

|| TEXAS CROSSROADS # 1 ||

At
Bluebonnet Lake

A Novel

Amanda Cabot



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For my readers.

Your emails brighten my day;
your support lifts my heart.
Truly, you are the reason I write.



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It had to be an April Fools' joke. Any second, Sally would laugh and tell Kate to turn the car around, that they weren't really going to spend a month in a place that—if the front gate was any indication—was in desperate need of an extreme makeover.

The drive from San Antonio's international airport had been easy, the traffic no challenge for a woman accustomed to dealing with the Garden State Parkway and New Jersey Turnpike, and once they'd left the city itself, the scenery had proven to be even more beautiful than Sally had promised. The rolling tree-covered hills, the lush meadows, even the oversized prickly pear cactus all added to the pastoral beauty. No doubt about it: the Texas Hill Country was beautiful. All except for this particular spot. This was literally the end of the road.

After they'd left the tiny town of Dupree, they'd climbed a hill before descending into one of the prettiest valleys Kate had seen. Then the road had ended abruptly, leaving her with the choice of a U-turn or passing through this gate. Kate had seen similar gates on TV, and they'd always led to the estate of some millionaire. Not this time. She might be in Texas, but this

wasn't Southfork. Far from it. This was definitely a joke, and now it was time to admit she'd been fooled.

Kate turned to look at her passenger. As she'd expected, Sally was smiling. Unfortunately, it wasn't a "fooled you this time, didn't I?" smile. To the contrary, Kate's grandmother radiated happiness. Genuine happiness.

Kate's stomach did somersaults at the realization that this was no joke. This was the place Sally expected them to spend the next month.

"Oh, Kate, it's just the way I remember. The beautiful iron gate with the rainbow on top, the trees—even the prickly pears are the way I remember them."

Kate tried not to sigh. The finish on what Sally called the beautiful iron gate was peeling; the rainbow's colors had faded; the ark that replaced the fabled pot of gold at one end was so bent it was almost unrecognizable. Though she knew that Sally's eyesight was no longer perfect, Kate was certain that the entrance to Rainbow's End hadn't looked like this when her grandmother visited it half a century ago. Sally was seeing what she wanted to see.

"The trees are beautiful," Kate admitted as she steered her rental car through the gate and onto the resort's private drive. Live oaks and cypresses shaded the badly rutted road and seemed to promise that even the hottest days of July and August would be bearable. Perhaps only the entrance needed work. Perhaps the resort itself would be better.

It was not. Kate parked as close as she could to what appeared to be the entrance and tried not to frown. Any resemblance to the Tyrolean cottage in the brochure was purely coincidental. The paint was faded; one of the shutters hung askew; and the flowers in the window box were cheap plastic, as faded as the paint. Whoever had designed the resort's brochure had both a vivid imagination and more than a passing acquaintance with

Photoshop. Kate's colleagues would have laughed at this example of faux-tography. She wasn't laughing.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Kate knew she was grasping at straws. There couldn't be another place called Rainbow's End so close to this one.

"Of course it is." Sally's voice was uncharacteristically sharp as she ran a hand through her tightly curled silver hair in an equally uncharacteristic gesture. Kate felt more than a momentary stab of guilt. Her grandmother had asked very little of her over the years. It was unkind of Kate to even hint that she was less than thrilled to be here, especially given Sally's health. That was, after all, the reason Kate was taking an extended vacation, so that her grandmother could have the trip she'd dreamed of for so long.

"There's the door to the office." Sally pointed to a sign that appeared to be relatively new. "Let's see which cabin they've given us."

Waiting until Sally had swung her legs out of the car and stood, albeit a bit shakily, Kate extended her arm and let Sally grasp it. Though Sally hated any show of dependence, the path was uneven, making the few yards treacherous for a woman with poor knees that were already tired from the long trip.

Kate opened the door and ushered her grandmother inside the small but seemingly well-appointed office. A computer and printer shared space with a phone on a long credenza that housed six file drawers. There was even a vase of fresh flowers on the tall counter separating guests from the working area. There was, however, no sign of staff.

Kate smiled at Sally as she rang the old-fashioned bell on the counter. Her grandmother had had a similar bell at home and had never once complained during the weeks when it was Kate's favorite toy.

