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Too WRONG To Be RIGHT

A Novel

MELONIE JOHNSON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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WRONG

To BE
RIGHT***

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Mom.

The love you and Dad shared will always be an inspiration. As a writer of happy endings, I wish I could give you more chapters together. I'm so proud of how you continue on with your story and all the love you continue to give. And I know Dad is proud of you too.

CHAPTER 1

Kat

“Why is there a crocheted penis lying on the floor?” Kat Kowalski demanded. It was five minutes to five on Friday night, and all Kat wanted to do was close up the flower shop and get on with her evening. She’d been attempting to do just that, briskly sweeping the store’s floor, when the broom had abruptly encountered ... something.

Ronnie, her coworker and second-in-command, leaned over the counter and inspected the object in question. “Yep. That’s a dick.”

“I know it’s a dick,” Kat confirmed. “What I don’t know is what is it doing here?” She prodded the limp lump of yarn with her broom and it flopped across the shop floor like it absolutely did not give a fuck.

It was a very nice floor too. New. Installed last spring, the gleaming slats looked like hardwood, but they were actually made from repurposed bamboo stalks. Allen, the owner of the flower shop, had always been into conservation, but in the last year or so, he’d taken his green crusade to the next level. He’d installed solar panels and a rain barrel reservoir system and was researching geothermal heating options for a greenhouse.

But as far as Kat knew, her boss hadn’t taken up crocheting genitalia.

The wind chimes over the shop’s entrance jangled, the upcycled metal gardening tools hanging from an old terracotta pot clattering against each other in a surprisingly melodic racket. On instinct, Kat dove, broom handle smacking the floor as she snatched up the mystery penis. She straightened and crammed her hands behind her back. “Laura.” Kat exhaled, relieved to see it wasn’t a customer who had entered, but their delivery driver. “It’s just you.”

“Hello to you too,” Laura said as she flipped the open sign on the door to closed. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“No. But we found a, ah...” Kat waved her recent discovery in the air.

“You found my cock!” Laura exclaimed.

“That’s *yours*?” Ronnie asked, stooping to pick up the broom.

“Yep.” Laura nodded, wiggling her fingers in a *Give me* gesture. “It’s my cozy cock.”

Kat handed the object over. “It’s your what, now?”

“Cozy cock,” Laura repeated. “Or cock cozy.” She shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet.” Laura set the cock in question on the counter. Then she reached around and grabbed one of the travel mugs that had collected on the shelf below the register thanks to the employees’ caffeine habit. Another Allen rule: all reusable cups, all the time.

“What are you planning to do with that?” Ronnie asked.

Laura flipped the tip open. “Watch.” She slid the mug inside the hollow space, then stood the handcrafted organ upright and stepped back with a flourish. “Ta-da!”

Kat’s brows rose as she gazed upon the woman’s handiwork. Tucked snug inside the, um, shaft, the mug did indeed look cozy. “Okay, that does look nice and warm, but why...”

“Why a cock?” Laura grinned. “I’m thinking about starting a side business. I’ve got ideas for a whole line of products.”

“You might be onto something.” Kat eyed the yarn penis propped on the counter. “They’d make great favors for bachelorette parties,” she snickered. “Speaking of parties,” she added, glancing at the clock over the door, “I’ve gotta finish closing. It’s CCC night.”

“Ah yes, your weekly movie night.” Laura snagged the broom from Ronnie and took over sweeping. “Are you still doing that?”

“Yeah.” Kat grabbed the clipboard hanging from a hook by the cooler and began to take inventory of the unsold bouquets. “But we skipped the last few.”

“I thought your Friday night tradition was sacred,” Ronnie said, removing their name tag and the THEY/THEM pronoun pin they wore and tossing both in a drawer by the register.

“It *is* sacred.” Cocktails, carbs, and comedies had been a staple of Kat’s life since college. She and her two best friends had been getting together for their Friday night tradition for the better part of a decade. “But lately Julia and Andie have been busy with other plans.”

“Things must be getting serious if they’re putting dicks before chick flicks.” Ronnie tartly observed, counting down the register. “What about your dick, Kat?”

Kat lost her count. “Pardon?”

Ronnie blinked innocently. “How are things going with Chad?”

“Tad,” Kat corrected automatically. Ronnie wasn’t Tad’s biggest fan and always said his name wrong on purpose.

“Any man’s name that ends in ‘ad’ should come with a warning label,” Laura said as she emptied the dustpan into the trash.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kat promised. She finished inventorying the bouquets and moved on to the single stems. Knowing Laura’s history with her ex-husband Brad, she didn’t fault the woman for her obviously biased opinion. “We’ve been seeing each other for almost half a year now, and things seem to be going well.”

