



A Completion Novel

KICK

U.S.A. Today Best-Selling Author

Holly S. Roberts

Chapter One

Holding my double soy latte and keys in one hand with my scrap bag in the other, I struggled to place the key in the car door. My trembling fingers didn't help. I could have set my bag down or rested the strap on my shoulder, but no, that would be too easy.

The coffee tipped a little too far. I stumbled back, almost falling off my clearance, Valentino knockoffs, or Vals, as I'd named them. They still cost more than I could afford. I bought them in celebration when I finished my internship at the *Cleveland News and Journal* and they offered me a full-time position. I'd worn them exactly twice over the past eighteen months. They only had a two-inch heel, but that was the high end of my balancing act. I hid my sexy shoes beneath pants that were a little too long and definitely too baggy.

The shoes were as far as I would step to the wild side. I was too introverted for more. And, I needed my Vals for good luck because the chief editor of the daily news division, Mr. Miller, requested a meeting with me this morning. I usually managed to stay under the radar while copy editing classified ads and rarely, if ever, saw my immediate boss. I received an email at six the previous evening requesting my presence in Miller's office at eight sharp. He was my boss's boss.

No rest for the woefully, not so wicked! I had barely managed to shut my eyes last night as the what ifs continued spinning through my head, driving me crazy and keeping me awake. I couldn't afford to lose my job. I barely scraped my rent together as it was. And, I had dreams—dreams of landing that big story, cementing my place in investigative journalism, and someday winning a Pulitzer. Naïve, but it was what kept me going in the boring world of classified ads where I'd worked for the past year. Ridiculous really. Who would want a reporter who stared at the ground and not into the eyes of the

people around her?

I didn't have time to wipe off the long trail of latte running down the car door. It's not like it mattered. Carmen, my old but reliable 1999 Ford Focus, had seen better days, but she was a champ and she'd wait patiently for her weekly bath.

After a quick sip of my latte to help my exhausted brain function, I placed it in the center console's cup holder, shifted my glasses up higher on my nose, and finished the commute to the high rise. The building itself spoke volumes about the *Journal's* success in an industry where physical paper was the dinosaur of journalism. I had to give Bob Shirley, the paper's owner, props for blending his physical copy daily news with today's social media Internet craze and making money.

Please let me keep my job, I recited repetitively while sitting in stop-and-go traffic. I'd left early enough to grab my once-a-week coffee splurge and arrive in plenty of time for the meeting. I pulled into the underground garage with ten minutes to spare and parked in my allotted space, number one-sixty-two. I tucked my keys inside my scrap bag, so named because it held everything I needed if that one big case fell into my lap. The bag doubled as a backpack, leaving both my hands free—it held small notebooks, pens, two digital recorders, extra batteries, and a used iPad, along with odds and ends of female necessities. Made of soft durable leather, my parents gave it to me as a college graduation gift.

I took the garage elevator to the ground floor and passed security. I gave them a nervous smile, flashing the neck badge I wore in their general direction and not meeting anyone's eyes. I waited at the inside elevators for a door to open. My appointment was on the fourth floor, but I actually worked in what my fellow co-workers referred to as the mosh pit on the second floor. It consisted of ten desks surrounded by glass offices of the paper's lower level division heads.

The doors to my left opened and I stepped inside with several other

people. Someone pressed the number four button while I stood at the back trying to gain control of my sinking stomach. The doors opened twice more letting people on and off. I took a firmer grip on my bag because of my sweaty palms as the elevator pinged the fourth floor.

This was it. I lifted my chin. I had to face this head on or head up, which was completely opposite of my normal demeanor.

Following the long hallway to the back, I opened the door to Mr. Miller's outer office. I'd been here once before when I first started as an intern and received my obligatory tour of the building. "Ms. Avesque?" the middle-aged secretary asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes." She had pretty eyes and I knew I'd have missed them if I wasn't forcing my head to this unnatural angle called confidence.

"I'm to show you into Miller's office immediately."

I followed her wedged heels and black, knee-length skirt the short distance to the doom room. What would happen if I fainted or vomited up my latte on the threshold of his office?

Mr. Miller, in his sixties with a bald head and prominent belly paunch, rose from his chair, came around his desk, and shook my hand. "Please have a seat, Cami; we have a few things to go over and I have a full schedule today." He pulled out one of two chairs in front of his desk before walking back around and taking his. I nervously forced myself to keep my eyes even with his.

