

BETH K. VOGT

wish you were here

A NOVEL



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were here*

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FICTION/CHRISTIAN/ROMANCE

*Kissing the wrong guy
days before her scheduled wedding leads Allison to become a
runaway bride. But can it also lead to happily ever after?*

Allison Denman is supposed to get married in five days, but everything is all wrong. The huge wedding. The frothy dress. And the groom.

Still, kissing the groom's brother, Daniel, in an unguarded moment is decidedly *not* the right thing to do. How could she have made such a mistake? It seems Allison's life is nothing but mistakes at this point. Daniel's adventures—chronicled through a collection of postcards—have always appealed to Allison's well-hidden desire for something more. But how can betraying her fiancé's trust lead to a true happily ever after?

Can Allison find her way out of this mess? Recognizing she doesn't have all the answers won't be easy because she's used to being in control. To find her way again, she will have to believe that God has a plan for her—one outside her carefully defined comfort zone—and find the strength to let Him lead.



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BETH K. VOGT is also the author of *Baby Changes Everything: Embracing and Preparing for Motherhood After 35*. Beth is a consulting editor for *MomSense*, the Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) International's magazine for moms, as well as a bimonthly columnist for *MOMSnexT*, their e-zine for moms of school-age children. She's been published in a variety of magazines, as well as *Chicken Soup for the Soul: A Tribute to Moms* and *The Mommy Diaries*. Beth and her husband, Rob, treasure their four children and son- and daughter-in-love.



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*As promised—one postcard
from Australia!*
—Daniel

CHAPTER 1

She never should have said yes.

Allison smoothed the bodice of the wedding gown, the fitted lace sleeves clinging to her arms. Waves of material billowed out from her waist, threatening to overwhelm her like a silken tsunami.

The style was all wrong.

She'd known it months ago—the moment the saleswoman released the dress from its protective plastic covering. Allison doubted all those layers of ivory lace and silk, bows and beads would ever fit back into such a small bag.

Securing the myriad of tiny pearl buttons marching down the back took precedence over her request for something simpler. She'd been instructed to stand on a round carpeted platform in front of a wall of angled mirrors. Encouraged to turn this way and that for the assembled critics—her best friend, Meghan; her mom; her younger sister, Hadleigh; and Seth's mom. Her future mother-in-law's breathless “Perfect” sealed Allison's fate.

While her mother paid a price as outlandish as the dress, the bridal shop attendant stressed the “no returns/no refunds” policy. And now . . . well, Allison couldn't do anything about her decision five days before the wedding.

Allison moved toward her standing beveled mirror. The only thing out of place in the room was the garment bag emblazoned with the elaborate, oversize initials of the bridal shop lying across her spotless white matelassé bedspread. Four pillows covered in matching shams and arranged just so lined the open-rail headboard. A framed oval photo of a triumphant Seth after winning a marathon stood on the bedside table.

Allison turned the photo around so it faced the wall. “No seeing the bride before the wedding day. It’s bad luck.”

She leaned toward her reflection in the mirror, gathering her auburn hair into a haphazard pile on top of her head. Maybe with an updo, veil, manicure, makeup—

“Who am I trying to kid?” She let her hair fall past her slumped shoulders. “Nothing can turn the wrong choice into the right one.”

She should have spoken up, insisted she have the chance to try on a few more gowns. But if there was one thing she’d learned during the six years she’d dated Seth Rayner, it was how to go along with what someone else wanted.

Turning away from the irrefutable evidence, she fought to move past her bed as the gown swirled around her legs. The partially buttoned dress gaped open in the back, causing the sheer sleeves to slip off her shoulders.

She wouldn’t wear the dress forever. Just for the ceremony. The reception. The limo ride to the hotel. Six hours, tops. Once it was dry-cleaned and stowed in the cavernous walk-in closet in Seth’s town house, she’d never have to see the designer debacle again.

Except in the wedding photos.

“Scat, Bisquick.” Allison lifted the material as her cat swatted the delicate hem. “I am not wearing a pricey cat toy.”

Undeterred, her yellow cat stalked her out of the bedroom, menacing sounds warning Allison the game was still on. She sidestepped down the hall to her living room, keeping a watchful eye on her marauding feline. The five-foot train followed her like a guest who had overstayed her welcome.

She paced around her couch and matching chairs, upholstered in soft white suede. She was careful to avoid snagging the gown on her cognac-colored coffee table as she swished by. She hated the thought of storing the items in her parents' attic, but it couldn't be helped. There was no place to put her furniture at Seth's.

Maybe she should practice walking down the aisle. Practice made perfect, right?

Allison closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. Sang the words "Here comes the bride . . ."

