



Redeem

MY HEART

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

redeem my heart

saddle creek, tx: the whitmores

book three

Kat Baxter



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redeem my heart



A WOUNDED HERO/CURVY **Girl Romance**

Dane

When I left the military and came home to Saddle Creek, I was looking for peace and solitude, not love. I have too many scars, inside and out, to hope for that kind of thing. But a random encounter brings me face-to-face with Shelby Coleman, and I find myself in a fake relationship. She's short and sweet with curves for days, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I've never wanted a woman more. I don't have much of a heart left but Shelby makes me wish I had more to give.

Shelby

I've crushed on Dane Whitmore from afar since I was a teenager. With his worn in jeans and scuffed cowboy boots, he's a walking thirst trap. Being his pretend girlfriend requires public displays of affection. Every kiss and touch light my body up. But I have to remind myself its just for pretend.

Redeem My Heart

Kat Baxter

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Edited by: Emily Beierle-McKaskle

Copyeditor: [BookReadingJenn](#)

Book cover: [Cormar Covers](#)

With regard to digital publication, be advised that any alteration of font size or spacing by the reader could change the author's original format.

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chapter

one



SHELBY

“Kidnapping is a felony, you know,” I say, keeping my tone light even though I’m only half joking.

“Bah,” Lily says. “It doesn’t count if I’m your boss.”

I laugh. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“It doesn’t count if your boss is taking you to a party. That is definitely not kidnapping,” Lily chirps.

“So what is this party?” I ask.

I suppose, technically, it’s not kidnapping if your boss lures you into her truck with the promise of post-work drinks and snacks, and just happens to not mention that these drinks and snacks will mean talking to other people. Maybe this is on me. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so eager, but it was a long day. I’m a vet tech for Lily’s large animal mobile veterinary business. By definition, ‘long days’ involve animal poop. And piss. And sometimes other animal liquids I like to think about even less.

Have I earned a post-work drink, compliments of my boss?

Yes. Yes, I have.

Do I want to meet strangers when there’s even the slightest chance I still have cow jizz on my shoes?

No. No, I do not.

Lily and I live in, and both grew up in, the small town of Saddle Creek. So it’s not like there are that many people I don’t know or at least know of. But she’s a few years older

than I am, so most of her friends were far enough ahead of me in school that I don't know them well.

Lily maneuvers her truck onto a county road. "It's just a little get together where the women will watch a movie and the men are playing poker."

I stare at my boss. "So it's like a couples gathering? I'm not part of a couple."

She waves one hand dismissively. "No, it's not about that. Besides Forest is out of town so my person won't even be there. We'll stick together."

"But you have a person. I don't even have a pet." As much as I love animals, my work hours would keep me away from the house too long. Even the pothos ivy I bought a year ago died of neglect. I stare out the window and watch the scrubby cedar trees and prickly pear cacti pass by. "Maybe I should get a cactus."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Just talking out loud. Where even is this party?" I finally ask because I realize we're heading out of Saddle Creek.

"It's at one of the Whitmores' house," Lily says.

My heart thunders in my chest. I lick my suddenly dry lips.

The Whitmores are a ranching family from the area with a bunch of siblings and cousins and roots deep in Saddle Creek. I went to school with Daphne, and we were friends when we were little. But then sorta drifted apart as we grew up. But she's not the Whitmore I'm worried about.

The one I'm worried about is Dane. Stunningly hot, achingly broody Dane. Dane, the object of my life-long secret crush. The guy so far out of my league we aren't even playing the same sport.

"Which Whitmore?" I mean it's very unlikely out of all the Whitmores, he would be the one hosting a party. But stranger things have happened.

"Uh," Lily says. "Grady."

Shit. I'm not sure that's much better. Though for very different reasons. "As in, Grady the one married to the pop sensation, Jess Munoz?"

"That's the one."

"So we're going to a party at Jess Munoz's house?" I look down at my blue jeans and simple graphic t-shirt. The one that has a pirate skull and the words, 'Goonies never say die.' My black low-top Chucks round out my super casual look and my dark blond hair is piled on top of my head the messiest of all messy buns. I glance over at Lily to find she's not dressed much differently.

My boss, the large animal vet in town, is already married though. And she's never seemed to care much about what other people think. I wish I could do that. Instead, I have a constant replay of my mother's voice in my head.

Sugar, girls your size can't wear shorts like that.

You really need to fix yourself up, Sugar. You never know who you're going to see when you go out.

I got you this magazine, Sugar, because there's the newest diet inside.

She means well, I suppose. Or not. Honestly, I don't even know. I haven't spoken to her in years. Not since she left my dad and me and my siblings. She still sends us birthday cards and I get the occasional email about the next diet fad to which I send a quick, 'thanks,' and leave it at that.

(XX - something about her sister)

Our brother Max, despite the fact that he's younger than both of us, is fiercely protective. So he has no fucks to give when it comes to dear old mom.

It doesn't take too much longer before we're turning down the road that leads to the Whitmore land. I think it was originally just one big ranch, but Mr. Whitmore, the patriarch, parceled it off for his kids as they grew up. Now they each have their own spaces. I don't believe Daphne nor Garrett, the two youngest, have started building houses out here, despite the fact that they're both married.

When it comes to ranching families, the Whitmores are up there with Saddle Creek royalty. Only the Crawfords and Blankenship's have more land each.

Lily turns down the gravel drive that leads to Grady's house.

"I cannot believe you're making me do this," I mutter.

"I know, right? What was I thinking, bringing you somewhere they have free snacks, your favorite pop star, and fun to be had? I am the worst."

I roll my eyes and then reluctantly follow her to the door where she doesn't even knock, just opens it and strolls on inside. I can't let her get too far ahead of me though because I really don't want to be alone.

Yes, I grew up in this town. Yes, I was once friends with Daphne, the only girl in the Whitmore tribe. Still, I don't like situations where I might stand out. I'm more of a blend into the background kind of girl.

Which maybe won't be hard once we get past the introductions.

"Lily! I'm so glad you could make it," a voice coos. And then there she is, pop sensation, Jess Munoz in the flesh. It's kinda weird seeing her barefoot and in leggings and a t-shirt. I'm used to her being in sequins. Still, even dressed as casually as she is, she radiates star power. It's not blinding, not like the one time I saw her in concert, but it's there. Jess squeezes Lily's shoulder, a testament that she knows my boss well and that she's not really a hugger.

"I brought a co-worker," Lily says, then shifts her body so I can step up next to her. "Jess, this is Sugar. Sugar, meet Jess."

Sugar. Ugh, how embarrassing.

"You can actually just call me Shelby," I say. "Sugar is just a nickname from when I was kid."

Lily spins to face me. "Do you wish I wouldn't call you Sugar?"

I shrug. “It’s okay. You’ve known me my whole life. But when I meet new people...” I let my words dwindle.

“Then I will call you Shelby,” Jess says, linking our arms together. “So you’re another native Saddle Creek-er?”

“I am. Born and raised.”

“Then you probably know my husband and my in-laws.”

“I do.” I glance around and thankfully don’t see the one Whitmore I simultaneously want to see and hope won’t be here. I turn to Jess. “Can I fangirl all over you for a minute? I know we’re in your house and that’s probably obnoxious, but OMG I really love your music.”

She gives me a genuine smile. “Thank you. Truly.”

We enter into the big open space that houses the kitchen and living room. The house is gorgeous and spacious and has obviously had some renovations done since Jess moved in. I’m about to comment on them, when I see Dane standing leaning against the island that creates a natural separation between the two rooms.

Just like that, all coherent thought vanishes, along with the nerves I had about meeting Jess.

Because it’s him. Dane. Looking as beautiful as I remember him being. Nope, he’s even more attractive.

Thick and big, like his older brother, Grady, Dane Whitmore is barrel-chested with a thick neck and massive thighs. His biceps threaten the t-shirt he’s wearing. He’s obviously got a tattoo sleeve on his right arm, but his left looks bare. There’s a hint of some ink creeping up from his shoulder to the right side of his neck.

And he’s scowling. Which somehow makes him even sexier.

chapter

two



DANE

“Grady,” I call to my older brother. He ambles over, a long neck dangling from two of his fingers.

“What?” he asks.

I nod across the room. “Who is that?” I say about the blonde that I haven’t been able to take my eyes off of since she walked into the room.

He looks at me, kind of up and down and then into my eyes as if he’s trying to see into my soul.

“What?” I ask.

He just smirks and shakes his head a little. “That’s Sugar Coleman.”

Sugar? “Why does that sound familiar?”

“She and Daph were friends growing up. I think she came over for a slumber party or a birthday party or something a couple of times. She’s Luna’s little sister.”

“Luna.” I nod. “Yeah, okay. Makes sense.” But I can’t reconcile any memories in my head of pigtailed girls with the curvaceous bombshell across the room.

Her tits look amazing in her Goonies t shirt. And even if I wasn’t already a huge fan of the movie, I would be now just because of the way that shirt molds to her curves. And that’s not even taking into consideration the way her jeans hug her ass and her thick, thick thighs.

