

|| TEXAS CROSSROADS #2 ||

In
Firefly Valley

A Novel

Amanda Cabot



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Amanda Cabot, *In Firefly Valley*
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For Martha Long,
whose emails, Smileboxes,
and special snail mails
have brightened so many days.
Thank you!





It wasn't the homecoming of her dreams. When she'd pictured this moment, Marisa St. George had imagined herself riding in a shiny new Lexus. She'd be wearing a designer dress and sporting an impressive diamond on her left hand, while her tall, dark, and handsome husband smiled at her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. Instead she was driving an ordinary white sedan with more than its share of dents and a loud rattle that the previous owner had assured her wasn't serious. Her clothes were as ordinary as the car, and the diamond ring and doting husband were as much a figment of her imagination as the luxury car and expensive clothing.

The car clanked again, reminding Marisa she was no longer a rising star at a prestigious Atlanta accounting firm but was back in the town she'd been so eager to flee and headed for a job that was definitely not part of her career plan.

Think of something positive, she admonished herself. She glanced at the sign marking the entrance to town and nodded. It still said "Welcome to Dupree, the Heart of the Hills," reminding passing motorists that they were in Texas's famed Hill Country, but the sagging wooden post that had turned it into a Texas version of the Leaning Tower of Pisa had been replaced by two perfectly

straight shiny metal poles. The sign itself was freshly painted, a nice improvement over the faded and peeling greeting Marisa had seen the last time she'd been here.

Maybe it wasn't just wishful thinking. Maybe Mom and Lauren were right when they said Dupree was changing. Marisa hoped that was the case. The town needed a boost, and so did her mother and her best friend. Being with them again was the one good thing to come out of all that had happened this year.

Marisa was smiling as she turned onto Hickory Street and pulled into the driveway of what had once felt like her second home. Her smile turned into a grin as a seven-year-old dynamo launched herself from the porch, her dark brown braids bouncing against her shoulders as she ran, and her socks—one purple, the other an unfortunate shade of puce—sagging around her ankles.

"Aunt Marisa, I thought you'd never get here," the young girl announced, throwing her arms around Marisa. "Mom baked brownies, and she wouldn't let me have any until you came. But now you're here, and we can eat. So, hurry up." Fiona turned, raced up the steps, and flung the front door open. "Come on. You've got to hurry."

Marisa rubbed her stomach, smiling at the girl who'd made her an honorary aunt. "It just so happens that I'm extra hungry. I might have to eat all the brownies," she teased.

"You wouldn't." A stomp accompanied Fiona's words, and her smile turned into a pout. That wasn't normal. The last time Marisa had video called Fiona, she'd seemed to enjoy a little teasing.

"Don't get her started," Lauren called from the doorway. "She threw a fit this morning and yelled so loudly I thought the neighbors might call Child Services."

"All because you wouldn't let her have a brownie?" Marisa asked as she hugged her friend, holding on a second longer than normal when she sensed that Lauren needed comfort.

The woman who'd been her best friend since grade school was the same height as Marisa—an inch over five and a half feet. When they were growing up, no one would have mistaken them for sisters,

but thanks to L’Oreal, Marisa’s once-blonde hair was now the same dark brown as Lauren’s, and colored contacts had transformed her blue eyes to a shade of brown only slightly lighter than Lauren’s chocolate brown. Now the most striking difference between the two women was that Lauren was thin enough to be called skinny, whereas Marisa’s weight was well within the normal range.

“What’s wrong?” Marisa asked.

Turning to her daughter, Lauren laid her hand on the child’s head, giving her a loving pat. “Why don’t you pour yourself some milk and get Aunt Marisa a glass of tea? We’ll be there in a minute.”

When Fiona scampered off to the kitchen, Lauren shrugged and gestured toward the stack of boxes that filled one corner of the living room. Like the rest of the house, this room had changed little since Lauren had lived here as a child. When she and Patrick had inherited it after her parents’ deaths, they’d planned to renovate but had never had enough money to turn plans into reality, and so the house retained what Lauren called shabby chic décor.

