

ALLISON AND THE
OUTFIELDER

BASEBALL BRIDES BOOK FOUR



ANGELA SARGENTI

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



ALLISON

“Josh Bright is here,” says my good friend, Miranda, in a sing-song voice. I take an hors d’oeuvre off the tray she’s passing around and eat it up in two bites. “He’s here alone,” she adds, inclining her head in his direction. I look over and he’s standing there, as sexy as ever.

“Damn, he’s hot,” I say, dusting the crumbs off my fingers.

“Then go get him, tiger.”

Josh Bright is the rookie right fielder for the Quails. I met him briefly at Miranda’s last party, and I liked him then, but he skipped over me in favor of Miranda and my other friend, Marigold.

It still irks me a little bit, but I really can’t blame him. I mean, she’s dainty and petite and has those foxy sort of eyes all the guys go nuts for. But what really gets on my nerves is, she didn’t even like him. She blew him off in favor of the Quails’ manager, Bob, to whom she’s now engaged.

Anyway, there’s Josh, standing alone. The reason why is, the party’s a little thin on girls because Miranda’s not allowed to invite

any baseball groupies to her uncle's parties. So, since he's not here with anyone, I decide he's fair game and make my way over to see if I can't strike up a conversation.

He sees me coming and smiles, so I smile back.

"Hey, Josh, can I grab you a drink?" I ask, breezing up to him. "I'm going that way anyhow."

He looks at me like he's not a hundred percent sure he's met me before, but he plays along anyway.

"Sure," he tells me. "But let me go with you. What was your name again? I suck at names."

"Allison Taylor."

"Josh Bright, in case you forgot, too."

"No, I remember. You went out with my friend, Marigold."

"Oh, yeah. We didn't hit it off so good."

"Sorry to hear that," I tell him. "I guess it wasn't meant to be."

He smiles, glad, I suppose, that I'm not cutting up all jealous. He doesn't say anything else, so we stroll into the kitchen and go up to Miranda's housekeeper, Ignatius, who's tending bar and is secretly the boss of the whole house. I ask him for a Cosmo, a drink Marigold and I both love, and Josh just has a beer.

"Why are you tending bar?" I ask Ignatius. "Aren't you invited?"

"Yes, but last time one of the temps stole some very expensive saffron, so now I don't like anybody else messing around in my kitchen."

I don't know what my answer should be, so I just say, "That sucks."

"Indeed."

There doesn't seem to be anything else to say, so I tell him, "Well, catch you later," as Josh and I head outside to go hang out by the pool.

We talk for a while before he drags my chair up next to his, and then he leans over and catches me off guard by kissing me. I return the kiss, and we start making out for a little while. I like the way he kisses, and apparently, he likes the way I kiss, too, because we keep

going for at least twenty minutes. But I cut him short at second base, because I don't let any guy start touching the goods until at least the third date. Not that I'm all prudish or anything, it's just that I've made that mistake before and got dumped after. He takes the hint and stops, and we finish our drinks and go back in for another round.

"Do you want to do something some time?" he asks me.

"Like what?"

"Do you like roller coasters? Haskell, one of our pitchers, says there's a couple of pretty good ones at that Boardwalk they have over in Santa Cruz."

"Oh, I love roller coasters," I tell him. "And they are pretty fun. Miranda and I went last year."

"Of course, we'll have to wait until the season's over, since this is our last day off."

"Fine with me."

"And we'll actually have to wait even longer than that, since we're going to the playoffs."

I say, "Okay. I'll wait, but only if you'll do me a giant favor and be my date to Miranda's wedding."

He looks surprised and says, "Sure. No problem. I was afraid I was going to have to go alone."

"No, and you don't even have to worry about having a day off, since it's in the middle of November."

"Man. Everybody's getting married around here," he tells me.

"I know. This is the season. Or it will be, when baseball's over."

Out of discretion, I don't mention Marigold and Bob's double wedding with Miranda's uncle, Tommy Wright, and his fiancée, Vanessa, but I'm sure he knows about it, anyway. I have it on good authority the guys gossip in the locker room more than a bunch of old women.

"So, where do you live?" he asks.