Within seconds of the bell's ringing, a tall, athletic woman

whom Kate guessed to be in her midforties entered the office. Dressed in khaki slacks and a navy polo shirt with the Rainbow's End logo, she was undoubtedly an employee, and the way she assessed Kate and Sally made Kate suspect she was one of the owners.

"You must be our new guests," the auburn-haired woman said with a smile. "I'm Angela Sinclair."

Kate nodded as she recognized the name. According to the brochure, Angela and Tim Sinclair were the proprietors of Rainbow's End. "I'm Kate Sherwood, and this is my grandmother, Sally Fuller." Though colleagues found it a bit strange, Kate hadn't called her Grandma since Grandpa Larry's death when Sally had announced that Kate was old enough to drop the title.

"Ah yes." The woman's smile broadened as she looked at Sally. Who wouldn't smile at a petite, silver-haired woman whose plump cheeks made her look like Mrs. Claus? "You mentioned that you were a guest here in the past." Angela Sinclair gestured toward the row of file cabinets. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Fuller, but I couldn't find the records."

Sally's laugh filled the room. "That's probably because it was such a long time ago. Dinosaurs were still roaming the earth then."

"I doubt that." Angela chuckled as she pulled a key from the rack over the credenza. "My husband and I have owned Rainbow's End for five years, but we have records going back another decade."

"Not far enough." Sally leaned forward and cupped her hand around one side of her mouth, as if she were about to impart a state secret. "I was here fifty years ago."

Her eyes widening in surprise, Angela nodded. "We get some repeat business, but you're the first from that far back. Welcome to Rainbow's End," she said, apparently realizing that she hadn't formally greeted them. "Tim and I are glad you've decided to

return.” Angela pulled out a map and circled a square. “I’ve put you in number 12.”

For the first time since they’d entered the office, Sally’s smile faded, making Kate wonder what was bothering her. She didn’t have to wait long for the answer.

“The cabins have numbers?” Sally reached for the old-fashioned iron key and slid it into the front pocket of her purse. “When Larry and I were here, they were named for people from the Bible. We stayed in Joshua, right on Bluebonnet Lake.”

Angela lowered her eyes, clearly uncomfortable with some aspect of the conversation. “I see. Tim and I made a few changes, and that was one of them. When we saw that the signs needed to be repainted, we decided it would be easier to replace them with new metal numbers.”

Cheaper too. Judging from what Kate had seen so far, Rainbow’s End was not exactly flourishing. She studied the map for a second. “I’m sure number 12 will be lovely. It looks easy enough to find.”

With a quick nod, Angela handed Kate a second sheet of paper. “All the information is here. You know we’re on the modified American plan. Supper’s at 6:00. Breakfast is a buffet from 7:00 to 8:30. On Sunday we serve a midday meal instead of supper.”

Her face once more beaming, Sally touched Kate’s arm. “It’s just the way I remembered. Oh, Kate, I’m so glad we came.”

And so was Kate, if it made her grandmother this happy. But as she drove the short distance to the cabin, Kate’s doubts resurfaced. “Are you sure this will be all right?” she asked as she pulled into the parking space on the east side of the building and checked the odometer. “It’s a tenth of a mile to the dining room.”

Sally gripped her purse with both hands. “I’m not an invalid, Kate. It’s true Dr. Morrison said my heart isn’t as strong as it used to be, but I can certainly walk to meals.”

Sally's cheeks flushed, and Kate wondered if it was from the realization that this story was significantly different from the one she'd told when she was trying to convince Kate they should come here. At that time, Sally had claimed that the doctor believed her heart was so weak that she might be unable to travel in another year.

Wondering if she'd been manipulated, Kate raised an eyebrow.

"Dr. Morrison told me moderate exercise is good," her grandmother said, sounding a bit defensive. "Besides, this cabin looks as delightful as Joshua, and it's bigger. I think I remember hearing that all the cabins along the lakefront had only one bedroom." Sally tipped her head in the opposite direction, her change of subject telling Kate she had no intention of continuing the discussion of her health today.

Kate had to admit that their cabin appeared to be in better shape than the office, perhaps because it was constructed of fieldstone. Although she had seen only a few of the cabins, it seemed that each was unique, which gave Rainbow's End a surprisingly charming hodgepodge look. Rough-hewn wood, painted cinder blocks, stucco, and even what appeared to be genuine logs might have seemed haphazard, as if the original owners had no idea what they wanted for their resort, but somehow the cabins blended together, perhaps because they all had the same gray metal roofs.

