



It's All Relative



A NOVEL



Rachel Magee



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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

It's All Relative

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Chapter 1

Helena

HELENA CROSBY HAD AN UNUSUAL amount of optimism for seven o'clock on a Monday morning.

Part of that, no doubt, was because there were only four Mondays left in the school year. Four. That meant she was so close to swapping lecturing from the front of her English lit classroom for lounging poolside, she could practically feel the sun on her skin.

Not that she didn't love her job. She did. While teaching wasn't what she originally had gone to school for, it had quickly become her passion. Who wouldn't want to spend the day with (mostly) hilarious high school students while discussing the works of some of her favorite British authors like Jane Austen and Shakespeare? It was enough to make the school's ancient HVAC system, whose only settings appeared to be Arctic Circle and Sahara Desert, and the weird odor, best described as body spray with a hint of discount industrial cleaner and dust, worth it. Still, there was only so much teenage humor and fighting with an obstinate thermostat that one could take. Plus, between all the required reading and grading, her own personal reading list was getting a little out of control. She needed to knock some of them out before the mountain of books on her nightstand toppled over and caused real damage.

But even more than her TBR pile and her countdown to summer,

what really had Helena in a perfectly positive mood at this early hour on a Monday was that she had a plan.

This was noteworthy for two reasons. First, Helena *rarely* had a plan. She was more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants kind of girl. A take-the-world-as-it-comes girl. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate a good plan. They certainly came in handy from time to time. But for the most part, she preferred her freedom.

Which brought her to the second noteworthy point: this plan was awesome. Not only would it solve a problem—nay, avoid a crisis—it was also so well thought out that there was zero chance it would fall apart. Plus, this plan included a vacation with her best friend and one of her favorite humans on the planet, Landon Blake. So really, what could go wrong?

Of course, she had to get Landon on board first, which did pose a teensy threat to the whole scheme. But she'd even come up with a plan for that as well.

Helena cruised down the empty hallway full of confidence and casually propped herself against the doorframe of Landon's classroom, clutching her "But First, Coffee" mug between both hands. "I know where you'll be spending the first week of *summer vacation*," she said, the last two words in a singsong voice.

"Please tell me it's far, far away from any kind of grading." Landon scribbled something across the top of the page in front of him before he looked up. "I think I'm going cross-eyed." He moved the paper to the bottom of the large stack and leaned over the next one.

"Trust me, I know the feeling. I spent my weekend trying to dig my way out of sophomore research papers." She ventured into the American history classroom, decorated with maps of the United States and posters from professional soccer teams from around the world, and leaned against a desk in the front row. "I promise where we're going is miles away from any sort of grading. In fact, there's a good chance it's even illegal there."

Landon clasped his hands together on the stack of papers and focused his friendly deep blue gaze on her. "I'm intrigued. Tell me more."

Their friendship had started the day they both walked into new teacher training at Pineview High School four years ago. As usual, Helena had gotten there a few minutes late. In order to draw as little attention to herself as possible, she'd snagged a seat in the back. Landon had walked in a couple minutes later and claimed the spot next to her.

Even if he hadn't been sitting right next to her, it would've been impossible not to notice him. He was all relaxed confidence and charming grin with the toned body of an athlete and the sun-bronzed skin of someone who'd spent their summer outside. If there was any doubt that he was part of the coaching staff, the school-colored polo shirt with "Pineview Soccer" embroidered on the front cleared it up. She'd started to wonder if she needed to give the HR handbook a read after all, to find out if there was a faculty dating policy.

Then Landon had made a snarky comment during the first sentence of the principal's opening remarks—at which she'd laughed louder than was appropriate—and Helena was convinced he was going to be in her life for a long, long time. Only, things didn't turn out quite as expected. After their third date, they'd both realized that while they loved being together, there was no spark. So in an effort to save what they had, they transitioned their relationship from romantic to platonic. In Helena's opinion, it was the best decision she'd ever made.

"We'll be staying on a tropical island off the coast of Florida that is so remote, you have to take a ferry to get there. The sounds of the waves and the rustle of the palm trees on your own private beach will whisk you into complete and total relaxation." She swept her arm in front of her in a dramatic arc, then paused, staring wistfully into the distance as if gazing at the beautiful scene awaiting them.

At least she hoped she was staring wistfully. It wasn't exactly a look she'd ever tried to force before, but if selling this trip to Landon meant she had to tap into her inner actress, so be it.

Landon gave a nod of approval. "I'm packing my bags."

"Great." She dropped her arm and took a sip of coffee. "Just make sure to pack something to wear to my mom's wedding. The dress is semiformal with shoes comfortable enough for dancing."

"Your mom's wedding?" He set his pen down and leaned back in his chair, studying her. "I didn't think they'd set a date yet." The tone behind his question was one of genuine concern, compassion even, which Helena appreciated. After all, the whole situation was . . . complicated.

"This news is hot off the press. The decision was made over the weekend to have the wedding at The Perfects' family beach house, which, so they tell me, has been in the family for generations."

"The Perfects" was the nickname Helena had given to her mom's fiancé's family after their first meeting had left her with a healthy dose of self-consciousness. Everything they did was simply *perfect*, especially the eldest daughter whom Helena had not-so-affectionately dubbed "Polly Perfect," the most perfect of The Perfects. In her opinion, the name was so spot-on, she'd stopped calling any of them by their real names.

"From what I hear," Helena continued, "the place is amazing. There are stunning beaches and crystal-clear ocean waters and lots of fun family togetherness." She tried to keep her voice bright and festive, just the way she'd practiced, but she couldn't help the hint of strain that snuck in. It was a good thing she didn't have career aspirations in acting.

Landon sat there for a second, as if he were considering it, then picked up a pen and pulled the stack of papers toward him. "Yeah, I'm out."