For a brief moment her eyes catch mine and it's like the world around me freezes. She bites down on her lip, then her eyes drop away from me.

"If you keep looking at her like that, you're gonna incinerate her clothes with just your eyeballs," Grady says.

"Fuck you." I take a swig of my own beer. "I'm just looking. You know I don't mess with girls like that."

"Girls like what exactly?"

"Good girls. Sweet and naive. They don't have the necessary skills to deal with someone like me."

Grady snorts. "Because you're so tortured and broody? Give me a break."

I glance over at my brother. "Again, fuck you."

I scan the room and it's comprised of mostly couples. It seems like everyone in my life has paired up. "I'm not a relationship guy. Never have been. That woman screams relationship. Like get-down-on-one-knee-and-promise-me-the-moon kind of romance. I am so not that guy."

Grady chuckles. "Well, it looks like she's a fan of your favorite movie."

I shrug. "Everybody our age likes that movie."

He makes a noise in his throat. "No. Everybody *dad's age* likes that movie. He just saturated our childhood with all of the 80's goodness."

I say nothing.

"All I'm saying is that maybe you should give dating a try. If you remember correctly, I wasn't open to it either. But somebody I know told me to go for it." He gives me a knowing look.

Okay, yeah, when Grady and Jess first met, he was being a whiny-ass pussy about going after what he wanted. Maybe I gave him a nudge. But this situation is different.

"No, I told you to fuck her, not marry her."

“I did both,” Grady says.

Instantly, I’m struck with a vision of me fucking Sugar.

Yeah, I probably should not have brought up fucking. I force my gaze away from her.

“What exactly are we supposed to be doing tonight?” I ask.

“Jess called it Pride and Prejudice and Poker,” Grady says.

“I don’t think that’s a thing.”

“If my wife says it’s a thing, it’s a thing.”

“Okay.”

We live in the south where nicknames are not unusual. Still, I want to know *why* she’s called ‘Sugar.’ Is it because she was such a sweet little girl. Or is it something else? Of course, all I can think of is the sugar that’s nestled between her thighs. Fuck, I need to get laid.

“How’s the new endeavor with the dogs going?” Grady asks. “Is Liam really shipping them all to you?”

I blow out a breath. “Not great. The dogs are being delivered in two days and I still have no idea how I’m going to pay for all of this. Liam is sending all their records and the food supplies that he has, but it won’t last long enough to cover all the expenses.”

“Jess and I could pay—”

I hold a hand up to stop him, already shaking my head. “Absolutely not. I will not ask my sister-in-law to pay for this. Besides, I need a long-term solution to fund this. Liam says there are new dogs nearly every week.”

“What dogs?” Natalie, Linc’s wife asks. She’s perched on her husband’s knee.

That’s when I realize that all eyes are on me.

I clear my throat. “My unit commander started a sanctuary on his land after we all came home the last time.” When the shit hit the proverbial fan and we all came home scarred and a little more mangled than we’d been before.

“A dog sanctuary?” Daphne asks.

“Yes. But Liam has run into a problem with the rights of his land (XX or medical problem) and has to find a new place for the dogs. I offered my land since I’m not exactly doing anything with it.”

“How many dogs are we talking about?” Cain asks.

I scratch the back of my neck. “Thirty-five to start out. The other guys from the unit are dividing up the rest, but I’m the only one with enough space for the bulk of the dogs.”

“Problem is, he doesn’t have the funding for all of this,” Grady interjects.

“I’ll pay,” Jess says cheerfully.

I roll my eyes. “No. I’ll figure something out.”

“You need to file papers to create a non-profit organization first. It will make it easier to solicit donations and then when you do have funds rolling in, you won’t be taxed on them.” This comes from Sugar.

I’m not even gonna lie; her voice has my dick stirring in my jeans. What is it about this woman?

“You should do what Sasha did for her uncle Cain,” my niece Taylor says around a mouthful of macaroni and cheese.

“Oh yeah, we made loads of money,” Sasha agrees.

“Girls, I really don’t think—” Cain starts, but his wife puts a hand on his arm.

“That’s actually not a bad idea.”

“I have no clue what y’all are talking about,” I admit.

“Ever hear of the Shirtless Lumbersnack?” Jade asks.

“For fuck’s sake,” Cain mutters.

“Language,” Grady barks.

Cain responds with a flip of his middle finger.

“No. Should I have heard of that?”

“Social media sensation,” Jade says. “It’s just Cain chopping wood and working on his furniture pieces (XX - is this what he does?). But he got endorsements and then came the click pays,” Jade says. “It’s been a steady source of income.”

I shake my head. “I’m not following.”

“I think she’s suggesting you have someone film you, or you do it yourself, walking around your property with all the dogs, sans shirt,” Daphne says.

“Shirtless Dog Whisperer,” Sasha suggests.

“I can help,” Daphne says. “I run the social media for many of the shops and restaurants downtown.”

“All you have to do is look hot while taking care of the dogs,” Natalie says. “This is perfect.”

I want to ask more about how to *look hot*, but I’m thinking this isn’t the right crowd. Unless I want them to give me shit about it for the rest of eternity. My eyes flick to Sugar again and I can’t help but wonder if she thinks I’m attractive.

The minute the thought fully forms, I shut that shit down. I am not that guy. She’s full of innocence and rainbows and I’m practically Oscar the Grouch.

chapter
three

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FROM THE SADDLE PEEK...

It would seem that we have another celebrity in our midst. Dane Whitmore of Great Dane's Dog Sanctuary has become an overnight social media super star. Known for walking his land in all his shirtless glory, with a massive pack of dogs running behind him, Dane takes in new canines on the regular, giving them a safe place to flourish. While we all know rescuing dogs is a noble endeavor, can we just agree that most of his fans aren't there for the pups?

chapter

four



SHELBY

Three months later...

I take a sip of my hot chocolate, letting the decadent richness coat my tongue. Fridays are my day off from work. And it's the one day a week I let myself indulge my sweet tooth. So, I have a delicious mug of cocoa and a treat from the coffee shop's bakery.

For a minute I'm tempted to snap a picture and text it to my mom to see if she's heard about the new pastry diet. But, let's face it, she probably wouldn't get that I'm just messing with her, and then it would be a whole thing. That's okay. I can appreciate how outrageously funny I am in the privacy of my own mind.

I take a bite of my Nutella filled soft pretzel and close my eyes, enjoying the mixture of sweet and salty.

"Well, I think it's gross," a woman's voice comes from behind me.

"Gross is not the word I would use. More like scrumptious," another says.

"I've heard that Great Dane refers to the size of his... you know," a third woman adds.

My cheeks heat at just the thought of what they're discussing.

Dane Whitmore has been a hot topic of conversation around town ever since he started his nonprofit and its

accompanying social media presence. I haven't seen him in person since the night of the Pride, Prejudice, and Poker party.

I've seen him around town, sure. I've done some low-key stalking on social media, yes. But we haven't actually spoken.

Which is to be expected, right?

After all, the night of the party, we exchanged only a handful of words. It wasn't even a conversation. Little more than a sentence or two. It was a non-event.

Except for all those steamy looks he sent my way. But I probably imagined those. Those smolders weren't actually directed at me. That's just what his face looks like.

And he probably isn't actively avoiding me around town. That's just how it seems to me since I'm so hyper-aware of him.

Still, it's obvious that I'm not the only one thinking about Dane Whitmore, given the way these ladies are talking about him.

The way they say 'great' gives me the creeps.

Surely that's not where he got the name for the sanctuary. It's just because of the tie-in to the dog breed.

"Size doesn't matter," the first woman argues.

"If you believe that, then I guess we know what Randy is packing."

The other two women giggle. By now I'm fairly certain of the identity of the table behind me. Miranda Dillard is the one being judgmental because of course she is. Which means the other two are her besties, Amanda Stone and Brittany Collins. They're all older than me, older than Luna too, but she was a freshman when they were graduating.

You know what happens to the mean girls from high school? They grow up to be mean ladies.

I roll my eyes and take another bite of my treat. I won't let small town gossips interrupt my self-care time.

“Did you watch yesterday’s reels? They were the hottest yet.”

“I swear that man’s arms are as big as my thighs.”

“I’d like to leash him up and lick—”

I whip around. “*He* is a person, you know. And what he’s doing out there, for the dogs, is important.”

The three women stare at me. Amanda’s eyebrows nearly crawl into her hairline.

“Maybe, but he’s a hot commodity. He wouldn’t be flaunting his body like that if he didn’t want people to look. It’s so not about the dogs.”

I want to correct them. But I don’t know if the real reason for Dane’s social media presence is widely known. Obviously, these women are some of his pay clicks though.

“Seriously. He should auction himself off. The highest bidder could spend a night in his bed.” Brittany waggles her eyebrows.

“Y’all are being really disrespectful,” I point out.

