

ALMOST
LIKE BEING
in LOVE

• • • a destination wedding novel • • •

BETH K. VOGT

 **HOWARD BOOKS**
AN IMPRINT OF SIMON & SCHUSTER, INC.

NEW YORK NASHVILLE LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



Howard Books
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Howard Books trade paperback edition June 2016

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Interior design by Jaime Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-4767-8980-4

ISBN 978-1-4767-8981-1 (ebook)

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ONE



A new day—another opportunity to prove herself to her boss. Of course, Caron had complicated the whole “prove herself” challenge by working for her father.

She leaned back in the driver’s seat of her car, inhaling the faint citrus scent of Armor All lingering in her SUV. From the hubcaps to the dials of the CD player, the car gleamed. Dash and door handles wiped down with cleaner. Windows streak-free. Floors vacuumed so that not a candy wrapper or Hot Tamale lurked beneath her car seats. At this moment, she sat in the perfect car for a Realtor to transport clients to see properties.

Not that her father conducted weekly inspections of his employees’ cars. But he could inspect hers, if he wanted to.

Caron unbuckled her seat belt with a sharp metallic click. Time to get to work. It was almost six o’clock in the morning. Showing up before sunrise might earn a brief nod of acknowledgment from her father, but only if he’d been there to see her early entrance into the empty building.

She paused in the reception area long enough to place a fresh arrangement of bright purple irises and vivid blue cornflowers in the vase on the glass-topped coffee table, then switched the outdated copies of *Real Simple* and *HGTV* magazines with more current ones. She returned to her SUV to grab the bags of pillows she'd purchased over the weekend. Removing the teal and muted silver ones set along the back of the sofa, she added the circular pops of yellow, white, and royal blue. The final touch—a single spray of cornflowers added to the tall glass bottle on the receptionist's desk.

Her father might not ever acknowledge her attention to detail, but their—*his*—clients appreciated the welcoming touches. And the coming summer season was the perfect time to update the look in the reception area.

Once she was in her office, the minutes disappeared into the silence, her thermos of cold sweet tea ignored on the corner of her desk as she studied the new homes on the MLS list. She e-mailed a prospective buyer, a military spouse flying in midweek to house-hunt, attaching photos of a few of the houses she had in mind for the family of five. Later today, she'd go visit some of the homes she'd marked down and begin mapping out the showings.

"You heading into the morning staff meeting?" Jackie appeared in the open doorway to Caron's office, holding a mug of coffee emblazoned with the company logo.

Caron rested her chin on her hand, resisting the urge to rub her eyes and smudge her mascara. "Is it almost nine o'clock already?"

"Yep." Jackie nodded toward the conference room, causing her sleek black ponytail to sway. "I think your dad—I mean the boss—brought in some sort of motivational speaker this morning. I only got a quick look, but there's something familiar about her."

"What? My father didn't mention anything during Sunday's barbecue."

Of course, he didn't have to tell Caron everything—or anything—just because they worked together. But there were the very rare times they talked business, sitting in his office at the back of the house until her mom came looking for them and demanded that they stop.

“Well, we won't know what's going on until the meeting starts.” Jackie took a step back. “And we both know the boss likes his employees to be punctual.”

Caron slipped on her floral heels, organizing the top of her desk before joining Jackie and making their way to the conference room. “Did you have a good Memorial Day weekend?”

“Spent it out on the bayou, water-skiing. What about you?”

“The traditional barbecue with my family and Alex's family.” Caron lowered her voice as they entered the conference room, nodding to her father. “Alex didn't get called away once on an emergency.”

“All the air conditioners on the Panhandle managed to stay functioning for a day, huh?”

Caron muffled her laugh with her hand, turning it into a cough as her father took his place at the head of the long table. It was their Monday-morning staff meeting—only on Tuesday morning, thanks to the holiday weekend. Time to focus, to be professional.

Caron used the logo-branded pen to surround the list of topics on the paper in front of her with various-sized arrows, mentally ticking off each one as her father worked his way through each one.

