

**Michele Scott**

**Happy Hour**

**Chapter 1**

Kat

Kat McClintock was late. This was not good. This would not be good. Damn. Damn. Damn. “Okay, boys, listen.”

Neither one of her pre-pubescent sons looked at her. They were far too absorbed in whatever new Game Station, Game Cube, Play Station, Wii, (whatever it was these days) game their father had recently purchased for them. She turned the TV off.

“Hey!” Jeremy yelled. “What are you doing, Mom? Not cool. Turn it back on.” Jeremy had evidently bypassed pre-pubescence altogether and jumped right into raging adolescence and his day-to-day tone with her ranged from apathetic to surly.

“Mommy, we were about to kill the boss,” Brian, her ten-year-old, said. “The like, the big boss, you know? The guy to win!”

Thank God. He was definitely still not even close to adolescence. He was still sweet. No one going through puberty would dream of calling their mother Mommy. “I’m sorry, boys. I have to go. Your Aunt Tammy was supposed to be here by now. Typical.” She shook her head.

“Anyway, Jeremy, I need you to take out two frozen burritos and put them in the microwave. There’re some bananas and I have some broccoli already cut up in there.”

“I hate broccoli,” Brian said.

“You like it with ranch dressing.”

“No, I don’t.”

“How come we can’t go out to eat? Dad always takes us out to eat,” Jeremy said.

Because Dad is an asshole. No, no, she couldn’t say that. Dad screwed me over in our settlement and while he’s out wining and dining, I’m trying to get a job to support us. No, no, not that either. Let go and let God. Wasn’t that what Mom was always saying to her? Breathe! Now there you go. This is all one growing experience that will get you to another side of things. The silver lining, or pot of gold, or whatever the hell it was at the end of the rainbow. Better be a pot of gold.

Kat placed her hands on her hips and tried to look official. “I’m having you eat a healthy meal.” That sort of sounded okay. “Good food makes you grow big and strong and have a smart brain.” She winked at them.

“Frozen burritos?” Jeremy replied.

Too smart for his own good. “Jer, no more lip. Eat the burritos. You know you like them. I’ll be back by bedtime and your homework needs to be done. Don’t answer the phone unless you see that it’s coming from me and call me on my cell if you have a problem. Obviously do not go outside or open the door for anyone. Leave Squeak in the house. She’s on my bed right now. She makes a good watchdog.”

“She’s a Chihuahua,” Jeremy said. “Not exactly a watchdog, Mom.” He gave her a half smile and the twinkle in his blue eyes left nothing for the imagination. Her oldest boy defined mischief. The kind she knew later in life would break many a woman’s heart. She sighed and shook her

head. At twelve, Jeremy was getting by on his charm and good looks with his teachers—all blue eyed, olive skinned, and thick dark hair. Brian was, of course, beautiful, too, but he took after her with lighter brown hair. No one knew exactly how to describe his eye color--hazel, brown, green? Kat settled on avocado. It was what her mother called them. Mom never described anything as green, blue, or brown. With Mom it was always lime, cornflower, hazelnut, etceteras.

“But she barks. Can you handle all that? I’m sorry, guys. I’ll take you out for pizza on Friday.”

“We’re going with Dad on Friday and, duh, I can handle it. I’m twelve, not a baby anymore.” Jeremy turned back to the TV. “Can we turn it back on now?”

“No. I don’t like your attitude, buddy. You’re acting like a monkey. Ooh ah ooh.” Kat tucked her arms underneath her, and jumped up and down in her best imitation of a monkey. Jeremy stared at her, but Brian giggled. The monkey imitation used to work so well, and now--a stare and one little giggle. “Alrighty then, I am officially a goober. That much is obvious, right? But as your officially gooberish mom, your attitude Mr. Jeremy—ooh wait.” She held up a finger. “If I am goober mom then you must be my goober sons! Ha. So, I need your goober bad attitude straightened out by the time I get home.”

Jeremy frowned. “Mom, goober is so old school. You’re a nube.” Now both boys broke up in hilarity. “But we still love you.” He grinned.

