

BETH K. VOGT

*catch a falling star*

A NOVEL



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★★★★★ A NOVEL ★★★★★

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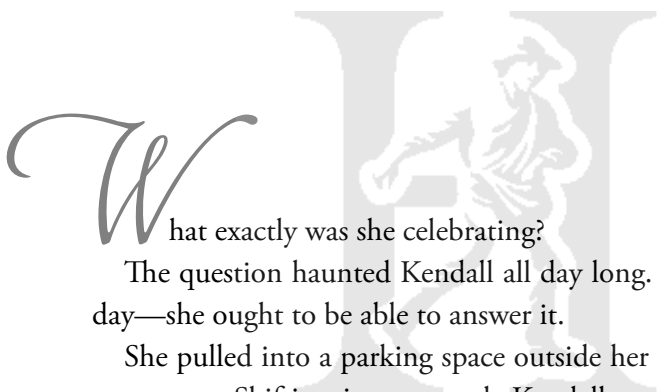
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## CHAPTER ONE



What exactly was she celebrating?

The question haunted Kendall all day long. It was her birthday—she ought to be able to answer it.

She pulled into a parking space outside her favorite Mexican restaurant. Shifting into neutral, Kendall turned off the Jeep and deposited her keys into her purse, exchanging them for a tattered makeup bag and her ever-handy GorillaTorch.

Just once, she'd like to put her makeup on in front of the bathroom mirror like a normal person.

Attaching the twistable hands-free flashlight to her steering wheel so her face was illuminated in her rearview mirror, Kendall twisted her body to the left so she could trace a hint of brown eyeliner. *Sheesh*. Most women used a makeup mirror. Tossing the pencil into the bag lying open on the passenger seat of her Jeep, Kendall sorted through the containers of eye shadow and lip gloss, looking for her mascara. A quick peek at her phone

lying on her dash told her that she had five minutes before she was officially late to her birthday dinner. Yep. Enough time for mascara and a little blush. She assessed her short brown hair—all it required was a quick comb-through with her fingers.

Her closest friends waited inside On the Border, eager to celebrate. Nineteen hours into her birthday and she wanted to label it RETURN TO SENDER. Kendall couldn't help comparing today with her thirteenth birthday, when her mom decided to deluge her with pink frilly clothes. *Pink*. She looked like an overdose of cotton candy on a too-short stick. She returned all her gifts—except for the oversized stuffed pink bear her then-three-year-old-sister Bekah refused to release—and pocketed the cash.

Kendall swept blush across her cheeks. It wasn't that she didn't have a satisfying life—an exciting life, even. It's just that at thirty-six years old, she'd hoped for . . . more.

The buzz of her phone mocked her attempts to be on time. Why did she think she'd ever be in control of her time and be the first to arrive? She abandoned that ideal the day she entered medical school. Besides, all the other partygoers tonight were physicians like her. They'd understand when Kendall walked in late. Half made up. As usual.

She switched from blush to mascara as she turned her phone to speaker. "Dr. Haynes."

"Kendall, it's Mom."

Kendall's eyes closed as she mentally and physically sat straighter, as if her mother could see her. "Hey, Mom. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Are you having a good birthday?"

"Just finished clinic. Going to dinner with friends."

"Oh, how nice. I'm so glad you've found some friends there in Colorado."

Of course she'd found friends in Colorado. She wasn't in high school anymore. She had a thriving solo family practice, friends, even a dog to round out the picture of a satisfying life.

"Look, Mom, I'm running late—"

"Well, this is rather important . . ."

Kendall stared out the window of her Jeep, watching people walk into the restaurant. Rachel had just walked by her with a friendly see-you-inside wave. Most likely Melissa and Sonia were already seated, having ordered their usual Guac Live. Would there be any left by the time her mother finished talking?

"I've got about five minutes. Is that enough time?"

"I'll get straight to the point. Bekah's boyfriend, Ryan, is going to propose. I'd like to give him Mina's ring so he can give it to her."

Kendall dropped the tube of gloss she'd pulled from the makeup bag. "B-but Mina bequeathed the ring to me—"

"Because she assumed you'd get married first, since you're ten years older than Bekah. You know the ring traditionally goes to the first daughter who gets married. If she'd left the ring to your father, I wouldn't be put in this awkward position of having to explain all this." Her mother's sigh echoed over the phone. "The reality is, Bekah is the one getting married. Not you."

"Yet."