Number 12 was larger than most of its neighbors, and like them, it boasted a front porch that seemed to beg for rocking chairs. Kate could picture herself and Sally sitting there, watching for the birds that Sally claimed were one of the area's attractions. According to Sally, if they were lucky, they'd see everything from kingfishers to goldfinches to painted buntings. But first they needed chairs. Kate would ask for them as soon as she got Sally settled in the cabin.

"Let me take a quick look," she said to her grandmother,

holding out her hand for the key. “There’s no point in your getting out if we have to change cabins.”

Sally pursed her lips. “I told you I’m not an invalid.”

“Of course you’re not, but you are the stubborn woman who refused a ride through the terminals. You can deny it all you want, but I know you’re tired.”

Her grandmother nodded. “All right. I’ll let you be the boss this time.” That was a first.

As images of the resort’s dilapidated entrance sign flashed before her, Kate decided to examine all sides of the cabin’s exterior before venturing indoors. The front and the east side looked fine. She rounded the corner to the rear and stopped abruptly, startled by the sight of a man on a ladder, doing something to the window screen.

There was nothing remarkable about him. Kate suspected that most of the men in this part of the country wore jeans and chambray shirts, and while many sported cowboy hats, a baseball cap like this man’s wouldn’t alert the fashion police. Even his height—at least six feet—and the dark brown hair that appeared in need of a good cut weren’t uncommon here. As she and Sally had made their way through the airport, Kate had spotted plenty of tall, dark-haired men who obviously saw no reason to spend a hundred dollars at a fancy salon.

“Is something wrong?” she asked after clearing her throat. The last thing she needed was to have the man tumble off the ladder and blame her. While Texans might admonish each other to “drive friendly,” she doubted they were any less litigious than her New Jersey neighbors who’d been quick to sue their landlord when they tripped on a loose piece of carpet.

The man turned and shrugged, and in that instant, Kate revised her assessment. There was something remarkable about this man. It wasn’t his green eyes, nor was it the square chin that kept him from being movie-star handsome. It was his attitude.

Though his shrug was nonchalant, there was something about the tilt of his head and the way he regarded her that told Kate this man was used to being in charge.

What a ridiculous thought. That kind of guy wouldn't be working as a handyman at a rundown resort. Or would he? With the last recession, that was possible.

"Nothing's wrong," he said in a voice that bore no trace of a Texas drawl, "as long as you like flying insects and maybe a bat or two in your room." He pointed to a sizeable hole in the screen. "It'll only take a few minutes to patch this."

Though Kate knew that tourists flocked to Austin to see the bats that hung around—literally—on one of the bridges, she had no desire to see one up close and personal. "Thanks. We'd prefer bat-free accommodations." As she started to ask what else might be wrong here, she shook her head. That was one question best left unanswered.

She completed the circuit of the cabin, finding nothing to alarm her until she reached the front and saw Sally struggling to remove one of her suitcases from the trunk.

"Sally, I—"

"Let me help you, ma'am." The handyman must have decided that a woman who shuddered at the thought of bats needed assistance, for he had abandoned his ladder and was now approaching Sally, moving with an easy gait. Just as easily, he extracted the large wheeled bag from the trunk.

"Thank you, young man. I appreciate your help. I hate to admit it, but these bones aren't as young as they used to be." From Sally, that was a huge admission.

"My name's Greg, and I'm glad to help you, ma'am." His courtesy earned him a smile from Sally and Kate's admiration. The men she'd dated had not always been so polite to her grandmother.

When Greg reached the top of the stairs, he waited for Kate

to unlock the door, then pushed it open. “Where would you like me to put the bags?”

Kate took a quick look around the cabin, feeling herself relax when she saw that it was spotlessly clean and seemingly free of bats and other winged creatures. Comprised of a small living area with a sofa and two chairs, a shelf filled with books and a few board games, two bedrooms, and a bath, the cabin was far from luxurious but would be adequate for their stay.

“Right here is fine,” she said, pointing to an open area near the front door. “I’ll let my grandmother choose her room.” Though the bedrooms were of equal size and virtually identical with nondescript furnishings, Sally might have a preference.

