

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M e G

C a B O T

SIZE 14 IS NOT  
FAT EITHER



LITTLE  
BLACK  
BOOK  
SEE INSIDE

## Chapter Four

Barista Boy

Sex in a cup

Can't you ask me out

Instead of "Wassup?"

"Barista Boy" - Written by Heather Wells

In the end, I don't need any help. I recognize my student the minute I lay eyes on him, stretched out on a gurney beneath a white sheet.

"Gavin!"

He groans and buries his face in his pillow.

"Gavin." I stand beside the gurney, glaring down at him. I should have known. Gavin McGoren, junior, filmmaking student, and the biggest pain in the butt resident in Fischer Hall: who else would keep my boss up all night in the ER?

"I know you're not asleep, Gavin," I say, severely.

"Open your eyes."

Gavin's lids fly open. "Jesus Christ, woman!" he cries. "Can't you see I'm sick?" He points at the IV sticking out of his arm.

“Oh, please,” I say, disgustedly. “You’re not sick. You’re just stupid. Twenty-one shots, Gavin?”

“Whatever,” he mutters, folding his IV-free arm over his eyes, to block out the light from the fluorescents overhead. “I had my boys with me. I knew I’d be all right.”

“Your boys,” I say, disparagingly. “Oh, yeah, your boys took great care of you.”

“Hey.” Gavin winces as if the sound of his own voice hurts. It probably does. “They brought me here, didn’t they?”

“Dumped you here,” I correct him. “And left. I don’t see any of them around anymore, do you?”

“They had to go to class,” Gavin says, blearily.

“Anyway, how would you know? You weren’t here. It was that other tool from the hall office-where’d he go?”

“If you mean Tom, the hall director,” I say, “he had to go deal with another emergency. You’re not our only resident, you know, Gavin.”

“What are you riding on me for?” Gavin wants to know. “It’s my birthday.”

“What a way to celebrate,” I say.

“Whatevs. Not for nothing, but I was filming it for a class project.”

“You’re always filming yourself doing something stupid for a class project,” I say.

“Remember the re-enactment you did of the scene from Hannibal? The one with the cow brain?”

He lifts his arm to glare at me. “How was I supposed to know I’m allergic to fava beans?”

“It might surprise you to know, Gavin,” I say, as my cell phone vibrates in my coat pocket, “that Tom and I actually have better things to do than hold your hand every time you pull some stunt that ends up with you in the emergency room.”

“Like what?” Gavin asks, with a snort. “Let those ass-kissing RAs suck up to you some more?”

It is very hard for me not to tell Gavin about Lindsay. How can he lie there, feeling so sorry for himself-especially after having done something so incredibly stupid to get himself into this position in the first place-when back in the building, a girl is dead, and we can’t even find her body?

“Look, can you just find out when I can get out of here?” Gavin asks, with a moan. “And spare me the lectures, for once?”

“I can,” I say, only too happy to leave him to himself. Among other things, he doesn’t smell too good. “Do you want me to call your parents?”

“God, no,” he groans. “Why would I want you to do that?”

“Maybe to let them know how you celebrated your birthday? I’m sure they’ll be very proud....”

Gavin pulls the pillow over his head. I smile and go over to one of the nurses to discuss the possibility of his being released. She tells me she’ll see what the doctor says. I thank her and go back out into the waiting room, pulling out my cell phone to see who called me....

...and am thrilled to see the words Cartwright, Cooper on my cell phone’s screen.

I’m even more thrilled when, a second later, a voice says, “Heather.”

And I look up and find myself staring into the eyes of the man himself.

Oh, whatever. So I'm in love with him, and he has shown absolutely zero interest in reciprocating my feelings. So what? A girl can dream, right?

And at least I'm dreaming about someone age appropriate, since Cooper's over thirty—a decade older than Barista Boy.

And it's not like Cooper's earning minimum wage in some coffee shop. He owns his own business.

And, okay, he won't actually TELL me what it is he does all day, because he seems to think it's not fitting for someone of my tender sensibilities to know....

But that just means he cares, right?

Except that I know he cares. Why else would he have asked me to move in with him (well, into the top floor apartment of his brownstone, anyway) after Jordan kicked me out (even though Jordan maintains he did no such thing, that I'm the one who left. But, I'm sorry, he was the one who let Tania Trace fall face first into his crotch—in our own apartment, no less. Who wouldn't interpret something like that as an invitation to leave)?

But Cooper's made it VASTLY clear that he only cares about me as a friend. Well, insofar that he has never hit on me, anyway.

And, okay, Cooper did sort of mention once—when I was in a state of severe shock from having been nearly murdered, and was only semi-conscious—that he thinks I'm a nice girl.