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'yet.' I'm not getting married *yet*." Kendall reached for the necklace she'd slung over her rearview mirror—a strand of silver ovals that matched her earrings—and transferred it to her neck.

"You're thirty-six years old, dear. A professional woman. And in today's world, it's perfectly fine to focus on your career and stay single. No one's blaming you. But—" With a slight pause,

her mother lunged with her closing argument. “—Bekah will be married in the next year. Your sister loves that ruby ring as much as you do. You know how much fun she has mixing vintage clothes with modern styles.”

Had her sister coached her mother on what to say? *Make sure you remind Kendall I'm all about mixing vintage and modern, Mom. That will get her to say yes.*

Her mother's next words broke into Kendall's thoughts. “You don't want the ring to go to waste, do you?”

Of course she didn't want the ring to go to waste. But it wasn't *going to waste* . . . She was waiting to use it, that's all.

“Mom, I've gotta go. I saw Rachel walk into the restaurant, which officially makes me the last one to arrive. Again.”

True statement, even if Rachel had waved at her ten minutes ago.

“But we haven't finished talking about this—”

“I'll think about it, 'k? And thanks for the birthday call.”

Disconnecting, Kendall slid her feet into her four-inch platforms. Good thing tonight was all about sitting or her feet would ache within an hour. But every once in a while she enjoyed being eye-to-eye with other people. Well, almost eye-to-eye.

The warmth of the Mexican restaurant shoved away the cool night air and tucked the remnants of the phone conversation into the corner of Kendall's mind. Voices swirled around her, the scent of fresh tortillas teasing her nose and causing her stomach to rumble. The Greek yogurt she'd wolfed down mid-morning in between patients had worn off hours ago.

Thanks to a bouquet of brilliant Mylar balloons, Kendall spotted her three friends in a back corner booth. She nodded at the hostess and wove her way past tables crowded with families, couples, and several groups of college-aged kids. The

steady hum of voices muted all the should-have-said-this-to-Mom responses scrolling across her mind. Words like *possession is nine-tenths of the law* shouldn't be used between a mother and daughter.

She slid into the booth next to Rachel, who gave her a quick hug and then motioned toward a black stone bowl of guacamole and a paper-lined bowl of chips. "Catch up with us. Drinks are on the way. We ordered you an iced tea. Are you on allergy call for the ER tonight?"

Kendall dipped a chip through the chunky mix of avocado, chilies, and spices. "No. Just a quick chat with my mom. You know, the required birthday call." Ignoring the rectangular envelope stamped with the name of a local salon and her name scrawled across the middle, Kendall tapped a pile of papers on the table. "What's this?"

Sonia fanned the printouts, an eager smile lighting her face. "I know it's your birthday celebration—happy birthday, by the way—but we also need to finalize our decision for this summer's trip. I've been watching the airfares and the vacation spots and narrowed it down to a couple of places."

"You don't think we should wait until we get closer to our departure date—maybe snag a last-minute deal?" Kendall squeezed lemon into her tea and then savored a long sip.

"That was easy to do when we were all single." Sonia rested her elbows on the table, soft blond curls framing her face as she seemed to hesitate for half a second. "But now that Melissa and I are both married, it's better to plan things out. Kevin still wants to find time for some sort of vacation for the two of us."

Melissa nodded, her long brown hair tucked underneath a stylish black beret. "And I need to make sure that I've got the twins covered for that week. I can't leave that until the last minute."



Made sense.

Rachel shifted in the seat next to her, twisting her hands in her lap. Her cornflower-blue eyes darted from friend to friend and she chewed on her bottom lip.

Melissa leaned forward. "Something on your mind, Rach? You're not backing out, are you?"

"No . . . I wouldn't think of missing this trip. Especially now."

"Especially now?" Kendall turned to stare at her friend. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm engaged!"

Kendall reared back as Rachel flung her left arm out across the table, nearly tipping over her margarita.

Melissa and Sonia erupted in a cacophony of "What?" and "When?" causing other people in the restaurant to turn toward them. How had Kendall missed the diamond on Rachel's hand? Of course, her friend had kept her hands in her lap—not even indulging in the chips and guacamole, and taking almost-timid sips of her margarita.

"Tony proposed this past weekend. Can you believe it?" Rachel paused to admire her engagement ring, which she'd set off by indulging in a French manicure. "We've only been dating three months!"

