

Rachel Magee

*What Not
to do
on
Vacation*
A Novel





What/Not to do on Vacation

A Novel

Rachel Magee



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

What Not to Do on Vacation

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Cora

If any part of her day had gone according to plan, Cora Prestly wouldn't need a toothbrush right now. But it hadn't, so here she was.

She sat in her rental car and stared at the CVS entrance as rain came down with an intensity that matched Niagara Falls, because of course it did. That was the kind of day she was having.

She knew this trip would be a mistake.

In fact, if she recalled correctly—and she did—that was her exact response when her older sister Savannah pitched the absurd idea that the three Prestly sisters spend a month in Sunnyside, Florida, a small beach town in the panhandle, to relive their childhood summers. Then Cora followed the statement with her answer: an emphatic *"Absolutely not."*

She didn't care what sort of optimistic spin Savannah put on it, the trip was a recipe for disaster. They were adults with jobs and responsibilities. Well, maybe not Bianca, the baby of the family, but that was a different problem. The point was, they couldn't just pause their lives and spend the summer at the beach like they did when they were kids.

And even if they could, Cora didn't want to.

The Prestly sisters didn't exactly have that kind of relationship anymore. Don't get her wrong, she (mostly) loved her sisters. But in light of everything that had gone down, they now had more of a get-together-for-a-long-weekend kind of relationship. There was a four-day max before things started to get ugly. And last time Cora checked, a month was a lot longer than four days.

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“Next time I stick with *no*,” she said to the steering wheel.

Although to be fair, *no* wasn’t exactly an option.

Savannah had pulled out the unbeatable trump card that forced Cora into coming. This trip wasn’t about them. It was about fulfilling their mother’s last wish.

Before she passed, Julie Prestly made her three daughters promise her that they would spend one more happy summer on the white sandy beaches of Sunnyside, the way they did every year when they were growing up. And since their mother had lost her battle with breast cancer almost a decade ago, granting her wish was long overdue.

Did Cora think the whole idea was ridiculous, even at the time her mother had requested it? Absolutely. There was no way they could recreate one of those fairy-tale summers because way too much life—and not the good kind—had passed since those blissful days. But what choice did she have? Cora loved and respected her mother too much to just ignore her final wish.

So, when Savannah had put the wheels in motion for the overdue summer trip, Cora had begrudgingly cleared her calendar for the month of July and booked a flight to meet her two sisters in the sleepy little beach town of Sunnyside, Florida.

And so far, her prediction of a disastrous summer had been spot-on. She was only twelve hours into the trip and everything that could’ve gone wrong *had*. Which was how she wound up here, in the CVS parking lot, trying to judge how wet she would get in the fifty-foot sprint from her car to the store just to get a dumb toothbrush at 9:30 p.m.

“I think we’ve hit a new low,” she told the steering wheel, as if somehow it was involved in this situation. Then she counted down from three before she threw open the car door and made a mad dash to the entrance.

The answer to how soaked she would get during a fifty-foot run though a monsoon? Down to her underwear.

This was officially the worst vacation of all time.

She stopped just inside the door to wipe the rain off her face. The clerk, who was filing her nails behind the checkout counter, temporar-

ily paused her task. With a judgmental eyebrow raised, she gave Cora a once-over.

“Toothbrushes?” Cora asked.

The clerk popped her gum and tilted her head toward the back of the store before returning to her nails.

“Thanks.” Cora sloshed in the general direction the clerk had indicated.

The only reason she needed a toothbrush at all was because her journey to get here had been a complete disaster. What was supposed to be an easy two-hour flight from Houston had turned into a twelve-hour ordeal. Cora and her fellow passengers had to deplane and switch aircrafts because of mechanical issues. Twice. Then they were rerouted because of air traffic control, and had to land and refuel at a nearby airport while they waited out a storm. The fact that they’d arrived at their final destination, even if it was ten hours late, felt like a miracle.

Her luggage, however, hadn’t shared the same good fortune.

In fact, at the moment the airline wasn’t exactly sure where it was. But *of course* they would locate it (they wouldn’t use the word *find* because they insisted it wasn’t lost, simply unaccounted for) and soon as they did, it would be delivered to her. She should expect to have it in a couple of days. Three at the most.

So here she was. Replacing things that the airline couldn’t locate.

She trudged through the aisles of the deserted store in the direction of the dental care section, leaving a sort of Hansel-and-Gretel trail of water behind her.

Did she need more than a toothbrush? Probably. All she had was what she was wearing and a camera case full of her professional camera equipment. Knowing what she knew now, she’d made the right call to carry on the heavy camera case and check her clothes. Photography wasn’t just her profession (which she’d be doing during her stay, because the commercial photography industry didn’t pause for ridiculous family obligations). It was her passion. But her luggage choice did leave her in a bit of a predicament. She was on a four-week beach vacation without anything to wear to the actual beach.

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She paused in front of a rack of coverups. “I probably need one of these,” she said out loud.

Squinting slightly with serious consideration, she studied the options. Neon palm tree or the bedazzled option emblazoned with *Sun, Sand & Surf*?

“Palm tree,” she decided and draped the find over her arm. The endcap next to it had flip-flops in bright coordinating colors, so she grabbed a pair of those, too. After all, one couldn’t exactly go to the beach without flip-flops, could they?

With her beach outfit taken care of, she cruised back to the wall of toothbrushes. Wiping some of the dripping rainwater off her face, she scanned the options. She was reaching for one when a deep voice interrupted her.

“I wouldn’t go with that one, if I were you.”

The voice made her jump, mostly because she hadn’t realized there was anyone else in the store besides the gum-popping clerk. With her hand still reaching for the toothbrush, she did a quick sweep of the store to see if there was anyone else she’d miss before settling her gaze on the man standing next to her. Where had he come from?