But am I really supposed to think of that as a good thing? I mean, nice? Guys never go for nice girls. They go for girls like Tania Trace, who, in the video for her last single, "Bitch Slap," was rolling around in an oil slick wearing nothing but leather panties and a wife-beater.

They don't MAKE leather panties in my size. I'm pretty sure.

Still, there's always a chance Cooper isn't the leather panties type. I mean, he's already proved he's nothing like the rest of the family by being so nice to me. Maybe there's hope. Maybe that's why he's here at the hospital right now, to tell me that he can't stand to be without me a second more, and that his car is waiting outside to whisk us to

the airport for a Vegas wedding and a Hawaiian honeymoon-

“Hey,” Cooper says, holding up a paper bag. “I figured you hadn’t eaten. I brought you a sandwich from Joe’s.”

Oh. Well, okay. It’s not a Vegas wedding and a Hawaiian honeymoon.

But it’s a sandwich from Joe’s Dairy, my favorite cheese shop! And if you’ve ever tried Joe’s smoked mozzarella, you know it’s just as good as a Hawaiian honeymoon. Possibly better.

“How’d you know I was here?” I ask, dazedly, taking the bag.

“Sarah told me,” Cooper says. “I called your office when I heard what happened. It was on the police scanner.”

“Oh.” Of course. Cooper listens to a police scanner while he’s on stakeouts. That, or jazz. He’s a nut for Ella Fitzgerald. If Ella wasn’t dead, I’d be jealous.

“Aren’t your clients going to wonder where you are?” I ask. I can’t believe he’s blowing off a case for me.

“It’s okay,” Cooper says with a shrug. “My client’s husband is occupied for the moment.” I don’t even bother asking what he means, since I know he won’t tell me. “I was going for lunch, anyway, and I figured you hadn’t eaten,” he says.

My stomach rumbles hungrily at the word lunch.

“I’m famished,” I confess. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“So.” Cooper leads me to an empty set of orange plastic seats in the waiting room. “What’s the kid in for?”

I glance at the emergency room doors. “Who, Gavin? Chronic stupidity.”

“Gavin again, huh?” Cooper produces two Yoo-Hoos from his parka pockets and hands me one.

My heart lurches. YOO-HOOS! God, I love this man. Who wouldn’t? “If that kid lives to graduation, I’ll be surprised. So. How you hanging in there? I mean, with the dead girl.”

I’ve sunk my teeth into the crunchy baguette—filled with freshly made smoked mozzarella, garlicky roasted peppers, and sun-dried tomatoes. It is impossible to speak after that, of course, because

the inside of my mouth is having an orgasm.

“I actually put in a call,” Cooper goes on, seeing that my mouth is full (though ignorant, hopefully, of all the fireworks going on inside of it), “to a friend at the coroner’s office. They got over there pretty quickly, you know, on account of business being slow, thanks to this storm we’re supposed to get. Anyway, they’re pretty sure she was dead well before she was...well, you know.”

Decapitated. I nod, still chewing.

“I just thought you’d want to know,” Cooper goes on. He’s unwrapping a sandwich of his own. Proscuitto, I think. “I mean, that she didn’t...suffer. They’re pretty sure she was strangled.”

I swallow. “How can they tell?” I ask.

“Considering...well, there’s no neck?”

Cooper had just taken a bite of his own sandwich as I ask this. He chokes a little, but manages to get it down.

“Discoloration,” he says, between coughs. “Around the eyes. It means she quit breathing before death occurred, due to strangulation. They call it vagal

inhibition.”

“Oh,” I say. “Sorry.” I mean about making him choke.

He swills some Yoo-Hoo. As he does, I have a chance to observe him without his noticing. He hasn't shaved this morning...not that it matters. He's still one of the hottest-looking guys I've ever seen. His five o'clock-more like noon-shadow just makes the angular planes of his face more defined, bringing into even more definition his lean jaw and high cheekbones. Some people-like his father, Grant Cartwright—might think Cooper needs a haircut.

But I like a guy with hair you can run your fingers through.

You know, if he'd let you.

Still, though to me that slightly overlong dark hair gives him the appearance of a friendly sheepdog, Cooper must strike an imposing figure to others. This becomes obvious when a homeless guy carrying a bottle in a paper bag, coming into the hospital to get out of the cold for a little while,

spies an empty chair next to me, and wanders towards it....

...only to change his mind when he gets a look at Cooper's wide shoulders-made even more intimidating looking by the puffiness of his anorak-and massive Timberlands.

Cooper doesn't even notice.