Helena couldn't help the pang of disappointment. "Why? Did you hear the part about the stunning island and the amazing house

with the stellar views?" At least that was the way her mom had described it yesterday, when she'd called to tell her about the wedding plans they made over the weekend. "Do you have something against beaches?"

"I like a nice beach as much as the next guy." Landon shrugged and continued to grade the papers in front of him. "It's being in the middle of your family drama I have problems with."

Helena slumped against the desk in the front row, a deep sigh wheezing out like a deflated balloon. "Yeah, that's my problem too."

Landon looked up from his grading, his eyes filled with sympathy. "I know it's going to be weird, having your mom get married."

Helena twisted her mouth to the side and considered the upcoming nuptials. "The thing is, I don't even think it's that. Steve's great. I'm legitimately happy for her."

After spending the last twenty-seven years as a struggling single mom, Nora Crosby deserved a happy ending. And Steve, her fiancé, was absolutely perfect for her. To see her mom find the man of her dreams and walk down the aisle for the first time at the beautiful age of forty-eight was inspiring. Honestly, Helena was excited about the wedding.

She just wasn't excited about the family that came along with it.

"It's The Perfects. You can't leave me alone with them. You know how they are." Just the thought of them filled Helena with the familiar anxiety. She nibbled her lip and fiddled with the bracelet on her coffee-holding hand.

She was proud of who she was and the little life she'd built for herself in Charlotte, North Carolina, but her achievements paled in comparison to those of The Perfects. Polly Perfect, for example, was only a year older than Helena, yet she owned her own house, ran her father's architecture firm, and served on the boards of several charities. The son had graduated summa cum laude two years ago and was currently working for a Fortune 500 company. Even the twelve-year-old daughter had started her own charity.

Helena, on the other hand, counted it a win if she made it to school on time four out of five days. Her idea of meal planning was scribbling down lesson plans on a Post-it Note while she scarfed down whatever she'd found in the vending machine during her lunch break. Her biggest accomplishment this year was remembering to reset all her clocks the night *before* time sprang forward. Fitting into this clan was not going to be easy.

She told Landon, "They'll be playing some round of croquet with their careful manners and smart conversation, giving me condescending looks because I hit the ball too hard and laugh too loud at inappropriate times."

He raised an eyebrow. "There are inappropriate times for laughing in a croquet game?"

"Probably. How would I know? I haven't taken croquet etiquette. That's why I need you there."

"And you assume that at some point during my childhood I took croquet etiquette?"

"Maybe. You're a soccer coach. Don't they teach you about all kinds of games at those coaching training things?"

"Sure. Yeah." The sarcasm dripped from his voice. "They cover lawn game etiquette right after soccer defensive strategies and team-building techniques for high school players."

"Good. Because I don't know that it will be croquet. The Perfects could be into badminton. Or bocce ball." She ran a hand through her hair, which reminded her she needed to make an appointment to get her highlights touched up before the trip. She was pretty sure an overdue hair appointment could be spotted a mile away with this crew.

"Helena," Landon said and gave her *that* look.

Helena knew that look. It was the one he gave her when she knew whatever came out of his mouth was going to hit closer to home than she wanted it to. One of the things that had made Helena become fast friends with Landon was his ability to make her laugh.

He had this dry snarkiness that beckoned full-on belly laughs, often at the most inappropriate (but most needed) times. Like faculty meetings that lasted way longer than they needed to.

But if she were being honest, what made them true friends was the wisdom Landon gave after one of these looks. The first few times it had happened, early into their friendship, Helena was caught off guard. Landon's advice was often one sentence, barely more than a phrase, but it was so insightful that it forced her to look at the problem in a way no one else had pointed out to her. Landon's nuggets of wisdom prompted introspection and change. She loved him for it.

She also hated him for it.

At the moment, she didn't want introspection. She wanted someone to despise The Perfects as much as she did and be her plus-one at her mom's June wedding. And it wouldn't hurt if that person helped her kick their Perfect butts at whatever yard game she was forced to play with them at their isolated Indigo Island beach house.

"What?" There was a bit of hostility in her voice as she readied her guard for whatever truth bomb Landon was about to launch at her.

"You know that these people are about to be your family, right? You think it might be time to start calling them by their real names?"

Helena huffed. "First of all, they will not be *my* family. My mom is marrying their dad. At best I might have to spend some holidays with them. Let's call them my 'holiday buddies.'"

"Pretty sure that's not a thing."

"And secondly, if you meet them"—she held up a finger to correct herself—"No, *when* you meet them, you will also call them 'The Perfects.' They're like a walking, talking Christmas card with their solidarity and coordinating outfits. Grown-ups. Wearing coordinating outfits. It's weird."

“I thought one of them was a kid and they were dressed in similar colors because they actually *were* taking a picture for the family Christmas card.”

He wasn't wrong.

“What's your point?” she asked.

He stood up to walk around and leaned against the front of his desk, putting himself eye to eye with her. “My point is, you don't get to pick your family. You love your friends because of who they are. You love your family because they're your people.”

And there it was. The truth that rattled her.

Helena was the only child of a single mom. The only extended family she had was her great-aunt Robyn, but even she only came around once in a while. The Crosby family tree was more of a family stick.

Sure, Helena used to think she wanted to be part of a big family. In fact, it was what she wished for as a kid every time she threw a penny into a fountain. But she didn't feel like she was part of *this* family. Once Nora and Steve were married, there would be the trio of tight-knit siblings who all had their acts together—and Helena. The thought of trying to find her place in this group made her revisit her long-abandoned habit of biting her fingernails.

And if she dug way down deep to places she'd rather avoid, her biggest fear was that she'd lose her mom to them. What if Helena couldn't keep up? What if her mom liked The Perfects' traditions and family life better? What if, after all the dust settled, Helena was the odd one out of the happy little family that moved on without her?

