

a lauren holbrook novel  
e r y n n m a n g u m

# MISSMATCH



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Creative Team: Melanie Knox, Susan Martins Miller, Kathy Mosier, Arvid Wallen,  
Kathy Guist

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*To my mom, Susan Elaine Terry Mangum, who holds many titles in my life: Mom, Adviser, Co-conspirator, and, best of all, Friend. I can't even imagine a more amazing mother. I want to be like you when I grow up. I love you!*

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# Prologue

“Jingle alllll the waaay!”

It is one week until Christmas. My soon-to-be-retired boss, Mr. Knox, sighs as I come in the door.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Lauren, but I’d stick to photography.”

I toss my backpack in the general direction of the pointless secretary’s desk. Pointless because we don’t have a secretary nor a use for one.

“Has anyone ever told you how great you are with compliments?” I say.

“Do you mind taking my eleven o’clock appointment?” Mr. Knox asks, tucking his pencil behind his ear, as is his custom. Mr. Knox is in his sixties, is maybe five foot eight—barely two inches taller than me—and has balding hair the exact color of Nilla Wafers.

I know this because I discreetly compared the two just the other day.

He’s also the only person other than my oldest sister who calls me by my full name, Lauren. Most people call me Laurie.

“Sure, I can take it,” I tell him, pulling off my gloves and hat,

which makes my hair crackle with static.

Mr. Knox is giving me his classic How-Did-I-Get-Stuck-with-Her? look. “Your hair is a wreck, Lauren.”

“Once again, the compliments just overwhelm me.” I try my best to smooth my hair.

He frowns at the failed effort. “Go look in the mirror. And hurry. It’s three minutes until eleven.”

The studio is basically a big square building someone added interior walls to in order to make it seem more complex. One corner of the building is the front room with the useless secretary’s desk. The four portrait studios are right behind the desk. There’s a long hall with one office, a room for people to change clothes, a bathroom, and a tiny employee lounge alongside it. The studio is extremely well-respected—we get business from all over the area.

I half-skip down the hall. It is, after all, one week until Christmas—the most wonderful time of the year!

My best friend and Mr. Knox’s grandson, Brandon Knox, is sitting in the employee lounge, guzzling a Coke and staring at the clock.

I poke my head in. “Hey.”

He swallows. “Hi, Laur. Two minutes and thirty-three seconds.”

“Until what? The Ghost of Christmas Future?”

“Worse.”

“I don’t know, Brandon. The Christmas Future ghost was pretty scary.”

“The Rawleys.”

“Okay, never mind. You win.” The Rawleys have seven kids who don’t know the meaning of the word *discipline*. A part of me wants to throw the book of Proverbs at them each time they come in.

Brandon finishes the Coke and grabs a Dr. Pepper. He’s combating the Rawleys the only way we know how—loads and loads of

caffeine. “Your hair looks great,” he says between swallows.

“Thanks, I’m about to go spray it so it’ll stay like this.” I riffle my hand through it. “How do you think I’d look as a blonde?”

*Slurp.* “I prefer you as a brunette.”

“Even if my eyes were blue?”

“They’re not, so I don’t know why we’re having this conversation, Nutsy.”

Don’t ask. It’s a nickname dating to the first time we watched *Robin Hood* together.

“Gray is close to blue.” I bat my eyelashes at him.

“It is not.”

“Is too.”

“One minute and eleven seconds.”

I grab a can of Dr. Pepper for myself. “You’re in my prayers, Brandon.”

“I’m in my prayers too.” He moans.

I grin at him, duck into the bathroom, and comb down my hair, and I’m back down the hall just as an average-height guy with short, spiky brown hair gelled to perfection comes through the door. He’s wearing a nice suit and looks like he could quote me the stock exchange numbers for Procter & Gamble off the top of his head.

Mr. Knox has left apparently, but there’s one of his blue sticky notes on the desk. *His name is Nate Kennedy. Hope you fixed your hair.*

“Hi, Nate,” I say, smiling nicely. “I’m Laurie. I’ll be taking your picture.”

“It’s for my business cards.” He says this very loudly, as if my now-combed-down hair has clogged my ears.

“Oh yeah? What do you do?” I point toward Studio One and he follows me in. I bite back a grin as I see the Rawley’s fifteen-passenger van pull up.

“I’m a stockbroker.”

Man, I nailed his job.

“Neat.”

“I just moved to town. I got transferred here to Colorado from Arizona.” He looks around the small studio, stopping at the bright green piece of paper I have taped to the door. It has my favorite verse written on it: Psalm 37:4.

“Are you a Christian?” he asks.