"I'm still at home with my parents, but they're pretty cool. They treat me like an adult and everything. We live near the college. It's a

nice neighborhood, tree-lined streets, the whole bit, but nothing as nice as this.”

“I grew up in a three-bedroom apartment with two brothers and a sister,” he tells me. “My dad lived nearby and he was involved, so I always had that in my favor. He’s the one who got me into baseball, starting with Tee-Ball, when I was four.”

“He must be so proud of you.”

“He is.”

“Jeez,” I say. “I’m twenty-two and I still don’t know where I’m headed, other than eventually being an HR manager, and here you are with your whole career sewed up.”

He laughs. He’s got a nice laugh, and I scoot a little closer.

“Where do you work?” he asks me.

“Nowhere, yet. I’m still in college, taking business courses. That’s where I met Miranda and Marigold.”

“They’re nice. I mean, even though our date sucked, Marigold seemed pretty nice.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s my closest friend, besides Miranda.”

I can tell he doesn’t really want to talk about Marigold, though, so I drop the subject. I say, “What do you do in the off-season?”

“Play a little football, stuff like that. Mostly, I keep in shape for next season. You’d be surprised how easy it is to get out of shape. You don’t happen to play any sports, do you?”

“Sometimes I play softball,” I tell him, “and I used to be on the tennis team at school.”

“I play tennis once in a while. Maybe we should play together.”

“Yeah. My dad’s a member of a country club. We can go play there, if you like.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he says, and glances past me. “Oh, here comes Miranda.”

I look around and smile. She looks pretty, like she always does, and she has her hair out of her customary braids, for a change, so tonight she looks more like Morticia Addams than she does Wednesday. She gives Josh an air-kiss, and then she turns to me.

“Hors d’oeuvre?” she asks, holding the tray out for us. Her food is always excellent, so Josh takes one, and I take another. He pops it into his mouth and compliments her.

Compared to me, Miranda’s a dwarf, since I’m six feet tall and she’s about five-two. I can tell Josh appreciates her style of beauty, but he slips his hand in mine and holds it.

She smiles. “What are you two up to?” she asks.

“Just getting acquainted with your friend, Allison, here.”

“Oh, good. I was going to introduce you guys, but now I see I don’t have to.”

He squeezes my hand and smiles at me.

“We have a date for after baseball’s over for the year,” he tells her.

“Excellent,” she says. “I like to see all my friends happy.”

“It’s just for tennis at my dad’s club,” I tell her.

“That’s still a date.”

He says, “You don’t play anything, do you, Miranda?”

“Not anymore, but I used to play the field quite a bit.”

We all laugh when she says that, and I know how true it is, because tons of guys at school like her, but I also know her uncle frowned on it pretty hard and introduced her to Jason, her fiancé, mostly to keep her out of trouble.

“Where’ve you been?” I ask.

“Over there talking to Bob and Marigold,” she answers, with a vague wave of her hand. She’s wearing a moss-green velvet dress with a corset-type bodice and froths of black lace at her elbows, sort of like you’d find on a colonial lady, if she were a Goth.

“Cute dress, by the way,” I tell her.

“Oh, thanks. Kevin helped me pick it out. You remember Kevin, right? Ignatius’s boyfriend?”

“Oh, for sure. I saw him earlier, talking to Barbara from school.”

“Have you met Kevin and Ignatius yet?” Miranda asks Josh.

“They’re both in the kitchen right now, if you want to.”

“I just introduced him to Ignatius,” I tell Miranda.

"The one tending bar with the blue eyes?" he asks.

"That's him," she nods. "And his boyfriend is the one with the long, blond hair who looks like the singer from Van Halen."

"Sammy Hagar?" he asks.

"No. The other one."

"David Lee Roth?"

"Yes. I can never remember his name. Oh, there he is now. Kev. Come here."

Kevin approaches us, looking curious.

"Yes?"

"You have to meet Josh Bright. He's new this year, and he's our most excellent Center Fielder."

"Right Fielder," Josh says, correcting her. She smiles and nods.

"Sorry," she tells Josh. "Right Fielder."