She drew in a deep breath and shoved the fear back into the deep, dark place where she kept it locked away. One thing was for sure. She wasn't going to be on her own at this wedding because she was *not* going solo.

“Come with me and see for yourself what they're like. I'll do all your grading for the first quarter next year.” There was a hint of

unashamed pleading in her voice.

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" His eyes narrowed as he studied her. "What aren't you telling me?"

Emotional support was her main goal, and she didn't think it was too much to ask of one of her nearest and dearest friends. "The odds seem a little stacked in the badminton game when there are four on their side and only one on mine."

"Four? I thought there were only—" Landon's voice stopped abruptly and a knowing grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Ah, I see. This has less to do with the siblings and more to do with one soon-to-be Mr. Perfect."

Helena made a grand gesture of rolling her eyes so he'd know how ridiculous he was being. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Really? A certain fiancé of the oldest Perfect doesn't ring any bells?"

"No. I wasn't thinking about Polly Perfect's fiancé at all."

Landon rolled his eyes at her immature nickname but thankfully didn't call her out on it.

Helena studied her manicure just to show him that the chipped nail polish on her gnawed fingernails was more important to her than some guy who happened to be engaged to her soon-to-be-stepsister—even if he did have the most beautiful chestnut eyes she'd ever seen and a smile that made her a little woozy.

The room got eerily silent for a high school American history classroom, and she could feel Landon's accusing gaze burning into her.

Exasperated, she dropped her hand down to her side. She hated that he knew her better than she knew herself. "Fine. I'm crushing on my future stepsister's fiancé. If you want to know the truth, he's far too good for her. But that's not my problem. What is my problem is having to watch them make goo-goo eyes at each other while I sit all alone on my side of the table."

“As previously mentioned, you’re family now. There are no sides of tables.”

“A couple of ‘I do’s’ might marry our parents, but it isn’t going to make us a family.” She took a sip of her coffee, hoping the magic brew would soothe her. The truth was Nora was getting to spend forever with the man she loved and build a new life in Texas with his kids while Helena sat by herself in an entirely different time zone, wondering where she fit into this equation.

Landon took her empty hand in his and gave it a comforting squeeze. “You, Helena Crosby, are an amazing person. Any family would be lucky to have you in it.”

His words did far more for her soul than her lukewarm, bargain-brand coffee ever could. She glanced up at him from under her lids. “Why don’t you tell them that?”

Landon started to smirk, probably assuming she was being sarcastic, but she’d never been more serious.

“Please. Come with me to the wedding. Be my date. Tell The Perfects just how great I am. I need you.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

Helena shot him an impish grin. “I might have already booked your ticket. I’ll email you the confirmation.”

He let out a sigh. “Fine, I’ll go.”

Helena jumped to her feet and threw her free arm around him, careful not to slosh what was left of her coffee out of her mug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“On one condition.”

She pulled away from him, not entirely sure she liked where this was going. “Which is?”

“That you give your new family a chance, and you let go of this thing you have for someone else’s fiancé.”

She held up two fingers. “That’s two conditions.”

“So I can’t count. Good thing I’m not in the math department.”

With an indifferent shrug Landon strolled around his desk and reclaimed his spot in the squeaky desk chair.

Helena sighed to show her annoyance, although she wasn't quite sure if that annoyance was directed at Landon or herself. "It's not a *thing*. It's a . . ."

She let her voice trail away because she wasn't exactly sure how to classify it. It wasn't like she'd *meant* to start crushing on her soon-to-be-stepsister's fiancé. It had just sort of happened.

The first time she met Gage Demetrius was at the front desk of the beach resort where she was about to spend the weekend meeting her new stepfamily. In fact, he was the very first Perfect she met, if he could even be considered a Perfect. She was checking in, trying to decide if the jittery feeling in her stomach was from her excitement about the weekend or her nerves about what lay ahead, when the man at the other end of the long front desk interrupted her thoughts.

All right, she'd admit it: his broad, friendly smile might have momentarily captivated her. But she brushed it off. Just because she found him attractive didn't mean she was attracted *to* him.

But as the weekend progressed, their connection seemed to deepen. Every time she tried to fit in with this new family but inevitably began to feel out of place, Gage was right there to sympathize as a fellow newcomer. Every time she remembered everything was changing and began to tear up, he made her laugh. Plus, there was the fact that if she looked up the definition of "tall, dark, and handsome," his picture would be there. It would've been impossible for Helena to walk away from the weekend without a few teensy feelings.

But it wasn't until their second meeting, when she flew to Dallas for the engagement party, that Helena realized she'd sailed right past the finding-Gage-attractive zone and was now standing smack in the middle of full-on crush town. She didn't want to be there, but she couldn't help it. The more time she spent with him,

the more their connection grew. They had read many of the same books and liked the same kinds of music. Gage got her sense of humor, and their conversations never lulled. He was the perfect combination of rugged and sophisticated. The only problem was that he was already taken.

Normally, this would've been an unfortunate situation, but one Helena could've walked away from. The happy couple could go on living their perfect life, and she could work on forgetting him while she pondered the truth that "all the good ones were already taken." But this was different. After a couple sets of "I do's," Gage would be connected to her family forever. It was a lot harder to forget about someone you'd have to ask to pass the potatoes at every family holiday.

"It's ridiculous. Out of all the men in the world, why do I have to have a crush on the one who's engaged to *her*?" The impossible situation dragged Helena down, and she slumped against the desk again.

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

Helena narrowed her eyes on him. "Are you quoting Shakespeare to me?"

Landon winked. "Is it helping?"

Since whatever romantic connection there might have been between them fizzled sometime on their first date, Landon's boyish charm was completely lost on her. "No. Besides, it's not even relevant. No one said anything about the L word. I've known the man for about fifteen minutes."

"My mistake. The course of *crushing* never did run smooth."