He was tall and had an athletic build that, although she hated to admit it, looked good in jeans. His dark, wavy hair had the unmistakable mix of good genes and an expensive haircut, and his deep blue eyes twinkled. He reminded her of Gatsby, all charm and confidence with a healthy dose of swagger. It was the kind of thing most people probably found attractive.

Cora did not.

“I’m sorry?” Her tone was less asking him to repeat himself and more encouraging him to check himself, although he appeared to hear the former.

“Toothbrushes,” he clarified, gesturing to the product her hand was now touching. “You really should go with the two pack. Extra soft. It’s the better choice.”

Cora was a thirty-one-year-old successful business owner. She might look like a wet mess at the moment, and maybe she had arrived at the

point in a particularly bad day where she was narrating her life to stay sane, but that didn't mean she needed some random dude to mansplain a *toothbrush selection* to her. Who did he think he was?

"And what? You're, like, a toothbrush expert?"

Was the comment uncalled for? Probably. But keeping her opinions to herself had never really been Cora's thing. It was something she probably should work on, but she didn't want to. Not if there were guys like this still floating around.

Gatsby flashed a half-hitched grin, which he probably used to make people swoon. "More of a connoisseur, really."

She didn't mean to roll her eyes, they just sort of did it on their own. "I, along with everyone else with an olfactory sense, thank you for that choice."

His grin widened with amusement. "You're not even going to ask me why?"

"Why you made the bold decision to brush your teeth regularly?"

He gave a slight shrug. "A combination of respect for the people around me and a healthy fear of prolonged exposure to the dentist chair."

"Good to know." If the heavy dose of sarcasm wasn't enough of a signal that she was finished with the conversation, she turned her back to him and refocused on the wall of toothbrushes.

"I *meant* why you should go with the two pack."

Cora let out a heavy, annoyed sigh. "The only question I'm asking is why am I still standing here."

Once again, her snark didn't faze him. "Because I've found that it's nice to have a spare. You know, in a backpack or a purse or something." He grabbed the product in question and held it up as an example. "For the times when life throws you a curveball. Which happens a lot more than you'd expect."

"And yet, even with all that knowledge, here you are. In the middle of a rainstorm. Having to buy another one."

Again with the amused, half-hitched grin. "Touché."

"Thanks for your opinion, but I think I'm good." This time she

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made sure to add an extra dose of annoyance to her voice so he wouldn't mistake her choice of words for actual appreciation. "Besides, the situation that landed me here will *never* happen again." Because if she were traveling for any reason other than to fulfill her mother's final wish, she would've bailed out of this travel day long before now.

"Never say never." He tossed her the two-pack, which she had to struggle to catch with her arms full of beachwear. Then with a wink, he turned and walked away.

Cora glared in his direction. He might have lived his whole life believing the world would bend to his notion, but Cora did not. She returned the package to the rack before grabbing the single brush in the brand her dentist—an actual toothbrush expert—had given her during her last cleaning. And yes, it was a single because she only needed the one. Besides, she *did* have a spare toothbrush. She kept it in her medicine cabinet like a normal person.

Luckily, Gatsby had already disappeared by the time Cora got to the checkout, which she was glad for. She didn't know if she could handle listening to his helpful tips on how to pay for her items.

Still shaking her head with disbelief, she dashed through the rain for a second time and tossed her new finds in the backseat. "Well, that was something," she said to the steering wheel, then pointed her rental car in the direction of their vacation rental.

Savannah had rented the same beachside cottage they'd always stayed in when they were growing up. Every year, from June 1 until August 15, it was the place they called home. Back then, the blue clapboard house with the navy and white striped awning was one of Cora's favorite sights, and even the thought of it could fill her with buzzing excitement. There was no place in the world she'd rather be.

Some of her favorite memories took place on the back deck that led straight out to the sand. Sparklers on the Fourth of July. Watching movies outside on a white sheet their dad had hung between two beach umbrellas. Their mom making the most mundane day special because they were at the beach house with her games and *everything's-*

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an-adventure attitude. Just thinking about it filled Cora with a warm nostalgic glow.

Of course, that feeling was followed by an ache deep behind her rib cage, because what used to be hadn't been around for a long time. In fact, there were some days when she wondered if it had been real to begin with.

But that thought was the opposite of improving her mood. She pushed it deep down and switched her playlist to the one she'd named "Beach Tunes." If there were ever a time for Bob Marley to preach about not worrying and being happy, now was it.

The rain slowed from a downpour to a drizzle as she wound through the charming town. The GPS called out her turns, but she didn't need the help. Despite being gone for fifteen years, she remembered the way.

Of course there were several notable changes over the last decade. There was a whole new shopping complex with a big, fancy Publix. The new traffic light at the corner of Emerald Lane and the highway was a welcome and long overdue addition. The heavier traffic, not so much.

Yet, the vast majority of Sunnyside was just the way she remembered it. Main Street was still lined with palm trees. The aptly named T-Shirt Shop next to the beach still had its signature giant conch shell on top of it. Miss Mary's Ice Cream Shop was still on the corner next to the park.

She made two more quick turns, and then there it was. The blue clapboard house.

She turned off her engine and stared at the house for a moment as thoughts whirled around her mind. They were mostly nostalgic ones that hit her more in the feels than she was ready to deal with on a day that had been nothing but one disaster after another, so she did what any normal chronic avoider would do. She buried those feelings deep down with the other topics she didn't care to dive into at the moment. Or ever.

Plus, she really needed to go inside so she could get out of these wet clothes. She was starting to chafe.

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Cora grabbed her suitcase-sized camera bag and her drugstore goodies from the back seat and headed through the drizzle to the front door. Then she knocked.

Yes, she was aware that technically speaking she didn't have to knock. For starters, her name was on the rental agreement. She had the code that unlocked the front door.