“Right. Me nube, you nube.” Not only was Jeremy charming, but also downright manipulative when he needed to be, and too damn smart for his own good. “Love you.” She went around the cheapie sofa she’d bought at a hole in the wall furniture store. After only a few months the color changed from light beige to dreary mud. She made a mental note to get one of those shabby chic covers she’d seen at Target once she deposited her first paycheck—which--fingers crossed--would be soon. She kissed each boy on the cheek, with Jeremy responding by wiping it away and grimacing as if he’d been touched by an alien.

At least Brian hugged her back and smiled. “Bye, Mom. Good luck. You’ll get the job. I know it.”

“Bye, babe, and thank you. You can turn the TV back on after your homework is finished. Leave it out on the kitchen table so I can check it when I get home.” Who was she kidding? As soon as those boys heard the car pull out of the driveway of their three-bedroom townhouse in the outskirts of Oakland, she knew that the TV and game would be back on.

Guilt dropped in on her again. Guilt that she wouldn’t be home to make sure they ate a healthy meal. Guilt that she wouldn’t be there to help Brian with his math problems that he’d been having difficulty with. Guilt that she wasn’t there when Jeremy wanted to actually talk to her or watch TV with her. Too much God damned guilt went with divorce, and Kat hated it. But what was she supposed to do? Turn a blind eye? Allow the boys to grow up in a home where disrespecting women was accepted? No. She’d take this guilt. Peace. Breathe in peace and relaxation. Were all those tapes her mom had been sending her starting to rub off on her? The ones with titles like “Flowdreaming for Peace,” and “Balance Through Breath?”

She got behind the wheel of her jeep and pulled out of the one-car garage the town home afforded. The place where she and boys now lived was definitely a step down from upper middle class suburbia, but as she pressed the garage door remote, she knew that this place was far more a home than the Victorian they’d lived in, on the edge of Pacific Heights. So what if Perry still lived there with his flavor of the week? Kat sort of believed in karma and where her ex was

concerned, she found it almost orgasmic to have faith in this theory because she knew the man would get his just due. Yep. Perry had kept the classic painted lady and she'd downsized to the three-bedroom with mold under the sinks and peeling wallpaper in her room. But, it had given her back her sanity and a sense of self that she'd lost during those eight years of marriage (technically ten by the time the divorce was finalized). Why she hadn't gotten smart and taken that wake up pill when Perry had told her that he thought that marriage was an antiquated idea, she'd never know. One child out of wedlock had been one thing, but when she'd gotten pregnant with Brian she had insisted that Perry marry her, or else. She should have taken the "or else" part.

Enough of that though, because this was her new life--her new start--and she broke pretty much every speed limit trying to get to it, running a yellow light that was much closer to red than green. Stopping at the next one, she took a good look in the mirror. Yikes. The boys' soccer practice had run late. The coach who thought he was Pele himself preached this whole team effort philosophy: when you sign your kid up for a sport, there is a commitment factor you have to consider and blah, blah, blah. True—Kat believed in commitment. So much so that she had spent years overlooking her ex's over-spending habits and the lies that surrounded them, the flirting here and there with other women . . . But when it came right down to bedding one of the women in her book club? That had pretty much made the notion of commitment null and void.

The commitment to the boys' soccer now made her late for her job interview.

With one hand on the wheel and the other in her purse, Kat rummaged around feeling for a lipstick and hopefully, a hair clip. She needed to get a smaller purse. This was like diving into a black hole. So far she had found one bag of chips, a ton of receipts, a tampon, and a handful of candy wrappers. Aha, there was a clippie. Not the most attractive look, but it would have to do. Now for the lipstick.

Next to the lipstick she knew what she felt. The cigarette wrapper. She winced. To smoke or not to smoke? Serious question. No. She wouldn't do it. She thought about the discussion she'd had with her mother, Venus. Yes, Venus. Kat sighed. It had been Veronica all her life until ten years ago when she hit fifty-five and left Kat's dad to find herself. She moved to an ashram in Oregon, and changed her name. Anyhow, the conversation she'd had last month when her mother visited ran through her mind.

"Kitty, love, you have too many lines around your mouth for a woman your age. You're only thirty-five."

"I'm thirty-seven, Mom." Her mother was totally on her nerves at that point. They'd spent five solid days together and between learning how to make tofu dishes, attending the yoga classes her mother insisted on, and having henna tattoos painted on her feet, Kat thought she would lose it at any moment.