“Fiona’s upset because I’m cleaning out Patrick’s belongings. She saw me folding clothes and started wailing.”

“Oh, Lauren.” Marisa gave her friend another hug. “You should have waited until I arrived. I could have distracted her.”

“I didn’t expect that reaction. She doesn’t talk about Patrick very often anymore. Now she’s focused on wanting a new daddy.”

“I thought you’d resolved that. I saw her socks.” Earlier that year, when Fiona had been playing matchmaker for her mother, they’d struck an agreement. Fiona could choose her own socks—even on Sunday—and she’d let her mother choose a man to replace Patrick.

Not that anyone could do that. From the day Patrick Ahrens had walked into Dupree High and set eyes on Lauren Manning, everyone had known they were meant for each other. They’d married the day after Lauren graduated and had lived what had appeared to be a fairy-tale marriage until Patrick was diagnosed with leukemia. Now Lauren was a young widow, trying to rebuild her life in a town where single mothers were uncommon.

Lauren's lips curved into a smile. "Those socks. You couldn't miss them, could you? Unfortunately, when we made our agreement, I didn't stipulate that she couldn't whine about how much she wants a new daddy."

Marisa couldn't help laughing. "That sounds like hairsplitting to me. Do you suppose you have a future lawyer on your hands?"

"Heaven forbid. Fiona already tries to outtalk me. Imagine if she were trained!" Lauren laid her hand on the back of Marisa's waist and pushed her toward the kitchen door. "I can't vouch for the brownies' safety if we don't get in there."

The brownies proved to be as delicious as they smelled. Once Fiona had devoured two, she regained her normal sweetness and announced that it was time to play with Alice. As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

"Alice has a baby brother," Fiona announced as she jumped up from the table, giving her mother a look that told Marisa this was another point of contention. Lauren merely sighed.

"So she wants siblings as well as a father?" Marisa asked when Fiona had left.

"And a dog. I think Alice is behind that one. Every time she's here, she tells me we're lucky to have a backyard."

"I gather that she doesn't."

Lauren shook her head. "The Kozinskis live in Hickory View," she said, referring to Dupree's only apartment complex. "No pets."

"So, is Fiona going to get a puppy for Christmas?"

Wrinkling her nose, Lauren broke off a piece of brownie. "I'm not sure. Of course, if you promise to clean up after it and do all the training . . ." She popped the brownie into her mouth.

"In your dreams."

"Some friend you are." When Marisa refused another brownie, Lauren's expression sobered. "I'm really sorry you lost your job and that Trent turned out to be such a scoundrel, but I'd be lying if I said I was sorry you're back home. I've missed you so much."

"And I've missed you." Seeing the moisture beginning to pool in Lauren's eyes, Marisa decided they both needed a change of subject.

She glanced at her watch. “Mom’s not expecting me for an hour. Can I help you do some more sorting and packing?”

“Sure.” Lauren sounded grateful, although Marisa wasn’t certain whether it was for the change of subject or the offer of help. When they were back in the living room, Lauren pointed to one of a set of two matched bookcases. “That one’s filled with Patrick’s books. I know I won’t read them, so I might as well find them a new home.” She handed Marisa two empty boxes, then disappeared for a moment, returning with a pile of her late husband’s clothing.

Marisa heard her friend’s quick intake of breath. It couldn’t be easy, disposing of a loved one’s belongings. As far as Marisa knew, her mother hadn’t given away her father’s clothes, even though it had been more than eight years since anyone in Dupree had seen Eric St. George. Eight years, three months, and . . .

Marisa shook herself mentally. There was nothing to be gained by counting, just as nothing would be gained by continuing to search. She’d done everything she could to find her father, and she’d failed. It was time—well past time—to admit that she would never have the answers she sought.