But the bigger reason she didn't need to knock was that her family stood on the other side of the door.

There was a day when no Prestly sister knocked on a door, ever. Cora couldn't count the number of times Savannah or Bianca had barged into their shared bathroom while she'd been in there. There was a very loose definition of privacy among them.

Of course, that had been *before*, when life looked different.

It was only a matter of seconds before the door flung open to reveal both of her sisters standing in the doorway.

To any onlooker, it was impossible to deny that the three women were sisters. The Prestly girls had the exact same shade of chestnut brown hair and rich walnut eyes they'd gotten from their mom and the same button nose they'd gotten from their dad. But there were differences, too. Savannah was the shortest, with always-perfect curls that fell to her shoulders. Bianca, whose hairstyle changed with her mood, was currently sporting new curtain bangs and chunky, wavy layers. Long, lean Cora had always preferred her straight hair to be long with as little fuss as possible.

Of course, if their matching features didn't tip off their relation, the matching pajama sets Cora's sisters were wearing—bubblegum-pink pants with white polka-dots, and a white T-shirt with *Sister Squad* printed on the chest—were a dead giveaway.

"You're here!" Savannah and Bianca squealed in unison and threw their hands up in the air in celebration. The bright lights of the interior shone like a spotlight as they posed, smiles beaming, energy level off the Richter scale.

Yeah. It was going to be a long month.

Before Cora had a chance to change her mind and turn around, her

younger sister Bianca grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside. "Oh my gosh! That took you *forrrrrrevvvverrrr*." Bianca threw her arms around her sister in a dramatic hug.

"Yeah, I know," Cora mumbled. "I lived it."

"We're just glad you made it," Savannah said. "But you're soaking wet."

"Rainstorm." Cora gave a *what-do-you-do?* shrug.

"No worries." Savannah ushered her into the entryway with a protective arm. "We've got you covered. Bianca, get her bag."

Except, could this even be called an entryway? They were only two steps away from the front door, but they were already in the middle of the living room-slash-dining room. Cora glanced around, trying to take it all in. Had the cottage always been this small?

Savannah thrust a bubblegum-pink bundle into her hands. "Looks like once again it's matching jammies to the rescue!"

"No one has said that ever. Not even this time."

Savannah gave her a warning look.

So maybe their hairstyles weren't the only differences between them.

Savannah propped her hands on her hips. "Are you going to put them on? Or make fun of them while your wet clothes turn your entire body into a prune?"

Bianca giggled.

"Fine." Cora huffed as she carried her bubblegum bundle to the hall bathroom, although *hall* seemed like a bold title for the alcove between the two bedrooms. She could've sworn this was all larger last time she was here.

"We used to have matching jammies every time we came," Savannah called after her.

"We used to be eight." Cora's voice echoed inside the tiny bathroom.

She peeled off the wet clothes, dropped them on the floor and stepped into the dry set. While Cora maintained the pajama pants were the most obnoxious color of pink, she had to admit they were really soft. If she was going to be stuck wearing something for three days, at

least it was comfortable.

"When do they think you'll get your luggage?" Savannah asked through the closed door, as if she were listening to Cora's thoughts.

"I don't know." Cora shrugged on the "Sister Squad" shirt. "Two or three days is what they tell me." Although the tracking information online still listed her status as "locating" last time she checked. She gathered up her wet clothing and walked out of the bathroom in her matching pj's. "In the meantime, I guess I should throw these in the dryer." She raised the wet bunch in her arm.

"Here, let me." Savannah didn't even wait for an answer. She just took the clothes and disappeared into the primary bedroom and ensuite bathroom, which, Cora happened to know from previous visits, was where the stackable washer and dryer were located.

Bianca tucked her arm through Cora's and steered her toward the couch in the living room. "You should've reminded me that you don't do long road trips by yourself. I would've flown out to Houston and driven with you. You probably would've let me control the music."

"You had full control of the music until you proved you had questionable taste. That one's on you," Savannah said as she rejoined them in the living room. "Cora, are you hungry?"

"Starving," Cora said. "Sounds like road trips also haven't changed much."

"Have you heard the stuff she listens to? It's like a bad satire on indie garage bands." Savannah pulled a glass dish out of the fridge and held it up. "Leftover spaghetti?"

Cora nodded and Savannah popped the dish into the microwave.

"It has soul," Bianca retorted. "And passion. Which is a lot more than you can say about the boring formulaic stuff you listen to."

Cora flopped down on the couch. "That's okay. I still wouldn't have let you plug in. My car, my music."

Bianca gasped in mock offense. "Seriously? My own sister."

"Also, I'm not sleeping on the top bunk in that room." Cora nodded in the direction to the room she'd be sharing with Bianca. "Or the extra mattress they keep under the bed as a trundle."

Bianca crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. "On what grounds?"

"Seniority." Cora didn't miss a beat.

"What? Are we, like, twelve?" Bianca threw a pillow at her sister, as if she were answering her own question.

"Ah, fighting over beds. Feels like old times." Savannah handed Cora the steaming dish of spaghetti fresh from the microwave. "Either of you is welcome to sleep with me in the primary until Chris and the girls get here in a few weeks."

"In that tiny double?" Bianca wrinkled her nose. "Pass."

"I think it's a queen," Savannah offered.

"Still pass."

Cora tried to imagine Savannah, her husband, and their two little girls crammed into the tiny bedroom that barely seemed big enough to hold the bed. "I'll let you enjoy the space while you have it."

Savannah shrugged. "Suit yourselves. But while we're on subject of housekeeping, I have another beach house tradition." She swiped a circle of posterboard off the kitchen table and held it up. "Ta-da!"

"Is that the chore wheel?" Cora asked, not bothering to edit the horrified tone from her voice.