"Oh, I know who you are," says Kevin, snapping his fingers. "You went out with... uh... nice to meet you."

They shake hands and then Kevin and Josh both glance at me, both hoping I didn't catch Kevin's little faux pas, I guess. I pretend like I didn't and Miranda smooths it over by slipping her hand into the crook of Kevin's arm and telling Josh he's a paralegal.

"Even with the long hair?"

"Sometimes they make me tie it back, if I'm going to court."

"I'd like to grow my hair out, but it gets too hot with the ball cap and everything."

Kevin says, "I was just heading into the media room to play video games with Jason, if you guys want to come."

"All right," says Josh. "Can I play, though?"

"Sure. We can do four players, if you want to join in, too, Allison."

"Are you good at video games?" Josh asks me.

"I like to think so."

Miranda lets go of Kevin and says she has to go talk to her friend Amanda Rankin, whose husband is also on the team, and we

follow Kevin into the media room. Jason's just getting everything organized when we come in.

"There you are," he says to Kevin. "Want to finish setting everything up while I go get a drink?"

"Hey, can you get me one, too, Coach?" asks Josh.

"Sure. Anyone else?"

"I'd say yes, but I'm drinking Cosmos, and that'd be too hard to carry, with everything else. Let me go with you. Kevin? Are you good?"

He checks his bottle of beer and nods.

"Yep."

"Okay. We'll be right back."

On the way to the kitchen, Jason glances at me. "So, you guys looked pretty snug earlier."

For some reason, I feel myself blush. "He seems very nice," I tell him.

"He seems all right at work, too. We don't get a chance to talk much, but yeah."

"Are you excited about the wedding?" I ask, switching gears.

"Excited to get it over with. A wedding the size of ours is a lot of trouble. We should've done like Tommy's going to do and run off to Tahoe or somewhere."

"It'll turn out all right," I say. "Miranda's a master organizer."

"I know. She even organized this. I keep telling her to use a party planner, but she likes to be hands-on, so we let her."

When we get to the kitchen, he lets me go first. I decide since everybody else is drinking beer, I'll have one myself, and Ignatius hands me the brand he knows I like best.

"Thanks. We should have Miranda's bachelorette party at the gay bar."

"I was thinking the same thing," he tells me. "What about you, Jason? Where are you having your bachelor party?"

"I don't know. Tommy said something about Reno, if the roads are clear."

“Reno,” says Ignatius. “I haven’t been there since that fight broke out and Miranda got hurt.”

“Miranda says we can use the comps they gave her, if we go there,” Jason tells him.

“Do they do that?” I ask. “Let you transfer them to someone else?”

“I don’t know if they normally do, but Miranda’s friends with the guy now and he says she can.”

“All right,” says Ignatius, “if that’s what you feel like doing. It can be a lot of fun.”

“If we wait until a few days before the wedding, my best friend from Chicago will be here.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” says Ignatius.

“Well, we’d better get back in there,” Jason says. “They’re waiting on us to play video games.”

“See you,” Ignatius tells us.

When we get back to the media room, Kevin and Josh have the game all set up. We hand out the drinks, grab our controllers, and take our seats. The game they selected is a two-person game, so Jason and Kevin let me and Josh play first. I end up kicking Josh’s butt, but he’s a good loser and doesn’t throw a fit or get mad. Kevin and Jason play next, and it goes like that for over an hour, until we decide to change to a game for four people.

Josh and I get on one team, and the guys on another. Turns out we’re about evenly matched, because we win about as much as they do. After a while, Josh and I decide to go do something else, and that something else is to go back out and make out for a little while longer.

“Too bad they don’t have a foosball table here,” I say. “Then I could show you how good I am at it.”

“Oh, you like foosball? I’m pretty good at it, too. We should find someplace with a table.”

“There’s this pizza place over on Broadway that has a couple.”

“Want to go?”

“What, now? In the middle of the party? What if Miranda gets mad?”

“We’ll ask her if she minds first,” says Josh.

“Okay.”

And Miranda, when asked if she minds, says not at all and asks us if we’re coming back.

“I have to come back and get my car,” I tell her. “Besides, we’ll be back in an hour or so.”