- Scheduling for Continuing Education Courses
- Agents' New Listings
- Open House Weekly Caravan
- Office Total Production for Month/Quarter/Year
- Agents' Production for Month/Quarter/Year

“I wanted to single out one agent in particular this morning—Caron Hollister.”

At the mention of her name, Caron dropped her pen so that it rolled across the table with a clatter of plastic against glass, her attention pulled away from her doodling.

“Congratulations on surpassing the proposed quota in sales not only for the month, but for the quarter.” A brief smile creased her father’s face. “If you keep this up, you’re likely to be in the top ten percent of sales in the country by the end of the year.”

A flush heated her neck, rising to her face—the round of applause from her colleagues mere background noise to her father’s public praise. Yes, the sales meant she’d satisfied her clients, but she’d also made her father proud, which made all the early mornings and late nights worth it.

“And now that we’ve discussed the usual business agenda—” Her father smoothed his royal-blue tie against his starched white dress shirt. “—I have an important announcement that affects the future of this company.”

As he spoke, a petite woman, who appeared no more than ten years older than Caron, entered the room and came to stand beside him. She was all polish and poise. Immaculate deep red dress that almost shouted designer-made. Mile-high heels. Air-brushed makeup. Blond hair cut into a classic bob. Bleached-white smile.

Wait . . . who was she? Caron scrolled through her brain, trying to put a name to the vaguely familiar too-perfect face.

Nothing.

A hush settled over the room as if everyone took a collective breath and held it. No exhale.

Wait for it . . . wait for it . . .

“I’d like to introduce Nancy Miller. I’m sure you’re all familiar with her reputation along the Emerald Coast as a

well-respected Realtor. After some lengthy negotiations, I'm very pleased to inform you that Nancy is joining Hollister Realty . . . as my partner."

The room remained quiet, as if people weren't sure if a round of applause was in order. Caron gripped the fabric edge of her chair to keep from bolting to her feet. *His partner?* Her father didn't share his business with anyone. Caron stared down through the clear glass table. Maybe if she let go of the edge of the chair, she'd fall through the glass like some modern-day Alice. Fall, fall, fall into some other world where things made sense.

Her father's voice chained her to the how-can-this-be-true reality.

"As I'm sure you're all aware, Nancy has a thriving real estate firm in Navarre. I've watched her for years and I respect her business prowess and all she's accomplished in the past decade. We both realized that together we'd be a realty force to be reckoned with."

Her father was standing there . . . praising Nancy Miller . . . announcing she would be his new partner . . . only minutes after he'd finally acknowledged Caron was successful—on her way to possibly earning national acclaim.

"This is going to mean great things for our companies. A name change, for one. We'll become Hollister Realty Group. We're already working on our ad campaign to announce our merger and our new name." Her father beamed like a man announcing the birth of his firstborn. "At this time, no one needs to worry about any adjustments to our staffs."

Around the room, the employees relaxed in their chairs, a collective exhale whispering through the air.

"As a matter of fact, we may need to hire additional employees. But that's all to be determined. This morning, I just wanted to share that today's a new beginning for our company."

Applause splattered around the room.

“To celebrate, I requested champagne and cake. I’m not sure what the delay is.” Her father motioned Nancy forward. “I also wanted Nancy to say a few words and to give her the chance to tell you her vision for our future. While she does that, I’ll slip out and see what’s the holdup on the bubbly.”

As a wave of laughter flowed among the employees, Nancy worked the room like a pro, starting off with a joke about her early years as a Realtor. Caron slipped from her chair and caught up with her father in the hallway.

“What was that?” Her words were a timid verbal tap on his shoulder.

Her father didn’t slow his stride. “What was what?”

“That.” Caron motioned back toward the conference room. “That announcement.”

“Just like I said—it’s the future of this company.”

“I was at the house two days ago for lunch and you never said a word.”

“That was a family gathering. You found out today, with the rest of the employees, Caron.”

“But I’m your daughter.”