Helena rolled her eyes. "How about we discuss *your* love life for a while?"

He pulled the stack of papers toward him and picked up a pen, seemingly uninterested in Helena's conversation switch. "Nothing to talk about. I'm in a great place."

"Really? How did your date last weekend go?"

Landon scribbled something in the margin of the paper he was grading. "I don't know why I let you talk me into that dating app."

Helena knew. Landon was a romantic. He believed in love and forever and happily-ever-afters more than anyone she'd ever met. And she wanted that for him. But some girl from his past had ruined it.

"How'd this one rate on the Mia Meter?"

Mia was the one who had broken Landon's heart. She'd been before Helena's time, so Helena didn't know all the specifics. What she did know was that Landon had been completely in love with her, but she'd walked away for whatever idiotic reason and no one had ever come close to capturing his heart since. Helena pretty much considered this Mia to be the biggest fool who'd ever lived.

"We've been over this. I don't compare every date to Mia."

Of course he did. But if that was the lie he needed to believe, Helena would back him on it.

"I guess there's not going to be a second date?"

"No." He returned his attention to the grading.

"Maybe the second date will be better than the first," Helena offered.

"Maybe it'll be worse."

Helena chuckled. "Well, I'm sorry about the date, but it works out for me. Sounds like you're free to join my side as we take on The Perfects at their beach house."

"There are no sides, Helena. This is an all-for-one-and-one-for-all deal."

The first bell rang, signaling the beginning of the school day. The sounds of teenagers talking and lockers clanging drifted into the room. Helena stood up to head to her own class to kick off her fourth-to-the-last Monday.

"We'll see if you're singing the same tune after you meet them."

Chapter 2

Amelia

Four Mondays Later

AMELIA MADDOX SAT ON THE front deck of her family's beach house, looking out over the sparkling turquoise Atlantic, as she led the Monday afternoon conference call. She loved it here. There was something about the rustle of the palm trees and the rhythmic sound of the gentle waves rolling onto the sand that fed her soul.

Usually when she worked remotely she liked to keep the backdrop of her video conferences as generic as possible. She hated drawing unnecessary attention to the fact something had pulled her away from the office, especially if that something was personal and not business related.

But when she was here, she didn't mind having the beach house in the background. Her dad had designed it about fifteen years ago to replace the original beach cottage that had been there for two generations, and simply put, the house was stunning. With its careful combination of sleek modern lines and classic Caribbean style, Amelia considered it her father's most bragworthy accomplishment. And since he was the founder and CEO of TLR Designs, she loved using a Steve Maddox masterpiece as inspiration for the rest of the team at their small architecture firm.

“As we wrap this up, I only have a couple more things,” said Amelia. “Kevin, I know the plans of the new warehouse complex are finalized, but I want you to triple-check them before construction starts on Monday. We don’t want any surprises.” She put a check next to the first item on the “Final Thoughts” section of her agenda.

“On it, boss.”

“And, Sally, I need you to go over the proposal for the new elementary school one more time with a fine-tooth comb. When we present it to the committee next week, I want it to be perfect. Everything from plumbing to air ducts to think space.”

Sally nodded. “Will do.”

“Great.” Amelia reviewed her checklist to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. “That just about covers everything. Even though I’m not in the office, I’m available this week, so don’t hesitate to call me.”

“We have things covered here. You enjoy the wedding preparations,” said Shanda, their longtime receptionist. “And tell Steve we’re looking forward to celebrating the big day with him this weekend. We’ll see you at the rehearsal dinner.”

Amelia could feel the tension pulling at her smile. She wasn’t quite ready to make the mental switch from work to her father’s wedding festivities, especially in the middle of a meeting. But that was the thing about a small family-run business. Sometimes the lines between work life and personal life got blurred, no matter how hard she tried to keep them separate.

“Right. We’re glad most of you will be here. Let’s get these projects squared away this week, and then we’ll have a lot to celebrate this weekend.”

They took another minute to say their goodbyes, and one by one the video pictures popped off until Amelia’s screen was blank. She ended the call and quickly pulled her long hair into a bun to get it out of the way while she mentally added items to her to-do list.

Then she pulled up the screen to send the first of three emails that had come from their meeting. It was going to be a busy week.

“You know, it’s okay to take a vacation. Studies prove it actually makes you more productive at work.”

Amelia turned to see her father walking toward her with one of his famous fresh-squeezed lemonades in each hand. Ice clinked against the glass as he set a lemonade down on the table in front of her. Strolling over to the railing across from her, Steve leaned against it and took a sip of his own drink.

“What did the study say about taking a vacation in the middle of two major projects and two big proposals?” Amelia adjusted the black-framed glasses she used for computer work and returned her attention to the email she was typing.

“Honey, you’ve done a great job on all those projects. Even when they encounter problems—which will happen because life is unpredictable—solving them will be a piece of cake. And I’ve seen the new proposals. They’re inspired. I don’t see any way the school board won’t choose the elementary school.”

“Maybe.” Amelia pulled off her glasses and rubbed her temples. “But what if—”

“No what-ifs. The projects are going to be fine. You’ve done good work. Now it’s time to celebrate.” He flashed her a mischievous grin. “I’m getting married, you know.”

Amelia took a deep breath to push back some of her anxiety and forced herself to smile. “Oh, right. So that’s why we’re here,” she joked and took a sip of her lemonade.

“Four more days,” her dad sighed. He looked like a dreamy, lovesick puppy, which was weird. Fifty-six-year-old dads weren’t supposed to look like that. Especially *her* dad.

But all of that had changed when he’d met Nora Crosby. Now, here they were, at their Indigo Island beach house that had been in her family for generations, T-minus four days until the wedding festivities kicked off. The weather was forecasted to be perfect and

they'd picked out a breathtaking ceremony site. Catering had been finalized, the band was booked, RSVPs had been received and seating charts made. Yet the more the wedding preparations came together, the more anxious Amelia felt about the whole thing.