Amanda rolls her eyes. “Don’t be such a prude, *Sugar*.” She says my nickname in the way my mom meant it. As an insult.

“I’m not being a prude. I’m just trying to remind you, ladies,” I say the last word in the same way she said *sugar*. “Dane is a real person and y’all are being bitchy, judgmental and offensive.”

“What are you, his girlfriend?” Miranda asks, then laughs like her own question is the funniest joke ever.

“I don’t have to be his girlfriend to support someone in our community who is doing a good and noble thing.”

Brittany elbows Amanda. “Of course she’s not his girlfriend. You think a guy as hot as Dane Whitmore would be with our plump and frumpy Sugar Coleman? I mean look at her.”

The women all laugh. Tears burn at the back of my eyes and the bridge of my nose tingles with the tell-tale sign I'm about to cry. Not in front of these women.

I'm in the process of gathering my stuff when a shadow falls over my table.

“Hey Sunshine, you ready to go?”

I look up to find Dane leaning over me. He cups the back of my neck and tilts my head so he can—oh shit, he's going to kiss me!

And then he does. Soft, plump lips meet mine and I forget my name and everything else about me. His tongue swipes against my bottom lip, then he's pulling back and grinning down at me.

I think that's when I die. It's the smile he gives me. The one that lights up his pale blue eyes.

Before I can pick my jaw up off the floor or faint or hyperventilate—I'm not sure what my over-stimulated little brain might do at this point—he turns towards the bitches at the next table and gives them a cold, tight nod. “Ladies.”

Then he helps me grab my bag and we're walking out, side-by-side.

When we get to the door, he pats my ass, like this is something he does every day.

chapter

five



DANE

I don't say anything, just lead her straight to my truck where I lift her into the passenger seat. Walking around to my side, I try to adjust my half-chub without anyone seeing. The fact that a kiss that was relatively innocent could have me even partially hard is pissing me off. Once I climb in on my side, she turns to face me.

“What was that, exactly?”

“You defended me; I defended you.” I start my truck and back out of the spot in front of the coffee shop.

“Wait. What? How was kissing me in public ‘defending me’?”

I scratch at the back of my head. “Those women were being mean to you.”

“Yeah, do you not know them?”

“I might have recognized one of them.”

“They’re always mean. It’s their thing.”

I scowl. “Well, I didn’t like it. So that put a stop to it.”

“Yeah, but now they’re going to think ... I don’t even know what they’re going to think.”

“They’ll think we’re dating.”

“Exactly.” She squeezes her eyes shut and chews at that bottom lip.

I take the opportunity to drive the loop around town since I don't know where I'm supposed to take her.

"This is a disaster," she mumbles more to herself than to me.

"That seems a little dramatic."

"Well, we're not dating, so insinuating that we are to three of the biggest gossips in town feels like a disaster."

I pull into the parking lot next to the public library and just idle. "Well, maybe we should keep up appearances then."

"What are you saying? You want to pretend that we're dating?"

Fuck she's cute. She's looking up at me, all big green eyes and freckles smattered across her nose and cheeks. Her earnest expression tugs at something buried inside of me and fuck me if I don't want to kiss her again.

"I don't know what to do about it. I just reacted. They were being cruel to you, and since I don't hit women, it seemed like the best option."

Her lips twitch. "You want to fake date me so that they'll stop picking on me?"

"Yes, exactly."

Her arms cross over her chest bringing my eyes to her full tits hidden beneath her t-shirt. This one is a faded JAWS shirt. I swear this woman was made just for me.

"So, you think I'm some kind of charity case who needs your protection?" she asks.

"That's not exactly—"

"Poor Sugar," she says in a falsely high, annoying voice. "Can't get herself a real boyfriend. She's so pathetic she has to get pity dates from that hot guy who rescues dogs."

"I didn't say—"

She opens the door and jumps down from my truck. "You didn't have to say it." She slams the door, then says through

the opened window, “I’m not one of your dogs. I don’t need to be rescued.”

“Shelby, come on, you can’t just get out and walk,” I call to her.

“I actually can, and I did. Later, Dane.” Then she disappears into the town square park.

I bang on the steering wheel. “Fuck!”

A young mother holding hands with two little kids walking towards the library turns and glares at me.

I nod an apology and roll up my windows. I’m just fucking everything up today.

I’m nearly out of town when I realize I didn’t make it to the store to pick up the supplies I need. Since I currently live in a tiny home—just big enough for me—I’ve been building an outdoor structure for the dogs for when we have bad weather. Thankfully, this winter has been more mild than most and they’ve been just fine. Since spring is coming, things are going to potentially get stormy, so I need to finish it up. I turn my truck back around and head to Bolts.

My phone rings and I see my sister’s name flash on the screen.

“What’s up, Daph?”

“What did you do?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you kiss Sugar Coleman in the middle of the coffee shop?”

“Gotta love small town gossip,” I say drolly.

“Can you break it down for me?”

So I explain what happened. How I’d been sitting in a back booth at the coffee shop only to hear first those bitches talking about me, but then Shelby and her sassy voice defending me. Then how they turned on her like a bunch of jackals, and that’s when I made my move.

“What was the outcome you were hoping for?” Daphne asks.

“I don’t know. I just wanted them to stop talking shit about her.”

“You feel protective of her?”

“I guess. I don’t know. How do you even know about this?”

“Dane, honestly, you know you can’t do anything in this town without someone texting or calling to notify me. Like I need to know what my brothers are doing twenty-four/seven. Well, mostly I just hear about you now. I suppose they contact Grady and Garrett’s wives to tattle on them.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“You fucked up.”

“I realize that. Did you just call to chastise me, or do you have any ideas of how I can fix it?”

“Wait. You want to fix this?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What are you saying? You want to actually date her?”

“Well, I don’t want her to be pissed at me. Right now, she is seriously pissed at me.”

“Okay, you’re going to have to spell this out for me. Because you’ve always been Mr.-I’m-Gonna-Die-Alone.”

I grunt in response because she’s not wrong. I’ve never said those words specifically, but I’ve made it known that I don’t make it past the second date. Yeah, I occasionally go on a date, but I don’t *date*. Nothing extended. Nothing long term. Ever.

“Since you saw her three months ago, you’ve practically turned tail and run every time y’all have been in the same place.”

“What’s your point?”

“But now you want to ask her out?”

“What do you want me to say, Daphne? That she’s adorable and I can’t stop thinking about her?”

“Well, yeah, that would be a nice start.”

“Look, I know she’s not for me. I know she doesn’t need a guy like me. But I hate the idea that those women were treating her like a laughing stock for defending me, and I’m not going to sit by and allow them to be that cruel. They insinuated she couldn’t land me.” She’d looked brave in that moment, I’d seen her shoulders slightly round and her chin tilt up in defiance. But her eyes had told a different story. All sadness and vulnerability.

I’d never been one for jumping on the white horse and going in for a rescue, but it had been my knee-jerk reaction in that moment.

“If me taking her out on a few dates convinces them that she could get any single man she wanted, then I’m willing to do it.”

My sister hums on the other end of the phone. “Well, then I guess you better take her out on some dates.”

“Well, that’s what I suggested. But she thinks I’m doing this just out of pity?”

“Are you?”

“Fuck no. She’s gorgeous. She could get any man she wants.”

I ignore the kick to my gut at the thought of another man touching her.

“Well, then I guess you need to convince her that you guys need to fake date.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” I ask.

“Maybe you need to convince her that you’re not doing it to help her, but rather that she’s doing it to help you. Maybe you need to come up with a reason why people thinking you’re dating her would help you. You could start with the fact that women are trying to corner you every time you come into town.”

“Seriously, it’s like some of them are in heat. I am not interested in that,” I say.

“So tell her that. Be honest with her.”

“Could you text me her number?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

But even after I get her number, I sit in my car and stare at it for a long time before sending her a message.

I just sit there, thinking about that Jaws t-shirt she had on today and how my first thought when I saw it was ... okay, my *first* thought was that her tits looked amazing in it. My second thought was that she was made for me.

Part of me wishes that *I’d* been made for her

chapter

six

SHELBY

UNKNOWN: What's your work schedule this week?

I stare at my phone, frowning.

“What’s that face for?” my sister, Luna, asks.

“Just a random text from an unknown number. Probably a wrong number.”

UNKNOWN: I should apologize.

UNKNOWN: For earlier today.

“There’s that face again. Why don’t you ask them who it is?”
Luna suggests.

ME: Who is this?

UNKNOWN: Dane.

“Oh shit,” I whisper.

My sister leans over me to glance at my phone. “Dane Whitmore? What happened earlier today?”

“He kissed me. At the coffee shop. In front of Miranda Dillard, Amanda Stone and Brittany Collins.”

“Uh, Dane Whitmore kissed you and you didn’t tell me immediately? What is wrong with you? How was it?”

“Not the point, Luna.”

“Totally the point, Shelby,” she over-enunciates my name.

I blow out a breath. “Fast, but amazing.”