"Yes!" Savannah beamed as if the tone didn't bother her. "Just like Mom used to make. With a few updates, of course."

The circle was divided into three sections, each containing cheerful script and hand-drawn illustrations. "Each section has the list of daily and weekly chores you'll be responsible for." Savannah gestured to the chart, clearly proud of what she'd done.

Bianca smirked. "You're kidding, right?"

Savannah shot her the most mom-look Cora had ever seen. "We always had a chore wheel at the beach house."

"For the record, Bianca is old enough to do the regular chores now. She doesn't get to do half the list because she's a baby." Cora blew on her steaming dinner.

"You'd better get ready to rethink your stance on the top bunk, Big Sis, because you can't have it both ways."

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Savannah sighed as if this whole conversation had exhausted her. "Relax. If either of you had bothered to look in the room, you'd see there are two sets of bunkbeds now. No one has to sleep on the top."

Bianca looked at Cora. "Do you think we still fit on a bunk bed?"

Cora shrugged. "I can't even remember the last time I tried."

"You'll fit. It'll be fine. But back to the wheel." Savannah held the wheel out in front of her. "We each have a color, see? You're responsible for everything inside your color. Then we'll rotate each week."

Cora twirled spaghetti onto her fork. "Yeah, I'm not doing that."

Savannah glanced at the wheel, then back at her sister. "What? You're too good for unloading the dishwasher?"

"No. I'll absolutely unload the dishwasher like the adult that I am. But I don't need some chart to tell me when I have to do it."

"I agree with Cora." Bianca gave a decisive nod, then shot Cora a look of solidarity.

"Of course you do," Savannah said. "You've never done your chores. I've been to your apartment. It's a mess."

"She has a point," Cora said.

"Maybe. But that was in the past. I'm different now. I'm turning over a whole new leaf." Bianca straightened her posture, as if it were a sign of her maturity. "In fact, now that we're all here, I have an announcement to make. Something y'all are going to love." Bianca scooted to the edge of the couch and beamed with so much excitement that Cora thought she might pop off the couch.

"Oh, this must be good!" Savannah clapped her hands together, matching Bianca's excitement. "Let me guess. You got a new job?"

Bianca bobbed her head back and forth, as if she were weighing the guess. "Kind of, but no."

"You finally realized you're about to turn twenty-six and you should probably stop letting Dad pay your cell phone bill," Cora offered.

Bianca glared at her. "I hate you. And no."

"You're dating someone new?" Savannah's eyes sparkled at that suggestion.

"It's even better." Bianca paused dramatically while the air around

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her crackled with excitement. Even Cora couldn't help leaning in.

"As soon as we get home . . ." Bianca's smile stretched across her face, and she covered her mouth with her hands, as if she were so excited she couldn't contain it. "I'm moving to Idaho!" She let out an excited squeal.

For the first few seconds after the announcement, the room was completely silent. Cora ran the words through her mind again to make sure she'd heard them correctly. Moving? From Atlanta—where Bianca had lived her entire life—to Idaho?

Judging by the horrified look on Savannah's face, Cora assumed she was thinking the same thing.

Then they both fired off questions at the exact same time.

"What?"

"Why?"

Neither the questions nor the obvious hesitation in their voices seemed to give Bianca any pause. In fact, Cora wasn't even sure she'd heard them.

Instead, Bianca launched herself off the couch and threw her hands up in celebration. "Because I'm getting married!"

Savannah

Savannah felt like a bomb had just exploded. She was in shock, and there was still a little ringing in her ears. She stared at her sister, trying to make sense of what just happened. “You’re what?”

“I’m getting married!” Bianca seemed to sparkle, completely oblivious to the reaction around her. “We’re still working out all the details. You know, it’s a little hard to plan a wedding there when I’m here.” She waved her arms around in a cheerful, animated gesture, as if this were some delightful conversation that made total sense.

It wasn’t.

“It’s a little hard to plan a wedding when you don’t have a groom,” Cora said.

Exactly. Savannah would’ve said the same thing if the explosion hadn’t blocked her brain from thinking.

Bianca rolled her eyes. “Ha-ha.”

Savannah could feel panic setting in, like danger was prowling around the corner. “No, but seriously. Who are you marrying?” Her pulse quickened, and she took a deep breath to try to slow it down. “I didn’t even know you were dating anyone.”

Yes, she was aware that she wasn’t her sister’s keeper, but ever since the day Bianca had been born, it was Savannah’s job to keep an eye on her. *Savannah, watch the baby. Savannah, you’re in charge. Savannah, yes, you and Cora can go, but you have to let Bianca tag along.*

She couldn’t help it. Since the day baby Bianca came home from the hospital when Savannah was eight years old, it had been her job to make sure her baby sister didn’t get into trouble. And when their mom

died, that responsibility seemed to double.

“Oh my gosh. Seriously, you never listen to me, do you?” Bianca flopped back on the couch, looking defeated. “I’ve literally talked about him nonstop since we met.”

A slow, creeping awareness started to come back to Savannah. “Wait? Are you talking about that guy from the dating app? Not-a-gym-rat gym rat?” At the moment that was all she could remember about the guy her sister mentioned she’d met online.

Cora chuckled from her side of the couch and twirled spaghetti around her fork. “Oh, this is going to be good.”

Bianca shot her an annoyed glance before returning her argument to Savannah. “It’s not a dating app. It’s a matchmaking site. And he’s not a gym rat. He’s just really into fitness.”

“Which is exactly what Savannah said,” Cora said, which earned her another glare from Bianca.

“How long have you known him?” Even as she uttered the question, Savannah searched her memory for every mention of this guy.

Bianca lived fifteen minutes away from her in Atlanta. Although life was busy, they saw each other frequently enough that Savannah kept up with what was happening in Bianca’s life. Normally.

