



Ignite

MY HEART

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

ignite my heart

saddle creek, tx: the whitmores

book two

Kat Baxter



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A REVERSE GRUMPY-SUNSHINE/CURVY **Girl Romance**

Garrett

When Felicity Greer moves back to town, I have one plan: woo her, win her, wed her. It sounds simple enough, but she's not making it easy. For one, she keeps going out with other guys. Men, I know she has zero interest in. Thankfully we live in a small town and news travels fast, so I'm able to find her before the date goes too far. Yes, you could call it stalking, but I'm just staking my claim. Because this woman has been mine for years, it's just time for her to recognize it.

Felicity

Garrett Whitmore was the bane of my existence, long before he made it his life's mission to ruin my dating life. For a while there in high school, he was my friend and my secret crush. Then he started dating my best friend and I found out that he'd only been using me to get to her. Yeah, he's too nice a guy to ever say it to my face, but it still hurt finding out I was just the Designated Ugly Fat Friend. I fell for his easy charm once before. I don't know what he's playing at, but there's no way I'm making the same mistake twice ...

Ignite My Heart

Kat Baxter

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chapter **one**

GARRETT

When you live in a small town, life gets predictable. Each day is pretty much like every other day. It might sound boring, but for me it's perfect.

When I was kid, back before my mom got sick, she used to read us her favorite book from when she was a kid: Richard Scarry's *Busy, Busy Town*. Every page has different scenes from things that happen in a small town: people shopping, mail being sorted, trains arriving. Because it's a kids book, all the "people" are animals, but other than that, Busytown has always felt like Saddle Creek. I grew up knowing that my small town was perfect. So why would I ever want to live anywhere else?

Besides, Saddle Creek, Texas is a little slice of heaven. In the past couple of years, we've had honest-to-God celebrities have moved to town. My brother just married Jess Munoz. Yeah, *that* Jess Munoz. The pop princess. She could live anywhere in the world. If she thinks Saddle Creek is perfect, then I figure it is.

Secondly, I'm a firefighter. I get enough excitement at work. I like routine on my days off. I like to know what the day holds. I like knowing I can always get the perfect cup of

coffee at Ruthie's Diner. I like knowing that Nash makes the best homemade fudge in the world, and I can get it any day at The Candy Jar. I like that the hardware store in the town square carries anything I need for any project I'm working on.

My buddy, Jared, bought it a few years ago and named it "Bolts." I've been a regular in the store for a while. My visits increased, however, once I bought a fixer-upper a year ago.

This morning, Jared stands behind the worn wooden countertop, his massive arms crossed over his chest. He glares in the direction of the back of the store.

"Morning, sunshine," I quip as I step up to the counter.

Jared slowly turns to face me. "Fuck off."

I smile broadly. "Thanks, big guy."

"Delightful, isn't he?" Audrey says as she makes her way behind the counter. She tips her head up and gives her boss an exaggeratedly sweet smile.

Audrey is the quintessential "tomboy," and she's a savant when it comes to fixing anything requiring tools. She clearly annoys Jared, but he'd be an idiot to fire her since she helps anyone with just about anything.

She hip-checks Jared. "Did you not have enough children cross over your bridge this morning? Need another snack?"

I chuckle. "The customer service is why I come to this lovely establishment. So, is my sink in? Is that why you called?"

Audrey shakes her head and looks up at Jared.

"No sink yet. Just thought you might like to know about Felicity," he says.

My body goes still, and I stare at my buddy. “What about her?” Fuck, if he says she’s getting married, I’m gonna end up spending the day watching cartoons and eating ice cream directly out of the carton. Cookies and cream, in particular.

“She’s moved back,” Jared says nonchalantly as if that little nugget of information doesn’t completely change my life.

“To here? Saddle Creek? Felicity?”

Jared stares at me. “Did a beam fall on your head at work? What the fuck did I say?”

I exhale slowly. I bend over, my hands braced on my knees, and breathe in through my nose. I’m generally a pretty easy-going guy. I’ve been compared to a Golden Retriever more times than I can count, and I still haven’t decided if that’s a compliment. I’ve never been restless like my older brother, Dane. I’ve never been grumpy like my other older brother, Grady. I’m generally happy and satisfied with life.

“Is he having a panic attack?” Audrey asks.

“Fuck if I know.”

“I feel like one of those weird partly hairless dogs that shake a lot. You know the ones that look like they have their ears up in ponytails or whatever?”

“Japanese crested dogs,” Audrey says. “That was a pretty accurate description of them.”