Three months—and the man proposed? No, Kendall most definitely couldn't believe it. Their foursome had started out as a group of single female physicians, focused on establishing themselves in Colorado Springs. Now married, Melissa stayed home with her twins full-time, and Sonia worked part-time. Now Rachel was headed for "I do" while Kendall remained an "I haven't"—a status she probably wouldn't change anytime soon.

She forced herself to look at her friend's dazzling pear-shaped diamond ring. She was happy for Rachel—truly. Tony seemed

like a good guy, someone who didn't mind Rachel's long hours as an ER doctor.

"Tony thinks a December wedding is perfect, so I don't see any problem with still having our girls' vacation in June." Rachel bounced on the blue vinyl-covered seat, threatening to unseat Kendall in her excitement. "Maybe we can make it a weeklong bachelorette party! I want you all to be in my wedding, you know that, right?"

Perfect. Another wear-it-once dress to add to her closet. It seemed as though she'd never break the tradition she started way back in high school. Of course, she didn't even get to wear her homecoming dress for the entire evening.

Whoa. Rachel was engaged and she was wandering the wrong way down memory lane. Where was the waiter? She needed a refill.

"Melissa, I was hoping you'd be my matron of honor." Rachel reached across the table and clasped Melissa's hand even as her smile encompassed each friend. "And I want Kendall and Sonia to be my bridesmaids."

Oh.

Kendall hoped her face didn't reveal any surprise or disappointment. Of course, Rachel could arrange her bridal party any way she wanted. Kendall shouldn't assume she'd be the maid of honor.

A lanky teen boy wearing a faded T-shirt and baggy jeans crossed her line of vision. What was wrong with him? Exiting the restroom area to a table in the center of the room, he seemed unsteady on his feet, almost disoriented. Was he . . . high? He slumped into a wooden chair, a series of raspy coughs shaking his shoulders. Maybe he was coming down with the flu. A broad-shouldered man with short-cropped hair sprinkled with gray—probably his father—leaned toward him, as if asking a

question. Kendall watched as the coughing grew worse and the boy tugged on the collar of his maroon T-shirt. Maybe he was choking . . . But why wasn't the kid's father doing anything?

"Kendall. Kendall." Sonia waved a hand in front of her face. "Hey, the party's in this booth!"

"Excuse me for a minute." Kendall slid out of her seat, tossing the words over her shoulder. "Something's wrong with that kid."

By the time she crossed the floor to the table where the man and his son sat, she sensed the other customers' surveillance as she watched the teen cough. And cough. She knelt beside him. Touched his arm.

"Are you choking?" Even as she asked, she knew he wasn't. His lips were swollen, his face blotchy with hives. The boy's eyes flamed with panic as they darted between her and his father. "What are you allergic to?"

"He's not allergic—" The man stood and towered over her.

"A-avocado."

"Your son is allergic to avocado and *you didn't even know it?*" Some parents had no right to have kids. Kendall got to her feet, the swift movement causing her to rock back on her platforms. "Where is your EpiPen?"

"He doesn't have an EpiPen—"

"With this severe an allergy, your son needs to carry an EpiPen at all times."

"He's not my son—"

Kendall turned to the teen. "Do you have an EpiPen?" When he shook his head no, she shouted for Rachel to bring her purse. "Somebody call nine-one-one."

The man pulled an iPhone from the pocket of his wool jacket hanging on the back of the chair. "I'll call nine-one-one."

"Fine. Do something." She didn't mean to sound so abrupt,

but she didn't have time to apologize. The teen was her concern—not whether she'd offended his dad. His son needed help—fast.

Rachel appeared beside her, already digging in Kendall's purse for the EpiPen. "What can I do?"

"Call nine-one-one."

"I'm already dialing—" The man waved his phone in her face.

"Okay, then. I'm stepping back." Rachel retrieved Kendall's purse from where she'd dropped it on the floor. "But remember, I'm right over there."

"Right." Kendall focused on the teen, talking to him as she popped the cap off the plastic device. "You know how this works. It doesn't hurt that bad. Here goes. One, two, three . . ."



Griffin wanted to turn away—maybe even walk out the door and escape what was happening. But he hadn't done that, not once in the last four months, no matter how many times the thought crossed his mind. Standing here, watching his brother gasp for breath, only confirmed once again that Griffin was the last person who should take responsibility for Ian.

"Have you reached nine-one-one?" His brother's rescuer barely glanced at him.

