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Magnolia

By Kristi Cook



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Jenna and Ryder are far from friends—until a storm stirs up their passion in this contemporary southern romance from *New York Times* bestselling author Kristi Cook.

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Except Jemma Cafferty and Ryder Marsden have no intention of giving in to their parents' wishes. They're only seventeen—oh, and also? They hate each other. Jemma can't stand Ryder's nauseating golden-boy persona, and Ryder would prefer it if stubborn-headed Jemma didn't exist. And their communication is not exactly effective: even a casual hello turns into a yelling match.

But when a violent Mississippi storm ravages through Magnolia Branch, it unearths feelings Jemma and Ryder didn't know they had. And the line between love and hate just might be thin enough to cross...



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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kristi Cook also publishes adult titles under the names Kristina Cook and Kristi Astor. Her YA novels include *Haven*, *Mirage*, *Eternal*, and *Magnolia*. Kristi lives in New York City with her husband and two daughters. Visit her at Kristi-Cook.com.

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Magnolia



ACT I

Scene 1

Glancing out my window, I hold up my finger and thumb, creating a little frame around Ryder Marsden, who stands outside on the lawn below. I close one eye to get the illusion just right and then pretend to squash him.

Take that.

I let the curtains fall back against the glass, effectively blocking the view of my nemesis standing there beneath the twinkle lights, looking way too hot in his charcoal-colored suit. It would be so much easier to hate him if he didn't look so good. And I want to hate him; I really do.

You know those tragic stories where two kids from feuding families fall in love? Okay, flip that inside out and turn it on its head and you've got our story, Ryder's and mine.

It all began like this: On April 6, 1862, at the Battle of Shiloh, Captain Jeremiah D. Marsden—that's Ryder's ancestor—took a minie ball in the left kneecap. Corporal Lewiston G. Cafferty—that's mine—picked up Captain Marsden and carried him off the field of battle to safety.

On his back. More than a mile. Barefoot.

At least, that's how the story goes. Frankly, I'm a little skeptical, but whatever. The point is, the Marsdens and the Caffertys have been like this ever since.

And when I say like this, I'm talking complete and utter familial devotion. Our families' lives are so intertwined it's sometimes hard to remember who belongs where and with whom. We do everything together—church, backyard barbeques, even vacations. One of my favorite stories is about the time my uncle Don was somehow left behind with the Marsdens after a trip to the coast and no one noticed for two weeks. Seriously.

The Marsdens and the Caffertys play out their drama right here in Magnolia Branch, Mississippi, population 2,190. This little slice of heaven boasts one traffic light, six churches, a library, and a picturesque town square. The only nod to civilization is a Ward's just off the highway, and you wouldn't believe how hard

some of the locals fought it when they first proposed it, back before I was born.

If you're wondering what it's like to grow up here, just consider this—there are six choices when it comes to places of worship, but only one when it comes to fast food (the aforementioned Ward's). Need I say more? By the way, if you want to see some real Shakespearean-style feuding, look no farther than First Methodist and Cavalry Baptist—they've been going at it for years.

Truth be told, not much has changed here in Magnolia Branch since the war—and when anyone around here says “the war,” they mean the Civil War. Yeah, a hundred and fifty years and several other wars later.

The Marsdens still live at Magnolia Landing, an old, antebellum-era plantation house on two-hundred-plus acres down by Flint Creek. It looks just like you'd imagine—pristine white and perfectly symmetrical, with huge columns and a half-mile-long drive shaded by a canopy of ancient oaks dripping Spanish moss.

And we Caffertys still live just down the road in a house that once served as Magnolia Landing's overseer's cottage. The house has been added on to several times throughout the years, giving it a haphazard, rambling look. Even so, I think it's perfect—whitewashed brick and clapboard with wide plank floors and sleeping porches. Unlike Magnolia Landing, our house looks comfortable and lived in. Visiting the Marsdens is like visiting a museum—and really, who wants to live in a museum?

Anyway, our families have been desperate to unite through matrimonial bliss for as long as anyone can remember. But as fate would have it, they were always out of sync. Or totally in sync, depending on how you look at it. Either way, in all these years, there hasn't been a single eligible male-female pair who could get the job done.