Just step forward. One foot in front of the other. One. Two. One. Two.

Her eyes flew open. "I'm flunking the wedding march five days before my wedding. If I can't walk down a pretend aisle in my apartment, how am I going to manage the real thing?"

She collapsed on the couch, waves of material swelling up around her like a hot air balloon. It wasn't that she didn't want to get married. Seth was perfect for her. She was just tired of talking about the wedding and thinking about the wedding . . . and what came after. Most of all, she was tired of this dress—and she hadn't even worn it for real yet.

She needed a diversion. Maybe Meghan would be up for a movie. Something happy, like . . . *An Affair to Remember*. She'd give her a call and then escape the bridal gown nightmare.

And the sooner the better. If they had a fire in the building, she'd perish under five thousand dollars' worth of lace, beads, pearls, and silk. As if to emphasize the ugly truth, someone rapped on her door. Meghan, reading her mind? Or the local fire marshal, ready to declare her a walking fire code violation?

Shoving the skirt aside, she pulled the door open with a welcoming smile. "Hey, Meggie—"

Or not Meggie.

Seth's older brother, Daniel, leaned against the doorjamb. "Hey, yourself, Kid." His mismatched eyes—one blue, one green—skimmed over her bridal frenzy. "Am I interrupting an elopement?"

A lazy grin slid up his face, as if he'd like to help with that adventure. Of course, Daniel's motto might be "Grab Your Backpack and Follow Me," thanks to the miles he'd logged in his hiking boots over the years. He appeared straight off some mountain trail, dressed in cargo pants and a LIFE IS GOOD T-shirt under his brown leather bomber jacket, chin unshaved, brown curls tamed by a baseball cap.

How he and her starched, spit-polished fiancé happened to be kin baffled her.

"O-of course not!" She gathered the open back of her gown in one hand, shoving the ivory fabric back over her shoulders. "What are you doing here?" And why now, when she wore the fire hazard? She debated grabbing the coat hanging on the rack near the door, but knew a layer of hunter green wool wouldn't improve her appearance.

"Seth asked me to help move some of your stuff to his house this week, remember? I thought I'd pick up a few boxes."

"Boxes?"

"Books. Kitchen supplies. Knickknacks. Whatever you've packed." He stepped into her apartment, his larger-than-life persona managing to shrink even her dress down to size. But Allison still had to part the waves of material as she backed up.

"Uh, is that the dress?"

Was he choking back a laugh? Confirmation the dress was a nightmare.

"Yes. Please, no comments." Allison ran her hands along the flowing skirt as if she could tame it. Not going to happen.

"It's impressive."

Allison blew a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "Are you kidding me? I look like Bridal Fashion Disaster Barbie."

"Hey, all brides are beautiful on their wedding day." Daniel tucked the strand of hair behind her ear, the warmth in his eyes offering encouragement. "Seth won't be able to take his eyes off you."

"He'll be trying to find me somewhere in all this fabric."

As Daniel stepped around Allison, she caught the sound of his

chuckle. She imagined his glance skimming the stack of assorted packing boxes piled in the living room of her otherwise immaculate apartment.

"You *are* planning on moving in with Seth after the wedding, right?"

"Of course I am. I've just been busy with deadlines and . . . and things . . ." She hated how the unused packing boxes made her feel guilty of some unnamed crime.

"Okay, so show me where the *packed* boxes are, and I'll get out of your way."

She longed to provide proof that she'd packed something. Say a few magic words and conjure up some boxes under the dress. *Abra-cadabra, I do, I do*. "I-I haven't packed anything yet." She shrugged, causing the lace to slip a few inches.

"Too busy playing dress-up?" The disarming grin Daniel tossed over his shoulder took any potential sting out of his question. "I really do like the dress, by the way."

"You're a liar, but thanks." She tugged the fabric back in place. Stupid dress.

Daniel turned back and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. Allison's dress crunched in protest even as his embrace wrapped her in the scent of leather and remnants of the brisk November night air. "Listen, Alli, you don't have to explain to a master procrastinator like me. Let's just consider helping the bride pack a best man's duty. Besides, what's a future brother-in-law for? We can order Chinese and tackle a few boxes. Deal?"

"You sure you've got time? I'd have to change."

"I hope so. Or I'm hopelessly underdressed." He turned her in the direction of her bedroom, his hands warm on her shoulders. "Need help with the buttons in the back . . . ummm, that would be a no."

Allison fled to her room, her laughter mingled with the heat of a blush that coursed across her face and all the way down her spine.

That Daniel—he knew how to make her laugh. She couldn't wait until he was actually her family.