Her question jerked him back to reality. He punched the numbers before answering her and then stayed on the line with the dispatcher and watched the woman work with his brother. Ian's teeth clenched, lips tinted a pale blue, as silent tears streamed down his face. Ian hadn't shed a single tear during their parents' funeral. Did he even realize he sat in the middle of a restaurant, crying? Probably not. He was too busy struggling

to breathe, despite the woman kneeling next to him and attempting to keep him calm.

While the dispatcher talked with the ambulance driver, Griffin paced closer, tilting the phone away from his mouth. "Who are you?"

She flicked her eyes up at him for the briefest of moments, a look of irritation storming across their gray depths before she focused on Ian again. "I'm a physician. I'll take care of your son until the EMTs get here."

"Ian's my brother, not my son."

"Look, I can't really have a conversation with you and concentrate." The woman brushed the long strands of Ian's dark hair away from his eyes, her tone softening. "Feeling any better? Y'know, if you were gonna do something like this, you picked a good place. All my friends over there? They're doctors, too."

The hint of a smile crossed Ian's face, despite the fact his breath still wheezed in and out as if his lungs were a pair of worn-out accordions.

"Sir, can you hear the sirens yet?" The dispatcher's dispassionate voice broke in on his thoughts. "They should be almost there by now."

With everyone in the restaurant silently watching the drama at their table, Griffin could easily hear the strident wail of the approaching medical truck. "Yes, I hear them."

"How's he doing now, sir? You said he's your brother, right?"

"He's better." Griffin watched for flickers of emergency lights outside the restaurant's front window. "There's a doctor here. She had an EpiPen."

"Good. If he was having a severe allergic reaction, she did the right thing."

Griffin scanned Ian's face, noticing that, while he was still pale, the blotchiness was fading. The doctor had gotten Ian

to sit up straight rather than slump forward in his chair. She'd kicked off a ridiculous pair of shoes and looked barely more than a teenager herself—a female Doogie Howser. Had he risked Ian's life letting this unknown woman take over?

The red-haired hostess pushed open the restaurant's wooden front doors, stepping aside to let the EMTs pass through, trundling a metal gurney across the black tile floors. Griffin could almost feel everyone in the building exhale. The manager followed the medical team over to their table. One of the EMTs nodded to the woman kneeling beside Ian.

"Hey, Doc!"

"Hey, Andrew." After a quick nod at the EMT, the woman refocused on Ian. "Good to see you again."

"You've got everything under control, I see." The man snapped on a pair of purple vinyl gloves. "Mind if I take it from here?"

"Be my guest." The woman stood. Leaned over and whispered something to Ian before patting him on the shoulder. "I'll get back to my dinner."

"Sorry for the interruption, Doc."

She winked at the EMT. "It happens."

As she bent to pick up her shoes, Griffin stepped forward. "I want to thank you for helping my brother."

Shoes dangling from her fingertips, the woman stepped back, tilting her head so she could make eye contact with him. "Ian's your brother?" She looked at Griffin, then at Ian. "You don't know him very well, do you?"

"Let's just say I haven't been my brother's keeper."

"Too bad for him." She waved aside Griffin's attempt to interrupt. "You're risking Ian's life by not knowing about his allergies. By not carrying an EpiPen *all the time*. Forget the thanks. Just be the guy Ian needs you to be."

And with that verbal slap in his face, she walked back to where her friends waited.

Not that he didn't deserve it.

Griffin positioned a chair next to his brother, watching the young man check Ian's vitals and jot notes on a clipboard. The manager talked with another EMT.

"We're recommending that Ian go to the hospital, sir." Andrew began putting the medical equipment away.

"Is that really necessary?" Griffin watched his brother, thankful he didn't have to turn his head to the left and deal with the ongoing threat of dizziness.

"Your . . . brother, is it? He had an anaphylactic reaction to eating avocado—guacamole, right? His throat started to close up on him, cutting off his airway. It's best to get him checked out more thoroughly. They might decide to keep him overnight. Or they might send him home with you. Depends."

Great. Why couldn't they just grab a quick dinner, go home, deal with homework and the pile of dirty laundry that mocked him every time he walked through the door? Nope. Nothing came easy lately. And tonight was going to be topped off with a run to the ER. If Ian was allergic to avocado, why'd he agree to Griffin ordering the chips and guac? How was Griffin supposed to know details like that? Had their mother ever mentioned allergies?

"Whatever needs to be done is fine." He watched the medical personnel settle Ian onto the gurney and then walked over to the manager. "I've already paid for my dinner. Do me a favor—the woman who helped my brother? Add her dinner to my bill."