"They think she'd been there awhile," he says, having successfully forced down whatever it was he'd been choking on. "On the, er, stove. Since before dawn, at least."

"God," I say.

But though back in the dorm-I mean, residence hall-I couldn't think about what had happened to Lindsay without feeling a wave of nausea, I have no trouble finishing my sandwich. Maybe it's because I really was starving.

Or maybe it's because of Cooper's soothing presence. Love does funny things to you, I guess. Speaking of love....

My cell phone chirps, and when I take it out of my pocket, I see that Jordan is calling me. Again. I

hastily shove the phone back into the recesses of my coat.

Not quickly enough, though.

“He must really need to talk to you about something,” Cooper says, mildly. “He left a message at home, too.”

“I know,” I say, sheepishly. “I heard it.”

“I see.” Cooper looks amused about something... at least if the way the corners of his mouth curl up beneath the quarter inch of dark fuzz growing around them. “And you aren’t calling him back because....?”

“Whatever,” I say, annoyed. But not with Cooper. I’m annoyed with his brother, who refuses to realize that a breakup is just that: a breakup. You don’t keep on calling your ex, especially when you’re engaged to someone else, after you’ve broken up. I mean, it’s common courtesy.

I guess it doesn’t help that I keep sleeping with him. Jordan, I mean.

But seriously, it was just that one time on Cooper’s hallway runner, and in a moment of total weakness.

It's not like it's ever going to happen again.

I don't think.

I guess you could also say I'm a little annoyed with myself.

“So did you know her?” Cooper asks, artfully changing the subject, I guess because he can tell it's not one I'm relishing.

“Who? The dead girl?” I take a slug of Yoo-Hoo. “Yeah. Everyone did. She was popular. A cheerleader.”

Cooper looks shocked. “They have cheerleaders in college?”

“Sure,” I say. “New York College's team made it to the finals last year.”

“The finals of what?”

“I don't know,” I admit. “But they're proud of it. Lindsay—that's the dead girl—was especially proud of it. She was studying to be an accountant. But she had tons of school spirit. She—” I break off. Even Yoo-Hoo doesn't help this time. “Cooper. Who would do something like that to someone? And why?”

“Well, what do you know about this girl?” he asks.

“I mean, besides that she was a cheerleader studying to be an accountant?”

I think about it. “She was dating one of the basketball players,” I say, after a while. “In fact, I think he might be a suspect. Detective Canavan seems to think so, anyway. But he didn’t do it. I know he didn’t. Mark’s a nice kid. He’d never kill anyone. And certainly not his girlfriend. And not that way.”

“It’s the way that strikes me as....” Cooper shrugs beneath his anorak. “Well, the word overkill comes to mind. It’s almost as if the killer left her that way as a warning.”

“A warning to who?” I ask. “Jimmy the line cook?”

“Well, if we knew that,” Cooper says, “we’d have a good idea who did it, wouldn’t we? And why.

Canavan’s right to start with the boyfriend. He any good? As a ball player, I mean?”

I look at him blankly. “Coop. We’re Division Three. How good can he be?”

“But the Pansies have been playing a lot better since

they got that new coach, this Andrews guy,” Cooper says, with a slight smile...I guess at my sports ignorance. “They’ve even started broadcasting the games. Locally only, I know. But still. I take it tomorrow night’s game will be canceled, in light of all this?”

I snort. “Are you kidding? We’re playing the New Jersey East Devils at home. Don’t you know we’re eight and oh?”

Cooper’s smile broadens, but his voice is tinged with frost. “The head of one of the cheerleaders was found in her dorm cafeteria, but they aren’t canceling tomorrow night’s ball game?”

“Residence hall,” I correct him.

“Heather Wells?” A doctor has come out of the ER, holding a clipboard.

“Excuse me,” I say to Cooper, and hurry over to the ER doc, who informs me that Gavin is recovering nicely and that she’s releasing him. He’ll be out as soon as he’s signed the appropriate forms. I thank the doctor and return to Cooper’s side, only to find he’s already on his feet, gathering the debris

from our picnic and stuffing it into a nearby trash can.

“Gavin’s ready to go,” I say to him.

“So I gathered.” Cooper pulls his gloves back on, readying himself for the plunge back into the arctic weather. “You guys need a lift back?”

“I doubt Gavin’s up to walking,” I say. “But we’ll grab a cab. I’m not running the risk of him barfing in your car.”

“For which I thank you,” Cooper says, gravely.

“Well, see you at home, then. And, Heather...about Lindsay—”

“Don’t worry,” I interrupt. “In no way am I going to interfere with the investigation into her death. I totally learned my lesson last time. The NYPD is on their own with this one.”