"Age is only a number." She waved a hand through the air. They were seated at Kat's kitchen table drinking green tea. "Look at me. No lines. I have no stress. I take the day as it comes and because of that I have found not only perfection in my outward appearance, but also in my inner spirit as well. Namaste." With her hands in prayer position she bowed to Kat.

Gag.

Mom ran a hand over her face. It was true that she had no lines. But, Kat hadn't forgotten (and apparently Mom had) that before her mother had gone all Hare Krishna on them and left Dad, she'd had one helluva face lift. Veronica or Venus—whatever—her mother looked like a

new age Raquel Welch. That is, if Welch had had the poor fashion sense to don Birkenstocks and a muu muu.

“Kitty Love, I think that you must have too much stress in your life. You look bitter. Or like a smoker might. Have you seen what women who smoke look like? It’s not pretty.”

Last straw. Right then and there Kat determined she was fixing burgers that evening. “Mom, I am a little bitter, but I’ll get through that.” Her mother started to interrupt her. She shook her head and held up a hand. “Oh, no, no, I am not going to discuss my reasons why with you. I’m working through it on my own and in my own time, so you let it go. And I am a smoker.”

Her mother’s face paled.

“I’ve been a closet smoker since I was fifteen.”

“What?”

Kat took a sip from her tea feeling decidedly good about herself. She smiled and nodded. “Yes. I smoke three to four cigarettes a day. When the boys leave for school I have a smoke. After lunch I have a smoke, and then after dinner, when I take a walk, I have a smoke. And guess what, Venus? Sometimes I have a smoke before bed if I’m really stressed out. Been doing it for years.”

Shortly after Mom got back home, Kat started receiving self-help CDs in the mail along with yoga DVD’s. She figured she had the entire Rodney Yee and Baron Baptiste library.

One day she would do one of those DVD’s. She had felt so bad about that conversation that she’d gone ahead and started listening to the CD’s. The result being that she’d pretty much stopped smoking. Pretty much. But right now a cigarette would surely take the edge off.

Getting the pack out of her purse, Kat glanced down for a second. When she looked back up there was another red light, and thankfully she caught it in time or she would have slammed into the back of a semi. Her purse flew to the floor, its contents going every which way. “Shit!” That had to be a sign, right? Stop smoking or die. Duh, as Jeremy would say. It would either be through lung cancer, according to Mom, or on the highway while in such desperate need of a smoke she was willing to risk having the back end of a double wide shoved up her nose.

She crossed the Oakland Bridge and for the rest of her drive into the city she listened to her mother’s latest gift, Wayne Dyer’s *Being in Balance*. By the time she made it into San Fran, she understood the third chapter fairly well: *Your Addictions Tell You*, “You’ll Never Get Enough of What You Want.” Now there was one she’d have to listen to again on the drive home. About the time that the lull of Dr. Dyer’s voice settled her into a calm state, she realized she needed to find parking and she was already five minutes late. Great way to go in for a job interview.

Four blocks away, Kat located a space, parked, and then practically jogged to the restaurant, praying she wouldn’t look a total disaster when she made it there. After taking a deep breath and smoothing down her clothes, she opened the door to Sphinx.

A stylish, brown-eyed, long dark-haired hostess stood at the front. What was she? Twenty-three tops? How did anyone at twenty-three look so put together? She hadn’t even managed it by thirty-seven, conscious of the wrinkling in her light blue cotton blouse and the small stain from one of the boys’ juice boxes that had squirted out in the car earlier when Brian had poked his straw into it. The boys thought it hilarious that the juice had sprayed everywhere. Kat hadn’t noticed the spot until now, face to face with little Miss Shine and Sparkle, when she spotted the small red stain on the left thigh of her khakis. Boys!

Kat closed her hands around the handle on her purse and smiled. “Hi, I’m Kat McClintock. I’m here for an interview with Mr. Reilly.” What she lacked in fashion sense she could at least make up for with maturity.

“One moment. I’ll get him for you.”