“Dating for six months...” Laura’s nose crinkled in speculation. “I think I was pregnant with my first kid by then. *Not* that I’m suggesting you should follow in my delinquent footsteps.”

Kat laughed. Laura was so chill, she often forgot the woman was more than a dozen years her senior, with a minivan and four kids, the oldest of whom was starting high school. “This is the first relationship I’ve had in ages that lasted longer than a month, but I don’t think we’re quite ready for that step.”

The wind chimes jangled, and everyone’s attention jerked to the entrance of the store.

“Speak of the spray-tanned devil,” Ronnie muttered.

Kat blinked in surprise as her boyfriend entered the supposedly closed shop.

“Oops.” Laura slid them a sheepish look. “I must have forgotten to lock that.”

“Probably because you were distracted by your giant yarn wiener.”

Smothering a giggle at Ronnie’s snarky tone, Kat shifted her gaze back to Tad. “This is unexpected,” she said, offering him a warm, albeit confused, smile.

“Sorry about showing up unannounced like this.” He propped his elbows on the counter. “But I had to see you.”

“That’s sweet.” Happiness fizzed inside her. Kat hung the clipboard back on the hook and joined him at the counter. “But I’m getting together with my friends tonight, remember?”

“Come on.” He reached out and tugged on her braid. “You can ditch ’em.”

“I really can’t.” She bit her lip, torn between appreciation for his apparent enthusiasm to see her and frustration at how easily he dismissed her plans. Her favorite Friday night ritual with her besties had been canceled the last three out of four times, once by Julia and twice by Andie. Kat had given them both a ton of shit about it. Threatened bodily harm if they canceled on her again. There was no way she was going to be the one to bail this time. “This couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

“Actually, no.” The sharp edge to Tad’s voice made it clear he was put off by the fact she was putting him off. “I really need to talk to you now.” He shifted his attention to her coworkers. “Alone.”

“We can take a hint.” Laura scooped up her cock cozy. “Right, Ronnie?”

“Right.” Ronnie held Kat’s gaze. “Unless you want us to stay here?”

Appreciating their concern, Kat shook her head. “I’m good, thanks.”

They disappeared into the back room and Kat’s stomach knotted as she belatedly realized that when somebody said they wanted—no, *needed*—to “talk,” it usually wasn’t good. But things were good between them ... at least she’d thought they were. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is great.” Eyes bright, Tad’s entire body seemed to radiate an anxious sort of energy. He grabbed her hands and squeezed. “Better than great.”

His obvious excitement was infectious, and Kat’s initial concern began to ebb. “Tell me already,” she encouraged, squeezing back. “What’s happening that’s so great?”

He beamed at her, flashing his perfect pearly whites. “My flight leaves in a few hours.”

Flight? Kat pulled away from him, treading carefully. “You’re going somewhere?”

“Canada.”

“You’re leaving the country?” she asked, voice rising as her heart plummeted. “Tonight?”

“You’re upset.” Tad sighed.

“I’m not upset,” Kat began. “I’m ... confused. Are you in trouble or something?”

“No.” He snorted as if the idea were absurd. “Quite the opposite.”

“Oka-a-y,” she said slowly. “Then what’s going on?”

“My big break!” He threw his arms wide and announced, “*Hot and Single!*”

“*Hot and Single?*” Kat repeated, voice rising once more. Now she *was* getting upset. And she had every right to be. Her boyfriend had just told her he was planning to appear on a reality TV dating show, one known for salacious hookups both on and off the screen. “You’re going to be a contestant?”

“No. I’m going to be the new host.”

“Oh.” Kat paused. That was better, at least. “Wow.” Now that the initial shock had passed, her brain tried to catch up. “You already got the job?”

“Not yet,” Tad admitted. He turned, pacing around the store’s freshly swept floor. “Last month I did a virtual casting call, and yesterday I found out I made the

final cut.”

“I didn’t even know you’d auditioned.” Kat tried to brush off the sense of disappointment that he hadn’t mentioned anything to her.

“I didn’t want to tell you in case nothing came of it. You know how it is.”

“Um, yeah. I guess.” As an actor, he went on auditions all the time, mostly for commercials. She didn’t expect him to tell her about each and every one of those. But not only was hosting *Hot and Single* a much bigger deal than a commercial, it was something they shared, a common interest. They often watched the reality show together and had spent more than one date debating the merits of various contestants and speculating on who was sleeping with whom. “Wow,” Kat said again, still trying to process the news. “This is ... wow.”

