warmed stones of its wall. No-one, however zoned-out, could wander off the edge with this solid barrier here. I hefted myself up and sat on it.

Tears came, mocking me. I loved to sing, and, no matter what Bates thought, I was good at it. The songs in *Cinderella* were so fun—and like one of Erik's hawks, I was ready to soar, singing out with my own voice, alone.

Instead, I'd smacked into a wall, landing crumpled on the ground.

And could I get into a decent music school with no lead to put on applications? Would I stand out enough for a scholarship? The surprise arrival of Tabitha, two years ago, had cleaned out the savings my parents had for my college fund.

But I had to get a grip, or my eyes would be red, and I'd have to explain it all to Mom. Luckily, I had a pack of crumpled tissues in my purse. I mopped my face and went home.

As soon as I opened the door, Hannah, our Sheltie, galloped over and licked my hand, tail wagging. "Hi, girl," I said, rubbing her velvety ears. Nothing's as comforting as a pet dog's welcome.

"Oh, Mandy, thank God you're home!" Mom dashed into the living room as I dropped my backpack on the couch. "Gram Thorpe fell on her front steps and broke her hip."

"Oh, no! Will she be OK?" I sank down beside my bag, stunned. Gram was strong and sturdy. People leaned on her, not the other way around.

"I'll know more when I see her. Your dad's still out of reach at the digging site, and I need you to watch Tabitha so I can meet Gram at the hospital. She's napping, now, for once. Tab is, I mean. Hope she isn't coming down with something. Now, what'd she do with my car keys?"

My normally sane mom ricocheted around the room.

"Try under the CD rack. In the magazines. She likes to hide them there."

The keys did a victory jingle. "Thanks, Mandy. What would I do without you?"

"Where's Ryan?"

She slung her purse over her arm and headed for the door. "Soccer practice. They have a match on Saturday. Oh, there's mac and cheese in the fridge if Tab wakes up hungry."

"Tell Gram—"

"I will," Mom promised, and left.

Gram hurt? The last time I saw her—Saturday?—she was watering her elderly neighbor's garden. Elderly, as in five years older than her, maybe. She'd probably weeded that garden the day before. Might've dug post holes for the fence before that. I tried to picture her struggling to get around with a walker. Impossible.

By the time I nuked and ate pizza, Tabitha climbed out of her crib and found me. She sneezed a couple of times, but that didn't slow her down. For the next three hours I did toddler disaster prevention. At least it kept me from dwelling on Gram's injury...and brooding about *Cinderella*.

~*~

Erik was waiting for me in Calc on Wednesday morning, flipping the pages of his notebook. "So, ole Bates blew his chance again, eh? Wasted his best talent in the chorus?"

I glanced up at him for a quick second. The tenderness in his eyes pierced my shell of control. I swallowed. In all the chaos with Gram, no-one at home had asked about the audition. "I'll survive. Had enough practice losing. It ought to get easier..."

Erik leaned forward, anger sparking his eyes. "This favoritism rots—you need to try out for a

different director.”

“Bates kinda has a monopoly around here.”

“What about the civic theater? Don’t they let high school kids audition?”

I held his gaze then, absorbed in his ocean-blue eyes. “Never thought of that. I’ll have to check their website, see what’s scheduled. Thanks!”

“Anything to support the arts.” He drummed his pencil on the notebook.

~*~

During the annual “Don’t Drink and Drive” assembly that afternoon—why couldn’t they ever find a different film?—I got seated at an angle behind Erik. Instead of watching the car wrecks and mangled bodies for the fourth year, I gazed at his profile. Straight forehead over deep-set eyes. Cute nose. Dimples around his lips. What would it be like to kiss those lips? Would I find out Saturday, at Lake Michigan?

On Friday, after school, I realized I hadn’t cancelled my Saturday morning voice lesson for the Tower Hill trip. Oops. I dangled a rainbow slinky off the arm of the couch to keep Tab busy and called Mrs. Gilman.

“Did you get a part?” she asked, eagerness vibrating in her alto voice.

“No, just the chorus again,” I said. “But Riverwood Civic Theater has auditions for *Carousel* on September 24th. Thought I might try that.”

Tab climbed on my lap.

“Great idea. The civic theater has a reputation for quality work. I’ll check my file. I think I have some of

the *Carousel* music."

As soon as I got off the phone, Mom came in from the kitchen and sat by me. The couch settled with a creak.

Tabitha stretched out so her head was on Mom's lap with the rest of her on me.

"Mandy, we have a problem."

"What now?"

Mom pulled a tissue out of her jeans pocket and wiped Tab's nose. She felt Tab's forehead. "Hmmm. She's a little warm. Anyway, until I heard you telling Mrs. Gilman a minute ago, I forgot you had an outing planned for tomorrow." She dropped the tissue into the wastebasket under the end table.

I stiffened. An *outing*? A date with Erik, after two long years—an *outing*?

Mom reached over, tracing a loose strand of my hair. "Your dad's flight from Wyoming doesn't get in until 6:30 tomorrow night, and the hospital says Gram has to move into the rehabilitation place tomorrow afternoon. There's no way I could pack Gram's things and get her settled with Tabitha running around. And if Tab's contagious, I shouldn't bring her there anyway."

I didn't speak. She couldn't expect this of me.

"I hate to ask..."

Silence.

"But Ryan has his soccer match..."

"What about Mrs. Curtis?" I leaned away, allergic to Mom's touch, and bounced the slinky.

"I thought of her, but Tab probably caught this from another child at day care. I'd hate to spread it to Mrs. Curtis's kids."

Tab sneezed, right on cue.