Without preamble, he began speaking. "I've heard good things about you. It's wonderful when an intern stays around and becomes a valuable asset to the *Journal*. I've read some of your column ideas and a few have promise."

Good things. Strange. Was it good to be anti-social, come to work on time, and do your job without fuss or complaint? If so, I'm sure I received a rave review. And... my suggestions for the newspaper. Everyone working at the paper had the opportunity to send emails with ideas for future stories, columns, or just basic helpful hints that would improve the paper. Mr. Shirley wanted employees to have a part of the *Journal's* success.

All I could take from his first comments was that he wasn't firing me. "Thank you, Mr. Miller," I said as I tried to control my trembling fingers by clenching my hands together.

"Please call me Miller like everyone else. I'd like you to tell me about your goals regarding the *Journal*."

Goals. Crap, my stomach flip-flopped again. I fought the need to cross my arms knowing it was a defensive move. *Eyes on his, eyes on his*, I repeated silently to myself. Here goes nothing. "I'm interested in investigative journalism, being out on the street, and getting my hands dirty." Pretending I was a normal person, forcing myself to deal with the world head on, making friends my age—the list went on and on, but I couldn't share those thoughts.

"Perfect, and I like how you worded that. We've had a situation and Ted mentioned your name in last night's meeting."

Ted had one of the small offices on the second floor and wrote a weekly column about consumer alerts and recalls. I'd stayed late without pay several times, Googling information and copy editing his column when he was behind schedule. He'd accepted two pieces I wrote—one highlighting safety issues with baby products and the other showing the lack of oversight in the car industry when it came to recalls. He gave me credit in his column for each piece and praised my work. Also, Ted didn't insist I look at him.

Miller continued. "You may have heard that Skylar Locke, one of our sports reporters, is expecting her first child. Her doctor placed her on bed rest during the next six months of pregnancy due to complications. What you might not know is that she was supposed to start a series of articles about a NRFL team..." At my blank look, he slowly defined the acronym, "National Rugby Football League."

He thought my shock was caused by his use of an unknown acronym, but what he didn't know was that my mind froze on the word sports. I hated anything to do with athletes. I did not have a good history with muscle-bound brainless hardons. Even in the privacy of my small apartment, I avoided

watching any sport men played with balls. A hard body flipped a switch in me and the wild side that I buried came out to play. Since high school, my wild side spelled disaster.

“Is there a problem, Cami?” Miller was looking at me with concern.

I think I’d missed half of what he’d said. Had my face gone green? “No, Mr. umm, Miller, I’m sorry, I just...”

He cut me off. “Two brothers own and manage the team. Their father, I believe another partial owner, lives here in Cleveland and he’s a large contributor to local charities. He made a personal request to Bob Shirley during a round of golf to garner publicity. Skylar planned to spend up to four weeks following the team during their playoffs and possible championship while interviewing management and players. We expected weekly articles as the team progressed. Now, we’re re-assigning the story to you. Your plane leaves tomorrow morning.”

His beaming smile didn’t help my sudden urge to run screaming from the room. In his eyes this was the dream of a lifetime. To me it was a very short stay of execution. “Tomorrow?”

“I know it’s short notice, but an investigative journalist needs to be ready at a moment’s notice, don’t you agree?”

The total lie slipped from my lips. “Yes, you’re right. Um thank you,” I said with a forced smile.

“My secretary has an envelope with your tickets, itinerary, and a company credit card. I recommend you use the rest of the day to research rugby and make yourself familiar with the team. I’ve cleared it on the second floor if you prefer to do it from home. I’m sure you need to pack and handle any last-minute arrangements. Do you have any questions?” He began shuffling through folders on his desk; the meeting obviously over.

“Where am I going?” I asked trying to hide my dread.

“Colt, it’s a few hours from here.”

Chapter Two

My anxiety increased the entire walk to my car. I didn't trust my stomach enough to check in with Ted. I shut my car door and stared at the gray wall in front of me. What the hell was I going to do? I was so nervous and maybe I wasn't ready for the big break I dreamed of. Meeting Miller's eyes and those of his secretary was physically painful. Without thinking, I reached for my latte and downed a healthy dose of cold coffee. Yuck! Why me? There was no way anyone could look at me and see a sports reporter. Hell, any kind of reporter, but assuredly not sports.