I plop a chair in front of the camera for him. “Yep.”

“Really? Wow, this is great. Me too. I’m actually looking for a church.” He sits in the chair.

I go around to the other side of the camera. “Well, you can try my church. They only tar every third visitor, and I think that happened last week, so you should be good.”

He starts laughing right away. A nice laugh.

I smile, squint through the lens, and suddenly have a very realistic daydream.

*Lexi wearing a white slip dress, carrying a bouquet of red tulips, walking down the aisle to Nate.*

Lexi? My older sister? Marrying this up-and-coming stockbroker?

I half-gasp.

“What?” Nate yells.

I decide he cannot lower his voice to save his life. “Come to church on Sunday. You’ll like it. I promise.”

“Uh. Sure.”



Sunday morning dawns sunshiny and bitterly cold. I am standing just inside the front door of my church, shivering. The things I do for my

sister's future happiness.

Nate comes through the door and I yell, "Nate! Hi, remember me?"

His face splits in a grin. "Um. Yeah, of course I remember you."

"Good. How was your week?"

"Fine."

He looks like he's going to go on into the service, so I need to distract him. Lexi has no sense of punctuality at all.

"Tell me about the stock exchange. I've been thinking about investing."

"Really? Well, that's good because right now . . ."

My brain stops there and I keep eye contact and nod occasionally just so he thinks I'm still paying attention.

The door opens.

Remember those movie scenes where the hero and heroine finally meet and there's this huge swell from an orchestra?

You're not going to believe this, but it does happen!

The door opens; Lexi pops her incredibly gorgeous head in and doesn't even glance in my direction as she half-runs to the sanctuary, pushing her earrings through her ears as she jogs.

"Lex!"

She turns, and right then is when the music director, David, starts strumming a sweet song on his guitar.

Nate blinks at her, taken aback. Lexi is beautiful—long, long, long honey blonde hair, huge gray eyes, a perfect smattering of freckles across her adorable nose.

"Hey, Baby," she says to me. She smiles politely at the starched gent next to me. "I'm Lexi Holbrook, Laurie's sister."

"I'm Nate." Swallow. "Nate Kennedy."

They shake hands.

I grin. Electricity is zipping through the air and it isn't just from my

again static-clung hair.

“You’re welcome to sit next to us,” Lexi says, like I knew she would.

“Sure. I’d like that.”

They don’t even make sure I’m behind them as they disappear into the sanctuary.

I try very hard not to burst into a happy song and dance. Well, moderately hard anyway.

“Laurie?”

I whirl, midtwist.

Brandon comes down the hall, frowning. “What are you doing?”

“Brandon, darlin’,” I drawl, grinning exuberantly, “I have discovered my life’s work.”

“It’s not coffee drinking, is it? How many cups have you had today anyway?”

“No, it’s not coffee drinking.” I wave my hands around. “Eight months, Brandon. Maybe less.”

“Eight months until what?”

I grin in the direction of the sanctuary doors and then smirk at Brandon. “First Corinthians 7:36,” I tell him, opening the door.

He whips his Bible from his coat pocket, flips to the passage. I’m halfway in the sanctuary, the congregation is singing, and I can *still* hear his yell.

““They should get married’? *Laurie!*”

# Chapter One

## Twelve Months, Three Weeks, and Nine Hours Later

There comes a time in every woman's life when she desperately desires to be married. At least, this is what I have always been told by my father. I am beginning to doubt his word on the subject. I am officially, as of one week, twenty-three years old and haven't the slightest inkling of matrimony *or* desperation.

I didn't feel desperate at my friends' weddings or even at my sister's wedding, which took place just a few hours ago. My father did, however.

"I can't believe Lexi's getting married." This is all Dad said during Lexi's six-month engagement. To be honest, I'm glad the day finally came so Dad can maybe get over it and move on with life.

I shouldn't be so optimistic.

"I can't believe Lexi got married."

The only change in the conversation is the tense.

Dad is in his favorite chair, the red one with the plaid stripes, staring bleakly at the floor where Lexi's dog, Muffin, blissfully chews the designer coffee table legs unhindered. Dad's gray hair is still combed nicely from the wedding, but he's changed into a pair of khakis and a polo shirt.

A fire is roaring in the massive fireplace, and all the lights in the house are off except the one lamp by Dad's chair.

"Dad, come on. You've got to move on now. Lex is married, to a wonderful guy I might add, and that's that." I lounge on the limited edition leather couch, still in my maid of honor gown. Lexi always dreamed of a fancy, black-tie-only wedding. Fortunately Dad could afford it. Dad told me he didn't sell his Internet company just to sit on the millions of dollars, and Lexi told me to stand up straight every four minutes so I wouldn't wrinkle the two-thousand-dollar dress.