“I know. It’s huge, right?” Tad’s perfect lips curved beguilingly. It was that stunning smile that had first caught her attention across a crowded downtown bar, a radiant, rakish grin she was sure would capture the hearts of viewers everywhere. “They’re flying me out for a screen test and some interviews with the producers.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“A week or two.” He reached for her again. “That’s why we need to talk. I want to ask you something.” He threaded their fingers together and tugged her forward, pulling her through the door of the shop. “I know it might seem like a lot,” he said, stopping in front of his car parked along the curb.

“Let me guess,” Kat said, tone dry, “you need me to drive you to the airport.”

“No,” he said, staring at her intently. “This is much more important.”

Her pulse began to pound. Did he want her to come with him? She couldn’t leave the shop, couldn’t drop everything and leave her life here in Chicago ...

“Will you take care of JoJo?”

“JoJo?” Kat echoed, thoughts still swirling, debating, making plans. “JoJo,” she repeated as realization dawned. “Your hedgehog?”

Tad nodded, untangling his fingers from hers. “To bring her across the border, I’d need some kind of permit,” he explained, opening the passenger door and pulling out a plastic storage tub. “Besides, I’m probably going to be so busy with show stuff, I won’t have time to take care of her.”

Bemused, Kat peered into the container. When she’d first met Tad’s pet, she thought the little critter was charming. She’d never known anyone who owned a hedgehog before. Tad had said he’d only be gone for a few weeks. How hard could it be? “I guess I could,” she said.

“I knew I could count on you.” He handed her the container and reached back into the car, pulling out bags of supplies. “Thanks for doing this.”

“Um, sure.” With his flight only hours from now, he wasn’t giving her much of a choice. Was it presumptuous of Tad to assume she would agree to watch JoJo? Absolutely. But it’s not like she would have said no, and he obviously knew that.

Maybe this was the sign Kat had been waiting for, an indication their relationship was ready for the next level. He was trusting her with something important to him. Asking her to take care of his pet, something he loved. Kat smiled up at Tad. “It will be like we’re coparenting.”

“Coparenting?” His brow furrowed.

“Well, yeah. I’ll be in charge of JoJo while you’re gone, and then when you come back...”

“I’m not coming back.”

Kat blinked. “But you said you would only be gone for a week or two...” Her voice faltered as a seed of doubt burrowed between her ribs.

“For the audition.” Tad closed his car door and leaned against it. “If I get the job, they’ll want me to start right away.”

The seed sprouted, tendrils of concern creeping into her heart. “What if you don’t get the job?”

“Ouch.” Tad clapped a melodramatic hand to his chest. “Wound a man, why don’t you.”

Kat bit back a snarky reply. He’d told her he was leaving the country. And ditching her with his pet. Yet somehow he had the audacity to make a joke about *his* feelings being hurt.

Oblivious to the direction of her thoughts, Tad continued, “Hopefully, I’ll get the hosting gig. I mean, I’m perfect for it. But if not, tons of shows film in Vancouver. Since I’m already out there, why not audition for as many of them as possible?”

Why not indeed. “What does that mean for the two of us?” she asked tightly.

“You and JoJo will get along great,” Tad assured her.

He had to be acting purposely obtuse. Nobody could be this clueless. “I was talking about *us*.” She gestured between herself and Tad. “You and me.” The vines were thick now, apprehension wrapping around her lungs, cutting off her air. She fought for breath and forced the words out. “Are you dumping me?”

“What? No,” he stuttered. “I figured you weren’t interested in a long-distance relationship,” he declared. “You’re not ... Are you?” His sandy brows crept up his perfect forehead, as if the idea were completely absurd.

“I might have been open to discussing the possibility.” Kat shifted the tub with the hedgehog to one hip. “But you obviously aren’t.”

He didn't argue.

Yep, she was being dumped. Fears confirmed, Kat bent, gathering the bags of supplies sitting on the sidewalk with her free hand.

"Here, let me help you." Tad reached for one of the bags, but she jerked away from him.

"I got it," she spat.

"Come on, don't be like that." His tone managed to be both accusatory and aggrieved, implying the current situation was her fault.

Maybe it was. Kat dropped her gaze to the pudgy ball of spikes pattering around in the tub, considering. Not directly, of course, but maybe, if she stopped falling for assholes, she wouldn't find herself standing on the sidewalk, shouting at the jerk who'd told her he was leaving the country, and by the way, here's my pet rodent—or whatever fucking subsection of the animal kingdom a hedgehog was part of—as a parting gift. "I have a fucking right to be mad, don't you think?"