And yes, Savannah knew she’d been distracted lately. With all the *developments* she’d been dealing with, her mind had been on other things. But she hadn’t been so preoccupied with her own stuff that she’d missed her baby sister being in the middle of a love affair.

Had she?

“Time is irrelevant.” Bianca gave an airy wave of her hand to dismiss the thought. “Zander and I connect at a deeper level, so it feels like I’ve known him forever.”

“What does that even mean?” Savannah didn’t even try to hide the judgment in her voice.

Also, had the temperature just jumped ten degrees?

Bianca settled into the cushions with a love-swept look. “I think Jane Austen summed it up when she said, ‘Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven

days are more than enough for others.”

Savannah’s mouth fell open. Was Bianca even serious right now?

“Yeah, but just for funsies, if you had to circle a date on the calendar when you met, how many of those little boxes are in between that day and today?” Cora flicked her fork in the air as if she were using it to count the imaginary calendar boxes.

Bianca huffed, the absurdity of the questions clearly too much for her. “If you must put a number on it, five weeks. We were introduced five weeks ago.”

Savannah was starting to feel sick. “Five weeks?” She didn’t care what Jane Austen had said. Five weeks was not long enough for someone to meet another person and to move across the country for them. Especially when that someone was her baby sister. “Have you ever met him in real life?” There was a crease between her eyes now. She could feel it. It was probably the kind that would leave a permanent line.

“We FaceTime literally all day every day, which is better than real life. I’ve been everywhere with him.” She settled back into the couch cushions and let out a contented sigh, as if she could picture the conversations. “I’m there when he makes dinner, I ride along with him on his way to work. He’s the last person I talk to before I fall asleep. I know everything about him.”

“Except what he looks like in 3-D,” Cora said.

Bianca shot her a look. “Are you still talking?”

Cora wagged her eyebrows and shoveled a forkful of spaghetti into her mouth.

Savannah let out a heavy sigh and sank into the chair. She was well aware she sounded like a mom, but she couldn’t help it. Her sister was behaving like a child. “I have to agree with Cora on this one. How much can you really know about a man you’ve only known for a month and have never met in person?”

“You’re so caught up on this construct of time that it’s blocking you from seeing the bigger picture,” Bianca said.

“Which is?”

“He’s my soulmate.” Bianca’s eyes fluttered in a look of love. “It was

like magic from the very first time we talked.”

Cora let out a burst of laughter, and Savannah might have too if she weren’t panicking about her baby sister marrying someone she met a month ago. On the internet.

It was like the start of some *Dateline* special.

“Honestly?” Savannah crossed her arms in front of her chest and gave Bianca her best mom-look. “That’s the biggest load of bologna I’ve ever heard.”

Bianca looked hurt. “I thought you of all people would understand. Don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

“No,” Cora said from her side of the couch with zero hesitation in her voice.

Bianca’s look of disappointment caused Savannah to soften, and she dropped her hands to her side. “Look, I’m not saying it can’t happen. But with someone you happened to swipe right on? Who you’ve never actually met in person?”

“First of all, we didn’t *swipe right*. We were matched through Soul-Match. It’s a new matchmaking app that uses AI to bring soulmates together. It’s so effective that almost seventy percent of their matches lead to marriage or lifelong commitments.”

Savannah still wasn’t buying it. “Aren’t there at least ten different dating sites that claim to find your perfect match based on their proprietary method?”

Bianca shook her head. “Not like this. Not to the same level Soul-Match does. It uses the same philosophy as a matchmaker who is only interested in deep, lasting connections. There’s no list to *swipe right* on. You only get one match. You chat and go on dates for as long as you need to see if that’s your person. If the match doesn’t work, you go back into the system to be matched again. This time with new questions about what didn’t work to help find a better connection.”

“So, you better hope your soulmate decides to try out the dating app the same time you do,” Cora said.

“Isn’t love always a game of serendipity?” Bianca argued. “You wouldn’t question a couple who met because they happened to be at

the coffee shop at the same time or went to a mutual friend's birthday party." She turned to Savannah. "You'd probably eat it up if we had accidentally gotten each other's dry cleaning. This is the same thing, with the added benefit of a background check first."

"All those other scenarios have something in common. You live in the same area or like the same kinds of people or are interested in the same things," Savannah countered. Could you feel your blood pressure rise? Because she was pretty sure that's what she was feeling.

"What's your problem with modern technology? Everything else has evolved, so why can't how we meet our soulmates?"

"Because even though the entire world is digitized, human interaction isn't. A computer program can't tell you who to fall in love with."

"This one can!" Bianca stood up, her face turning red and the anger rising in her voice. "It's so good, it could even match Cora with someone she'd fall head over heels for!" She jabbed her finger in the direction of where Cora was sitting.

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?"

Bianca glared at her. "If the shoe fits."

"Don't drag me into your little fight," Cora said, unconcerned. "If you want to run off and marry some man you've never met because a computer told you to, that's your business. I'm just here for the spaghetti."

Bianca crossed her arms and huffed. "Zander isn't just *some man*. We belong together. Everything about him makes me better, and I want to spend all of time—my forever—with him." She turned to face Cora directly. "It's something you know nothing about, because you're allergic to relationships of any kind. Do you want to die alone?"

It was harsh and uncalled for, but it wasn't untrue. And for the first time since Bianca dropped the news, Savannah's panic shifted to another stress-inducing subject: Cora.

"You're being ridiculous." Cora shook her head and went back to her spaghetti.

Savannah agreed, but Bianca's comment sparked an idea, and the wheels in Savannah's mind started to turn.

What if. . .

Bianca kept Savannah up at night because she was reckless. Her baby sister was impulsive, going all in on whatever idea sounded fun at the time, no matter how half-baked the idea was. But Cora was the opposite.