I pulled the large envelope from my bag and turned on the overhead light. After opening the clasp, several sheets of paper with my schedule, boarding pass, and a credit card slipped out. I checked the itinerary first. My plane left at eight forty-five the following morning. The name of my hotel was listed next, followed by a seven a.m. appointment the following day with Van Stelson, one of the team's owner/managers. My daily schedule or I should say the team's schedule, followed. Glancing farther down the list, I noticed I would be riding the team bus the second Saturday after my arrival. Absolutely no escaping them. My forehead hit the steering wheel several times. I had trouble considering this entire fiasco the big break I'd prayed for. Mixing my libido with jocks was a recipe for disaster. I was completely screwed.

In a daze, I drove to my apartment. I sat outside in my parking spot for a few minutes wondering how I got there. After entering my small one-bedroom, three-hundred-square foot home, I opened my laptop, which sat on the corner desk in the living area that doubled as my home office. I grabbed a yogurt from the fridge to help soothe my digestion before sitting down and staring at a dark computer screen. I inched my glasses up, pressed the "on" button, and stared at the colorful desktop icons in front of me. After taking several slow bites of yogurt, my computer screen saver popped up. I

absorbed the familiar words scrolling across the monitor.

*News is what someone wants suppressed. Everything else is advertising. ~
Katharine Graham*

Advertising. That's what I worked on every day. It was safe and kept me in a perfect, closed box. Yes, I had dreams. I knew that one day I would lift my head and be ready to tackle the world again. Nowhere in those dreams was there room for a jock, or multiple jocks. To me, sports were a lower rung on my dream ladder than classifieds. Professional athletes were a waste of good air and they were the reason I lived the way I did. No, scratch that. I was the reason. I was a self-diagnosed male muscle nymphomaniac. The scientific world should study me and write books about my affliction.

I started laughing and it felt good. I should have majored in drama because the woe-is-me mental breakdown I was bringing on myself was entirely over the top. If my best friend, Tyson... okay, only friend, were here, he would stuff me in the trunk of my car and throw away the key. I really should research nymphomania and see if you could even have the disorder after more than two years of celibacy.

I took a deep breath. Now that I had myself past the onset of a melodramatic panic attack, I realized I was stuck writing a series of articles on athletes while children around the world starved. This was supposed to be a make-it-or-break-it moment for my career. Could I bring a positive light to something entirely useless in humanity's struggles? I didn't know. If athletes switched pay with teachers and police officers, our world would be a better place.

I didn't think I could fake my mental dislike of jocks or my body's lust for them. I could see myself salivating at their muscles with a sneer on my face. I'd sat brooding for so long, my screensaver popped up. I hit the "enter" key and clicked on Google. Two hours later, I was more confused than ever. The terminology alone had my head aching—scrum, maul, ruck—where did they come up with this shit? My frustration had me Googling Van Stelson because

nowhere on my documentation was his brother's name mentioned.

"Great," I muttered aloud when Van's face flashed on the screen.

Gorgeous and a playboy. His father, a retired movie mogul, helped buy the team for his sons and supported their wild bad boy escapades. At least Van's. The other brother, Joel Stelson, stayed out of the limelight, but I couldn't imagine him being any better than his brother. The most surprising thing I discovered was that both sons were key players for the team. The Slam, the team's name wasn't a surprise; it was exactly what I suspected—violence, dirt, and sweat. A dumb jock's wet dream.

Several pictures of Van showed his great body, blue puppy dog eyes, and cocky grin. God, he even had a square jaw and dimples. Ugh, how stereotypical can you get? Oh, shocker... Van was named as a leading magazine's most eligible bachelor. Vomit rose in my throat. I ate a spoonful of warm yogurt to hold it back.

If I didn't have bad luck, I'd have no luck at all. It was the most apt cliché I could think of. All at once I was terribly homesick. Taking out my older model cell phone, the monthly bill paid by my parents, I called my mom.

She answered on the second ring. "Hi, dear, we're headed out for a board of supervisors' meeting. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah great, I just wanted to hear your voice. I got my first break at the *Journal* and I'm flying to a small town here in state tomorrow morning."