“What can you tell me about my new employers?” Marisa asked, hoping to distract both herself and Lauren. This was the first time she had taken a job without an in-person interview. Although she was familiar with Rainbow’s End, since her mother had been employed at the resort for over seven years, Marisa’s only contact with the new owners had been by phone.

“Greg and Kate?”

Marisa nodded. “According to my mother, they practically walk on water. I wanted a less biased opinion.”

Lauren turned a jeans pocket inside out, checking for anything Patrick might have left. “Greg and Kate are probably the best thing to happen to Dupree in this century. Kate’s a former advertising whiz, and Greg made more money than I can even imagine with his software company.”

As Marisa placed three more books in the first box, she heard the smile in Lauren's voice as she continued. "It had to be a God thing that they both came to Rainbow's End at the same time, fell in love, and decided to revive the resort. No one in Dupree wants to admit it, but you've been there, so you know I'm not exaggerating when I say the place was on its last legs. It wasn't helping the town much, but if it had closed, it would have been another blow to our economy."

Though she didn't say it, Marisa knew that the resort's closure would have impacted Lauren's livelihood.

"How is HCP doing?" Although officially named Hill Country Pieces, Lauren and Marisa always referred to the quilt shop by its initials.

"Better than I dreamed possible." Lauren's grin underscored her words. "I had my best Labor Day ever yesterday. That's why I was able to close this afternoon. Best of all, Kate has commissioned a quilt for every bed at Rainbow's End, and that's in addition to the ones she wants as wall hangings for the dining room."

"Fabulous." Marisa was thrilled that her friend was doing so well. If anyone deserved good fortune, Lauren did.

"It is fabulous," Lauren agreed. "I no longer have to worry about paying bills. Now my biggest worry is sidestepping the Matchers."

"The Matchers?" Marisa wasn't aware of anyone in town with that name.

Lauren chuckled. "That's my abbreviation for the matchmakers. You remember Amelia, Debra, and Edie," she said, naming three of the older women who attended her church. "They've made it their mission to ensure there are no single women in Dupree." Lauren folded another pair of jeans and laid them carefully in the box, then looked up at Marisa and grinned. "That's one of the reasons I'm so glad you're back in town: they'll have a new target."

"I hope they're prepared for failure." Though her dreams included a husband and children, Marisa knew she was not ready for either. She needed more time to heal. After plunking two more

books into the box, she grabbed the cover, thankful that Lauren was using bankers' boxes with separate covers and cutouts for handles. That would make carrying the decidedly heavy boxes easier. "This is just a temporary stage—one year, no more." If she was very careful, she'd be able to replenish her bank account, and with some luck, the job market would improve.

"You might change your mind. Dupree's not so bad."

But working at a small resort in a small town was not what Marisa had in mind when she'd studied so hard for the CPA exam. She wanted big city lights and large corporate clients. Now was not the time to say that. Instead, she pulled a couple books from the next shelf and glanced at the first cover.

"Ken Blake," she said, not bothering to hide her disgust. "I'm surprised Patrick would buy books like that." Marisa had read one, curious about what had intrigued so many people. One was more than enough.

Lauren took a quick look at the book that was causing Marisa such distress. "Oh, those. Patrick said they kept his mind off the cancer."

"With a hero who's a heavy drinker and breaks just about every commandment? There had to have been a better diversion." Though Marisa wanted to toss the book into the wastebasket, she laid it in the box destined for the library's sale shelf.

"Don't you think you're overreacting just a bit?" Lauren said. "I understand where you're coming from, with your dad and all, but Patrick said the hero is like a modern Superman who always defeats the bad guys."

Marisa shook her head. She picked up another of Ken Blake's thrillers and pointed to the back cover. Instead of the typical photo of an author's smiling face, this one featured the back of a man wearing a Stetson and a khaki trench coat. He was turned in such a way that there wasn't even the slightest hint of a profile.

"If his characters are so good, why won't he show his face?"