• • •

Daniel sat back on his heels, his hands braced on his thighs. “How many boxes is that? Six?”

“That makes eight.” Alli wrote LINENS across the top in block letters with a black Sharpie.

“I’ve never known anyone to color coordinate a linen closet.” Daniel stood and offered his hand to Alli. “Your über-organization makes it easy to pack your stuff. DVDs filed by genre and alphabetized by title?”

“It makes life easier. I don’t like wasting time looking for things.” She wrapped her fingers around his and stood, rubbing her neck with her other hand. “You know what they say: ‘A place for everything, and everything in its place.’”

“Yeah, well, this is why you’re marrying my brother, Mr. Clean. I’m more of a ‘let everything go all over the place’ kind of guy.” Daniel placed his hand over hers where she kneaded her shoulder. “Muscle spasm?”

“Just a little one.” Allison stilled as he worked to ease the tightness. “Too much time hunched over my computer, trying to finish up projects before the h-honeymoon.”

Somewhere in the midst of her detailed retelling of a recent graphic design deadline, Daniel realized he’d stopped listening and let himself focus way too much attention on the curve of Alli’s neck and the softness of her skin as he massaged her shoulder. He patted her back—a nice brotherly gesture—and stepped away. “All better?”

“Y-yes. Thanks.” She turned, pulling at the hem of her oversize Air Force Falcons sweatshirt and then smoothing it against her black yoga pants. “So . . . interested in dessert? I mean, something other than fortune cookies? I’ve got some ice cream.”

“Sounds great.”

Shoving his hands into his back pockets, he followed her to the kitchen. She’d decorated in basic black and white—white towels, black ceramic containers on the countertops, a white KitchenAid

mixer. Even her cat's dishes were color-coordinated, one black, one white. The only splash of color was the large bulletin board displayed on one wall. He stood in front of it, realizing it was a pictorial travelogue of his past. An assortment of "Wish You Were Here" postcards threatened to overflow the frame's borders. Almost all of the fifty states. Canada. Germany. The Bahamas. Turkey. Kenya. He went through passports the way some people went through credit card balances. He shook his head. "I can't believe you kept all these."

"Some people collect antique paperweights." Alli came to stand beside him, a metal ice cream scoop in her hand. "I collect postcards from my future brother-in-law."

"Isn't this the first one I ever sent you?" He touched a postcard in the middle of the collection.

"That's the one. And nice guy that you are, you kept sending them. Thanks. I liked seeing all the exotic places you were visiting while I sloggged through midterms and finals."

"I remember that trip to Australia. You and Seth were—what?—juniors in high school. You begged me to send you a postcard—"

"I did not beg!"

He deflected her well-aimed jab with the spoon, wrapping his hand around hers. "Were you already dating my little brother back then?"

"Barely." Allison withdrew her hand and went to the freezer to get the ice cream. "He'd asked me to homecoming, and we just kind of started dating after that."

"Kind of started dating?" Daniel gave a snort of laughter, watching her scoop mounds of fudge ripple into a white ceramic bowl. "You know Seth better than that. He had every step planned out to get you to fall in love with him."

And he accomplished that goal, just as he gets everything he sets his sights on.

Daniel leaned against the counter, snagging a spoonful of ice cream. "Aren't you going to have any?"

Alli stashed the carton back in the freezer. "I'm the one who has

to fit in a wedding gown in five days, remember? I thought I'd share a bite of yours."

He held a spoonful of fudge ripple in front of her. "I suppose this counts as another best-man duty—saving you from not fitting in that gorgeous gown of yours?"

"Very funny, wise guy." She paused before handing the spoon back to him. "Hey, there's a thought! If I can't fit into the dress, I can't wear it, right? Quick, I need more ice cream!"

She dashed toward the fridge, but Daniel was there ahead of her, blocking her way.

"Come on, Daniel. Move."

"I'm saving you from a very rash decision, Alli." He marched her back into the living room, directing her to sit on the couch. "I told you that you look beautiful in that dress."

"And I told you that I don't believe you." Alli pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees.

Daniel started piling boxes by the door to carry them down to his truck. As he turned from depositing a box by the door, he caught Alli smothering a yawn. "That's my cue to leave." He moved Bisquick from where he lay snoozing in a chair—on top of Daniel's ball cap. "Stupid cat."

Allison followed him to the door, watching him slip on his boots. "I'll ignore the 'stupid cat' remark because you didn't laugh out loud when you saw my wedding gown."

"Don't worry about the dress, Alli. You'll take Seth's breath away." He ran his finger along the line of doubt etched between her eyebrows. "Trust me."