“My, this is nice.” To Kate’s dismay, though there were only three steps leading to the porch, Sally was slightly out of breath. As images of heart attacks whirled through her brain, Kate forced herself to inhale deeply. There could be a less ominous cause. Sally wasn’t used to flying. Perhaps that was the reason for her apparent fatigue.

Kate’s grandmother flashed Greg a smile that bore no hint of alarm. “Thank you, young man.”

“Greg,” he reminded her before he turned to Kate. As Sally began to explore the cabin, he asked, “Would you like me to bring in your bags too?”

His voice was low and well modulated. If Kate had had to guess, she would have said it was the product of an expensive education. That increased her belief that Greg had lost his job and was filling in here until he found another position. The question was, what had he done before? He didn’t look like a lawyer or a financial planner—at least not the ones she’d met—but he moved with more assurance than most junior level managers.

Realizing that she’d been staring and hadn’t answered his question, Kate shook her head. “The screen is more important.”

She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet, intending to tip him.

Greg shook his head, then brushed back the errant lock that had tumbled over his forehead when he'd removed his hat. "No need for that. As I told your grandmother, I'm glad to help."

Though she doubted working at Rainbow's End paid more than minimum wage, Kate wouldn't insult Greg. She simply smiled and thanked him for his efforts. As soon as he'd left, she turned to her grandmother. Sally had given the bedrooms a cursory glance, chosen the one that faced the front of the cabin, then settled into one of the overstuffed chairs that flanked the large window.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" Kate asked. Other than the helpful—and handsome—handyman, Kate had seen no reason to spend even one night, much less the entire month of April, here.

Sally ran her hand through her curls again as she nodded. "I'm as sure as I've ever been of anything. It's not just my heart and the feeling that time is short," she said, her expression as solemn as the day she'd taken Kate into the kitchen, given her a cup of hot chocolate, even though it was early May, and told her that Grandpa Larry had died.

"We need the time here," Sally continued. "I know you didn't want to leave your job for so long." She gave Kate one of those looks that always made Kate uncomfortable, because they seemed to see deep inside her. "You probably think your bosses will decide they don't need you. If this is the right job for you, it'll be there in a month."

"It is the right job." Kate was as convinced of that as she was that Rainbow's End was not a five-star resort. That was why she'd do whatever it took to keep Heather and Nick Maddox satisfied with her performance. Sally would probably disapprove, and so Kate had decided she wouldn't tell her grandmother

that, although she was technically on vacation, she had agreed to check messages daily in case there was something Heather or Nick needed her to handle.

Though Kate had completed all of her projects, the advertising agency was small enough that one person's extended absence would make a difference in the daily running. Instead of having separate departments like larger companies, everyone at Maddox and Associates did a little of everything. That was one of the things Kate liked about the firm where she'd spent the past four years.

"You know I wasn't happy at the big agency." Even though it had been the one Grandpa Larry had claimed was the best, it hadn't been a good fit for Kate. "Maddox and Associates is perfect for me. Nick and Heather are great bosses, and everything they do is ethical."

Kate frowned as she wondered who had done Rainbow's End's advertising. The pictures in the brochure verged on deceptive. While it was true that any organization would choose photographs taken from the best possible angle, the ones for Rainbow's End were more than flattering. They were false.

"I love my job," Kate told her grandmother, "and they seem happy with me. Heather's even hinted that I'm being considered for a partnership." That had been Kate's dream for almost as long as she could remember. She'd grown up with Grandpa Larry's stories of the challenge of advertising, and they'd convinced her that was the career she wanted. Maddox, which combined business consulting with advertising, had turned Kate's dream into reality.

Sally smiled. "You see, I was right. They'll miss you while you're gone, but they won't replace you. They'll just realize how much they depend on you. Meanwhile, you and I will have a wonderful time here and then . . ." She paused, her expression once more solemn. "The future's in God's hands. Let's stay here."

“All right, Sally. You win.” The truth was, Kate would do almost anything for the woman who’d raised her. If Sally wanted them to spend a month here, they would.

As she started to unpack her suitcases, Kate tried to put a positive spin on the day. Perhaps Rainbow’s End wasn’t as bad as she thought. But though she gave herself a pep talk, her heart didn’t believe it.