“Exactly. At home, you’re my daughter. Here, you’re my employee like everyone else.” He stopped outside the kitchen, where two of the receptionists arranged clear plastic champagne glasses and plastic plates with slices of cake on two rolling carts. “And I decided it was best you found out today.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Six months, maybe a little longer than that.”

Six months? For a moment, the scene in front of her blurred—the receptionists pouring streams of champagne into tiny cups seemed to fade in and out. “You didn’t think I would want to know? Didn’t realize how this would affect me?”

“My decision affects you the same way it affects any other Realtor who works for me. It’s a wise move for the business.”

Caron’s fingers worried the collar of her linen dress. “Dad, you made Nancy Miller your *partner*. You’ve always said that this company was yours—a family-owned business—”

“And it still is. I’ve retained majority ownership in the business.”

“But Nancy Miller isn’t family—”

“No, she’s not. She’s my partner. And I chose to expand my business by making the best decision for this company.”

Nancy Miller. Her father’s partner.

And where did that leave her?

Caron swallowed past the sharp ache slicing the back of her throat. This was not the time to give in to emotion. Her father had taught her the importance of remaining calm when negotiating. “But . . . you knew my dream was to . . . to one day . . .”

Her father stepped away from the other women, blocking them as he turned to face her. Lowered his voice, his gray eyes glacial. “Dreams don’t get handed to you. Having the Hollister name doesn’t guarantee you anything. I make *business* decisions based on what’s best now as well as in the future. Granted, you’ve surprised me by settling in here and proving to be a good Realtor. But Nancy Miller has years of experience that you don’t have. She’s rocketed past anyone’s expectations for her success. A good employee doesn’t question her boss’s decisions—in public or private. Given time, you’ll realize this was a wise decision.”

With that, her father addressed the receptionists, his voice smooth. Caron braced a hand against the wall. With her father’s unexpected decision to form a partnership, she’d lost her way. His “surprise” at her success erased any indication she’d made real progress. It was as if he’d removed all the signs, all the mile markers, from the road map of her life.

Her father took a few steps past her, back toward the conference room. Stopped. “Are you coming?”

Was she coming . . . where? Back to the conference room to watch everyone fawn over the woman who’d stolen her dream?

No, that wasn’t true. Nancy Miller hadn’t stolen her dream. Her father had handed Caron’s dream to her, with no thought of how it would destroy his daughter’s professional goals.

By aligning himself with Nancy Miller, her father had betrayed her. Was she going to betray herself?

Caron forced herself to stand straight, fisting her hands at her sides. How . . . why had her father done this to her? She’d poured hours into being the best Realtor she could, all the while hoping that one day she’d be her dad’s partner. How was she supposed to work under Nancy Miller?

“Dad, you’ve worked hard for what you’ve accomplished. Made the decisions you thought best.” Her body flushed hot, then cold. “It’s . . . only right I do the same.”

A nod of agreement. “Now you’re talking.”

“I don’t understand your latest decision . . . how I fit in . . .” Caron searched for the next words. The necessary words. The words that would stamp FINAL on today. “—so . . . so I think it’s best that I’m not a part of Hollister Realty Group.”

“Excuse me?”

She hesitated for only a moment, waiting until she could say what needed to be said without her voice quavering. “I quit. I’ll draw up the standard two weeks’ resignation today—”

“Don’t be rash, Caron. You’re not in high school anymore.”

High school.

With those two words, her father reduced her to a seventeen-year-old with streaks of vivid pink in her hair.

“I’m not being rash.” Caron maintained eye contact. “I’m making a wise business decision. For me.”

Now was the time for her father to tell her that she was too valuable an employee to lose. Maybe even put his arm around her shoulder in an all-too-rare display of affection. Insist they both calm down and talk this out, Hollister to Hollister.

But instead, her father nodded again, his face devoid of any emotion. "You do recall you signed a contract stating that when you leave here, any and all deals in process revert back. That your commission drops down to fifty-fifty, even if you are making a larger commission at the time. I will not make an exception for you, daughter or not."