"I can help carry the boxes to your truck—"

"Don't bother, bride-to-be." He leaned down to place a quick good-night kiss on Alli's cheek just as she tilted her face up. His lips brushed hers, halting her thanks with the lightest of touches. The slightest bit of contact.

Not a kiss. Not really.

Just enough for Daniel to capture the softness of Alli's lips and the hint of chocolate that lingered there.

He would never kiss his brother's fiancée.

He looked up—and lost himself in Alli's eyes, their gray-blue depths reminding him of a cloudless expanse of sky. The light citrus scent that always lingered in her auburn hair lured him closer. "Alli . . ."

He placed his hand against the curve of her back, drawing her against him. Caressed the side of her face, watching as the cloud of confusion in her eyes changed to a spark of startled awareness. Their lips touched again. He closed his eyes, his hand sliding through her hair to the nape of her neck, just enough to let her know that yes, he meant every moment, every gentle touch of this kiss.

And to his shock, Alli kissed him back.

Instead of slapping his face.

Just as he began to lose himself in the kiss, an incessant tone jarred Daniel's senses, pulling him back to reality—away from Alli. What *was* that?

Alli stared at him, confusion once again clouding her eyes. She cut short the whisper of his name when she covered her lips with trembling fingers. "Y-your cell." She shook her head as if clearing her thoughts and stepped out of his embrace. "You probably need to answer that."

"Alli, wait." He reached for her hand as he dug his phone out of his back pocket and flipped it open. "Daniel here."

"Hey, it's Seth. Did you go by Allison's tonight like I asked? I've tried calling her, but she's not answering her cell."

"Seth." Alli's eyes widened, the lips he'd just kissed forming his brother's name. Their eyes locked, and Alli seemed to hold her breath, waiting to see what he would say. What was he supposed to do? Add lying to his sins? "Yeah, I'm just leaving Alli's. I grabbed a load of boxes. I'll drop them by your house tomorrow."

"You want to bring them by tonight?"

"No, it's later than I realized." He faced away from Alli, putting distance between them.

"How's Allison?"

"She's fine." Not that Daniel was asking at the moment. "She'd tried on her dress when I showed up. Counting the days until the wedding."

"I can't wait to see it. Mom said it's stunning."

Daniel managed some noncommittal reply. Their mom was right—and wrong. The dress *was* stunning, but it wasn't right for Alli. Didn't matter. Alli would be a beautiful bride for his brother.

After signing off, Daniel shoved his cell into his back pocket. Took a deep breath and faced—an empty room. Where did Alli disappear to?

The kitchen?

Empty.

Daniel walked down the hallway to Alli's bedroom. Her cat lounged in front of her closed bedroom door like a sorry excuse for a watchdog.

"Not necessary, cat."

He eyed the door, debating. Beat a hasty retreat or face Alli like a man? The cat stared him down through half-closed eyes.

He rapped his knuckles against the door. "Alli, come on out."

Silence.

"Come on, Kid. We need to talk."

When he leaned close, he heard her muffled response: "Go away, Daniel."

"This is ridiculous. We can't have a conversation through a closed door."

"We're not having a conversation—"

"What do you call this?"

Silence.

"Alli?" Daniel stared at the door, unsure if he wanted her to open it or keep it closed.

She pulled the door open so fast that he took two steps backward. He missed trampling on the cat, who hissed and darted back down the hallway to the living room.

"You want to talk? Fine. What do you want me to say?" She raked

her fingers through her hair. "How could you . . . how could we . . ." Her voice broke off as she choked back a sob.

"Don't cry, Kid—"

She stomped her foot. "Don't you dare tell me not to cry, Daniel Rayner! You're not the one getting married in five days! You're not the one who just made the biggest mistake of her life!"

He held up his hands. "Hey, I don't think what happened is the biggest mistake of your life."

She glared at him. "I am not going to stand here and discuss all my mistakes with you, letting you decide where k-kissing you ranks—"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

More silence.

"Look, I got ahead of myself, wanting to kiss the bride." Daniel figured if he downplayed the whole episode, Alli would too. "Let's not make a big deal out of it."

"N-not make a big deal out of it?" She stared at him, looking as shocked as if he'd suggested they kiss again.

"It was just a kiss, not a one-night stand." Daniel's lie tore him apart. The kiss had mattered to him—not that he could admit it. How many lies had he told tonight? "You're not the first woman I've kissed, Alli. You won't be the last." He forced a laugh that sounded fake, even to him. What was that verse his scoutmaster used to quote? *Even a fool, when he is silent, seems wise*. Daniel needed someone running a teleprompter with that verse on it.

Alli's words were a strained whisper. "How could we do something like that?"