Until Ryder and me, that is.

We were born exactly six weeks apart, a perfect match, agewise. You can imagine what it's been like since our mothers first plopped us into a crib together, rubbing their hands in conspiratorial glee as they planned our wedding. Playdates followed where the adults smiled and cooed as they watched us dig in the sandbox, where Ryder tugging on my pigtails was a sure sign of his adoration, where me throwing sand in his face only proved my devotion.

Star-crossed love? Ha! Not even close. Mostly, I try to avoid him whenever possible. I'm not sure how I'm going to accomplish that tonight, though.

Because tonight is the annual Magnolia Branch Historical Society Gala. Think huge, formal party where the who's who of Magnolia Branch gather to rub shoulders and gossip while they sip champagne and eat fancy food. My mom is this year's chair and hostess, which means I have to smile and make nice and mingle with the guests. And yes, Ryder Marsden is one of the guests.

“Ugh,” I groan, peering out the window at the growing crowd. The party is in full swing out on the lawn, and I'm sure my mom is wondering where I am. Reluctantly, I leave behind the comfortable cocoon of my bedroom and hurry down the stairs and through the front hall. Smoothing down my pale blue dress with damp palms, I step out onto the front porch and take a deep, calming breath.

The first thing I notice is the oppressive heat. It must be close to ninety degrees, the air warm and heavy even though the sun set a half hour ago. The full moon has risen over the horizon, casting a silvery glow on the scene before me. The effect is magical, and I shiver despite the heat.

The yard has been completely transformed, every tree wrapped with bright twinkle lights, colorful paper lanterns strung between them. There's a wooden dance floor out in the middle of the lawn, the band set just behind it. The strings are playing something slow and pretty while the rest of the musicians ready their instruments.

My mom has set up the buffet beneath the tallest, broadest magnolia tree, long tables filled with silver chafing dishes and manned by servers wearing crisp white aprons. She's rented real china dishes for tonight—I'd helped her pick out the pattern, plain ivory with a bamboolike border.

Round tables are grouped around the dance floor, all draped in cream linens. Each table is lit by an ivory pillar candle in a hurricane vase, colorful hydrangeas arranged artfully around the base. It's beautiful, all of it.

I search for my mom and find her standing beside the buffet with Laura Grace Marsden, Ryder's mom. They are BFFs, of course—sorority sisters at Ole Miss, mutual maids of honor. Mama spies me and waves, gesturing for me to join them.

"Jemma!" Laura Grace calls out as I make my way toward them, my silver flats silent on the thick grass. "You look like a princess, honey. Come here and give me some sugar."

I hurry to her side and allow her to wrap me in a Shalimar-scented hug. "You like the dress?" I ask her.

She grasps my shoulders and eyes me at arm's length, her gaze scanning me from head to toe. "It's gorgeous! Vintage?"

Grinning, I nod. "From 1960-something. Lucy helped me fix it up."

We'd had to cut away most of the ratty blue tulle and replace the skirt, along with adding a new zipper. But the original satin bodice was intact, and it's beyond gorgeous.

Laura Grace touches one of the pale pink rosettes at my hip. "You and Lucy should go into business together. Folks'd pay a fortune for a dress like this."

Mama smiles archly. "I told you so."

I ignore that. "Have you seen Morgan and Lucy?"

She points to her left. "Down by the creek with the boys. If you find Daddy, send him over here, okay? I think that strand of lights is coming loose." She glances up at the twinkling limb overhead.

"Sure," I say, though the lights in question look fine to me. Good thing, since my dad is a doctor, not an electrician, as he likes to say. Apparently, it's a Star Trek thing.

And by "doctor" he means the PhD kind—he's a physics professor over at the university.

"Oh, and, Jemma?" Laura Grace offers me a dazzling smile. "You make sure to save a dance for my son."

I can't help but roll my eyes. Yeah, as if that's going to happen.

As I set off to find my friends I actually hear the two of them giggling behind me.

Unbelievable. What are they, twelve?