She smiles her big sister ‘I told you so’ smile. “Now, why is this a problem? Haven’t you crushed on him for like ever?”

“I barely know him.”

She rolls her eyes. “So! I’ve been half in love with Mason Bell since I was a teenager, and I don’t know him at all.”

I laugh. “When is your big concert.”

She stands and shakes her bootie while squealing. “In just two weeks. I cannot wait to see Soul Obsession live.” She falls back on the couch with another little wiggle.

My sister was obsessed with the boy band for years and legitimately cried when they broke up. When the reunion tour was announced, she was so excited, she went and got a tattoo to commemorate the occasion.

“Stop trying to distract me with my favorite subject,” Luna says. “Why did Dane kiss you and why is it a problem?”

“He did it because he heard them giving me a hard time and he thought he’d swoop in and rescue me.”

“Sounds pretty gallant, if you ask me.”

“But now those women are going to spread rumors all over town that Dane and I are a couple. When the truth comes out, they’ll laugh all the more. I haven’t let women like that bother me in a long time and I was content to let them spew their vitriol at me and then calmly leave The Coffee Cup. This will just give them more fodder.”

Luna sighs and squeezes my hand. “Want me to shiv them for you?”

I snort-laugh because my sister is about the least violent person in the world. She catches and releases spiders because

she's a lunatic. "No, that's okay. I appreciate it though."

UNKNOWN: Are you just going to ignore me?

ME: What exactly are you apologizing for?

UNKNOWN: For pissing you off.

"Typical man. He's just covering all his bases," Luna says. "But really what are you mad about?"

"That he sees me as some pathetic loser who can't get a real boyfriend. That he stole my first kiss without even knowing it."

"Oh, Shelby. I'm sorry." Another squeeze of my hand. "To play the devil's advocate though, at least your first kiss wasn't some pimple-faced teen who came at you tongue first rather than lips first." She shudders.

"No, it wasn't like that at all. It was perfect in every way. Except for the fact that it was fake."

"Then make him your real boyfriend and it can be your real first kiss," Luna says flippantly, as if what she's suggesting is as casual as how I should wear my hair.

"I can't *make* him be my real boyfriend," I say.

"I bet you can."

I throw my arms up. "You are not helpful!"

UNKNOWN: Do you forgive me?

ME: Whatever, Dane. It's fine.

UNKNOWN: So that's a no. Gotcha.

UNKNOWN: My sister told me to tell you about all the women bugging me since my social media stuff launched.

ME: What kind of bugging?

UNKNOWN: Just hitting on me. It's not a big deal. A pain in the ass.

UNKNOWN: She thought it might make you more sympathetic to being my fake girlfriend. So you'd know it's more about me than you.

ME: Why are you telling me this?

UNKNOWN: Because I don't want to manipulate you. Not that that was what Daphne was suggesting. She told me in no uncertain terms that I royally fucked up.

ME: I'll do it.

ME: But I get to decide on the terms.

ME: And I get to break up with you when the time comes.

UNKNOWN: Deal. But are you sure?

ME: Adding you to my contacts as "My hot boyfriend"

MY HOT BOYFRIEND: Then I'll add you to my contacts too.

MY HOT BOYFRIEND: <screenshot of “my sexy AF girlfriend” contact>

My cheeks heat. I know he’s just returning the favor, but still, just knowing that’s in his phone makes my whole body feel warm.

“What are y’all discussing now?” Luna asks.

I startle at her voice.

She laughs. “You totally forgot I was in the room, didn’t you?”

“Shut up.” But she’s right, I had completely forgotten everything outside of the semi-flirtatious texting with Dane.

Two days later I’m in the middle of inventorying our supply cabinet at work when Yvette, the front desk receptionist pokes her head in.

“Uh, Shelby, your boyfriend is here.” She’s frowning as if me having a boyfriend is the most absurd thing she’s ever heard. I know for a fact that she doesn’t mean it that way because Yvette is the nicest person.

I set down my clipboard and smile at her. “Thanks.” Then I go out to the front to find Dane standing there, looking slightly awkward, but ridiculously handsome at the same time.

He holds up a bag. “Brought you lunch, Sunshine.” His lips quirk in a smile and my stupid heart flips over in my chest.

This man is going to break my heart into a million pieces. Maybe it’ll be worth it. At least it’s for a good cause. All of those dogs need a safe home.

Yes, I know that’s not actually why we’re fake dating, but it’s what I’m telling myself because it’s more palatable than sticking it to three women whose opinions should not matter to me.

“Thanks. Come on back.”

He steps over to me and kisses my cheek.

“What did you bring me?” I chirp as if I was totally expecting the hottest man in Saddle Creek to come to my work with food.

“All your favorites from Ruthie’s,” he says.

Another flip-flop. Stupid, stupid heart.

I lead him into the storage room and over to the table. “I’ve just been doing inventory today while Lily is out inseminating some heifers.”

Ohmygosh! Why am I talking about insemination right now?

“I mean you know how it goes. Your family owns cattle.”

He grins at me with a full-fledged smile that literally steals my breath, and I make a weird choking noise. I quickly sit down to cover my awkwardness.

He chuckles and unpacks the food. And sure enough, he has brought my favorites. Chicken fried steak fingers with extra cream gravy. And fried pickles with ranch dressing.

“I’m a dipper,” I say stupidly. What is wrong with me? Stop saying words.

He pulls out the seat next to me and sits.

“What did you get?” I ask.

One meaty shoulder lifts in a shrug. “Cheeseburger with bacon and barbecue sauce. Fries. My usual.”

I dip a pickle in the ranch, then pop it into my mouth. “How did you know about my favorites?” I ask, pointing to the spread of fried goodness.

He scratches at the back of his neck. It’s a movement I’ve seen him do on more than one occasion. Maybe when he’s feeling unsure of himself. Which just seems crazy because he’s beautiful and smart and obviously kind. What could he possibly have to be self-conscious about?

“I might have begged for your sister’s number, then texted her to ask.”

I stare at him. Pretty sure my mouth is open, and I pray that a partially chewed pickle isn't falling out onto the table. That took effort. All for a fake date?

“That was thoughtful. Thank you.”

Again, he lifts a boulder-sized shoulder up in a shrug. “I didn't want to bring you anything you didn't like or that you were allergic to or whatever.”

“I'm not allergic to anything. And the only foods I hate are mushrooms—they're slimy—and tomatoes. But I do eat salsa and tomato sauce and yes, I realize that doesn't make sense.”

“You're fucking delightful. I hope you don't mind me saying that.”

“Not at all.”

“Will you tell me why you hate your nickname?”

My spine goes still and all humor drains from my body.

He holds up a hand. “Sorry, that was abrupt and it's not my business.”

“How did you know?”

“It's all over your face every time someone uses it.”

“No one has ever noticed that before.”

“So will you tell me?”

“Not today.”

“Fair enough.”

chapter

seven



SHELBY

So far being in a fake relationship is not that much different than my regular life. Except for the fact that people in town treat me a little better. Well, most of them. I have been getting a lot of glares from some of the single women.

Though Dane texts me a lot. Always a ‘good morning, Sunshine’ and a ‘night, beautiful.’ Like he’s expecting people to use our texts as proof of our relationship. Then there are all the pictures of the dogs. I became a vet tech because I love animals. Obviously.

So, pictures of him snuggling with dogs keep me in a constant state of ... horniness. Okay, it’s him. His texts. His voice over the phone, the few times we’ve chatted that way. Everything about Dane Whitmore lights me up. It’s been like that since the first time I ever saw him.

It was at one of Daphne’s birthday parties when we were younger. I shouldn’t have even been noticing boys, let alone ones that were so much older than I was. I’d barely been in a training bra and I’m pretty sure he’d had leg hair already.

Those pale blue eyes, so much like the big Texas sky, had met mine for a fraction of a second and it was like my heart had started beating for the first time.

My phone rings and I roll over in bed, half expecting it to be him. But Daphne’s name flashes across my screen.

“Hello?”

“Hey. I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. I’m in bed reading, but still awake.” Okay, I intended to be reading, but then my thoughts about Dane distracted me.

“Do you still take pictures?”

“Uh, yeah. Mostly just as a hobby now and then.”

“Have a nice camera?”

“It’s decently nice. Why?”

“Perfect! Okay I need a huge favor and I know you’re off work tomorrow so can you help?”

“Sure.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up. Just bring your camera and I will take care of the rest.”

“What’s it for?”

“More details tomorrow. I gotta go. Night.”

MY HOT BOYFRIEND: Goodnight, beautiful.

My heart palpitates and I sigh.

ME: Night.

I have to remind myself every other minute that this is all fake and that regardless of how it feels, Dane is not falling in love with me.

True to her word, Daphne picks me up bright and early, but comes equipped with caffeine, so all is forgiven.

Once I’m buckled into her front seat and we’re on our way driving out of town, I ask. “So, what am I taking pictures of today?”