Josh walks me to his car. He’s got one of those new muscle cars that look like the old ones, and his is shiny red and black. He helps me in, and then gets behind the steering wheel and fires that baby up.

“Nice,” I tell him.

“Want to drive it? I’ll take you to this place I know out in the country and let you go to town.”

“All right. After we play foosball.”

We have a pretty good time playing, and I even win a few times, but before too long, my wrist is getting sore and I mention it.

“Yeah, mine, too,” he says. “I’d better not mess it up. I need to be able to handle the ball during our next game.”

“Want to go back to Miranda’s, then?”

“I’d rather go back to my place.”

“No, I think we’d better go to Miranda’s. I have a three-date policy.”

He looks disappointed, but nods.

“No problem. Do you still want to drive my car?”

“Sure, if you really don’t mind.”

He hands me the keys and I start it up. He tells me which way to go, and once we’re out past Broadway he says, “Get on the freeway here. How about some thrash metal?”

“Hell, yeah,” I say, and he cranks up the stereo. It’s the perfect music for right now, after foosball and kicking ass on video games and now driving Josh’s powerful car. It’s late on a Thursday night, so there’s not too much traffic. He tells me where to go and then he

sits back to let me do as I please. I glance down at the speedometer and I'm going eighty-five miles per hour. I ease up on the accelerator and slow it down some, and then I glance at him.

"It's got some pick-up, doesn't it?" I ask, practically shouting to be heard.

"It's why I bought it," he answers, turning the down the music a notch or two. "You should've seen the salesman when I was test-driving it. I thought he was going to shit."

I giggle and say, "I can just imagine."

He points at a road sign up ahead and tells me to get off at the next exit. "It's up here on the left." He gives me step-by-step instructions that guide me to an empty parking lot where the light poles are spread far apart. We sit there and talk a minute, and then he tells me to do a one-eighty.

"What do I have to do? I've never done one before."

"Go straight until you hit about thirty-five, forty, and then turn your wheels left while pulling the hand brake. Don't worry. It'll drift."

I haven't even gone yet and my heart's pounding.

"Okay, so I speed up to thirty-five and pull the hand brake?"

"Yeah. If you don't pick up enough speed, it won't work. And don't forget to cut the wheels to the left."

"Okay," I tell him. "Here we go."

I punch it and he turns the music back up and sits back. When I hit the right speed, I pull the brake and, for a sickening split second, the car feels like it's going to turn over. It doesn't, though. The back wheels break loose and we start to spin, and a moment later, I bring the car to a stop. To my surprise, I've done a one-eighty. Actually, it's more like a one-seventy, but close enough. My hands are shaking, and I still can't believe I've accomplished the stunt.

"Oh my God," I tell Josh, turning the stereo off so we can talk. "That was so awesome."

"Want to try it again?"

"Yeah. One more time."

We go again with the same results, except this time I'm closer to an actual one-eighty. I stop the car again and glance over at him.

"Awesome," I repeat.

"I'm proud of you," he tells me. "Most girls wouldn't even try this."

"I believe it. I bet none of my female friends would."

We switch places and Josh shows me some drifting techniques. He drifts completely around one of the light poles, and even though it's frightening, it's exhilarating, too.

"Do you want to try it?" he asks.

"No. What if I wreck your car?"

"You won't."

"Let me try drifting a few more times with nothing in the way, and then I'll give it a whirl."

He lets me drift, using the techniques he showed me, and I do pretty well. I build my confidence up enough to tackle the light pole stunt, and I pull it off, even if I do get a little close to the concrete base of the pole. After that, we decide to head back to Miranda's.

The party's still going strong. Jason and Kevin have finished playing video games, and they wave us over when we come back in.

"Where've you guys been?"

"Learning how to drift," I tell them. "Well, just me. Josh already knows how."

They look surprised. "Weren't you scared?" Jason asks me.

"Yeah, a little, but it turned out all right."

"I never would've pegged you for a stunt driver," laughs Kevin.

"Well, Josh has a great car for it."

Suddenly, Miranda and Marigold come up to us, and we have to repeat the whole story. They're both amazed, too, and I feel a surge of self-pride.