"It was my fault, Alli. Not yours." He longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he didn't dare touch her again. No more mistakes tonight.

She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. "I-I need you to leave. Please."

"I'll load the boxes in my truck and lock your front door, okay?"

"Fine."

Okay, then. His work here was done. The sooner he left, the better. He needed to put some distance between himself and the temptation of his brother's fiancée.

Allison twisted the shower handles. *Come on, hot water.*

She tilted her head so the water streamed across her face and down her shoulders, waiting for the warmth to ease the tension from her body.

It was late for a shower—more like early—but she knew she'd never go to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Daniel's face right before he kissed her . . .

Shampoo. She should shampoo her hair. One less thing to do when she got up for work in a few hours. She'd French-braid her hair before she went to sleep.

She lathered her head, savoring the familiar mandarin-orange scent of her favorite shampoo. Scrubbing her hair reminded her of how Daniel's hand slipped through her hair as he pulled her close . . .

Rinse. She needed to rinse and condition.

And she needed to stop thinking about Daniel Rayner.

Massaging the cream from scalp to ends, she conjured up a mental to-do list.

One: Send off the PDFs of the magazine layouts she'd completed.

Two: Make sure Lori knew what deadlines would come up while she was on her honeymoon.

The honeymoon. She and Meghan were going shopping tomorrow—*today*—for some last-minute must-haves. She still needed a beach cover-up and some sort of hat. And maybe she could find a new dress for the wedding rehearsal.

The rehearsal.

Well, that was a huge number three on her list.

How would she survive seeing Daniel at the rehearsal? How would she survive being his sister-in-law for the next who knew how many decades of wedding anniversaries with Seth?

"Why did I kiss him, God? Why? Why?" Allison leaned her forehead against the shower tile. "What was I thinking?"

No answer.

Instead, Daniel kept interrupting her attempts to organize the upcoming day. The strength of his arms wrapped around her. How his lips coaxed an unexpected response from her. How he whispered her name right before he kissed her the second time.

The cold spray forced Allison to turn off the water. She'd emptied her hot water tank. Shivering, she grabbed her faded green robe and wrapped it around her still-damp body. She grabbed a towel off the rack and gathered her wet hair into the soft cotton. Turning, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over her sink.

Don't you look great?

Not.

Gray streaks of mascara marred her pasty white face. She looked like she had the twenty-four-hour flu. She certainly felt sick. The Kung Pao chicken and beef and broccoli she'd shared with Daniel threatened to come back up her throat.

"What have you done?" Allison whispered to her reflection.

Again, no answer. Apparently, both she and God were out of answers tonight.

She walked into her bedroom, toweling her hair. The pristine white designer gown hung in front of the window, the moonlight making it seem iridescent. It loomed like a silent judge, declaring her guilty. She ought to stitch a scarlet "K" across the bodice. If anyone asked about the last-minute embellishment, she could say, "Oh, this? I somehow managed to kiss my fiancé's brother."

Allison climbed into bed, too tired to care about dropping the towel on the floor. She removed a wide-tooth comb from the bedside table, worked out the snarls in her hair, and began braiding it.

How long would she and Daniel have kissed if his cell phone hadn't rung? Did the caller have to be Seth? It was almost as if he'd caught her in Daniel's arms.

As hard as she tried to avoid them, Allison knew she'd made some

mistakes in her life. And now she could no longer lie about her feelings for Seth's adventuresome brother. Part of her wished Daniel hadn't answered his phone. The harmless first not-really-a-kiss had surprised her. But she hadn't resisted when Daniel kissed her again. During her impressionable teen years, she'd imagined what it would be like to kiss Daniel. Now she knew.

She'd always admired Seth's older brother—his love for the outdoors, his independent streak, his ability to make her laugh. Until tonight, she'd convinced herself that her mixed-up emotions for Daniel were remnants of an adolescent crush. Now she wasn't sure what she felt for her fiancé's brother.

But she was engaged to Seth. She'd dated him for six years. He was perfect for her. Reliable. Safe. Her dream come true.

How could she betray him like this? What kind of person was she to kiss her fiancé's brother? Did she even deserve someone as good as Seth?

With a groan, Allison slipped under the blankets, rolling onto her stomach. How was she going to tell Seth?

Shame caused her to bury her face in her pillow, her prayer a broken plea. "I can't tell him, God. I can't. He won't understand. I don't even understand how it happened."

Tears scorched her face as she imagined standing before Seth, confessing her sin. He would be so hurt.

Allison pressed her hand against the ache in her chest.

Could he hurt any worse than she did?

Shoving the pillows away, Alli turned onto her side, staring at her wedding gown.

What if Daniel told Seth?