“Firemen.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Well, and dogs. Firemen and dogs. For a calendar. Fundraiser for Great Dane’s.”

Her words feel like random things from a crossword puzzle, but then everything aligns.

“Does that mean we’re going out there? To Dane’s?”

“Yes.” She glances over at me and gives me a cheeky grin.
“That a problem.”

“You are a meddling meddler, Daphne Whitmore.”

“Bates. It’s Daphne Bates now.” She wiggles her wedding ring finger.

“Still a meddler, no matter what your name is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

chapter

eight

Redeem
MY HEART
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

DANE

My sister has taken over my life. I'm grateful, it's not that I'm not. Her organizing the calendar as a fundraiser is pretty damn brilliant. But I know she's also matchmaking. Which is why she's brought Shelby here to play photographer.

"I know what you're doing," I tell Daphne as she walks past me into the fenced in area.

"Who me?" she asks with feigned innocence.

"Sunshine," I say to Shelby. I lean down to kiss her right beneath her ear. She smells so sweet here, I want to nuzzle in, lick the spot to see if she's sensitive. If she'll lean closer and moan for more. "Thanks for helping today."

She looks up at me, her pupils wide, letting me know in no uncertain terms that she is attracted to me. Thank fuck for that. This might have started as pretend, but my desire for her is one hundred percent real.

We're having an unseasonably hot day, the temperatures heading north of eighty degrees when normally January hovers in the fifties for central Texas. Shelby is looking particularly sexy in her denim cut-off shorts and an Austin Armadillo's t-shirt. Is she just wearing it or does she actually like football? I make a mental note to ask her later.

She gives me a smile and then follows Daphne further into the outer yard. I had to install a second fence to encircle my property so the dogs can't escape.

Once I open the second gate and let the girls into that yard, the pups come running. Daphne drops down to the ground.

“Oh my goodness, look at you. Sweet babies,” she coos while the dogs circle around her smelling and licking. She laughs and the sound floods my body like a shot of whiskey. Warm and calming, her happiness soothes me.

Pretty sure that means I am well and truly fucked. But there’s not a damn thing I’m going to do about it.

Daphne organizes all the guys and pairs them up with the dogs that match the month’s theme—whatever that means—and then hands them all a set of matching hats. Hats for them and the dog they’ll be posing with. I guess the point of a fireman calendar is for them to look like firemen, so they’ll be wearing half of their uniform and the hats will represent the month.

She and Shelby confer over the clipboard, glancing up at the line-up of buff, shirtless firemen standing in my yard.

For fuck’s sake.

Finally they get started, and Shelby calls instructions out to the guys as she poses them. Daphne jumps in to help, maneuvering the men’s arms or the direction their faces are turned.

Shelby looks down at the screen on her camera and laughs. “That one is perfect. Got the lick in an action shot,” she tells the guy.

I know most of them. Hell, my brother, Garrett is among them. As is my brother-in-law, Fletch. Still, I don’t like how they’re all looking at Shelby. Smiling at her, flexing their arms and shooting her winks.

“You do know you’re actually growling, right?” Grady asks from next to me.

I glance over at him. “When did you get here?”

“Couple minutes ago.”

“I’m not growling.”

“You totally are.”

The guy she’s photographing now is holding a beagle mix named Juniper. She’s one of my favorites. Juni and her fireman, some newer guy to the fire house. I think his name is Eric, but I’m not positive.

Daphne is over talking to Fletch and not paying attention, so when Shelby needs Eric, the pussy wearing a green top hat, to shift positions, she goes over there to give him better instructions. She moves her body into a pose to show him what she wants, and he reaches out and mother fucking touches her face.

“Hands to yourself, Fire Boy!” I shout.

“Fire Boy?” Grady asks with a snort.

“Fuck off. Why are you even here?”

“I’m helping.”

“With what, exactly?”

“Helping to entertain myself. Plus, I figured it would be a good opportunity to give Garrett shit about his smolder.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. Our younger brother has been practicing his smolder since he was a kid. He’d literally sit in front of the mirror and make these faces. *Hilarious*.

But I’m not worried about my little brother right now. No, I’m glaring daggers at one of his fellow firemen.

“You her husband?” Eric has the balls to ask me.

“Not yet,” I bark, taking a step towards him.

Daphne claps her hands. “Okay, let’s take a quick break, shall we?”

“No,” Shelby says. “We’re good to finish up. Only three more pups, right?”

I glare at Eric and he smirks right back at me. Fucker.

“Maybe if you went over there and pissed on her leg, it would help,” Grady suggests.

“Again, why are you here?”

“Maybe to tell you to pull your head out of your ass.”

I shake my head. “She’s too good for me.”

“Of course she is. You think Jess isn’t too good for me?”
He smacks the back of my head. “Don’t be a dumbass.”

I rub my head. “Super helpful.”

We watch the rest of the photo shoot in silence until Garrett gets up there. He’s clearly Mr. December because he and his golden retriever are wearing matching Santa hats.

Daphne and Fletch walk by. “I take it I can leave Shelby safely here with you,” she says.

“Yes. I’ll take her home.”

“Or—” Daphne starts, but Fletch drags her away.

“Enough meddling for one day, Firecracker,” Fletch says.

Grady and I turn back just in time to see Garrett’s smolder.

“Work it,” Grady yells.

“Smolder, baby,” I yell.

“Y’all suck,” Garrett yells.

Shelby laughs but keeps shooting with her camera. “Okay, I think that’s it. I’ll need to edit these, Daphne, before...” She turns around, clearly searching for my sister.

I shoot a look at Grady. “I trust you can escort these fuckers out of my yard without setting all the dogs free?”

He nods.

“Thanks.” I make my way over to Shelby. I grab her hand and pull her with me towards my house.

“Where did your sister go?” she asks.

“She had to leave.”

“Of course she did.” She tries to pull her hand free. “I’m sure one of the guys can give me a ride back into town.”

“The fuck they can.”

She whirls around to face me. “What is your problem today?”

I open the door to my tiny house and motion for her to step inside.

“What is this place?” she asks.

“My house.”

She glances around. “Well, it’s really nice,” she says, her tone still annoyed. Then she jabs me in the chest. “So what was your deal? You were rude to those guys, and they were out here doing something for you. Doing you a favor and you were acting all possessive and jealous.”

“Because I was fucking jealous.” Then I press her against my door and do what I’ve been wanting to do all day. I kiss her. Our tongues fight for dominance and she’s already lifting one of her legs to wrap around me. I grab her ass and lift her so she can properly hold on to me.

She pulls back from the kiss and glares at me. “It doesn’t make any sense that you would be jealous. Because you and I aren’t a real couple.” Her lips meet mine in another kiss.

“Doesn’t change how I feel,” I say, then kiss her again.

“You drive me crazy,” she pants.

“I’ve never wanted anyone the way that I want you. It’s driving me fucking nuts. I haven’t jacked off like this since I was a teenager.” I know she can feel the ridge of my hard on up against the seam of her jeans. Denim can hide some things, but not this.

“Damn, that’s really hot.”

Then we’re kissing again and I’m walking us to my couch. I lower myself down, her on my lap. My hand immediately goes to the hem of her shirt, slipping underneath to feel the silky smoothness of her bare skin.

She whimpers into my mouth, and I trail my lips down her throat. My hand shifts higher, cupping her tit over her bra. Her nipple is already hard, pressing against the fabric.

“You’ve been jacking off thinking about me?” she asks, her voice breathy and lust drunk.

“Yeah, Sunshine. Every day. Sometimes twice a day. You have no idea what you do to me.”

“Show me.”

chapter

nine

Redeem
MY HEART
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

DANE

“I’d rather make you come,” I say.

“Okay. But first show me how you touch yourself.”

Her big green eyes and those goddamn freckles make her look the picture of innocence. I’m betting she’s a virgin, but I’ll wait for her to tell me that if she thinks it’s important.

“Do you want to stay here on the couch, or go up to my bedroom?”

She glances over at the staircase that sits on one wall of my galley kitchen. The loft above is spacious, with a big king mattress and enough ceiling height for me to stand to my full six foot, three inches.

“Bed,” she says. She stands and walks to the staircase.

I’m stuck behind her watching her plump ass encased in those denim cut-offs. It is a hell of a view. I can’t help myself so I reach out and smack her right cheek.

She squeals and glances at me over her shoulder. “Did you just spank me?”

“You’re taking too long to get up these stairs.”

“Impatient much?”

Finally we’re standing in my bedroom, and I know it’s not that much to look at, but it’s nice and well constructed and suits me just fine. Everything about my house screams ‘confirmed bachelor’ and for the first time in my life, I wonder how that feels to another person.

Is she seeing me in a different light right now when she realizes I have nothing to offer her?

But then she's on me, kissing me, and I'm lost in the taste of her and the feel of her curves in my hands.

"You're a really good kisser," she says.

"You are too."

She steps back and stares at me. "Are you messing with me right now?"