"You're mad?" For a heartbeat, Tad had the decency to look abashed. Some emotion that might not be related to his own feelings flickered across his chiseled features, but it faded as quickly as it surfaced, and he frowned in disapproval. "No need to swear at me."

"When I get mad, I swear. And to answer your question, yes, I'm fucking mad."

Tad let out a heavy sigh and grumbled, "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Understand what? Why you'd dump me in the middle of the street?" A bubble of laughter escaped Kat. Tad's commitment to placing the blame at her feet was so absolute it was comical. If her hands had been free, she might have poked him in the chest, tried to pop a hole in that inflated ego of his. She settled for glaring daggers at him. "It's because you're a selfish asshole. Thanks for helping me figure that out. Good luck with the audition." She spun on her heel and walked away.

She'd planned to leave it at that. Calmly make her exit before she completely lost her shit. But between the hedgehog container and the bags of supplies, Kat belatedly realized she couldn't open the shop door. Frustration stiffened her spine and she turned to face him once more. "Goodbye, Tad."

The clatter of wind chimes broke the tension as Laura stepped outside. "Everything okay out here?" she asked.

"Yep." Kat slapped a sunny grin on her face. "You see the guy standing on the sidewalk staring at me?"

Laura leaned against the open door and peered over Kat's shoulder. "You mean your boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend," Kat corrected. "Can you do me a favor?"

"You want me to stab him?" Laura wielded her crochet hook like a weapon, a half-finished cock cozy swinging wildly from the end.

"Nah, just flip him the bird. My hands are full." Without waiting to see if Laura would oblige her request, Kat scooted past, dodging the yarn penis and hauling everything into the store.

A moment later, Laura followed her inside, this time remembering to lock the door. "I told ya." Laura clicked her tongue, snarky yet sympathetic. "Gotta watch out for guys with a name that ends in 'ad.'"

"I'll keep that in mind for next time." Did she even want a next time? The longest relationship she'd had, perhaps ever, was over, and Tad had officially joined her hall of former flames. It was getting crowded in there. Kat suddenly felt very tired. Tired of dating jerks. Tired of thinking that this time—this guy—would be different.

Ronnie appeared in the doorway from the back room. "No more Vlad?"

"No more Tad," Kat simultaneously corrected and confirmed.

"What happened?"

"He dumped me," Kat said, dropping the bags Tad had dumped on her while dumping her.

"I offered to stab him," Laura added.

"Which I appreciated." Kat set the plastic tote containing JoJo on the counter. The spiky ball rolled, butting up against the side and coming to a halt. A snub nose appeared, topped by a pair of beady black eyes.

"What the hell is that?" Ronnie asked.

"A hedgehog."

"Oh." Ronnie moved closer and stared down at the creature. "He's a cute little thing."

"It's a she."

"Sorry," Ronnie apologized to the hedgehog with complete sincerity. "We respect each other's pronouns around here."

Laura bent over the makeshift carrier, taking a closer look. "Does this cutie have a name?"

"JoJo." Kat shook her head, recalling the night Tad had introduced her to his pet. Ironically, he'd mentioned he'd named the hedgehog after a contestant who'd appeared on *Hot and Single*. What a twist.

“Nice to meet you, JoJo. I’m Laura.”

The hedgehog’s nose twitched, and Ronnie reached out a hand, pausing to ask, “Does she bite?”

“I don’t think so.” Kat shook her head. “I’m not even sure she has teeth.”

“Let’s see.” Ronnie tickled the hedgehog’s snout. “Open up, JoJo. Show me your choppers.”

Laura snorted. “First, you’re afraid of getting bit, and now you want to see her teeth?”

“Sure.” Ronnie tapped JoJo’s nose again. “That way I know what I’m dealing with.”

“Well, appearances can be deceiving.” Kat sighed, thinking of all the beautiful men she’d dated who turned out to be ugly on the inside. She ran the tip of her index finger over JoJo’s quills. “Like these. They look sharp but actually feel quite soft.”

Ronnie squeezed Kat’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” Kat picked at the edge of JoJo’s container. “I thought this time was going to be different.”

The look Ronnie gave Kat was equal parts sympathetic and exasperated. “You always think that.”

“I’ve gotta be right eventually, don’t I?” Kat said. “What’s that expression? Even a broken clock is right twice a day...”

“We’re not talking about clocks,” Laura reminded her. “We’re talking about cocks. Men are much less reliable.”

“Let’s avoid the gender generalizations, please.” Ronnie turned back to Kat. “What happened?”