As I round the dance floor I spot my dad over by the bar. “Hey,” I call out, hooking a thumb in my mom’s direction. “You’re wanted over by the buffet. Something about loose lights.”

He picks up his drink with a sigh. “On my way.”

I hurry my pace, eager to find my friends. The moon illuminates the sandy, moss-strewn path that leads down to the creek, but I could easily find my way in the dark. I love to come down here at night and listen to the symphony of sounds—frogs croaking, katydids singing, owls hooting. The Mississippi Moonlight Sonata, as I like to call it.

When my sister, Nan, and I were kids, we would sneak down here on hot summer nights. We’d hike up our nightgowns and wade in the shallows to cool off and then lie down on the hard, scratchy picnic tables, staring up at the sky.

I miss my sister. None of us could understand why she chose Southern Miss—a good four-hour drive from home—when she could’ve gone to school in Oxford. But that’s Nan, always unpredictable, always rebelling against my parents’ expectations.

Not like me.

I can’t help but sigh as I follow the path down the slope and around the bend to the sandy clearing on the edge of the flat, black water.

“Fashionably late, as always,” Morgan calls out in greeting, her body a dark silhouette against the night sky. She’s perched on one of the picnic tables, her strappy-sandaled feet resting on the bench below.

“Hey, I’ve got a rep to uphold,” I shoot back. “Wouldn’t want to disappoint my fans. What are y’all doing down here?”

“The guys are sneaking in a case of beer. By boat,” she adds with a grin. “Me, I’m just watching.”

I can just make out a handful of boys down by the water’s edge, hauling in a sleek canoe.

“Very clever,” I say. “Let me guess—Mason’s idea?”

“Probably.” Morgan unfolds her long legs and steps gracefully down to the ground, coming around the table to stand beside me.

“You look great!” I say, taking in her simple pink silk sheath dress. Her pale blond hair is twisted into a knot at the back of her head, and a strand of creamy pearls encircles her throat. Morgan is the reigning Miss Teen Lafayette County, and she looks every bit the part tonight.

Her mouth curves into a pageant-perfected smile. “You look great too. Love the dress.”

“What, this ol’ thing?” I quip.

“No camera? I figured you’d be filming the party for sure.”

I carry my video camera with me everywhere. It’s a hobby of mine. I like to make movies. And, okay . . . I’d love to go to film school next year, but that’s a whole nother story. “Mama made me promise to leave it in my room tonight—said it would make the guests feel uncomfortable or something,” I say with a shrug. “Where’s Lucy, by the way?”

“I sent her off to find you ten minutes ago. She must have gotten lost.” She shifts her gaze to the spot just above my left shoulder. “Wait, here she comes.”

I swat at a mosquito as I turn to watch Lucy make her way toward us with a murderous scowl on her face. “I just got stuck talking to Mr. Donaldson for, like, fifteen minutes,” she calls out. “I’m all hoarse now. Where the hell were you?”

Mr. Donaldson is our AP European History teacher. He’s starting to go deaf in one ear but refuses to acknowledge it, so you have to yell at him. Loudly.

“We must have crossed paths or something,” I say with a shrug.

“So, what do you think?” Lucy strikes a runway pose, right down to the purposefully blank expression. The white halter neckline sets off her dark, bronze-brown skin, the easy drape of fabric highlighting her curves. She’s had her hair relaxed, and soft, glamorous-looking waves fall just past her shoulders.

“Perfect,” I reply. “As always.” She looks sophisticated, far beyond her seventeen years.

The boys have reached the picnic tables now, hooting triumphantly as they pass around the contraband cans of Schaefer Light.

“Y’all better take it easy,” I call out. “No ruining Mama’s party, okay?”

A grinning Ben salutes me with his beer. “Yes’m.”

Ben is Ryder’s cousin—second cousin, to be specific—and one of his best friends, even though they couldn’t be any more different. Ben is sweet, thoughtful. Kind.

Whereas Ryder, well . . . I’ll tell you about Ryder. He’s the star quarterback of our Division 1A state-championship football team. Top student in our class, and he doesn’t even have to work at it. He plays the piano like some kind of freaking prodigy, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he composed sonatas or something in his spare time.