"She's with a group, sir. It's her birthday."

"Well, since we managed to interrupt her celebration, go ahead and charge the whole thing. But don't tell her I paid for it, okay?"



After the night she had, Kendall was not up to Sully's attitude.

And since she'd abandoned him all evening, he would most definitely have an attitude.

Her satchel handbag slung over her shoulders, hanging on to the bunch of birthday balloons in one hand, Kendall clomped up the stairs to her loft. She inserted a key in the door's lock and pushed. The door moved an inch—and no farther.

Sully.

"This is no way to act." Kendall rested her forehead against the door. "Get out of the way of the door and let me come in."

She pushed on the door again. Nothing.

"Come on, Sully. I'm tired." She stomped her foot, balloons dancing around her face. "I'm the one paying the mortgage on this place. Let me in already!"

Another shove. Another inch.

"Let me in and I'll give you a treat . . ."

At the word *treat*, Kendall heard the welcome sound of four big paws scraping on the floors. She'd forgive the big hairy goldendoodle for scratching her custom cement floor if he'd stop stretching out in front of the door, blocking the entrance. As she stepped inside, she braced herself for Sully's frontal attack. A basso profundo "Woof!" and then two large paws landed on her shoulders.

"Off, you stupid dog. Off!" Kendall staggered back, trying to keep the balloons out of Sully's way. "Don't you even remember going to obedience school?"

Apparently not.

Sully's furry chocolate-brown face came nose-to-nose with hers, his mouth parted in a welcoming doggy grin.

"Thank you. I missed you, too. Yes, I had a nice birthday.



Somebody even paid for dinner. The girls all say hi.” She shoved him down to the ground. “Now sit. Stay.”

As she headed toward the kitchen, Sully bounded in front of her. “Fine. Lead.”

She tossed her purse on top of the red granite countertop stretching across the front of the kitchen, separating it from her dining room/living room area. Sully nudged at her elbow until she opened a silver tin of doggie snacks and tossed him two. After tying the balloons to the back of a chair and leaving Sully lounging on the floor, she went off in search of more comfortable clothes.

Her phone went into its waiting charger. Her shoes went in the ever-growing shoe pile at the bottom of her closet. She tugged off her wide-leg black slacks and plum-colored cashmere sweater and slipped into a pair of checked pajama bottoms and a waffle-weave long-sleeved top. Rubbing her eyes, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed. But she was a stickler for hygiene, and her bedtime routine awaited. And before that, Sully needed a quick walk outside.

Half an hour later, Kendall sat on her bed, a faded, black-velvet jeweler’s box cradled in her hands. She probably should keep this in a bank box of some sort rather than in a fire safe in the back of her closet. But she liked keeping her most treasured possession nearby.

Flicking back the lid, she traced the outline of Mina’s ring.

How many times had she stared at the ring as a little girl, watching its delicate white-gold filigree glint in the sunlight as her Mina embroidered or made bread or stirred a pot of soup on the stove? How many times had she asked to wear the ring? She would slip it on her finger as she lay in bed, waiting for the tightness to ease in her lungs, while Mina read her fairy tales of princesses hidden away in towers waiting to be rescued. How

many times had Mina patted her hand, whispering that one day the ring would be *hers*?

She'd lost count.

But she never lost sight of the dream hidden in the jewel's red depth. One day, she'd have it all: Romance. Love. Marriage. A husband. A family. And yes, a career, too. Because she was going to be a doctor. With all the time she spent in the hospital during her elementary and middle school years, she had at least part of a medical education just by osmosis. She would put all those hours, days, weeks, months spent in a hospital room or a doctor's office to good use and grow up and help kids like her whose lives were affected by asthma and allergies.

And she had.

She was living her dreams.

Almost.

She closed the box, the soft click a whisper of a rebuke. But it took two to make happily ever after come true—and lately no one pursued her. Well, not anyone who she wanted to be “caught” by. Kendall shook her head, catching her reflection in the mirror, the corner of her mouth twisting in the parody of a smile. Her last few dates hadn't been worth a let's-try-again to see if things would go anywhere. Both guys were hoping to get her one place: in bed. Her sister might laugh at her old-fashioned ideals, but Kendall had managed to resist temptation this far. More like fight it off.

Of course, at this rate, she might die a virgin and an old maid, clutching Mina's ring in her gnarled hands.

If that was God's will, then she was content with that.

Right?

Yes, yes, she was.

She had to be.