I swallow hard. "No." I reach out and take her hand. "Why would I be messing with you?"

She looks away from me, then bites her lip. "That day in The Coffee Cup, that was my first kiss."

Initially I think she's teasing me, but I see the vulnerability shining in those eyes.

"Best kiss of my life," I tell her honestly. Then I pull her to me, my palm curving around her hip. "Remember, we came up here so I could show you what you do to me. That day, I had to awkwardly hide my erection so you wouldn't think I was a complete pervert."

"Did you touch yourself that night?" she asks.

"Twice. Came so hard, calling your name," I tell her.

She folds that bottom lip into her mouth, sucking.

"You're so fucking sexy, Shelby. I want to get you naked and keep you that way for at least a week so I can do all of the things I've imagined."

Her hands go to the bottom of her shirt, and she whips it off, dropping it on the floor. Then she unbuttons her shorts, leaving them hanging open to give me a peek at her bright orange panties. Her arms go behind her and she unhooks her bra, letting it fall to the floor.

"Fuck, Shelby. You're so damn gorgeous. I want to touch you."

“Touch yourself first. I’m going to watch.” Then she climbs onto the center of my bed, leaning back on her elbows.

She’s fucking teasing me with those glorious tits of hers.

I pull off my own shirt, letting it drop to the floor. Then I undo my jeans and pull out my dick.

She gasps, her eyes glued to my hand. Then she glances up at me. “I know you don’t just stand there holding it. Show me.”

“You’re kinda bossy,” I tell her. I lose my jeans but keep my boxer briefs on.

“It doesn’t appear to be bothering you,” she says.

“If your commands start to bother me, I’ll just give you something else to do with your mouth.” I slowly pump my hand. “Put your hand in your panties and tell me if you’re wet.”

She follows my instructions and moans when she brushes through her folds.

I squeeze my dick because I do not want to come just from watching her stick her hand down her panties.

She withdraws her hand, showing it to me, and her fingertips are glistening.

I can’t help myself. I lean forward and pull them into my mouth sucking off her sweet nectar. I growl around her fingers, then I’m coming down on top of her and we’re kissing.

“What are you doing to me, Sunshine? I feel like if I don’t touch you, I’ll lose my fucking mind.”

“Then touch me. Have me.” She spreads her arms open, and I take a moment to stare at her face.

“You don’t even know how breathtaking you are, do you?”

She gives me a shy smile. “I’m glad you think so.”

“These tits,” I say, staring down at them. They’re perfect, heavy and pale with a smattering of freckles across the top of

her cleavage. I slide my hand up the valley between her breasts. “I could put my dick right here and fuck these beauties.”

She whimpers. “Okay. We can do that. But if you don’t touch me soon, I am going to combust.”

“Now who’s the impatient one?” I ask, but drop my mouth to her tit. I suck her nipple into my mouth drawing hard on it.

Her hands rake up my naked back and I’m so ready to be balls deep inside her. I’ve got to take it slow though. While I give her breasts all the attention, I slip a hand into her panties.

My fingers slip into her hot, slick folds.

“Oh!”

She sounds a little surprised and moans loudly when I circle her clit, mimicking what my mouth is doing to her nipples. Her short nails dig into my back and she bucks against my hand.

“That’s it, Sunshine, I’m going to watch you fall apart on my hand, then you’re going to sit on my face so I can make you come with my tongue.”

Her orgasm rockets through her, back bowing off the bed as she cries out my name.

I may not deserve this woman, and I don’t have anything to offer her, but I know without a doubt I’ll never desire another woman.

chapter

ten



SHELBY

I'm boneless and weak after the most intense orgasm of my life. Vibrators are great in a pinch, but Dane's hands proved even better.

I reach down and slip my hand into his boxer briefs. The hard, hot length of his erection brushes against palm. I wrap my hand around as far as it'll go and give him an experimental tug.

"Fuuuuuckkk," he growls. Then he rolls over onto his back, effectively removing my hand from his underwear. "I need my tongue on your pussy." He situates himself on the bed, then pats his chest. "Right here."

"What do you want me to do?"

I want you to come and sit right here so I can eat your pussy."

My face flames and I'm sure I'm splotchy and red from blushing, but I don't have time to care about that.

"Come on. Put your knees on either side of my head. You'll be my earmuffs." He winks at me.

I laugh but crawl my way over to him. I want to explore his body more. Run my hands up his thick chest. Feel the hairs around his chest and belly tease my palm.

I pull down my shorts and panties, not before I notice the huge wet spot on my underwear. It's safe to say that Dane turns me on.

My nipples pebble so tightly, they hurt.

He grips his dick through his boxers and squeezes. "I could come just from looking at you, Shelby. Now let me have your pussy. I'm starving."

Gently and probably more than a little awkwardly, I get into the position he requested. My knees on either side of his head, my pussy right by his mouth.

"Fuck you smell good." He gives me a lick straight up the center. "And that's the prettiest pussy I've ever seen."

Then he devours me. There's no other way to describe it. I grab a handful of his hair and hold on. He plunges his tongue inside me. His beard scrapes and tickles my tender flesh, adding to the myriad of sensations.

He licks up the side of my folds and up around the hood of my clit, careful not to actually touch it. Over and over he does this until I'm riding his face and pleading with him.

"Dane, please."

Then his tongue finally finds my clit and he circles it tightly. Over and over until my climax detonates inside me. The waves seem to last forever and now I'm worried that I'm suffocating him.

I move quickly to get off of him, but he just follows me.

He looks down into my eyes. "We don't have to do anything else if you aren't ready. No pressure from me."

"I want to."

"I want to too," he says. He stands and drops his boxer briefs and he's just there, standing in front of me completely naked.

"You're beautiful," I tell him. "I've always thought so."

He grunts. "Garrett's the pretty boy in the family."

I shake my head. "Not compared to you."

He grabs a condom out of the top drawer of the small chest across the room.

“It’s okay; I’m on the pill and obviously clean since I’m a virgin.”

He swallows visibly. He drops down next to me on the bed, still holding the condom. “I’m clean too. Just got a clean bill of health last month. And it’s been a hell of a lot longer than that since I’ve been with someone.”

“I trust you,” I tell him.

He nods. “I’ve never gone without a condom.”

“Oh, well if you feel more comfortable using one, then it’s fine.”

“Shelby, I want you to know that this means something to me. You mean something to me.”

I know my eyes are brimming with tears, so I just nod. He means something to me. I’m pretty sure that goes without saying. My girlhood crush on a friend’s older brother has morphed into something so much more adult and big.

Then he’s lowering himself on top of me. His hips wedge between my thighs and I feel the long, hard length of him brush against my leg.

He notches himself at my entrance then slowly pushes inside. There’s pressure but no pain. Probably because I have a toy that’s a little smaller than him.

“Goddamn, you’re wrecking me, Sunshine.” He thrusts all the way inside, then looks down at me.

I wrap my legs around his waist, hooking my feet at the ankles and squeezing him to me.

“You feel so good. I don’t know how long I can make this last. You’re so hot inside, and wet. Perfect. You’re perfect.”

“You feel perfect too,” I tell him. “You can move now. I’m good.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. You feel amazing.”

Somehow, he rocks back on his knees. His dick stays in place, and his eyes are locked on where our bodies are joined.

“I have to watch,” he says.

Then he starts to move, shallow at first and then long, hard thrusts.

“Oh shit!” He’s rubbing some spot inside of me that I’ve never been able to reach. “Don’t stop doing it just like that.”

“Look at that greedy pussy.” He puts one hand on my pelvis, his thumb dropping so that it just barely rubs against my clit.

And that is all it takes before I come completely undone.

I’m pretty sure I’m screaming or crying or just chanting his name. That was the orgasm to end all orgasms. I feel utterly drained.

I open my eyes in time to see him climax as he empties himself inside me with a roar.

chapter

eleven



DANE

We're laying cocooned in my bed, her body snuggled against mine and her head on my chest. I've never done this with any other woman. It feels so much better than I would have imagined. I always thought this rom-com movie position was solely for the ladies.

"This thing that you're doing with the dogs is important." Her fingers trace random designs on my chest while she speaks. "It's a good thing. I hope you realize that."

"It's just nice to have a purpose again."

She looks up at me then, her eyes searching mine. I'm not sure what she's looking for, but she leans in and kisses me.

We're quiet for a little longer, and I think she's maybe fallen asleep until she speaks again.

"So, what are we doing here exactly? Are we changing the fake dating to real dating?"

Her question seems to take on a life of its own, coiling around me like a snake about to strike. That's when the panic slams into me like a hard, concrete surface.

I know I should answer her. Say something. Anything. But I'm frozen.

I don't want to make her promises I can't keep.

"Must be door number three then, the awkward hook-up. Gotcha."

"What do you want me to say, Sunshine?"

She stands, hands on her hips, and she looks like a fucking goddess. One that looks angry enough to rip my balls off.

“I don’t know. Something!” She grabs her clothes and starts pulling things back on. “Do you want to date me or not?”