“TLDR?” Kat gestured between herself, JoJo, and the bags of supplies on the floor. “Tad got a big break and is flying to an audition in Canada. He asked me to take care of his pet, said it was over between us, and took off.”

“What a prick.” Ronnie shook their head in disgust.

“Now who’s generalizing?” Laura teased.

“Trust me,” Ronnie said. “You don’t have to own a prick to be one.”

“True.” Kat nudged the hedgehog onto its back. “Well, I’m done with them,” she declared.

“Who?” Ronnie asked. “Pricks?”

“Jerks,” Kat clarified. “Hot guys who think they’re hot shit. I officially declare, no more.”

“Yeah, right,” Laura snorted.

“I’m serious!” Kat insisted as Laura and Ronnie both guffawed. “I know my radar is broken. My compass is calibrated to assholes. What if I ignored my instincts and went for the *opposite* of my type? Someone sweet and nice.”

“But you’re not attracted to someone like that,” Ronnie pointed out.

“Exactly,” Kat agreed. “If I’m always chasing after Mr. Wrong, how will I ever find Mr. Right?”

JoJo scratched at the side of the container.

“Before we go looking for Mr. Right, how about we find some pet food?” Laura rummaged through the bags of stuff from Tad. “I think the little critter is hungry.”

“What do hedgehogs eat, anyway?” Ronnie wondered.

“Ah-ha!” Laura waved a box of kibble in triumph. “Tad might be a narcissistic prick, but at least he left supplies.” She sprinkled a few nuggets into the container, and JoJo began to nibble, making soft crunching sounds with the tiny teeth it turned out hedgehogs did indeed have.

“Oh my god, look at her little hands!” Ronnie cooed. “That’s adorable.”

“Much cuter than my offspring slurping mac and cheese,” Laura agreed. “Which reminds me, I need to get going, I have my own hungry brood to feed.” Stuffing her cozy coxcs and yarn into her crochet bag, Laura prepared to leave. She paused to pat Kat on the back. “Welcome to the single parents club.”

“Thanks.” Smiling despite herself, Kat waved as Laura exited through the front of the shop.

“Sorry about the breakup,” Ronnie said, locking the door again after Laura left. “At least you got this bundle of cuteness out of the deal.”

“Did you hear that, JoJo?” Kat rested her elbows on the counter and watched the hedgehog munch away, blissfully unaware of how much her world had changed. “It’s you and me now.”

“And me,” Ronnie noted. “Unless you’re planning to take JoJo with you tonight.”

Shit. Friday. CCC night. “Are you offering to watch her?” Kat asked. “How much is the average hedgehog sitter charging these days?”

“Depends,” Ronnie said, a playful gleam in their eye. “Do you have any of your grandma’s cookies upstairs?”

Kat didn’t need to be asked twice. She gathered the bags and led the way up to her place. One of the best perks of managing the flower shop for Allen was the apartment that came with the job. “Are you sure all you want is some of Babcia’s cookies?” Kat asked once they’d gotten JoJo settled.

“I want *all* of them, thank you.” Ronnie popped the lid on the cookie tin and plopped onto the papasan chair in the corner. “And you’ll need to drop off the deposit at the bank.”

“Done,” Kat agreed. “Anything else?”

“Oh!” Ronnie exclaimed around a mouthful of cookie. “I almost forgot, there is one other thing. A delivery.”

Kat blinked. “Tonight?”

Ronnie nodded. “The client specifically requested the drop-off happen at six thirty. Since it was after Laura’s shift, I was planning to handle it.”

Kat glanced at the clock. It was one of those kitschy cat clocks with the swinging tail and blinking eyes. A gift from her grandmother. Babcia had found it at the thrift store, dusty and broken. She’d tucked it under her arm like a lost kitten and taken it home. Now it perched on Kat’s living room wall, as good as new. The tail twitched mischievously as the hands on the clock crept toward six. With all that had happened since closing the shop, Kat thought it would have been later.

But nope. It had taken less than an hour for her life to get upended. “Yeah, okay. I should have time to squeeze it in. Where?”

“O’Sullivan’s Funeral Home.”

“A funeral?” Kat froze, an unwelcome but familiar ripple of nausea washing over her.

“I know you hate these, but it’s a small order,” Ronnie assured her. “Everything’s packed and ready to go in the delivery cooler. You’ll be in and out in no time.” Ronnie bit into another cookie, letting the hedgehog nibble crumbs from their finger.

“Fine,” Kat grumbled. “I’ll do it.” She’d been dumped without warning, become the adopted parent of a hedgehog, and now she was headed to a funeral.

Not how she’d expected her evening to go.