Kat took a good long look around. Modern flair painted in warm shades of green made the restaurant look as chic as Kat had read about in the foodie magazines. The floors were done in cherry wood squares, with a lighter wood of some sort cut out in a diamond pattern filling the center. Gold suede-covered booths lined the walls. The tables and chairs arranged in the middle spoke of elegance in dark woods and gold colored linens. Paintings of the Sphinx arranged around the restaurant added mystique to the elegance. She could see herself working here. The décor was nothing compared to the smells coming from the kitchen. Sphinx was the new hot restaurant in San Francisco. She breathed in the decadent smells of garlic, tomato, basil, onion, a bit of curry—totally intoxicating and intimidating all at once.

Then out walked Christian Reilly, the owner and head chef, and if there was any truth to the idea that you could actually go weak in the knees at the sight of splendor, well, Kat experienced it right then and there. An actual physical reaction made her reach out and grab the hostess stand with one hand. Christian Reilly wasn’t gorgeous in the Brad Pitt kind of way. In fact, to some women he might not even be considered all that great looking. But to Kat he fit right into her beautiful category: hazel eyes, not too tall for her, as she was a petite five-foot-three. Christian had dark hair,—the kind she could run her fingers through—a barely there scruff of a beard, and wrinkles that deepened when he said her name with a slight Irish accent. When he repeated her name and smiled, the lines around his eyes deepened. A man who had lived a little. Nice. Butterfly, stomach-swirling nice. For a second, she had to make sure she wasn’t licking her lips.

“Kat McClintock?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I, uh, yes.”

He reached his hand out and she shook it. Strong, tough. Again, nice.

“Why don’t we take a seat in the back booth? The lunch crowd is cleared out, yeah, so we’ll be prepping for dinner shortly, but I think we have about thirty minutes.”

“Great. I’m so sorry for being late.” Blame it on the parking.

As if reading her mind he turned and smiled. “You have problems finding parking, did you?”  
“I did.”

They sat down and Christian asked a server to bring them out several bite size appetizers and two flights of wine—one white, the other red. Kat tried not to give him a questioning look, but she knew she’d failed when he said, “Maybe a bit unorthodox, but you are applying for the sommelier position. I thought I’d see what you know. Tell me what tastes good with what.”

She cleared her throat and crossed her legs. “Don’t you want to ask me about my education? Where I went to school?”

He waved a hand. “Nah. I want to know if you can pair wines.”

She shifted in the booth.

“What do you say, shall we get a start on this?” he asked, and held up a glass of sauvignon blanc. “Tell me about this wine and suggest what to order with it.”

This was it. Impress the man with what you know, Kat. Mhmm, those eyes were looking at her, their color a cross between jade and tiger-eye. Brother, she was thinking like Venus. They were hazel! She lifted up a glass of wine, smiled, and started by holding it up to the light.

Thirty minutes turned into two hours while the sous chef was apparently covering in the kitchen. After the first hour, she was hired. She'd paired every wine he had brought out, could tell him the notes on the wine, and her overall impressions.

"You do know your stuff."

She twirled the glass with a sip of Bordeaux left in it. "Surprised?"

"I looked at your resume." He sat back and crossed his arms. "First job at this, huh?"

Why was it that he seemed to look at her like he could see right through her? She'd heard that in a song before, or maybe read it in a book, and thought it sounded so ridiculous and trite, but Christian Reilly had this look: a look that said, I'm going to get under your skin, turn you inside out. "It is. I thought you didn't care what my resume said," she replied, trying so hard to sound cool.

"I don't. I care that you know your wines. What made you decide to become a sommelier?"

"I got a divorce."

Christian raised a brow. "I'm divorced too. Six months now."

"Oh."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" he asked.

She paused, looking at her wine glass. "Wouldn't that be weird? You're my boss now, right?"

"I could fire you for the night and then re-hire you tomorrow. But if it goes well tonight, I'd have to fire you again." He laughed. "Come on. It's only dinner."

She crossed and uncrossed her legs. "No. I want the job and, I, yes, I would love to have dinner. When?"

"I think I mentioned tonight. Now works for me." His hand brushed over the top of hers as he reached across to refill her glass.

"I, well, I..." She'd never been good at this. She had met Perry in high school and married him fresh out of college. "My boys. I have sons and they're at home and they have school. And, I need to get home for them."