I’m fucking everything up; I know I am, but I will not lie to her. “Look, I don’t date.”

Her eyes narrow in a glare. “I see. Only pretend girlfriends for you?” She picks up her phone and starts jabbing her fingers on it, clearly texting someone. “You are so full of shit,” she says. “I have seen you on dates with other women.”

“Okay, yes, I have gone on dates. I have hooked up with other women.” Though the urge to do that hasn’t come up even once since I saw Shelby standing in Grady’s kitchen.

“You’re right. I have gone on dates. The noun. I don’t date women. The verb. I’m not made for that. I don’t settle well. I’m too grouchy. I’ve been alone too long. I’m too bitter and too hard. I’m not made for commitment.”

“That is such bullshit. A man who isn’t made for commitment doesn’t adopt forty-six dogs and build them their own shelter and coddle them like you fucking do.”

“Dogs are different. And you’re the one who said you aren’t one of my dogs.”

She rolls her eyes. “That isn’t what I meant and you know it. Look, if you’re done here and you don’t want to see me again, I get it. I can show myself out. And you don’t need to go through the whole ‘I’m a lone wolf’ speech. Just say you’re not into me that way.”

I stand because I can’t just let her walk away. I pull her to me and kiss her. “I’m not done with you yet.” She shoves me away from her and I drop my arms. “Sunshine, please, let’s talk about this.”

“I’m going to stop you right there. You don’t get to call me a cute nickname if we’re not in a committed relationship. I’ve put up with people calling me Sugar all my life because I wasn’t confident enough to stand up for what I wanted and to

tell them how much I hated it. Even knowing that none of the people in town knew the root of the nickname, it was still there. Every time someone said it, I heard my mother complaining about how much weight she'd gained while carrying me and it was because I was born with a sweet tooth and all I wanted was to eat sugar."

She swipes at her tears. "Maybe it didn't really matter, because most of the people who call me Sugar aren't important to me. So it doesn't matter if they don't talk to me with respect. But I *do* care about you, and I care about how you think of me. So I care enough to tell you that I can't be with you just for now. I can't be with you until you decide you're done with me. I don't work that way."

Headlights shine through the windows.

"That's my ride. Have a nice life, Dane."

And then she leaves.

chapter

twelve



SHELBY

My tears are already to full on hysterical sobs by the time I climb into my sister's car.

"Oh Shelby, I'm sorry." She opens her arms and I fall against her. She hugs me until I pull back.

"I need tissues," I say.

"Back seat on the floor, I think."

"You're always prepared. Thank you for coming to get me."

"Of course. I'll always come get you. Whenever you need me." She nods to the house. "Want me to go in there and shiv him for you?"

I release a watery laugh. "No. Let's just go home."

Once we get to the house, she fixes me a mug of hot tea and sits down on the couch with me. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It's that old cliched story of girl crushes on boy. Girl becomes boy's fake girlfriend. Girl gives boy her very real virginity, and then he tells her he doesn't do relationships."

"Oh sweetie," Luna coos. "What can I do?"

"Nothing to do. I was a fool. I made a mistake and now I have to pick up the pieces."

"Was it at least good?"

I wince. “It was amazing. Like something straight out of a romance novel.”

“Well, then you’re one up on me. I lost mine in the back seat of a Toyota in the high school parking lot on prom night.”

“But you didn’t go to prom.”

“Exactly.”

The week that follows sucks. Word has spread quickly through town that Dane and I are no longer an item. This morning I ran into Miranda Dillard at *The Coffee Cup*, and the look she gave me was almost full of actual sympathy instead of the overblown mock sympathy she normally bestows upon the rest of us. Thank God she caught herself in time. I don’t know what either of us would have done if she’d exhibited real, human emotion in public.

Thankfully work has been busy. The new small animal vet who just moved to town got started, and I’ve been working with him some. There was never that much in the way of animal work that I could help Lily with. For the most part, the ranchers do a lot of that anyways after she shows them how.

Since I don’t have to be at work early today, I settle into a booth with my e-reader to get over the shock of Miranda almost being nice to me. I’m still there a half hour later when Daphne slides into the booth opposite me.

I close my e-reader because I’m not actually reading anything, though I keep trying. But my mind won’t focus.

“Okay, so my brother is an idiot,” Daphne says as she settles in across from me.

“This is unnecessary, Daphne. He didn’t break any promises to me.”

“No, but he broke your heart; that much is clear.” She looks at me.

I know I look a mess. My eyes are permanently red-rimmed it seems from all the tears. “I’ll get over it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, he broke his own heart too.”

“No, that does not make me feel better.”

“He’s miserable,” she says. “Which I know is not your concern and not exactly why I sought you out. I’m not making excuses for him; I just wanted you to know that he’s afraid. I’m not even sure if he knows that yet. But you got too close, and he panicked. It’s what he does. It’s why he joined the military. After our mom died, Dane got into all kinds of trouble. Got caught with pot at school. Skipped classes. Drank too much. My dad had to give him an ultimatum.”

I should be annoyed that his sister is here doing his dirty work. But I know him well enough to know that he didn’t send Daphne to tell me any of this. This is her meddling again.

“He was spiraling out of control because he didn’t know how to handle his grief. I truly believe that he loves you and when he realizes that, he’ll be on his knees begging for another chance.”

I snort because I’m not so sure.

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are, and I know your heart is the right place. But I can guarantee that Dane is not in love with me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Did he say that?”

“He didn’t use those words specifically, but that was their meaning. After he told me how special I was and that he cared about me. I hate to tell you this, Daphne, but your bother is a fuck boy.” I stand and march out of the coffee shop without another word.

Do I really think that’s what he is? No. But right now being angry with him is easier than dealing with how much I miss him.

chapter

thirteen

Redeem
MY HEART
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

DANE

It's been two weeks since Shelby walked out of my life. I think it's safe to say I'm losing my fucking mind. Thankfully the dogs keep me busy. I got three new ones just today.

I keep hearing those words she said to me about how doing what I'm doing with the dog sanctuary is not the actions of a man who is unable to commit. The same could be said about my time in the service. I had intended to be there until I died. Instead, my whole team got injured and sent home. Medical discharge.

Gravel crunches beneath the wheels of a car. No doubt one of my siblings. They've been all up my ass since the big "breakup." I've tried to explain it wasn't really a breakup because we weren't really a couple, but that sounds like a lie even to my ears.

My dad steps into the house. He's still an imposing guy, tall and barrel chested like Grady and me.

"Which one of them sent you?" I ask.

He chuckles. "More or less all of them." He lowers himself onto the sofa next to me.

That's the thing about having a tiny house, when you have company, you practically have to sit on top of each other.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly. I fucked up. As usual. That's the gist of it."

“Dane, how are you feeling since she walked out?”

“Like the sun stopped shining and I’ll never take a full breath again.”

“Do you know what that is?” he asks.

“I’m guessing guilt and shame for the way I hurt her.”

He reaches up and smacks me on the back of my head.

“Ow,” I say, rubbing the spot. “What was that for?”

“Don’t be an idiot. You are in love with that woman. That’s what you’re feeling.” He taps on my chest. “And it can be fixed.”

I clench my jaw hoping the tears won’t come.

“Son, you’ve been on your own in many ways longer than the other three. You’re a doer, I get it. But it doesn’t mean that’s all you can do. You do have the capacity to love and be loved just as much as anyone does.”

I shake my head, ignoring the fact that I’m crying like a goddamn baby in front of my father. “I’m not as strong as you are. I couldn’t lose a wife like you did.”

“Strength has nothing to do with it. You do what you have to do. Every day. That’s how you survive.” He subconsciously reaches for his left hand to twist the ring he took off just last year. “When your mother died, I thought I’d die with her. But I knew she’d kick my ass if I didn’t take care of you kids. Some days it was enough to say that y’all were home and fed.” He chuckles. “My bar was low.”

“But you’ve never wanted to date again or anything.”

“No, I had my happy ending. Now I get to sit back and watch you kids do it, and hopefully y’all will give me more grandkids than Taylor. She’s my pride and joy, but we could use more babies in this family.” He reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. “You should be a part of that. Don’t walk away from the best thing that’s ever happened to you because you’re afraid.”

Then he stands. “I’ll get out of your hair now. Let me know when the wedding is.” Then he leaves.

My dad, casually dropping wisdom like it’s nothing.

He’s not wrong. I am afraid. Scared to death of what would happen if I lost her. Not like this way, but in the permanent way. Losing my mom was hard. But watching my dad grieve her nearly tore me apart. I made a vow to myself back then that I’d never put myself in that position.

That was a child’s vow. I’m a man now, and I’d rather have one hour of bliss with Shelby Coleman next to me than to live the next forty years watching her build a life with another man.

I clean my face and then pick up my phone. I push the call button.

“What do you want?”

“Luna, hear me out. I fucked up.”

“No shit. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m guessing groveling will be involved.”

She chuckles. “Then it sounds like we’re off to a great start.”