She'd always been the one to do her own thing. She was independent and determined, but she was also skeptical, especially of trusting people. In more recent years, it seemed that skepticism had grown. Instead of facing her past hurts and dealing with them, Cora had walled herself off. She kept the entire world—even her sisters—at arm's length, hiding away in her Houston apartment. It was making her more and more cranky.

What she needed, in Savannah's humble opinion, was to get back in the real world and let people love her, and the sooner the better. After all, life was never meant to be lived alone. What better way for that to happen than for Cora to fall in love?

Cora finding someone was the reason Savannah interviewed every single guy she ever came in contact with. New hire at Chris's office? She'd corner him at the company Christmas party. Guy in the grocery store without a ring? She'd worm her way to the checkout line in front of him. She could be quite crafty when she wanted to be.

But so far her scheming hadn't done any good. The dates Savannah had managed to set up for Cora had turned into disasters. After the last one, which was over a year ago, Cora had threatened to never come to Atlanta again if Savannah set her up one more time. That hadn't stopped Savannah from being on the lookout for Cora's perfect partner, but it *had* stopped the dates since Savannah hadn't figured out a way to get Cora to go on them.

Until now.

"You might be right," Savannah said as the plan started to form in her mind.

Cora gave a confident nod from her corner of the couch. "Of course I'm right."

"No, not you." Savannah deliberately focused her gaze on Bianca.

“You.”

“Me?” Bianca looked surprised, pointing a finger at herself.

Savannah nodded.

She still didn’t believe AI was capable of cracking the code to true love any more than meteorology had cracked the code to accurately predicting the weather. But maybe it could get close. Maybe it could see something the rest of them were missing. Plus, there was the added benefit that the setup wouldn’t come from Savannah.

This could work.

“Maybe your little computer program is on to something,” Savannah said.

“Scientifically backed AI,” Bianca corrected.

“Sure, we’ll call it that.” Savannah waved a dismissive hand as she sorted the plan in her mind.

“Maybe we should call it a crock of—”

Savannah held up her hand to stop Cora before she went any further but kept her focus on Bianca. “You really think SoulMatch could find Cora’s soulmate?”

“I mean, it can’t create a man who doesn’t exist. But if he’s out there and willing to be found, SoulMatch will find him.”

“Interesting.” Savannah nibbled on her lip.

“Did it ever occur to you two that maybe I don’t want to find my soulmate?” Cora said. “That maybe I’m alone because I prefer it that way?”

Savannah ignored her. Maybe that was the story she was telling everyone else. Maybe that was even what she was telling herself, but it wasn’t the whole story.

Savannah *knew* Cora. She was one of the most caring, kind, and selfless people she’d ever met. She loved big.

But she wasn’t as tough as she came across. Cora had been hurt before. And each time, she seemed to back away from love, from people a little more. It was starting to get to the point that if she backed away any further, Savannah was afraid she’d disconnect completely.

The same way Savannah wasn’t willing to let Bianca run off with

every single person who sparked the slightest interest, she wasn't willing to let Cora give up on love because her heart had been broken. If Cora wasn't going to put herself out there, Savannah would have to do it for her.

The plan brewing in her mind might be crazy, but maybe there was merit to it. Maybe, just maybe, it could work.

"Okay," Savannah said finally.

Bianca narrowed her eyes, looking suspicious. "Okay, what?"

Savannah propped her hands on her hips and squared off with Bianca. "If you can prove your new dating site is so good that it can make Cora fall in love, then we'll have no choice but to admit you were right."

"Who's the *we* in this scenario?" Cora said from behind her. "Because I'm certainly not part of it."

"Let me get this straight." Bianca locked her steely gaze with Savannah's. "If I can prove this dating app is legit, then you'll be okay with me moving to Idaho to be with Zander?"

"I mean, it's far away, but—"

Bianca cut her off. "And get married?"

"If he's really your soulmate, I would never want to stand in your way." That was a big *if*. But Savannah would be the first to admit she'd been wrong before. Maybe she was wrong about this. It seemed highly unlikely, but . . .

"At the end of the summer?"

The anxiety Savannah been trying to keep at bay bubbled up, but she pushed it back down and kept going. "Seems a little quick. But, sure. I'll even help you plan it. We could do it here."

Bianca cocked a suspicious eyebrow. "And all I have to do is find Cora a date?"

Savannah held up a finger. "Not a date. I could find Cora a date."

"Perfectly capable of finding my own dates, thank you. That has never been the problem," Cora said.

Savannah ignored her and kept going. "You have to find someone she'll fall in love with. Correction: your *dating app* has to find some-

one.”

Baby sister and eldest sister stared each other down like they were a couple of gunslingers at a showdown, the words settling around them like dust on a Wild West road.

Bianca’s gaze was steely, as if she were weighing some kind of challenge or a dare. “Done.”

Honestly, it felt kind of like a dare, which wasn’t exactly Savannah’s purpose.

Her goal was to keep her sisters from self-destructing. She’d assumed wise words and encouragement would’ve been enough for that. But since neither of them was listening, she was forced to take drastic measures.

Cora stepped between them, breaking up the stare-down. “There’s only one problem.”

“Which is?” Bianca asked.

“I never agreed to any of this.”

The realization knocked some of the wind out of Savannah’s sails. “But . . .” she started without any idea of where to go with it. Because she knew one thing for sure: it was easier to catch a cloud than to try to get Cora to do what Cora didn’t want to do.

“But nothing,” Cora said. “I’m not going on a date with some rando. And I sure as heck am not putting my profile on some dating app for a bunch of creepers.”

Bianca looked offended. “Not even for me?”

“Especially not for you. I agree with Savannah. You can’t marry someone you’ve only talked to *on the internet*.” The extra emphasis Cora put on the last three words made it sound like Bianca was hanging out in some crime-ridden, lawless back alley instead of a site many people spent a large part of their day using.