It wasn't that she had anything against who her dad was marrying. Nora was a lovely person: kind, genuine, and overall fun to be around. And she made her dad happy, which was a welcome relief. Seeing her father heartbroken and lost after losing her mom three years ago—his wife of twenty-eight years—had been excruciating. It was nice to see him smile again. Laugh again. Live again.

But it was a change. And change always made Amelia . . . cautious.

"You sure you're ready for this? *Forever* is a big word." She tried to toss out the question as casually as if they were discussing one of their projects at their weekly executive meeting.

"I wouldn't have asked Nora to marry me if I wasn't." There wasn't even the slightest hesitation in his answer, which probably should've eased her own hesitations. It didn't.

"Good. But remember, just because the date is set doesn't mean you can't get out of it if it's not right."

Her dad raised an eyebrow. "Now who's the one sounding like the concerned parent?"

A guilty grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. She couldn't help it. It was who she was. At least, it was who she had to be after one cancer diagnosis had changed everything.

"I'm just making sure you've looked at the situation from every angle. A wise man once told me that's the best way to make sure you don't run into problems."

Amusement twinkled in his eyes as she tossed his own catchphrase back at him. "Great advice if ever I've heard any."

Amelia shrugged one shoulder. "I learned from the master."

Steve set down his drink and leaned in, focusing his confident, fatherly gaze on her. "Honey, Nora and I have been dating for over a

year. She loves Emory, and Emory is pretty crazy about her. You and Peter approve.” He paused, apparently waiting for her to confirm the statement.

This was true. Twelve-year-old Emory, the surprise child their parents had had when Amelia was sixteen, loved Nora—another reason for Amelia to accept her dad’s choice of a companion.

It was just . . .

Nope, she wasn’t going to go there. Not today.

Amelia shoved all her apprehension deep down inside and refreshed her smile. “Of course I approve. Nora’s fantastic.” She managed to keep almost all the hesitation out of her voice as she delivered the line. “But since we’ve gotten that confirmed, I have a couple wedding-related questions. The caterer called with a few changes to the menu.”

She opened a different folder on her computer. Files full of checklists, schedules, and seating charts popped up for the rehearsal dinner she and her siblings were hosting and the wedding she was helping Nora plan. Just because she was working on embracing this change didn’t mean she needed to leave things up to chance. At the very least, she was going to do everything in her power to make sure the events ushering them into this new season went off without so much as a glitch.

Amelia was covering the last item on the list, swapping out the fruit salad for a more in-season selection of melons, when Emory popped her head out the back door, her long Dutch braids still damp from her earlier swim.

“Helena’s almost here! Nora said she and her friend just got off the ferry. The wedding week has begun!” She pumped her fist in the air then disappeared inside as quickly as she had appeared.

The last family member for their family wedding was about to arrive. Her soon-to-be-stepsister. It was time, whether Amelia was ready or not.

Steve nodded toward the door. “Let the wedding festivities com-

mence!" He waggled his eyebrows.

Amelia couldn't help but laugh. "Let me email this confirmation to the caterer and I'll be right there to greet them." She motioned at the computer in front of her.

"Just don't work too hard." He stood and started toward the house, giving her shoulder an encouraging squeeze on the way. "Remember, it's a celebration." He did a goofy little dance step on his way into the house.

Amelia waited until she heard the sliding glass door close before she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath of the tropical, briny air. So maybe this wasn't exactly how she'd imagined things playing out, but her dad seemed happy and confident. Plus, they were at her favorite place in the whole world. How bad could this week be?

With her lungs full of fresh beach air, she fluttered her eyes open and refocused on her emails. She was proofreading the last one when she heard tires crunching over the crushed shell drive on the other side of the house. She quickly finished up, hit Send, and closed her laptop.

Showtime.

She slowly made her way around the wide wraparound deck toward the back part of the house, which overlooked the driveway and detached garage. Since the main level of the house was raised one story above the ground, she'd be looking down at the group she was greeting, but at this point she didn't mind a little distance.

As she strolled, she could hear the sounds of the arrival. Car doors opening. Nora and her daughter squealing as they greeted each other. Emory's enthusiastic welcome. And then she heard another voice. A man's voice.

That, Amelia guessed, would be Helena's date. Normally, she would've gathered more information about the plus-one who was important enough to be included in the family-only portion of the festivities. Who was he? What did he like? Did he have any food allergies she needed to be aware of?

She'd sent a text to Helena a couple weeks back in an attempt to find out some of the information but had never gotten a response, which wasn't entirely unexpected. Her soon-to-be-stepsister was not—how could Amelia put it nicely—consistent in responding to texts. Or phone calls. Or emails. And since Amelia had a lot on her to-do lists, she hadn't followed up. Therefore, Amelia had added him to the list with the official name of Helena's Date. The only real information she knew about him was he was a dear friend who worked with Helena and he was, according to Emory, a coach.

Naturally, Amelia couldn't help picturing him showing up wearing gym shorts and a sun visor with a whistle around his neck. When she'd mentioned this to Emory, her sister had rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Who would wear their whistle on an airplane?" she'd asked.

The comment was no doubt meant to make Amelia realize how ridiculous her thought was. Instead, it only made her picture Helena's date as Ted Lasso. From that moment on, no matter how many times she tried to change the image in her head, she couldn't. It was at the point that if this guy didn't have a mustache and at least one funny saying, Amelia was going to be disappointed.

"Hello! Welcome to Driftwood." Amelia used her most festive voice as she rounded the corner to the back deck and the newcomers came into view.

Below her, Nora stepped away from hugging her daughter, an exuberant smile stretching from ear to ear. "Look at us. We're all here! The whole family together at last!" She beamed and threw one arm around her daughter's shoulder and her other arm around Emory, pulling them both into a tight side hug. As she did, she stepped to the side, giving Amelia her first glimpse of Helena's plus-one.