I force out a tight chuckle. “Thanks.”

Audrey frowns. “Who’s Felicity?”

“The one he fucked up with,” Jared explains. “Which he could fix if he stops acting like a goddamn pussy. You’re a

fireman, for fuck's sake. Act like it." Jared sweeps past me as he walks to the back of the store.

I suck in a breath and follow after him. "When is she getting here? Do you know where she'll be living? Or working?"

Jared spins, and I run smack into him. "Calm the fuck down, Garrett. Christ on a cracker, man. I wouldn't have told you if I'd known you were going to act like an idiot about it."

"No. It's good that I know. Because now I can prepare. Plan the perfect way to sweep her off her feet."

"You've got this, Garrett," Audrey says from across the store. "Everyone in town loves you. You're sweet and funny and smoking hot."

Jared growls from beside me. "Get to work, Audrey. I don't pay your ass to flirt with the customers."

She rolls her eyes at him.

"Get yourself under control so you don't blow it. I'm not going to listen to you moon about that woman for the next twenty years."

"Kathleen lied to both of us," I explain. "I'm sure once Felicity knows the truth, she'll be ready for us to have our shot."

"Whatever you say. All I know is that by the time she left for college, she pretty much hated your ass."

"Because she wanted me," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You're so going to fuck this up, and I'm going to have to ban you from the store." Jared marches to the office in the back and pours himself a cup of coffee. He fixes a second one,

walks past me to the counter, and sets the other mug in front of Audrey.

“I can’t fuck this up, J. She’s got to give me a chance this time.” I scrub a hand down my face. “I’ve loved this woman since I was fifteen, and I didn’t fight for her the first time around. I won’t make that same mistake again.”

“You’re getting on my last fucking nerve,” Jared barks. “Stop panicking. You’ve got this.”

“You just said I was going to fuck it all up,” I say.

“Motivational speaking doesn’t seem to be your forte, big buy,” Audrey observes.

Jared growls in response.

“Thank fuck, Kathleen finally moved to Houston,” I say about my on-again-off-again ex-girlfriend. And good riddance. I was done once I found out she’d been lying to me for years. Hell, I’d only ever gone out with her in the first place because I couldn’t have Felicity. That sounds terrible, I know, but I was seventeen when we started dating, so it’s not like I was a logical man at the time.

“I’ve seen you run into a burning building without blinking. How is this the thing that gives you a panic attack?” Jared asks.

I shake my head. “Completely different. I have years of training and practice. I know exactly what to do when that happens. I know the plan.”

“So make a plan,” Audrey suggests.

I nod. “Yeah. Okay. I can do that. I can make a plan.

“Which is the exact same advice I gave you,” Jared grumps.

“Well, maybe if you’d stop glaring and growling at people, they’d listen to you.” Audrey stares at her boss over her mug of coffee as she takes a sip.

He tears his gaze from her and looks back to me. “You’re a firefighter. Women love that shit. Use that to your advantage.”

I mean, he’s not wrong. Women have changed their entire exercise path to ensure they walk past the fire station, especially when we’re outside washing the trucks. “Unless you can convince her to come to the station for a tour, I doubt she’ll see me in action, as it were.”

“Women in this town stage crises all the time so they can get rescued by firefighters. Isn’t that how your sister met her fiancé?”

I hold up a hand, closing my eyes to ward off any impromptu imaginings of Daphne and Fletch’s first encounter. “That was not staged. She locked herself out on her balcony.”

“Naked, is what I heard.” Audrey grins.

“Audrey, please. It’s my sister.”

Jared releases a rusty sound that may be a legit chuckle. “My point is, he came and rescued her, and the rest is history. You need to create a situation where you have to rescue her from a burning building or something.”

“Pretty sure that’s arson.”

Jared waves a hand. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

I may have an idea...

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chapter **two**

FELICITY

I never thought I'd come back to Saddle Creek, Texas. Yet here I am. Late for my first day at my new job. Well, technically, this is the same job I've had for the last five years, but now I'm working here in Saddle Creek instead of downtown Austin. My view from the window won't be the cityscape I'm used to. Now, it'll be the gentle rolling hills that surround my small hometown. Who would've thought my cushy office job in Austin would get relocated to such a small town?

I suppose this is what I get for working for two guys I grew up with. They would've let me stay in Austin to work. Yes, they officially moved the headquarters of H & J Funds to Saddle Creek once Hayes and JD, the two owners, decided to move back home.