"Frank, Frank, she got her first break," my mom yelled, making me move the phone from my ear and smile.

"Congratulations, baby," my dad said after picking up the extension.

"Thanks, Dad. You too, Mom. I love you both. Drive carefully and I'll call once I'm settled. I might be there for several weeks. Love you."

"We love you too, baby. Make us proud."

"Frank, you know we're already proud."

"She knows that, Patty, it's an expression."

"Drive safely, love you." I clicked off my phone smiling at their

bickering. There weren't two people alive who loved each other more. Someday, I'd find someone who would love me like that. I would never settle for less.

My dad retired from the Forestry Service and my mom from the school district after thirty years as the principal's secretary. I spent my entire childhood in Downieville, Ohio, a very small town in the southern part of the state. The population remained just under three hundred. I received a full-ride academic scholarship to Ohio State and only went back to Downieville for holidays. I took part-time jobs to help with my expenses not covered by the scholarship and made a life away from my parents. I loved them and missed them, but, as an only child, they smothered me with worry. By living away from them, I could hide my idiosyncrasies and lessen their concern.

When I was a child, I didn't attend the local schools where we lived. My mom worked out of town at a large county school. She took me with her each day because she felt the county school district had more to offer an extremely bright, precocious child. Our modest home in Downieville was located on a barely drivable winding dirt road five miles off the main road. This left me with no friends in my area and little to do but read and watch TV for entertainment. I became increasingly addicted to news programs as I grew older, though romance novels remained my favorite light reading.

At school, I was horribly shy, gangly, and kept my face buried in a book whenever possible. I had a few girlfriends that were on the Academic Decathlon Team with me. We won state all four of my high school years.

I went to a few football and basketball games and dreamed about the popular guys who never looked twice at me. I was a late bloomer, and it wasn't until the summer before my junior year that my breasts decided to explode into a solid D cup. For the first time in my life, I had the attention of the school's elite jock club. While I walked through school the year before with my head down, now I watched as the boys took notice of my chest. I knew I was pretty. Not gorgeous or stunning, but pretty. My long blondish-

brown hair was thick and naturally wavy. My facial features nice, with a small nose and large eyes. With a newfound sense of power, I traded my glasses for contacts, changed my loose-fitting wardrobe for tighter, skimpier clothing, and the biggest difference—I lifted my head. I don't think my poor parents knew what hit them.

The schoolboys took notice, and before I knew it I was on my first date. He had grabby hands and sloppy kisses, but I still had a good time. I hooked up with another ball player the following week. Keeping them from going up my shirt wasn't easy. I let them touch my breasts over my clothes, but that was it. This went on until the football team's captain took me out. Conner acted different. He did nothing more than give me a kiss on the cheek after our date. For the first time, I wanted to go out with the same guy again. Conner took his time, and a few weeks later, my shirt and bra were completely off. He became the love of my teenage romantic life. He was the one—his hand in my back pocket when we walked through campus, hot kisses, and eventually backseat sex. We talked about attending the same college and getting married after we earned our diplomas. Even our names were the perfect match... Conner and Cami.

He played three sports and I attended every game. No, I wasn't cheerleader material because my coordination wasn't the best. I still enjoyed learning the cheers while I drooled over Conner's body on the field or court. Yes, he was still a growing teenager, but he lifted weights and had bulges in all the right places. I would lay with my head in his lap, running my fingers over his abs. They turned me on like nothing else. His biceps came in a close second. All he had to do was flex and I was a wet panty goner. I was the luckiest girl alive.

At least until the end of my junior year.

Leaving school late one evening after an ACADEC meeting, I noticed Conner's truck parked in a dark area next to the gym and I walked over. His practice had ended an hour earlier and I figured he was waiting for me. What

I discovered was my future fiancé in the cab of his lifted truck having sex with the head varsity cheerleader. I was devastated and began yelling at him, calling him every name in the book. This activated a side of Conner I'd never seen. I'll never forget what he said.

“You're the locker room joke,” he sneered. “Half the team has slept with you because of your big tits. Now I've had you too. Written on the locker room wall is ‘For big tits and a quick fuck, call Cami,’ and under it are all the names of the guys who took you up on your offer. You'll find my name at the bottom of the list and I'm sure next week another guy will add his.”