O. M. G.

The sight of him hit her like a rogue wave, and she had to hold on to the rail to keep from being knocked over. Jason Sudeikis him-

self standing there in his full Ted Lasso getup would've been less shocking than the reality standing in front of her. Her entire body froze while her brain stuttered through half-formed questions.

How did . . . What was . . .

Just . . . why?

Her dad strolled onto the driveway at that very moment and paused midstep. "Landon? Landon Blake?"

Steve tossed a slightly concerned look up at Amelia before he approached the blast from her past with his hand outstretched. "It's good to see you again. I had no idea you knew Helena."

Amelia felt disoriented, as if the force of the rogue wave had shifted the earth underneath her, and she swayed. Landon Blake was *here*? At her beach house? With Helena?

"Well then, sir, we're both surprised. I had no idea you were the same Maddoxes from Texas Helena's been talking about." Landon shook her dad's hand, seemingly in good spirits about the whole situation. Slowly he turned to look up at her, and for the first time since one of the most difficult days of her life, their eyes met. "Hello, Mia."

His greeting rattled through Amelia, causing her heart to race. She tightened her grip on the rail until her knuckles turned white. Probably she should've thought of something to say in response, but honestly, it was taking all her concentration just to stay on her feet.

He looked the same. Same dark blond hair that had the slight windblown look of someone who spent most of his day on a soccer pitch. Same stubble beard highlighting his chiseled jaw. Same stunning blue eyes, the exact color of her favorite pair of jeans, and every bit as warm and comforting. Amelia gave her head a slight shake to keep herself from getting lost in them.

"Mia?" Helena looked almost as shocked as Amelia felt. "As in *Mia*, Mia?"

So she was famous. Or infamous. Either way, he hadn't forgot-

ten her.

“It’s Amelia now,” she said as much to herself as to everyone standing below her. It probably wasn’t the greeting she should’ve gone with, but a lot had changed since their carefree college days when the world sparkled with optimism and opportunity. She wasn’t the same girl she used to be. “It’s good to see you again, Landon.”

Her voice sounded cold and distant, but at least it was steady, which she counted as a win. She pressed her lips together in a vain attempt to control her racing mind and contain all the emotions surging through her. *Keep it together.* All she had to do was keep it together until she could get behind the closed door of her bedroom.

“It’s nice to see you too. It’s been a while,” he said, his hypnotic blue gaze focused on her.

It *had* been a while. Six years to be exact, not that she was counting. It was just that when it came to Landon Blake, things were complicated. There was the whole breakup and the reason she walked away. And everything she’d left behind.

Which was why it was easier if the past stayed in the past where it belonged. But here he was, at her beach house, during the same week her world was spinning far too close to out of control for her liking.

“Well, isn’t this a fun surprise!” Nora clapped her hands together, looking delighted at this spontaneous reunion. “How do you two know each other?” She glanced expectantly from face to face.

“College,” Amelia said in what she hoped was a pleasant enough voice. She added a smile she hoped wasn’t too strained for good measure. “We were, uh, friends.” It was true enough. Kind of.

Her father raised an eyebrow.

Landon said nothing.

Amelia started to wonder if she was caught in a nightmare. And

as soon as she was sure this whole situation couldn't get more awkward, a deep, jovial voice boomed out behind her and made her jump.

"I thought I heard people arrive. Welcome!"

Gage—her fiancé who knew absolutely nothing about the three-year romance with the man standing in her driveway—cruised around the deck to join them with a wide grin and confident gait. He stepped up to the railing next to her. Her already tight muscles tensed even more.

She probably should've introduced him. Really, any sort of effort to move the conversation forward would have been acceptable. But as she stood there, stuck between her past and her present, she couldn't seem to make her voice work.

Before Amelia's silence got awkward, Nora took it upon herself to make the introductions. "Gage, I guess you're the only one who doesn't know Landon. This is Helena's dear friend, and it turns out he went to college with Amelia!" There was a thrill in Nora's voice. At least one person was excited by this coincidence.

Gage gave him a nod. "Excellent. I'd love to hear some stories from Amelia's crazy college days."

"I bet he would," Helena scoffed under her breath. When Landon shot her a warning look, she amended her statement. "We all would. I bet we all would." She flashed an innocent smile.

Nora, who seemed completely oblivious to the awkward tension in the driveway, continued with her hostess duties. "How about we get everyone settled in, then we can all catch up over dinner?"

"Absolutely," Steve agreed. "Now that we're all here, the celebration can begin." He moved closer to Nora and slid his arm around her shoulders. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you." He dipped her backward and planted a sizzling kiss on his bride-to-be.

Normally, Amelia wasn't a fan of PDA, especially when it in-

volved her middle-aged father. But in this instance, she was thankful for any distraction that shifted the attention away from her and Landon.

Helena and Emory, on the other hand, didn't seem to share her sentiment. They both made as much noise as possible to break up the situation.

"Ewww, Dad. Really?" Emory made a grand gesture of turning the other direction.

Helena's technique, while slightly subtler, made a bigger impact. She shut the car door with what could've been considered a stronger than necessary shove. "So where would you like us, Mom?"

Nora finished the kiss with a lingering lovestruck gaze at Steve before she turned to her daughter. "You're in the main house, darling. Emory graciously offered to share a room with Amelia so you could have her room."

Emory followed Helena around to the trunk of the car. There was an excited bounce in her step, and she chattered at a rapid pace that reminded Amelia of a chipmunk. "It's still a little babyish. We haven't redone it in forever. Like since I was in second grade. But the bed is still really comfy. Come on. I'll show you where it is."

Helena pulled out a small rolling suitcase and tossed a tote bag over her shoulder. "Sounds perfect."