I'm having fun mashing as many wrinkles as possible into the hateful fabric.

"Laurie-girl."

Dad turns woeful gray eyes at me, and I suddenly have the impression of staring at a humanized basset hound.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Don't ever get married, Laurie-girl. I don't think I can take you leaving me."

I laugh. "You have nothing to worry about, Dad. Even if I did want to get married, which I don't, there aren't any good men around anymore anyway."

"I feel the same way about women." The voice is not my dad's.

I roll my eyes. "Can't you ever knock?"

Brandon strolls into the room like he owns the place. He stops by Dad's chair. "How are you doing, sir?"

“Not too good, Brandon.”

“I was afraid of that.” Up to this point, Brandon hasn’t even turned in my direction. Now he winks at me. He is still in his tux, the tie undone, and his straight, short brown hair is no longer combed neatly. Brandon is tall, and his lankiness just makes him look taller. The tux kind of rounds him out a little bit.

He’s still talking. “Lexi’s absence will be keenly felt, I’m sure.”

“Oh brother.” I adjust my position so that I can attack the left side of the dress. “Why are you here, Brandon?”

He hands Dad a box. “I found these after the wedding. I thought you might like them, Mr. Holbrook.”

Unopened tea bags fill the box. Dad smiles for the first time that day. “Thanks.”

“For Pete’s sake.” I groan. “Dad, Lexi hasn’t lived here for four years! It’s not like you saw her every day. In fact, you’ll probably see her more now. Lexi and Nate’s house is two blocks away.”

Dad nods, his face easing back into a sad frown. “I guess, Laurie-girl.”

I close my eyes.

“So what big plans do you have for this evening?” Brandon sits at the other end of the couch from me, kicking my bare foot.

“None.” I twist away. “Dad wants to rest.”

“The wedding wore me out. And there’s a bad cold going around.” Dad puts a hand to his forehead. “I hope I didn’t catch it.”

When I was in fifth grade, my teacher asked my class to describe our parents in one word. Mom passed away when I was eight, so I only had to depict Dad. It was the easiest assignment I have ever had. One word: Hypochondriac. The hardest part of the assignment was spelling it.

Brandon’s mouth twists in a pitiful attempt to not smile. “Don’t worry, Mr. Holbrook. I’m sure you’re safe.”

“I don’t know. I’m going to go make some tea. Would either of you like some?”

I know what kind it will be. Lemongrass. *Blegh*.

“No thanks, Dad,” I say cheerfully. “I feel fine.”

“You got your mother’s immune system. You should be thanking God for that every day,” Dad says solemnly.

I nod.

“None for me either.” Brandon smiles. “I had a glass of orange juice before coming over.”

“Smart boy. See, Laurie-girl? You should take a few lessons from Brandon.”

“I’ll try,” I say, this time not as cheerfully.

Dad leaves the room. Brandon waits until Dad is out of earshot. “He’s not doing very well,” he whispers.

I groan.

“I guess you knew that.” He pauses. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. Lex is happy, Nate is happy, and I’m happy because I’m the one who introduced them.” One week before Christmas. How romantic is that?

He brushes it off. “Luck.”

“Not luck. They’re perfect for each other.”

“Yes, but don’t attribute that to yourself. God would have had them meet eventually on their own.”

Brandon takes great pride in minimizing the things in which I take great pride.

“Say what you want. But I know I’m partly responsible for the wedding today, and I’m proud of it.”

“Laurie, I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Dad says, coming back from the kitchen.

“What’s that, Dad?”

“Tear families apart.”

I blink. Brandon starts laughing and tries to cover it with a cough.

“Dad, I didn’t tear any families apart, I joined them together.”

“A wedding is a very sad thing for every family. Did you see Nate’s mother today?” He shakes his head mournfully.

“She was bawling,” Brandon says.

“Exactly.” Dad points at me. “Tearing families apart.” A faint whistle floats from the kitchen, and Dad leaves again.

I can’t get mad at Dad. But I definitely can at Brandon.

“What is the matter with you?”

“What?”

“Telling him Nate’s mom was bawling.” I whack his tux-shrouded shoulder. “Good grief, Brandon.”

He laughs.

Brandon Knox has been my best friend since second grade. We met on the playground during an intense game of Fox and Hound. After we both ended up with bloody noses and spent the next three hours together in the nurse’s office, it was fated—we would either be best friends or best enemies for life. There are times when I wonder if we’re really the latter dressed up as the former.