He had no idea why it had happened. Blake Kendall paced the office that bore his name along with the string of initials he'd acquired as a financial consultant. Door to window, window to door. It did no good. The muse that had served him so faithfully for close to a decade, the same muse that had propelled his books to the top of the national bestseller lists, spawned a series of blockbuster movies, and made his name—correction, his pseudonym—a household word, had vanished, leaving him with a seemingly incurable case of writer's block.

He poured himself another cup of coffee. Perhaps an infusion of caffeine would help. When he'd drained half the cup, Blake settled back in the chair whose superb ergonomics ensured that he never suffered from back pain or excessive fatigue and positioned his hands over the keyboard. Nothing. Not even a glimmer of an idea. Why had he expected anything different?

He hadn't worried the first day. After all, everyone had bad days. But as the days turned to weeks, Blake had begun to wonder whether he would ever be able to write again. The inspiration well that had once required only light priming was now bone dry. He emptied the coffee cup and rose. There had to be something he could do.

After taking three long strides, he stood next to the window with its million-dollar view of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco Bay. The sight never failed to stir him, and it did not disappoint today. He could wax eloquent over the beauty of his adopted hometown. Perhaps he ought to begin writing tourist brochures, since it was clear that that was all he could do today. But tourist brochures were not what readers expected from Ken Blake. They wanted another thriller. They wanted to know what disaster Cliff Pearson would encounter, what clever way he would find to foil the evildoers. Unfortunately, Cliff Pearson's next adventure was nothing more than a blank sheet of paper, all because Blake's creativity was locked up tighter than Alcatraz's prisoners used to be.

Caffeine, walking, staring. Nothing was working. He had to find another stimulus. Blake sank into his chair and opened the

file drawer on the right side of his desk. He didn't expect to find inspiration there. That drawer held the files of his few remaining investment clients. While those clients provided a modest but steady source of income, he knew nothing in the files would trigger ideas for a new book.

He fingered the folders, stopping when he reached the last one. Vange, Gregory. The image of his former college roommate flashed before him. Maybe Greg was the answer. A glance at his watch told Blake he had enough time to get to Greg's office before noon. Why not?

He picked up the phone. "Greg Vange, please," he said when the receptionist answered. With some luck, Greg would be free. If not, they could meet for an early dinner. Blake didn't delude himself into believing that his friend and client would have any ideas for the next foe Cliff would defeat, but perhaps all Blake needed was a change of scenery and a bit of friendly conversation.

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Vange is no longer with Sys=Simple."

He blinked in surprise. Had the earth suddenly stopped rotating around the sun? Sys=Simple was the company Greg had founded when they'd still been at Stanford. Surely nothing less than an earthshaking event would have caused him to leave.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir."

Sensing that she would not provide details, Blake asked for Drew Carroll, Greg's former partner and another of Blake's college friends.

"Hey, Drew, it's Blake," he said when they were connected. "I was trying to get ahold of Greg. The woman who answered the phone said he doesn't work there anymore."

"It's true." The unexpected terseness in Drew's voice made Blake suspect there was much he wanted to say but couldn't. "We sold the company, and Greg left."

Without telling Blake. That was almost as odd as the fact that Greg had abandoned Sys=Simple. Though they saw each other only

a couple times a year, Blake and Greg usually talked every quarter when Greg asked for a review of his investments.

Blake pulled out the file and frowned. They'd missed their second quarter review. How had he not noticed that? His frown deepened as he realized that the MIA muse had affected more than his writing.

"Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure." This time there was no question. Drew was angry. "The last I knew, he was at the most pathetic excuse for a resort I've ever seen."

That didn't sound like Greg. As far as Blake knew, he'd never taken a vacation. But then, Blake wouldn't have predicted that Greg would sell his firm. It had been his brainchild and, at least from what Blake had seen, the most important part of his life.

"Is the resort on the coast?" If so, perhaps Blake still had time to find Greg today.