"Landon, I bet you'd like to get settled too," Steve offered. "We have you in the pool house with the rest of the fellas."

Right. The plan was for her ex-boyfriend to share sleeping quarters with her brother and fiancé. Which wasn't going to be awkward because they were all cool, right?

"I'll walk you over." Gage's cheerful announcement caused her to jump slightly. "I'm headed that direction. It's time to drop off the ol' grindstone and call it a day." He held up the laptop in his hand to illustrate his point.

Amelia watched wide-eyed, knowing full well there was no way this was going to end well. But what could she do about it? Nor-

mally, she had backup plans for almost every situation, but, *What if my ex-boyfriend shows up as my soon-to-be-stepsister's date?* had never entered her mind.

"Great. Thanks." Landon gave a slight nod to Gage with a smile that was almost as tense as hers.

For half a second, Amelia wondered if she should offer the two men more of an introduction than they'd already been given. Surely even a slight explanation would help to smooth over whatever awkward conversation was sure to transpire as soon as she sent them off to bunk together for an entire week. But then again, what would she say? *Long-lost love, meet my new fiancé. Man I promised to spend the rest of my life with, meet my . . .*

But what was he, exactly?

The question made her pulse start galloping again.

"All right, so this is going to be fun!" Helena clapped her hands together in her typical overanimated fashion and looked from Landon to Amelia to her mom. "Let's get this party started!"

Nora pumped her fist in the air in agreement and Emory let out a high-pitched "Woo-hoo!" Landon just stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, looking as gobsmacked as she felt.

Helena tossed her arm around his shoulders. "I'm gonna head in with Emory. You good?"

"Yup."

Amelia felt pretty sure no one believed his answer for a single second, except maybe Nora, who seemed to be viewing the entire world through love-colored glasses. Or maybe she was just projecting her own feelings.

Landon grabbed a duffel bag and flung it over his shoulder before he closed the trunk. Then he turned his attention to her dad and Nora. "Thanks for letting me crash your celebration."

"Absolutely! You're practically part of the family," Nora gushed. "And how great that you know the Maddoxes. It's like you were meant to be here."

That was certainly one way to look at it.

“Helena, this way,” Emory called and turned for the house. Nora and Steve followed her, and Gage headed for the stairs to the lower level.

Before Helena took off to follow Emory, she leaned into Landon and lowered her voice to a level most people couldn’t hear. Amelia might have missed it too if she hadn’t been focused on the pair.

“For real? That’s *her*?” She didn’t wait for an answer before she glanced up at Amelia as if seeing her for the first time. Her soon-to-be-stepsister locked eyes with her, and a whole new level of understanding passed between them. “Oh boy.”

Amelia’s thoughts exactly.



Chapter 3

Landon

MIA. MADDOX.

How in the world had this happened?

Landon stood in the driveway and watched Helena disappear around the side of the house. He didn't know they were the same Maddoxes from Texas because he felt confident Helena had never mentioned their last name. Because if she had, he felt sure the name "Steve Maddox" would've at least triggered something in his subconscious to prepare him for the possibility of seeing Mia.

Instead, he felt as if he had just done the polar bear plunge. The icy shock reverberated all the way through his body, making him feel numb, and he was still trying to find a full breath.

But it was fine, right? Whatever had happened between them was in the past. People moved on. He had moved on. Seeing her again was no big deal.

Although she looked good. There were some differences, of course. Her dark caramel hair was pulled back in a tight bun instead of flowing over her shoulders, and there was a hint of weariness in her eyes. But other than that, she looked like the same woman he'd once . . .

He let that thought drift away, because what had once been was no longer relevant, right?

Gage stepped off the exterior staircase and joined him in the driveway. “You ready?”

Landon was pretty sure it was a loaded question. He was on a remote island that could only be accessed by a ferry that ran once an hour between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and he’d just found out he’d be spending the next six days secluded at this beach house with his ex-girlfriend and her family. Even if he’d had a month to prepare for this situation, he was pretty sure he still wouldn’t have been ready.

But he was a history teacher. He dealt with the past every day. Yes, showing up at the home of this particular slice of his history might’ve been awkward. And perhaps the wound from their breakup had cut a little deeper than he liked to admit, but this wasn’t about him. This week was about Helena.

He adjusted the bag on his shoulder and strengthened his resolve. “After you.”

“This way.” Gage led him around the back side of the long house.

As they strolled, Landon continued to size him up, which he told himself was completely for Helena’s benefit and had nothing to do with Mia. Or Amelia. Or whoever. “Helena tells me you’re in the construction business.”

“My family owns a little construction company.” Gage nodded, his sleek laptop computer tucked under his arm. “I’ve dabbled on the labor side but usually deal more with the project management aspect.”

That was an understatement. According to Helena, he was second in command. And according to a Google search of “Demetrius Construction,” the company was a billion-dollar corporation that handled most of the large building projects from central Texas up to Oklahoma.

Landon had to admit, his pass on the power play gained him a little respect.

“What line of work are you in?” Gage asked.

"I'm a high school soccer coach and U.S. history teacher." Even if Landon had wanted to, he couldn't make the job sound more impressive than it was. He loved it and wouldn't have traded it for the world. Still, it was public knowledge that what he made was a modest living at best. Even with the soccer clinics he held over the summer and the weekend job he had as a college soccer referee, he would never be able to afford something like this "weekend retreat" where they were staying, or even the watch Gage was wearing.

"Teaching's a noble profession. What made you decide to get into it?"

Landon wanted to think Gage was being condescending. Really, he was looking for any reason to not like this guy—which, again, was entirely for Helena's benefit and had nothing to do with his own situation. Surely there had to be something wrong with him, but Landon wasn't finding it in this conversation. So far Gage had backed up everything Helena had said about him, which boiled down to: "He's just a really great guy, Landon. In fact, I think y'all could be good friends." Perhaps they could have been, if they both hadn't happened to love the same woman. Although it was *loved*—past tense—for Landon. As in long, long ago.