It's not until I'm standing in the elevator heading up to my new third-floor office that I realize my shoes don't match. Well, they're the same shoe, but one is black and the other navy blue.

"Awesome," I mutter to myself.

Nothing I can do about it now.

As I walk to my office, I realize no one else is here. Anywhere. How is that possible?

I tilt my arm to see my watch, which spills coffee from my travel mug onto my pants leg. I'm not crazy early or super late, so I don't know where they are. Maybe there's a meeting somewhere I'm unaware of.

I'll see if I can find anyone after I put all my stuff on my desk and check my email. My nameplate is already on the door, and the room is unlocked for me. Handy since I haven't gotten my keys yet.

I set down my coffee and try, in vain, to wipe off the black droplets now speckling my pants. Blowing out a breath, I fall into the rolling chair behind the desk. At least it's comfortable. I decide to unpack my laptop and other items before going in search of people. Maybe they have a breakfast meeting downtown at the diner every Thursday?

I don't recall JD or Hayes saying anything, but memories of this town are sensitive for me, so I would likely tune out any mention of Saddle Creek.

When Hays and JD opened the new office here, they offered me a position. I was hesitant to take the job at first. Then, I mentioned the possibility of moving home to my mom. She was so over the moon excited about me moving back, how could I say no?

I took the job, packed up my place in Austin, and moved back home—back into the house I grew up in, no less—imagining that Mom and I would get to spend time together.

However, she had other plans.

Since she's newly retired from her teaching job, she has her heart set on traveling like she always dreamed of when I

was young. So now that I'm back home to look over the house and care for her cats—okay, technically, *our* cats—she's hit the road.

As soon as I agreed to move home, she booked a cruise. To Australia. She'll have weeks on the boat and two months Down Under.

I moved home to be near her, and all she saw was a glorified pet sitter.

I pinch my nose as a headache threatens. Caffeine will help. A door flings open down the hall as I reach for my coffee, followed by the thump of heavy booted steps.

“Yeah, I've got this floor,” a deep, masculine voice calls. Something is familiar about that voice, but I can't place it.

I wait, sitting behind my desk, and he comes into view. Holy hot fireman calendar! I'm pretty sure Mr. October just stopped in front of my new office. He's wearing full firefighter gear—at least, it looks that way to me. His helmet shield thingy is raised, giving me a glimpse of his masculine beauty.

He storms into the room and kneels beside my chair. A huge, gloved hand braces on one of the armrests, and he winks at me. “Don't you worry, ma'am. I'll get you out of this building safely.”

The wink solidifies my recognition. Mr. October is Garrett Whitmore. But before I can say anything to the bane of my high school existence, he tosses me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Probably way heavier than most bags of veggies, considering the extra weight on my five-and-a-half-foot frame. But that's too damn bad. I sure as hell didn't ask him to pick me up!

Then he's running—*running*—to the staircase. His beefy shoulder jars into my belly, and he takes us down the stairs. I'm so damn confused that I don't say anything, though my mouth is open and ready to spew words in his direction. I don't even know what to say.

Is the building under some kind of threat? I inhale deeply but don't smell smoke or gas.

“Is there something wrong with the building? I didn't see anyone else, but I don't smell smoke,” I huff.

“You're safe with me,” is all he says in response.

Garrett bursts out a door on the side of the building and sprints into a field where I see other firefighters, EMTs, and presumably my co-workers. He moves as far away from the building as possible, near a large shade tree. Judging from the amount of acorns littering the ground around us, it's an oak tree.

Finally, he sets me down, and my mismatched shoes land on the grass.

When he straightens, he's got a big, practiced grin on his face. He nods as if everything is settled.

“What in the actual hell is this?” I snap. He clearly doesn't recognize me, which pisses me right off.

“Nothing to worry about. Your company was participating in a training exercise for the local first responders. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Cooperation? He's clearly delusional. Surely, he can see I'm as mad as a hornet, not to be clichéd about the whole ordeal.

He steps closer, so I take a step back. My ass presses into the bark of the tree. He braces one arm against the tree beside my head and smiles.

Then he kisses me.

My mind spins out, and my head empties of coherent thought. That must be why I'm kissing him back. There's no other explanation for my lunacy.

Despite the impossible softness of his lips, the kiss is firm, open-mouthed, and sensual, even though he's not jamming his tongue down my throat,

I push him away.

Then I knee him in the balls.

He doubles over and falls to the ground. His "oofff" of pain is followed by a deep chuckle, and he looks up at me with his stupidly vivid blue eyes. "Welcome home, Felicity."