He studied her for a few seconds before replying. "Of course. I have a daughter. She's three. I understand. Some other time then. Why don't you plan to start training next Monday, right? I'll have Rachel e-mail you over copies of our menus, wine lists, and some specials I typically serve."

Kat nodded. "Can you give me a minute?"

"Sure."

She got up and headed to the bathroom, not believing what she was about to do. Before she could think twice, she dug through her purse, found her cell phone, and dialed Perry's number, her hands shaking.

"Kat?"

"Hi. I need a favor."

"What is it, sweetheart?"

She hated that. They were divorced! He'd screwed her former friend and after he was done with her, he went for pretty much anything wearing stilettos and short skirts. They didn't even have to be drinking age. No matter what, though, Perry had to play all Rico Sauvage and call her sweetheart as though she was itching to crawl back to him. Ick. "I'm in the city and can't get home until late and the boys are home. My sister was supposed to come over and watch them, but she didn't make it." She knew she sounded desperate, but for God's sake, when was the last

time a man looked at her the way Christian Reilly had? When was the last time butterflies did that dance in her stomach? It was now or never, baby. No more groveling. Perry owed her anyway. Big time.

“Of course your sister didn’t make it. She’s not exactly responsible. She’s an addict.”

“She’s been sober for seven years, Perry. You know that, and your responsibility comment? Isn’t the pot calling the kettle black?” Oops, that sorta slipped out.

“Kat, have you been drinking?”

Another thing she hated about him. He always knew if she’d had even one glass of wine. Perry got off telling people he didn’t drink, as if it set him above the luses of the world. Perry’s addiction was sex.

“You know what, Perry, I have had a glass of wine and I really need you to step up and go over to my place, pick up the boys, make sure their homework is finished, put them to bed, and take them to school in the morning. I’ll even drop off their lunches so you don’t have to worry about that.”

He laughed. “Listen to you. I got bad news, Kit-Kat.” She cringed. “I’m in a meeting. So, no can do. Guess you better end your little party and get home like a good girl.”

She took a deep breath. She hadn’t been great at setting boundaries or defending her needs, but this moron had some gall. How had she ever married him? It was long overdue to call his bluff. “No, you listen here, Paris.” He hated to be called by his real name. “I can practically hear the eighteen-year-old platinum blonde gyrating on you. Since when did you start listening to Britney Spears? God, what is that? Baby One More Time? Wow.” He was so predictable. “That said, get the girl off you, go pick up the boys, and leave me a check in my mailbox. As of now, you’re officially three weeks late on your child support.” No more groveling.

“When did you turn into such a bitch?”

“The night I found you in our bed on top of another woman. When will you be at my house?”

He sighed. “I guess I can be there in about thirty minutes.”

“Thank you.” She clicked the phone shut and then reopened it to call the boys. Much to her dismay, they were excited about the new plan. Time with Dad. Yippee-cay fucking-ay. She really did need to get over it. She obviously should listen to more Wayne Dyer.

When she walked back to the table, Christian looked up at her. “Still up for dinner?” she asked.

“I am.” He picked up his glass of wine and twirled it between his fingers, smiling.

She about turned to butter right there.

It was in that second hour over dinner that Kat knew, looking across the table at her now boss, that her life was never going to be the same. The man was adorable. And the thoughts running through her mind, seated across from him? Bad girl! She’d figured out that just because you have sex with a man didn’t mean you had to walk down the aisle with him. She’d made that mistake once and, besides the births of her sons, regretted every minute of it. But she hadn’t wanted to sleep with a man in a very long time, she couldn’t even believe she was thinking about sex with Christian. God! Hopefully he was thinking the same thing. But what if he wasn’t? Then again, what if he was?

Then he took her hand across the table and held it as if he’d always taken her hands and held them. “You’re beautiful,” he said, and she believed him.

Totally in deep trouble now. It was as if she were a runaway freight train and the engines driving the locomotive forward were her emotions on overdrive. She wasn’t about to listen to the

common sense angel sitting on her shoulder, the one she often sought advice from since the divorce. She frequently pictured an ivory skin, blonde haired fairy with lapis-colored eyes seated on her right shoulder telling her exactly how to behave in any given circumstance. Kat had named her Logic. She now caressed her shoulder, brushing Logic clean away.