"It was threefold," Landon said. "A desire to inspire kids, a love for soccer, and the draw of having summers off."

Gage chuckled. "The last part sounds like a nice bonus. Stringing together the days to be here was almost an impossible task." They rounded the corner, and the pool and pool house came into view. "But being here is always worth the struggle." He paused at the top of the hill and drew in a deep breath.

Landon paused, too. Only there was no deep breathing for him. Instead, the view before him stole all his oxygen.

When he had been with Mia, she had gone on and on about Driftwood. The property had been in the family for generations, but her father had transformed it from an old beach shack to their

own private resort. She described the house as her dad's masterpiece, his architectural dream come to life.

The last year they were together, the family was making plans to add a resort-style pool and pool house. Mia was designing the whole area, using it as the major project for her senior architecture class. Landon spent hours listening to her describe her vision and looking at drawings from every angle. By the time the semester was over, he knew the pool inside and out, down to the placement of every rock in the waterfall. There had always been a bit of regret they'd broken up before he got to see it in real life.

The main house was beautiful. It was the kind of luxury beach-front house with walls of glass windows and a wide wraparound porch that was featured in articles. It was admirable in its own right. But this . . . this was breathtaking.

Pride and something he was going to call "admiration" crackled through him as he took in Mia's creation.

The real-life version was more stunning than the drawings she had shown him. The pool was larger than he'd imagined, and the sparkling blue water against the natural rock was mesmerizing. There were three water features, but the highlight, the main waterfall that cascaded over boulders Mia had once told him they'd dug up on the property, was larger and more impressive than he had imagined. Tropical flowers spilled out of what seemed like every surface, painting the whole scene in a sort of technicolor wonder. And if the pool wasn't enough, a two-story fairy-tale stone cottage stood on the far side of the deck to complete the picture.

It was every bit as charming as the woman who designed it. At least the woman he used to know. It had the same intoxicating combination of being strong and impressive but also pretty and whimsical that had originally drawn Landon to Mia.

"Wow." He didn't mean to say it out loud; he just couldn't keep it in. His heart did a strange fluttering thing, which was probably due to his lack of oxygen.

A proud grin lit Gage's face. "It's great, right? Amelia designed this."

"I know. I saw the plans. She was working on it before—" He stopped himself just in time. "Before she moved to London."

Gage studied him for a second, giving Landon the impression that he hadn't heard of him before. It shouldn't have been all that surprising. After all, Landon was part of her past. Someone she used to know. But at the same time, there was a slight pang somewhere deep in his chest at the realization that maybe what they'd shared wasn't important enough for her to remember.

"How exactly did y'all know each other in college?"

"Intramurals." It was how they met, anyway. Plus, if Mia hadn't thought of their relationship as significant enough to bring up, why should he?

"Right." Gage didn't sound convinced, but he continued toward the pool house anyway. When they reached it, he strolled over to the middle set of French doors and pulled one open, holding it for Landon.

"Come on in. The guest rooms are upstairs." He motioned to the staircase on the far end of the room. "You're in the one on the right at the top of the stairs."

Landon headed that direction, but before he reached the stairs, he heard the sound of footsteps trotting down them.

"Hey, Gage, did I hear that Helena and her . . ." Peter Maddox, Mia's brother, stopped when he saw Landon. His eyes widened with a look of surprise that had been standard for the rest of the family, but melted almost immediately into a genuine smile. "Landon? What the heck?" He jogged down the last few steps and grabbed Landon's outstretched hand, pulling him in for a hug.

"Good to see you, Peter. Looks like you finally grew into that skinny neck of yours."

"Right? There were some gangly years in there, but they didn't keep me from sticking it to you on the basketball court." He crossed

his arms in front of his chest. “Man, what a surprise. What are you doing here?”

“Crashing weddings and visiting old friends.”

Peter chuckled. “Took you long enough.”

“Actually”—Landon paused, switching his tone to a more serious one—“I’m Helena’s plus-one.”

That news seemed to surprise Peter more than the fact that Landon was standing there.

“Helena? Like Nora’s Helena?”

“Yeah. We work together,” he said. Then, for some unknown reason, he felt the need to clarify. “Friends. We’re just friends who work together.”

“You still playing professional soccer?”

“Naw.” The tension in the air seemed to lift a bit, and Landon adjusted the bag on his shoulder. “Blown knee ended that just before my second MLS season. I’m coaching now. High school varsity.”

Peter’s gaze flickered to Landon’s knee, as if looking for the six-inch scar that commemorated the career-ending injury. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. But it turns out I like coaching more than I liked playing, so it all worked out.”

“Man, this is crazy. Has my sister seen you yet?” There was a hint of scandal in his voice, and a smirk accompanied the abrupt subject change.

“Yeah.” Landon tried to sound as nonchalant as possible and added a shoulder shrug for good measure. After all, it wasn’t a big deal, right? They’d both clearly moved on. Amelia even had the rock on her left hand and the fiancé who’d never heard of him to prove it.

“I miss all the good stuff.” Peter looked between the two men with a sort of playfulness. “Amelia’s past and present hanging out in the same house. Who says family weddings aren’t entertain-

ing?” He clapped both men on the shoulder. “And here I thought all the focus was going to be on my recent career announcement. Thanks for the diversion, men.”



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About the Author



Photo by Christi Mule

Rachel Magee writes rom-coms and women's fiction with relatable characters, witty dialogue, and plenty of happily-ever-afters. Her stories are usually set in fun, sunny locations where she doesn't mind spending lots of time 'researching'. When she's not out scouting the setting of her next book, you can find her at home in The Woodlands, Texas with her amazing husband and their two adventurous kids.



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