Through my tears, I realized Conner hadn't even known I was a virgin. I ran to my car crying, vowing to never return to school.

There was no way I could tell my mother the truth and she refused to allow me to stay home with the weak excuses I gave her. At school the following day, I asked one of the guys I previously went out with if it was true. He blushed and nodded his head, unable to look at me and answer.

The hardest thing I ever did was finish my junior year there. I switched back to baggy clothes and covered my eyes with glasses again. No one spoke to me. I had allowed my ACADEC friends to fade away during my stint with popularity and they weren't forgiving. I heard the whispers in the halls from boys and girls. The words “slut” and “whore” were the most common. I kept my head down and tried fading into the background.

That summer, my constant begging finally paid off and my parents switched me to the much smaller Downieville High School for my senior year. The girls at my new school wore cute spaghetti strap shirts with their colorful bra straps showing and the shortest shorts and skirts they could get away with. I hid large white bras with concealing clothes, talked as little as possible, and buried myself behind books again. Sadly, the rumors followed me to my new school. I refused all requests for dates, didn't go to my high school prom, and kept to myself. If there were a yearbook caption for most boring student that would be me.

I dreamed every night about breast reduction surgery. Eighteen was the magic age, but the cost was prohibitive unless a doctor felt my breasts caused back problems. At seventeen and eighteen I wasn't that lucky. I began wearing sports bras in a size too small. They were cheap and mashed my boobs down tight.

I swore off muscled jocks forever.

In college, and for the first time in almost two years, I made a few friends. Courtney, my roommate, was the best friend I'd ever had and she pulled me into her inner circle. I actually confided to her about what happened in high school. Like most women our age, we talked about guys. I told her I had a thing for man muscle and we scoured the Internet for hot-bodied jocks. Even with Courtney's constant harping about my clothes and lack of eye contact with those around me, I remained shy. She began dragging me to assorted ball games and had me lusting after the exact guys I knew were the worst.

I managed to keep myself hidden from college men until Maddux. He was a soccer player, and somehow, he saw straight through my rumpled appearance and quirky glasses. I held out against dating him for a month. His persuasive tactics included lots of flexing muscle that drew out my wild muscle-crazy side. The man excelled at making shirtless look like a fashion trend. A few weeks later, I was flat on my back in his bed. I enjoyed the sex more than I had with Conner, but still, something was missing. That sizzling something other girls talked about when it came to sex. I didn't get it. Sex was fun, but not earth shattering.

Maddux loved my boobs and paid them constant attention when we were in bed. Outside of the bedroom, he was glad I kept them hidden because he didn't want his friends taking an interest in my chest. His obsession with keeping me modestly dressed was a clue. I was in love and completely blind to the warning signs that Maddux wasn't who I thought he was.

A year after our relationship began, I found Maddux in bed with Courtney. Maddux's jealousy and keeping my body hidden came from his own

infidelity. I dumped him without the war of words I suffered from Conner, but the damage was done. There would be no more wild Cami. I locked her away forever.

The following day, I found another semi-part-time job. This allowed me to move into a quad apartment where I had my own small room. I avoided my former best friend and was no longer in her circle of friends. Eventually, I became good friends with one of my quad-mates, Tyson. He was as far from jock material as a heterosexual male could get. Tall and skinny to the point of emaciation, just by looking at him you knew he was a total geek. We attempted a very short friends-with-benefits relationship before deciding the benefits didn't work for us. He was the second person I confided everything to. Maybe it was because I knew he would never sleep with my boyfriends if I ever changed my mind about hooking up. I told him every painful detail, even about my fascination with man muscle.

Tyson had seen me naked and knew what I did to hide my breasts. Other than trying to convince me I was beautiful, he left me and my constrictive bras and baggy clothes alone. He managed to bug me enough that I lifted my head and made eye contact with people. We remained best friends even after his move to the East Coast post-graduation. When he left, it was easier to return to my shyer self, and my old habit of avoiding people took over. I rubbed my eyes, tearing myself from the painful memories of my past. I began packing my suitcase. When finished, I dipped some celery into peanut butter for dinner. After straightening my apartment, I crawled into bed, needing sleep. As tired as I was, I had trouble shutting down my brain. It pissed me off that my last thought before I fell asleep was Van Stelson's ripped chest.