"If I ever get enough money, I'm buying one of those cars," I tell Josh.

"Yeah, you should. You're a natural."

And because that's such a sweet thing to say, I give him a hug. He hugs me back, and I know it's on, that we're really going to have a second date. My hunch is confirmed a moment later when he asks me for my number. I give it to him and he texts me right away.

"Want to go out to lunch tomorrow?" he writes. "My treat."

"Sure," I write back. "Where do you want to go?"

He looks at me and smiles. "How about The Bluebird Cafe?" he says.

"Okay. I've never been there."

"You'll like it. They have the best onion rings I've ever tasted."

"Sounds good."

"I'll call you in the morning, but I have to jam now, okay?"

"All right. Bye. And thanks for the drifting lesson."

"My pleasure."



AT LUNCH THE NEXT DAY, he tells me a little bit more about his personal life.

"So, then this scout comes up to me after one of the games and talks to me. He says I have a fantastic arm and can really swing the bat, so he makes an appointment to talk to my parents, and that's how I got started in professional ball. They picked me in the first-round of the draft, and they had me down in the Minors for eight or nine months before they brought me up, and that was that."

"Excellent. That must've been so exciting."

"Yeah, it was pretty cool. Now tell me about yourself."

"I'm a senior in college and I'm studying business, which is what all three of us used to do, me, Marigold and Miranda. Marigold's taking this semester off, and Miranda pooped out and changed her major to English Literature. That's more her speed, anyway. She's kind of spoiled, if you haven't noticed. Not in a bratty way, it's just that she doesn't have to worry about anything, so it doesn't matter if her degree's in English."

"Yeah. She is kind of lucky, but I can't say anything about that. I'm lucky, too. They pay me a shit-load of money for doing something I love anyway."

"And here's me, hoping I'll get a fifty-thousand-dollar a year job."

"I have a feeling you'll do all right," he tells me. "Just a gut feeling I have."

That makes me smile, but I can't reply because the server comes to take our order.

"We're not ready yet," he tells her. "A couple more minutes, please."

She walks away and I watch her. She looks like a good server. She's very busy and I see her check in with all the tables in her section.

"And anyway, why is server better than waiter or waitress?" I ask, still watching her.

"I don't know," says Josh. "I guess they're trying to make everything all fancy. We'd better get our order straight before she comes back."

We both study our menus. I choose a chicken sandwich and Josh orders a humongous cheeseburger. When it comes, I freak out.

"Oh my God, what is that? A mountain of meat?"

"I can handle it," he tells me, and surprisingly enough, he does. He only has to get a box for about a third of it, which might sound like a waste of time to do, but it's a big third, probably enough to fill *me* up.

After lunch, we stand outside the restaurant. Josh puts his cheeseburger in his car, and then he turns to me.

"Listen, I have a bunch of crap I have to do, but I'd love to see you again."

I say, "Thanks. I'd like to see you, too."

"We're going to be on the road starting tomorrow, and then the playoffs, so depending on how far we get, I might be busy for a couple of weeks or so."

"I know how it goes. I've been friends with Miranda for four years now, and I've been around when the guys hit the road. Trust me, if she can live with it, so can I."

"Yeah, but she's been trained up for it. Didn't Tommy raise her or something?"

"Oh, I see what you're saying. Well, it might be a little hard on me, but I'll just have to get used to it."

"Then you're good with it?" he asks.

"What choice do we have? We'll just see each other when you have time."

"It might have to be lame old coffee dates or something," he says, "but I'll keep you posted."

"Okay."

He leans in and kisses me briefly, and then the kiss turns into more. He pulls me in close and wraps his arms around me so I can't escape and gives me a real kiss, a deep, probing kiss with his tongue.

"Are you sure you have to go?" I ask. "I might break my three-date rule, just for you."

He looks at me, an expression of surprise on his face. "Yeah?" he asks, definitely interested. "Well, I guess I can run errands later."

"You have a place, right? Because I still live at home, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," he says, nodding. "Yeah, I have a place. Do you want to ride over with me, and I'll bring you back later?"

"Okay."

And he kisses me again to cement the deal.