Of course he wouldn't.

"Understood."

"Fine. You've got until the end of the month under my name. Your MLS access shuts off in two weeks." Her father's words were automatic, as if he was checking off a list. "I'll waive the two-week resignation period. And Caron, don't be foolish enough to think there'll be a job waiting for you here when you realize your mistake."

"I won't."

"You can clean out your desk immediately."

And that meant she'd skip the champagne and cake, too.

. . .

What had she done?

Caron sat at her desk, the stillness seeming to crawl up her skin. Everyone else was in the main conference room. Celebrating. Toasting her father's brilliant business venture.

And she . . . she had just thrown away the only job she'd ever wanted. And her father hadn't stopped her. Hadn't done one thing to keep her as an employee, despite praising her less than an hour ago.

Why?

Caron closed her eyes, covering her face with her hands, fighting the increasing desire to burst into tears.

Not here. Not now.

Why didn't her father insist she stay? Was she nothing more than a quarterly statistic that benefited his company? Why didn't he at least try to discuss things with her? Why didn't he . . . understand?

With hands that shook, she moved one of the empty computer-paper boxes from the floor to the top of her desk. Slid open the middle file drawer, the scrape of metal against metal severing the suffocating silence. Within minutes, she'd transferred her transactions in process and future-leads files to the box. Farther in the back she found the folder of thank-you notes from clients, depositing those into the box, too. Sliding the drawer closed, she opened the bottom drawer, where she kept her stationery, a backup makeup kit, a small hairbrush, and a bottle of her favorite hair spray, along with a bag of cashews and another of golden raisins.

Next—the top desk drawer.

Paper clips. Neon Post-it notes. Pens with the company logo, which her father would be changing. A pack of breath mints.

She slammed the drawer shut. She didn't want, didn't need, any of it.

The pen engraved with her name that her parents had given her when she'd passed her real estate license exam lay on top of the desk. Caron balanced it in the palm of her hand, tempted to leave it among the other pens in her desk drawer.

No. She was still a Realtor, albeit an unemployed one. And she didn't have the energy to be petty. Her father likely wouldn't even notice she'd left the pen behind.

Her desk lamp. The chargers for her iPod and iPhone and the speakers she'd brought in so she could listen to music while

working. The photo calendar on the wall Vanessa had made her for Christmas, filling it with family photos and pictures from Logan and Vanessa's wedding and photos of Caron and Alex. Of course she'd take that, and the framed photo of Alex and her, taken on her last birthday.

The two watercolors of Destin—one of pale-green-and-gold sea oats, one of a purple-and-orange-tinged sunset—wouldn't fit in the boxes. She'd just carry them out to her car, then come back for the boxes.

On her return, she dumped her business cards in the box, so that they tumbled, helter-skelter, like oversize confetti. Tossed in her datebook. The small glass jar of bright red Hot Tamales she kept on the edge of her desk. Only a few pieces of candy remained inside. She'd meant to bring in a bag to refill it this week.

And that was that.

All that was left of her time here.

She'd have to call her clients, let them know she was no longer working for Hollister Realty. *Correction*. No longer working for Hollister Realty Group. She would try to find out who would be handling their closings. But she'd make those calls from home.

Caron stood in her office doorway. Did she want to wait, take the time to explain to Jackie? To say goodbye to everyone? Make the rounds of the other offices? Hug the receptionists?

No.

She needed to leave with her dignity intact. No wobbling chin, no blinking back tears.

She could always send e-mails or make phone calls later. Maybe bake brownies and drop them by in a few weeks—or better yet, have something delivered.

As she entered the building after depositing one box in her car, people had begun to return to their offices as the celebration

broke up. She needed to be done. Gone, before anyone tried to engage her in conversation. She wasn't a coward, but one confrontation was enough for this Tuesday.

. . .

She was no better than a thirteen-year-old, running home to her mother, expecting her to dispense just the right amount of love, listening, and momma-wisdom to make everything better.