Cooper looks serious. “That wasn’t what I was going to say,” he informs me. “It never occurred to me that you would even consider getting involved in what happened at Fischer Hall today. Especially not after what happened last time.”

It’s ridiculous. And yet, I feel stung.

“You mean last time, when I figured out who the killer was before anybody else did?” I demand.

“Before anyone else even realized those girls were being killed, and not dying of their own recklessness?”

“Whoa,” Cooper says. “Slow down, slugger. I just meant—”

“Because you do realize that whoever did this to Lindsay had to have access to the keys to the caf, right?” I don’t care that the homeless guy with the bottle-in-the-bag is now giving ME the wary eye he’d given Cooper just minutes before. What I lack in shoulder breadth, I make up for with hip girth. Oh, and pure shrillness.

“Because there was no sign of forced entry,” I go on. “Whoever put Lindsay’s head in there had to have had access to a master key. We’re talking about three or four individual locks. No one could’ve picked three or four different locks, not in one night, not without somebody noticing. So it had to be somebody who works for the school. Somebody with access to the keys. Somebody I KNOW.”

“Okay,” Cooper says, in a soothing voice... probably the same voice he uses on his clients, hysterical wives who are convinced their husbands are cheating on them, and need to hire him to prove it in order to get custody of the Hamptons beach house. “Calm down. Detective Canavan is on it, right?”

“Right,” I say. I don’t add that my faith in Detective Canavan’s investigative skills is not high. I mean, I did almost die once because of them.

“So don’t worry about it,” Cooper says. He’s laid a hand on my shoulder. Too bad I’m wearing so much-coat, sweater, turtleneck, undershirt, bra-I can barely even feel it. “Whoever it was, Canavan’ll catch him. This isn’t like last time, Heather. Last time, no one but you was even sure there’d been a crime. This time...well, it’s pretty obvious. The police will take care of it, Heather.” I feel his fingers tighten on my shoulder. His gaze is intent on mine. I feel like I could dive into those blue eyes of his and just start swimming, and go on and on and never reach the horizon.

“Yo, Wells.”

Trust Gavin McGoren to pick that moment to come limping out of the ER.

“This guy bothering you, Wells?” Gavin wants to know, thrusting his wispily goateed chin in Cooper’s direction.

I restrain myself-barely-from hitting him. College staff is forbidden from striking students, no matter how sorely tempted we might be. Interestingly, we aren’t allowed to kiss them, either. Not that I’ve ever wanted to, at least where Gavin is concerned.

“No, he isn’t bothering me,” I say. “This is my friend, Cooper. Cooper, this is Gavin.”

“Hey,” Cooper says, holding out his right hand. But Gavin just ignores the hand.

“This guy your boyfriend?” he demands of me, rudely.

“Gavin,” I say, mortified. I can’t look anywhere in the vicinity of Cooper’s face. “No. You know perfectly well he’s not my boyfriend.”

Gavin seems to relax a little. “Oh, that’s right,” he said. “You like those pretty boy types. Jordan

Cartwright. Mr. Easy Street.”

Cooper has dropped his hand. He is staring at Gavin with an expression of mingled amusement and derision. “Well, Heather,” he says. “Delightful as it’s been meeting one of your infant charges, I think I’ll be going now.”

“Hey!” Gavin looks insulted. “Who you calling an infant?”

Cooper barely acknowledges Gavin’s presence, saying only, “I’ll see you at home,” to me, with a wink, then turning to leave.

“See you at home?” Gavin is staring daggers at Cooper’s departing back. “You guys live together? I thought you said he wasn’t your boyfriend!”

“He’s my landlord,” I say. “And he’s right. You are an infant. Ready to go? Or do you want to stop by the liquor store on the way back to the hall so you can buy a bottle of Jaegermeister and finish off the job?”

“Woman,” Gavin says, shaking his head. “Why you gots to be that way? Always up in my business?”

“Gavin.” I’m rolling my eyes. “Seriously. I’ll call

your parents....”

He drops the gangbanger act at once.

“Don’t,” he says, the goatee drooping. “My mom’ll kill me.”

I sigh and take his arm. “Come on, then. Let’s get you home, before it starts snowing. Did you get a note from the doctor, to excuse you from class?”

He scowls. “They won’t give notes for alcohol poisoning.”

“Poor baby,” I say, cheerfully. “Maybe this will teach you a lesson.”

“Woman,” Gavin explodes again. “I don’t need you to tell me how to act!”

And we walk out into the cold together, bickering like a brother and sister. At least, I think that’s how we sound.

Little do I know Gavin thinks something entirely different.