

**It's
All
Relative**



Rachel Magee



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

It's All Relative

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*For my mom,
who first inspired my love of Shakespeare*

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 U.S. History classroom, decorated with maps of the United States and posters of 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 boccie 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 was about to come 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 and walked around to lean 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 who 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 U.S. 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 whether 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'd 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."