“Where is she?”

“Oh, she’s with Eric. Over at Ace’s.”

“The fuck she is.”

“Go get her, Tiger,” Luna says, then disconnects the line.

chapter

fourteen

SHELBY

“I really appreciate you meeting with me,” Eric says.

“Of course. So how old is your sister?”

“She’s seventeen. She’s about to graduate and is weighing her options. But something with animals is what she’s wanting. I don’t think she wants to go to veterinarian school. She’s dyslexic and always struggled with classes.”

“That makes sense.” I push the brochures I grabbed for him across the table. “This should get her started, but then she’s welcome to text me with any questions. We have other options here in Saddle Creek too. There’s Rory’s farm and Great Dane’s, and she could potentially find jobs there.”

Even saying the name of his sanctuary feels like a knife to my heart. I’ve given up asking when the pain will stop. Instead, I’m embracing my melodramatic nature and moaning and sighing a lot when I’m home. I think Luna might be planning to shiv me soon.

There is some noise around us as Dane storms inside of Ace’s and marches right over to our table.

“You her husband?” Eric asks, repeating the question he taunted Dane with during the photo shoot.

“Not yet,” Dane growls. His features ssoftens when he looks down at me. “Sunshine, fuck I’ve missed you. I have things I need to say.” He scrubs a hand over his face, looking tired, haggard.

“So say them, and then Eric and I will get back to our date,” I say.

Dane’s eyes land on the brochures on the table. “You trying to make me jealous?”

I cross my arms over my chest and ignore his question.

“It’s working. I’m so jealous I’d like to beat his face in. But I’m not going to do that.”

“Appreciate that,” Eric says. “I’ll be leaving now. Thanks, Shelby and good luck.”

Instead of taking Eric’s place and sliding into the booth across from me, he drops to his knees right here in Ace’s.

“I messed up.”

“Yeah, you did. You know everyone is scared of being left. That’s not a you thing.”

He nods.

“My mom left me and my siblings. She didn’t die. She just walked away because she wanted to. Because she didn’t love us enough. You think that doesn’t make me afraid that I’m not lovable?” My voice cracks on the last question and I quickly take a swallow of my iced tea.

“You’re the most lovable person there is. So easy to love that I didn’t even recognize it at first. I watched my dad grieve when my mom died and he just ~~+~~ looked so broken. And here we are, nearly sixteen years since she’s been gone, and he hasn’t been on a single date. That kind of love seems terrifying. But I could no more have prevented myself from falling in love with you than I could have stopped breathing. You snuck up on me like a sniper.”

My heart is pounding, and I want to jump on the table and cheer, but we still have some kinks to work out.

“When I told you I’m not done with you yet, I didn’t mean it how it sounds.”

“Good because it doesn’t sound permanent.”

“Do you know that I’ve had the exact same breakfast every day since I was fifteen?”

I feel a bit like I have whiplash because, where did that come from? “What does that have to do with anything?”

“That I love monotony. I’m like that little kid, and my dad is behind me pushing my swing. I keep saying, ‘do it again, Daddy’ over and over again. Because I just can’t get enough. I’m not done yet.” He scratches at the back of his head. “I don’t know if I’m explaining this right.” He grabs my hands. “What I’m trying to say is that I love you. I’m *in* love with you. And I know with the same certainty that I’m going to have oatmeal with sliced bananas and walnuts tomorrow morning for breakfast that I’m going to love you forever.”

I lean forward and kiss him. “I love you too. You broke my heart.”

“I know, but I’ll never do it again. I promise that.”

We stand and embrace and then we’re kissing and people around us are whistling and shouting for us to ‘get a room.’

“It wasn’t a date, you know,” I say as we walk out, our fingers threaded together.

“You and Eric? Yeah, I know. I’m pretty sure he’s gay, so I wasn’t too worried.”

I smack him in the arm. “You ass.”

“Come home with me, Shelby, now and forever. Marry me. Have babies with me. Run a crazy non-profit dog sanctuary with me.”

“I will. To all of those things.” When we reach his truck, I look up at him. “Since we just had our first fight, does that mean we get to have make-up sex?”

“Fuck yes, it does.”



I hope you loved Dane and Shelby’s story. Please consider [leaving me a review](#). Want to see where Saddle Creek started?

Keep scrolling for an excerpt from **Dad Bod Cowboy**, Grady and Jess's book.

Ready for Luna's book? You can pre-order it now: **Banging the Drummer**

Other books in the Saddle Creek, TX: The Whitmores series

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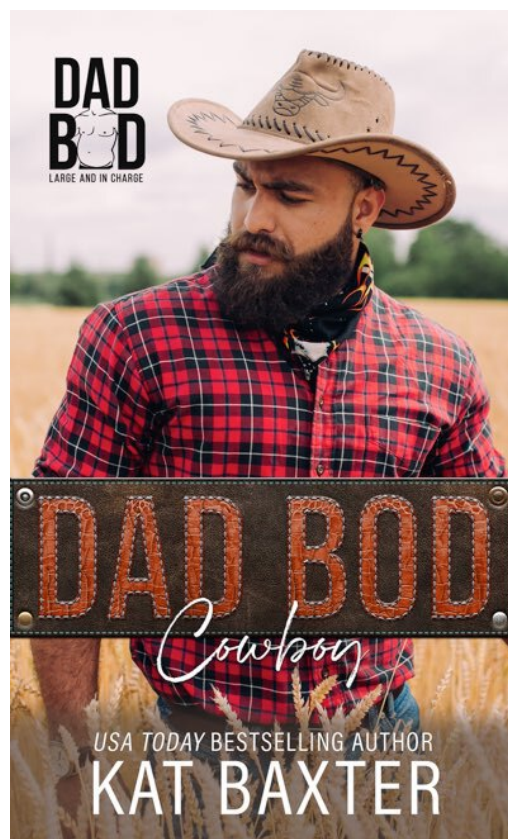
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excerpt from dad bod cowboy



JESS

I try not to use the word perfect anymore.

After growing up in the spotlight and trying so hard to be perfect for so long, I've been trying to embrace my imperfections.

Goodness knows, I have enough of them.

So when my friend Micah told me that he'd found the perfect spot for me to film my newest music video, I almost didn't come look at it.

But now that I'm here, I have to admit it. He's right. This spot is perfect.

I'm normally not a rule-breaker, but I've got to get closer to that tree. So I climb over the fence and jump down into the pasture. I pause for a moment waiting for some giant bull or something to come running towards me, but everything is still and quiet outside. The leaves on the giant oak tree rustle softly as a chilly morning breeze floats by.

I haven't quite reached the tree when I hear the distinct sound of hooves galloping. I look across the open expanse of the hilly pasture and a rider appears at the crest of a hill.

Even from this distance, I can tell two things. One, that man is commanding. There's no other way to describe it. He's in charge and he knows it. Two, he's not a small man and the horse is enormous. But there's so much competence and skill in the display that my breath catches.

I know the moment he sees me because his head tips and the cowboy hat sitting on his head tilts slightly. Then he changes course and rides in my direction.

My heart matches the tempo of the horse's footfalls and I feel breathless as the cowboy draws near. I'm originally from Texas. By the coast, so not in this vicinity, but still, I've seen men on horses before. I've never been affected by the mere sight of it though. Seriously though, can you ride a horse with swagger? Because this man is totally doing that.

And I am here for it!

As he gets closer, I can tell a couple more things about him. He's got massive thighs. Those wranglers are stretched to the limit across his muscular legs. He's frowning—okay, really that's a dead-on scowl—and despite that, he's the most ruggedly beautiful man I've ever seen.

He pulls his horse to a stop, then slides off with a thump of both of his booted feet on the ground.

I swallow thickly and just stand there waiting for what happens next. I imagine it just how I want it. For him to stride towards me, as he's doing now, with unrelenting purpose and intention. Then he's going to back me up until I'm pressed against the uneven bark of that big oak tree.

Then he's going to kiss me.

Have I mentioned I have an active imagination? It helps with songwriting. Yeah, so my mind is going wild, and then suddenly he's standing in front of me.

He's huge. Broad shouldered, barrel-chested and just thick everywhere. His pale blue eyes take in my appearance, which in truth is not all that special this morning. And his lip curls.

“Who the hell are you and what are you doing on my land?”

Read [Dad Bod Cowboy](#).

about the author



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR, Kat Baxter writes fast-paced, sweet & STEAMY romantic comedies. Readers have dubbed her “The Queen of Adorkable.” and her books “laugh-out-loud funny,” and “hot enough to melt your kindle.” She lives in Texas with her family and a menagerie of animals. Kat is the pseudonym for a bestselling historical romance author.

What readers have said about Kat’s books:

“Kat Baxter is my catnip!” ~ Goodreads review

“Whenever I need my sexy nerdy dirty talking romance fix, I know Kat Baxter has my back!” ~Goodreads review

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“You’ll instantly fall in love.” ~Goodreads review

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