Oh, and did I mention that he’s gorgeous? Of course he is. Six foot four, two hundred ten pounds of swoon-worthy good looks. Spiky dark hair, chocolate brown eyes, and full-on dimples.

And his future? Right now half the SEC is courting him hard, and the other half is wishing they were. It’s a foregone conclusion that he’ll play for Ole Miss—Mississippi’s golden boy, kept right here at home.

Ryder brushes past me and my friends as if we don’t exist, unworthy of his notice, as he follows Ben and the rest of the guys—Mason, Tanner, and Patrick—to the picnic table behind us.

Tonight, the guys are wearing the standard dress uniform of khakis with a white oxford-cloth shirt and colorful tie. Their jackets—navy blue, of course—have long since been discarded, their ties loosened and hanging untidily against their shirtfronts.

Only Ryder, discordant in his charcoal suit and French-blue tie, remains jacketed and fully buttoned up, not even appearing to break a sweat despite the oppressive heat. He's also the only one without a beer, I notice.

That doesn't mean he's quiet, though. They're loud and raucous, all of them, shouting and cursing at each other as they discuss—what else?—football.

"You've gotta see this dude's arm to believe it," Tanner is saying. "I'm talking perfect spiral." He mimes a throw.

"So? You need receivers who don't suck ass for it to make any difference." Mason tips back his beer and downs nearly half its contents in a single, long gulp. Mason is Ryder's other best friend. He also happens to be Morgan's twin brother. Back in elementary school, he wore his hair so long that people often mistook them for identical twin girls—a little factoid I like to revisit whenever he gets too annoying, which is often. He can be a jerk sometimes—hot-tempered and a little crude.

"Let's see if you're still singing the same song in two weeks, after we kick your sorry asses," Tanner says sourly.

"Just thinking it ain't gonna make it so, bro. Where'd you say this kid transferred from? Holy Cross?" Mason shakes his head, chuckling. "Yeah, I'm not worried. You worried, Ryder?"

All the guys' heads swivel toward Ryder. He tosses the football he's holding into the air and catches it. "Nope," he says with a cocky grin.

"Maybe you should be." Tanner is glaring now, his arms folded across his scrawny chest. Tanner is my cousin, on my mom's side. He goes to West Lafayette High, our big football rival. It's some kind of weird districting thing, because he went to elementary and middle school with us. He probably could've applied for a waiver or something, but he didn't. Mason claims it's because Tanner knew he wasn't good enough to play ball for Magnolia Branch, and who knows? Maybe he's right. Either way, things have a habit of getting pretty heated whenever he's around nowadays.

"Hey, did y'all catch the Alabama-LSU game this afternoon?" Ben asks, obviously trying to defuse the situation.

"They're such morons," Lucy mutters as the boys' conversation steers toward more neutral ground.

Morgan nods. "Mason brought his shotgun, by the way. In the boat with the beer. They'll probably go off and shoot stuff before the night is over."

"So long as Jemma doesn't go with them." Lucy directs a stern glare in my direction.

Because I'm the best shot in all of Magnolia Branch—an indisputable fact. I've got trophies to show for it. Not that I would ever shoot a living thing—it's just targets and skeet for me, thank you very much. But yeah, Mama taught me to sew, Daddy to shoot. That's the way we roll here in Magnolia Branch.

“Not in this dress and not with boys who’ve been drinking,” I say, stealing a glance over my shoulder at the boys in question.

At that exact moment, Patrick turns toward me and our gazes collide. He smiles at me—a goofy, mischievous grin.

Inexplicably, my stomach flutters in response. I swallow hard, my pulse racing.

Oh, no.

If there’s one thing I know about Patrick Hughes, it’s that he’s trouble. Big trouble. The Hugheses are old money—and I mean way old money—and Patrick is their little prince. Like Mason, he’s prone to having too good of a time, as evidenced by not one but two DUIs in the past year alone. Lucky for him, his daddy’s a lawyer, a partner at Marsden, Hughes & Fogarty, along with Ryder’s dad.

Nope, my parents would definitely not approve, despite his wealth and pedigree.

Who knows? Maybe that’s why I smile back.

Users Review

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