Kat wanted to get Christian naked—boss or not. In non-Kat fashion, she took his hand in return, smiled and said, “What do you like to do for fun?”

That night, while Perry had his once in a blue moon share of the boys, Kat decided she liked Christian’s idea of fun.

Back at his two story town home overlooking the city lights, Christian took out a bowl and sliced up some strawberries, drizzled them in Grand Marnier and topped them with whipped cream. He then walked over to his built in wine cabinet and took out a bottle of Chateau Chasse-Spleen 1959. Holding it up, he said, “Did you ever play spin the bottle when you were a kid?”

Kat giggled. “The kissing game?” He nodded and with a mischievous grin on his face, his cuteness factor sailed through the roof. “Believe it or not I was kind of a shy kid, so I knew kids who played but I never had the privilege. Plus I wasn’t real cute. Buck teeth.”

He laughed. “You’re gorgeous now, and I think we should play. I want to play with you.” He took her hands and sat down with her on his living room floor. They sunk into the plush white carpeting. “We get to make up our own rules though.”

“Okay.” Kat had never in her life been so forward with a man and never had she ever slept with a man after only a few hours of meeting him. She was pretty sure that was where this was headed, and it was pretty wonderful.

“You spin,” he said.

“But there’s only the two of us.”

“Yep. That’s where our own rules come into play. Here. I’ll go first and show you.” He spun and the bottle faced the sofa. “Look it’s close to you. So now I get to kiss you.” He reached out and touched her hair, then moved his finger to her lips, tracing the outline of them with his thumb. “I’ve been wanting to kiss your lips since I saw you this afternoon.”

A warm glow traveled through Kat. “Me too. I wanted to kiss you too.”

He inched closer and slid his lips across hers. She pulled away slightly. “You okay?” he asked. She nodded and then leaned forward, running her hands through his dark thick hair. “Your turn.” He pointed to the bottle.

She smiled and spun. “Huh. Landed on you.” Kat grazed his neck with her lips and she nibbled on his ear. She kissed him on his lips, biting him on the bottom lip.

“You vixen.”

She laughed. Christian grabbed the bottle of the seven-hundred-fifty dollar Bordeaux and uncorked it. He stood up and held out his hand. Kat took it and followed him into his bedroom. “Don’t we need glasses?” she asked, pointing to the wine.

He shook his head and pushed her back onto the bed, he lifted up her shirt, exposing her belly where he drizzled a small amount of wine onto her stomach and licked it off. Kat unbuttoned the rest of the blouse. She sat up. “We should, ah, do you have ah...” It was so awkward to interrupt the moment but all the same she wasn’t taking any chances.

He held up a finger. “I’ll be back.” A couple of minutes later, Christian came back from the restroom, condom in hand. He lit candles by the side of the bed that smelled of vanilla, and turned on his stereo and played Bebel Gilberto. Her seductive voice lingered in the air.

Christian laid down next to Kat, took her in his arms and again kissed her, long hard, passionately. He turned her onto her stomach and drizzled more wine down her back, licking it off of her, as he undid her bra. She rolled back over and fumbled with the buttons on his jeans. He helped her and shook them off, then slid his shirt over his head. Naked together they took each other in, their eyes lingering. He pulled her onto him. He smelled of cinnamon and rosemary. He cupped her breasts, pulling her closer, running his tongue over her nipples and then taking them one at a time inside his warm mouth. He reached up and held her face in his hands.

Kat straddled him, not breaking their stride as he entered her, her hands between his chest and shoulders. As they began to move together electric pulses ran up and down their bodies. It had never been like this before for Kat, never in sync in this way with any man. He flipped her over onto her back, kissing her face, her neck, her ears, his hands caressing her body, her fingers sliding down his back. He pressed deeper into her. Kat sighed with pleasure, moving her hips with Christian's, the intensity increasing. She yelled out as small waves of sweet ecstasy rolled through her into one crashing wave, her body trembling as he also came, whispering in her ear, "Oh Lord, oh Kat."

He held her in his arms afterwards, stroking her hair, caressing her body and every so often whispering, "You are so beautiful. My God, you are beautiful."

Kat decided right then and there that not only did she love Christian Reilly's version of spin the bottle, she might have just fallen in love with the man himself.