"Nope. He was in the Texas Hill Country, if you can believe that. I haven't heard from him since Easter, but I can give you his cell number if you don't have it." Blake heard a keyboard clacking and realized Drew was searching for the number. "I've got to warn you, though. There's no cell service there, so you'll probably get voice mail."

Greg Vange, the man who believed in being connected 24/7, living in a place with no cell service. The story became stranger by the minute. "Do you remember the name of the resort?" Presumably they'd have a landline.

"Rainbow something. Trust me, Blake, you don't want to go there."

But Blake wanted to talk to Greg. The urge he'd felt when he looked at the file had intensified. His friend had made a life-changing decision. Drew might not understand, but Blake wanted to find out what had happened and why.

Drew was right. The call to Greg's cell went to voice mail, but a quick Google search revealed a resort in the Texas Hill Country called Rainbow's End. It had to be the one.

“I’m trying to reach Greg Vange,” Blake said when a teenager answered the phone. “Is he by any chance still a guest?”

“Not exactly.” Blake heard a peal of laughter in the distance as the girl called out, “Greg! Phone for you.”

A second later, a familiar voice said, “Greg Vange speaking. How can I help you?”

“Blake Kendall here.” He matched his friend’s formality, then chuckled, more relieved than he’d expected that he’d been able to reach Greg. “What on earth are you doing in Texas?”

“You won’t believe it.” Greg took a deep breath and exhaled slowly in a technique Blake had seen him use when he wanted to increase the suspense. “You’d better sit down for this. Ready?” When Blake assured him that he was prepared for whatever Greg was going to send his way, Greg said, “I bought a resort, and I’m getting married in four days and three hours.”

Though he’d been leaning back in his chair, Blake bolted upright. “You what?” He’d never thought Greg would leave his company, but to buy a run-down resort in the middle of Texas was even more incomprehensible. And then there was the almost casual announcement that he was getting married . . . this Saturday. To the best of Blake’s knowledge, Greg had never dated seriously. He’d been too busy making Sys=Simpl one of the most successful companies of its kind to have time for dating and falling in love.

Though he felt like the world had indeed spun off its axis, Blake knew he owed his friend a response. “It seems congratulations are in order.”

“Thanks, pal.” If Greg heard the shock in Blake’s voice, he gave no sign. “It all happened pretty fast. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I was hoping to buy you lunch, but I guess that won’t happen unless . . .” The appeal of sitting down with Greg, even if it was only for a couple hours, to learn what had caused him to reinvent his life continued to grow. “You say you own a resort. Any chance you have a room for an old buddy?”

The hesitation, though only momentary, told Blake his question

was unexpected. “We’re in the middle of renovations. The grand opening is in a month.”

“I can’t wait a month.” Seeing Greg wasn’t guaranteed to break through his writer’s block, but Blake had to try. And, though he hadn’t thought it possible, he found himself excited by the prospect of visiting the Hill Country. It was supposed to be beautiful and very different from California. Perhaps that was what he needed to jump-start his imagination. “Can you recommend someplace else?”

Greg did not hesitate. “Carmen will probably kill me for this, but you can have my cabin starting Saturday. Kate and I’ll be on our honeymoon for two weeks, and we’re moving into the owners’ suite when we return.” Greg chuckled. “In case you were wondering, Carmen’s our cook, and Kate is the wonderful woman who agreed to take a chance on me.” The happiness radiating from his voice left no doubt that whatever had happened to Greg at Rainbow’s End, it had been good.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Something tells me you need Rainbow’s End right now.”

Blake did indeed. After he’d gotten directions to Greg’s new home and made his plane reservations, he called Drew.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded when Drew answered.

“Tell you what?”

“That Greg’s getting married. I thought he was a confirmed bachelor like me.” Drew had always been one step from the altar, but Greg and Blake had, for different reasons, steered clear of matrimony.

“So he’s really doing it. This is something I’ve got to see.”

“Me too.”