Bianca, however, looked unfazed. “You know what? Since you have zero experience with falling in love and a phobia to commitment, you don’t get to weigh in. Because you have no idea what you’re talking about.” She held her hand up in the shape of a zero for added emphasis.

It was another low blow, especially since the comment touched on

moments from the past Bianca clearly didn't remember. Or maybe, which was equally as likely, no one had ever told her. Since the sisters all felt the same age now, sometimes it was hard to remember that Bianca was still a kid when she and Cora were in college and testing their legs in the adult world.

Savannah sucked in a breath as if she were the one taking the punch and looked over at Cora. Hurt flickered across her face, but it faded quickly as her calm, stoic, nothing-gets-to-me exterior reappeared.

"Careful, sis. That's where you're wrong. I actually know exactly how this is going to turn out. And I don't even need a crystal ball."

Bianca huffed and rolled her eyes, which only seemed to heighten Cora's determination.

"You can match me with anyone you want on your cute little dating site," Cora continued. "But it doesn't matter how compatible we are, he's going to leave. They always leave."

Bianca studied her for a second. "You have to be the most cynical person in the world."

"Realistic. There's a difference."

Bianca rolled her eyes again.

"Fine," Cora crossed her arms in front of her chest, not bothering to hide her judgment. "If you need me to prove it, I'll prove it. Set me up. But if my guy walks away, you don't move to Idaho."

"You know what? Maybe this was a bad idea," Savannah said. Yes, she might have started this, but now that she heard it from the other side, she didn't like where it was going. Someone was going to get hurt.

"And how do I know you're not going to sabotage the relationship?" Bianca glared at Cora, who was looking more and more self-righteous as the conversation went on.

"Because I won't have to. Real life will do it for me. We can have the most perfect first date of all time. Shoot, we can even start dreaming about forever. But as soon as all the drama of reality sets in—which won't take long, because I'm sharing a house with my sisters—my *soul-mate* will be out the door so quick, he'll set a new record for fastest man alive."

“Seriously? That’s what you think?” Bianca matched Cora’s posture. “Who hurt you?”

Her answer was meant to be sarcastic, but it hit below the belt. This was starting to get out of hand.

“It’s called life experience. Get ya some.”

Bianca shook her head like Cora was the most ridiculous person she’d ever met. “You’re telling me there’s no way even your soulmate would stick around until the end of the summer?”

“That’s what I’m saying, assuming your AI bot can find my ‘soulmate.’” She gestured air quotes around the last word.

“But if he does stick around, you’ll admit you’re overly pessimistic and will agree to read whatever self-help book I deem most appropriate?”

“I feel so confident about my stance that if I’m wrong, I’ll sing at your wedding.”

“Interesting.” Bianca considered this for a second. “In front of everyone?”

“The cheesiest love song you can find.” Cora held out her hand to shake on it.

“Wait.” Savannah stepped in between them. “I don’t like this.”

Bianca glared at her. “Wasn’t it your idea?”

“Yes, but that was before it turned into this.” She waved her hand around like she could visibly see the conflict between them. “Someone is going to end up getting hurt.”

“Not if I do my job right,” Cora said. “The idea is to keep Bianca from getting hurt.”

“Or maybe we’ll be planning a double wedding.” Bianca winked.

“You really are that naïve, aren’t you?”

“Optimistic. You should try it. It’s more fun.”

Savannah held up her hands to stop her sisters.

She looked at Cora. “I have to admit, Bianca’s not wrong. You tend to err on the negative side. Especially when it comes to relationships.”

“Realistic,” Cora corrected.

Savannah gave a *maybe-maybe-not* bobble of her head. “The point

is, getting out there and meeting people might not be a bad thing.”

“I know plenty of people, thank you very much. But you don’t have to convince me. I already said I’ll be Bianca’s cautionary tale, since apparently she hasn’t lived long enough to have her own.”

“See? Negative,” Bianca said.

Savannah turned to Bianca. “But I’m with Cora on this. I love a good love story more than anyone, but there are some red flags here, Bee. You cannot trust everything you see online. Or on video chats.”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions about something you know nothing about.” Bianca was clearly offended and maybe even a little hurt.

Savannah hurt for her. Part of her that wanted to believe her sister’s romance was real. Happily-ever-afters were her thing. She married her high school sweetheart, after all. But this?

Maybe it was because her little sister’s heart was on the line. Or maybe it was the threat of Bianca moving away. Or maybe it was something else entirely. But something about this situation didn’t sit right. It felt like there was a giant *Do Not Enter* sign flashing over it.

“I hope for your sake that Zander is everything you say. But if time and experience and Mom taught me anything, it’s that not all that glitters is gold.”

“Mom? You’re actually going to bring Mom into this? Oh, you—”

Before Bianca could finish her sentence, the doorbell rang.

It was like the sound flash-froze the previous conversation along with all of the previous emotions—which were starting to slide out of control. The room fell completely still and silent except for three sets of questioning eyeballs that laser-beamed at one another.

Maybe Savannah needed to insert a random doorbell into all arguments.

“Are we expecting someone?” Cora whispered.

Savannah stared at the door. “It’s the middle of the night. Who would we be expecting in the middle of the night?”

Bianca wrinkled her forehead. “Y’all realize it’s not even ten o’clock, right?”

“Do *you* get unexpected visitors at ten o’clock?” Somehow, even when she was whispering, Cora’s sass rang through her words.

Bianca seemed to consider the question for a moment before she shrugged. “Should we answer it?”

“No.” Savannah didn’t even hesitate. In fact, Bianca had barely gotten the whole sentence out before she gave her answer.

“But what if it’s important?” Bianca countered.

“It’s 9:56 p.m. Either it’s important, or it’s an ax murderer. And if it was important someone would’ve texted.” Seriously, did her sisters never watch true crime shows?