She'd left her father's office with no real idea of where she was going. She'd driven over the Mid-Bay Bridge, ending up at the Donut Hole, in a booth with a glass of sweet iced tea that the waitress kept refilled and a salad that ended up in a to-go box. And despite several hours at the restaurant, going over listings, trying to create a semblance of order to her life—the life she'd wrecked of her own free will—she was still lost. Now she was driving back across the bridge to her parents' house, just wanting to be with her mom.

Not that Caron expected her mother to fix anything. She couldn't. And most of all, she didn't want her mother caught between her father's red-letter day and her unemployment announcement.

But Caron still wanted to tell her mother herself what had happened—what she'd done—before her father did. She needed to be an adult. First she'd tell her mother. Then she'd tell Alex that his girlfriend was now unemployed. And then, after conquering those two hurdles, she'd start sifting through the shambles of her life tomorrow.

Caron swallowed back the sour taste that filled her mouth, pressing the palm of her hand against her stomach. Right behind the looming question "What had she done?" lurked the question "What was she going to do?" Work for another realty company? Go independent? Or maybe she'd surprise everyone

and do something else. Go sell Hawaiian shaved ices in one of those little trucks along the beach in Destin.

Caron shut the front door of her parents' house, kicking off her high heels and heading for the kitchen, the plush carpeting soft on the soles of her feet. "Mom? It's me."

Where would she find her mother? Caron never stopped to consider what her mom did during the day. The house was always immaculate and her mother refused to let her father get a maid service. She nurtured the mini-jungle of plants growing in the sunroom, belonged to a book club, attended a women's prayer group. She planned dinners for her husband's business colleagues—the consummate hostess, Dad always said.

The kitchen smelled of chocolate and vanilla and peanut butter, and a quick glance at the red KitchenAid mixer on the counter—with remnants of cookie dough in the silver bowl and a black wire rack with cookies cooling alongside it—proved that her mother had decided to bake. She couldn't be that far away.

Sure enough, Caron found her mother sitting on the family room couch, her laptop balanced on her knees, a pair of bright fuchsia readers, embellished with gold filigree, perched on her nose.

"Hi, Mom." Caron offered her a small wave from where she stood in the archway separating the two rooms.

"Caron!" Her mother started and then smiled. "I didn't hear you come in, honey."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you. What are you doing?"

"Nothing important." Her mother moved the laptop aside, shoving her readers on top of her head. "I'm surprised to see you in the middle of the day right after a holiday weekend. The office is usually so busy—"

"I know. Usually."

“Do you have time for some lunch?” Her mother transitioned into the kitchen, offering Caron a quick hug that was like a soft kiss on her bruised emotions. “I have leftovers from Sunday, or I can whip up some tuna salad. It won’t take long.”

“I’m not that hungry, but some iced tea would be nice.”

“Coming right up. I’ve got it sweetened, just the way you like it.”

Unexpected tears stung Caron’s eyes, but she blinked them away. That was her mother—always taking care of her and everyone else, too.

“Listen, Mom, something happened at work today and I wanted to tell you myself . . .” Her voice wobbled like a kid’s bike with only one training wheel.

“Oh?”

Caron scooped the side of the mixing bowl with the plastic spatula, savoring the leftover cookie dough. “Did you know Dad was going to partner with Nancy Miller?”

Her mother stilled for just a moment, then resumed removing two tall glasses from a cabinet. “Yes. He’s talked about it for months.”

“Mom . . . you know he’s always said Hollister Realty is a family-owned business. His company. Why would he suddenly partner with Nancy Miller?”

“Caron, I don’t tell your father how to run his business. Yes, he discusses things with me, but in the end, he makes the decisions.” Her mother stopped talking for a moment as she filled the glasses with ice. “I do wish he’d told you before today, but he prefers to keep family and business separate as much as possible. And I respect that.”

“Well, there won’t be any problem with that now.”

Her mother carried a plastic pitcher of tea to the kitchen counter. “What do you mean?”