He’s been there for all the major events in my life. When my mom died. When I had braces. Graduation. Both of my sisters’ weddings.

It can make me sappy if I think about it too long.

“Where are you coming from, Brandon?” Dad comes into the room with a steaming mug filled with thick, pale sludge.

“Adam and Laney’s. Actually, they told me you weren’t taking this well.”

Laney is my sister and older than me by three years. Lexi is one year older.

“Laney.” Dad jumps on her name. “How is my girl?”

“Dad, you just saw her three hours ago.”

Dad ignores me. “Is she taking the wedding well?”

“She’s doing great. She was a little busy when I saw her. Jess was crying hysterically, Dorie was throwing her dinner, and Jack was spitting up.” He points to a red spot on his wrist. “Spaghetti.”

I start laughing. “Ah, the joys of motherhood.”

Brandon grins.

Dad doesn’t see the humor in it. “Does she need help?” Worry creeps into his tone.

“Not anymore. Between me and Adam there was an adult for each kid. So Adam cleaned up Dorie, Laney took care of Jack, and I tried to distract Jess.”

“I bet your mother feels the loss of Adam as much as I feel the loss of Laney and Lexi,” Dad says.

Brandon shrugs. “Mm. I think Mom was just glad he’d found a nice girl to marry.”

“She’s a strong woman, then.” Dad takes a sip of his tea. “Well, kids, I’m going to bed. Laurie-girl, you should as well. You don’t want to catch the cold.”

“I’ll be up soon.”

Dad nods at Brandon. “Good night, son.”

“Night, Mr. Holbrook.”

He disappears up the stairs.

I start working on the front of the dress.

“What in the world are you doing, Laurie?” Brandon is staring at me, his eyebrows bunched together.

“Wrinkling this.”

He starts laughing. “You are a stubborn, pig-headed, know-it-all woman.”

I crunch more of the silky material against the sofa. “Yeah, well, we

all have our little faults. You're opinionated, meddling, and devious, and I still let you stick around." I pause. "Don't ask me why."

"That's why I like you, Lauren Emma Holbrook. You're not afraid to tell me what you really think of me."

"Anytime, Knox."

He gets quiet and I look over at him. "What are you thinking about?"

Brandon blinks. "Oh. Nothing."

"Yeah, right. Give it up." He has his classic off-in-Never-Never-Land look. His eyes are usually a light brown color, but when he's deep in thought, they darken considerably. It makes it easy to know when he's stopped listening to me.

He stretches. "Adam and Laney."

"Translation: Chaos."

He smiles. "No, just about the two of them. They're happy. Really happy. Even in the chaos."

I stop messing up the dress for a minute. "So?"

"So don't you ever envy what they've got?"

This is what our friendship is like: No pretenses.

"Sometimes," I admit. "Not the whole husband thing, you understand. Just the contentment."

He nods. "I mean, we both know they aren't perfect." He snorts as he laughs.

"Yeah. But they accept it. Is that what you're talking about?"

"Yeah." He plays with his class ring. "I think Nate and Lexi have it too."

"Any good marriage should." I go back to wrinkling.

"Sometimes I wonder—"

"Uh-oh."

"What marriage would be like," he finishes.

I immediately start shaking my head. “I don’t. I am perfectly happy here. I’m not missing out on anything. I have everything I could ever want or need. Dad dotes on me, I have a good job, and then there’s you, of course.”

“Yeah, but, Laur, things change. One day you might wake up and I’ll be married with a couple of kids, you’ll have to take care of your dad instead of the other way around, and whatever.” He shakes his hands around as he talks, trying to pull the words from the air, I guess.

For a moment, just the tiniest millisecond, I worry.

Then I get over it. Nothing is going to change. Life is comfortable right now. Brandon is kidding.

He looks serious.

I shrug him off. “Well, I’ll stress about that when it happens.”

“Laurie’s lifelong motto.” He yawns. “I should go back to my place.”

“You mean you’ve had your own place this whole time? Heck, I thought you lived here.” I smile at him. He’s relaxed back into the sofa, head lolled, completely at ease.

He grins and he is the same old Brandon again. “Good night, Laurie,” he sing-songs.

I stand, relishing the way the dress creases in all the wrong places. “Night, Brandon.”

He watches my pleasure and shakes his head. “Lauren Holbrook, you are one of a kind.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“See you at work tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

He lets himself out and I go upstairs. It’s Sunday night. Work begins again tomorrow. Life will once again fall into its perfect pace.

I change into my pajamas, fall into bed, and am asleep almost as soon as I touch the pillow.

Almost.

Do I envy what Laney and Lexi have?

*Nah.*

And then I go to sleep.