Cora cocked an eyebrow. “Do ax murderers ring the doorbell?”

“It’s Luke from the property management company.” The muffled voice came from the other side of the door. “I, uh, texted that I’d be dropping by to fix the toilet you said wasn’t working.” After a short pause he added, “I promise I don’t have an ax.”

“See. Important,” Cora said and walked over to open the door.

Standing on the other side of the door was a tall, slender man with bright, friendly eyes and a warm smile. He had a toolbelt slung over one shoulder, giving merit to the claim that he was there to do a repair. Although the rest of him—the open rain jacket, khaki shorts, and HEYDUDE shoes—looked like the definition of a local.

And there was something about him that looked vaguely familiar.

“Oh my gosh, Little Luke Tudor?” Cora asked.

And that’s when it clicked. This was the grandson of the woman who owned this house.

For many years, their parents had a longstanding rental agreement directly with Betty, who had always felt like a grandparent to them. And Betty had a few actual grandkids of her own. Savannah hadn’t been here in so long that she’d almost forgotten about Lilly and Lacy, who were a couple years older than she was. But the grandchild who spent the most time with them was Lilly and Lacy’s little brother Luke, who was Bianca’s age and her main playmate while they were at the beach.

He gave a good-humored chuckle as Cora waved him into the

house. “No one has called me that in years.”

“Luke?” Bianca questioned. “My best friend for of eternity or . . .” She let the words fall off expectantly.

Luke flashed a smile revealing a set of charming dimples. “Or until your freezer runs out of Popsicles.” He chuckled. “I’d almost forgotten about that.”

Bianca looked at her sisters and gave a nonchalant shrug. “He swore an oath when we were eight. So, you know, it’s probably still binding.” She turned back to Luke. “Although don’t hold us to the freezer thing quite yet. We did just get back into town.”

He ran a hand through his floppy dark hair. “It’s good to see y’all back in Sunnyside. It’s been a while.”

“Thanks,” Savannah said and waved him into the house. “When we were texting about the rental, I didn’t realize you were the same Luke. I should have made that connection before now. How’s your grandmother?”

“She passed away about five years ago,” Luke said. Immediately the air in the room shifted as there was yet another reminder of how much had changed since their last visit.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Savannah said softly.

Cora nodded in solidarity. “She was a lovely woman.”

“Thanks,” Luke said. “We’ve turned all her properties into vacation rentals, so her legacy lives on. I manage them now along with some other vacation rentals in the area.” He held up the hardware store bag in his hand. “Which brings me to the reason for my visit.”

“Oh right!” Savannah suddenly felt guilty for the earlier text. If she’d known it was Luke, she would’ve held off sending the text about the toilet that wouldn’t flush until normal business hours. It wasn’t like it was an emergency. “We would’ve been fine until tomorrow. We can all share one bathroom for one night.”

“It’s not a problem. I was out, anyway. I’m on my way over to trivia night at Gus’s Tavern.” He glanced around, probably noting their choice of attire. “But I hope I didn’t keep you up.”

Bianca waved off the thought. “Us? Not at all. Matching pajamas

is kind of a beach house tradition. It doesn't mean we're going to bed."

Although, to be honest, Savannah was hoping to go to bed. She was actually proud that she'd stayed up this late. Late nights weren't really in the cards for her anymore. At least not in her current condition.

Not that she wanted to get into that at the moment.

"Some of us are just finishing dinner." Cora scooped the almost-empty bowl off the couch and held it up as evidence on her way to the kitchen. "Tell us about this trivia night thing."

"It's a summer tradition. Every Monday night at ten. People can get a little competitive over it."

"Sounds like fun," Cora said.

Luke nodded. "It is. Y'all should go."

"Okay," Bianca said, cheerfully. "I'm in."

"Now?" Savannah didn't bother to hide her surprise.

Bianca shrugged. "Sure. It's our first night in town. Why not?"

Savannah had a whole list of reasons, starting with it was late. Plus, she already had on her pajamas, and as previously mentioned, it was already past her bedtime. And possibly the biggest reason of all, she didn't want to.

She was trying to think of a delicate way to sum it all up when Cora beat her to it. "Yeah, I'm not doing that."

"Why not?" Bianca demanded. "Another pessimistic view of a positive situation?"

"After the travel day I had? I don't think I need another excuse." Cora rinsed out her bowl and stuck it in the dishwasher.

"Maybe we can go next week," Savannah offered, feeling more than a little relieved that she had a decent excuse for bailing. "We can add it to the Summer Bucket List."

Bianca shook her head, looking disappointed. "I can't believe my sisters are so lame."

"Believe it, baby." Cora blew her a kiss.

Bianca shifted her gaze to their guest. "What about you, Luke? Looking for a teammate tonight?"

He seemed surprised. "You want to go with me?"

It was more of a clarifying question, but Bianca jumped on the invitation anyway. "I'd love to, thanks." She gave Savannah a pointed look. "At least one person still knows how to have fun around here. I bet he doesn't even have a problem with dating apps."

"Um . . ." He drew the word out and gave a quick glance around the room as if he wasn't sure how to respond to any of what just happened.

"Just give me a minute to change," Bianca flashed him a smile.

"Great," Luke said. Although his tone didn't sound as enthusiastic as his answer. "And while I'm waiting, I'll just fix the toilet."

He looked at Savannah and pointed toward the primary bedroom. She gave him a nod and a sorry-about-all-this shrug, and he disappeared in that direction.

"So, this is off to a fun start," Cora said.

Savannah tried to give her best optimist smile, but she couldn't help the disappointed sigh that escaped.

No, things weren't going according to plan, but it was okay. It was only day one. There were still twenty-seven more. Things would get better.

They had to.

Right?

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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