“I quit.”

The pitcher hit the counter with a dull thud. “Caron! Why would you do that?”

“How can you even ask that question, Mom?” Caron abandoned the mixing bowl and held the glasses steady as her mom filled them with tea. “You know my dream has always been to be more than another one of Dad’s employees. I wanted to inherit the business one day. By partnering with that woman, he’s made it very clear I don’t fit in his plans.”

“I know that’s been your dream. And I know your father’s decision is a shock.” Her mother paused, seeming to debate her words. “But Caron, have you ever asked yourself if being with Hollister Realty is the right dream for you?”

“Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve loved going with Dad when he viewed houses, prepped them for showings. I worked in his office during the summer. All I’ve ever wanted was to be a Realtor—”

“I know that—”

“I kept waiting for him to see that even though Logan didn’t want to follow in his footsteps, I did. *I could.*” Caron closed her eyes, resisting the urge to stomp her foot on the tile floor. “And what good did it do me? He joins forces with Nancy Miller. And now I don’t have a job.”

“Caron, if you really want to be a Realtor, I’m sure your father will understand you were upset. Go back and talk with him—”

“Haven’t you been watching me for the last four years, Mom? Or listening to anything I said? I *am* a Realtor.” Now Caron did stomp her foot. “And I’m not asking for my job back. Dad may think Hollister Realty Group is the future of the company, but I don’t want to be a part of it. I was working for my future—what I hoped would be my future. I made the wrong assumption. I’ll figure out something else.”

“Well then, I won’t try to talk you out of your decision.” Her mother slid her readers off her head, setting them on the counter. “You’re an intelligent woman, Caron. Your decision to quit may have been sudden, but that doesn’t mean God isn’t in it. I once heard someone say an unexpected bend in the road can lead right to God’s next blessing for us.”

God. Right. He was probably standing back and watching her tear her life apart, wondering why she hadn’t asked for his help, his direction, when she was upset. Caron sipped her tea, but the sweetness didn’t alter her attitude in any tangible way. She didn’t have the right to throw a temper tantrum and blame anything on God. Her earthly father had hurt her, not her heavenly one. But right now her emotions were as shattered as if she’d dropped her glass of iced tea on the kitchen floor.

She wanted to blame somebody for the mess her life was. Her father for not making the decisions she wanted. Nancy Miller for being an interloper.

“So, what can I make you for lunch?”

“Mom, I didn’t come here for you to fix everything. Or to fix me lunch. I just wanted you to hear about my decision from me, not from Dad.”

“Making you something to eat doesn’t mean I’m fixing anything—”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m just not very good company right now.”

“Tell you what.” Her mother wrapped her in a loose hug and the faint scent of vanilla. “How about you go swim a few laps? That used to work when you were in high school and you were stressed out about exams or a basketball tournament.”

“Leave my troubles in the deep end of the pool, right?”

“Something like that. I’ll make lunch while I finish up these cookies. No more talking. As a matter of fact—” She consulted

her slender gold watch. “—I have somewhere to be in an hour. Lunch and fresh-baked cookies will be waiting for you after your swim. So what’s it going to be?”

“I learned a long time ago to never argue with the wisdom of my mom.” Caron returned her mother’s embrace. “A few laps sound perfect. Who knows? Maybe I’ll have an appetite when I’m done.”

“Swim as long as you want. I’ll have a sandwich waiting for you in the fridge and cookies in the usual container.”

Her mother was right. She’d drag her heated emotions through the pool, eventually tempering them in the repetitive motions of kicking and arm strokes, of breathe and hold, breathe and hold. Most days after high school basketball practice she’d come home and cool down with a swim. And when the team lost? She’d endure her father’s replay of the game—what she’d done right and everything she’d done wrong—and then muffle the sound of his criticism by swimming lap after lap in the pool. Caron only stopped when her mother stood at the edge, towel in hand, and demanded she get out, dry off, shower, and come get something to eat.

Some teenage habits were worth reviving.

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