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chapter **three**

GARRETT

I pull myself up onto the exam table and wait for the doctor.

Fuck, my balls hurt.

But damn, if I'm not still grinning like a fool. I finally kissed Felicity. She might have kneed me in the nuts, but she kissed me back first. I'm counting that as a win. However, today didn't go exactly how I wanted it to. She didn't throw her arms around me and declare how much she missed me.

The door opens, and Doc West steps inside. "Who do we have... oh, for fuck's sake, Garrett." He rolls his eyes and shuts the door behind him.

Graham West is my dad's best friend. He's been this age—however old he is—my entire life. Gray strands thread through the brown hair at his temples. Same with his tightly trimmed beard. It gives him a distinguished look—until you get a peek at the tattoo sleeve on his left arm. Then you realize that while he may be a gentle giant, he's a badass too.

He leans his shoulder against the wall and stares at me.

"I know you told me not to come here anymore, but the truth is, I don't get sick and haven't needed to find a new

doctor yet. And, well, you've been my doc my whole life," I say sheepishly.

"I'm a pediatrician, Garrett. We've discussed this. More than once." He closes his eyes and shakes his head. "Well, you're here now. What's going on?"

"Uh, I got kneed in the balls."

His brow arches, and I swear he's hiding a smile. "I take it you deserved it?"

"Probably. But it still hurts like a motherfucker."

"I imagine so." He opens the door and pops his head out. "Carol, bring a cold bunny bag to room three, please." Then he closes it and sits on the rolling stool. "Want to tell me about it?"

I open my mouth to answer, but his nurse, Carol, enters. She hands him the cold bunny bag and promptly leaves. Jeez, I hope it's not an actual bunny. Doc West tosses it at me and looks meaningful at my crotch.

I place the bunny bag—which is essentially a crazy-cold bean bag stuffy—on my sore junk.

"You were going to explain how that happened," Doc West prods.

I blow out a breath. "I kissed a woman without permission. Which I know is dumb."

"Yes, it is. Yet, you're still grinning like a fool."

I grin. "It was totally worth it."

"Do I need to call your pops and have a chat with him? Do you need a reminder about consent and how to approach women respectfully?"

My grin drops, and I shoot him a glare. “No. I’m good.”

He nods. “All right then. Take that home with you. Alternate it with a bag of frozen peas. The tenderness should stop eventually.”

“You don’t need to examine me or anything? I mean, I don’t want any lasting damage.”

He rolls forward on his stool. “Did you just ask me to look at your dick, Garrett?” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Listen, I can recommend a urologist if you’re concerned, but you’ll have to drive to Austin.”

If I’m honest, it’s already feeling better with the cold pack on it. Probably the numbing effect. “You think it’s okay?”

“You drove yourself here, I take it?”

I nod. “I did.”

“And you walked in here without assistance?”

“Damn, Doc. Way to make me feel like a complete moron.”

“You’re the grown-ass man who came to me after being kneed in the nut sack.”

I hop down from the table, still holding the cold bunny to my crotch. “Thanks.”

“Find yourself an adult doctor.”

“I guess there’s no way I can convince you not to tell this story to my dad?”

“Fuck, no. You don’t get the privilege of doctor/patient confidentiality. And that,” he points at my dick, “is hilarious.”

I sigh and leave.

I head to the Coffee Cup, our local coffee house, to grab some caffeine and sugar after my visit to Doc West. I'm not one of those guys who works out because I like exercising or want to be built. My job dictates that I stay in shape, but for the most part, I do cardio and lift so I can eat whatever the fuck I want. Which means copious amounts of sugar.

I've always had a sweet tooth. For me, a balanced diet means ensuring my sweet has some salty and my texture has some smooth and crunchy. I'm a greedy motherfucker, and I want it all in one bite.

Shoving open the door, I head straight for the counter and order my usual drink and snack. I loiter near the counter to wait and check my phone for updates. There's a group text from my family.

Daphne: Fletch and I are gonna bring pumpkins out to Dad's place this weekend so we can all carve. Who all wants one?

Grady: Better get me three. Jess and Taylor will want one for sure, and they'll bully me into participating.

Dad: I'll do one.

Me: Get me two.

Daphne: Not if you're bringing Kathleen.

Me: It's not for Kathleen.

I pocket my phone because I know they'll only ask more questions, and I don't have time for that shit.

When I grab my stuff and turn to find a table, I see a pair of ice-blue eyes locked on me. I smile broadly at Felicity and head her way.

I reach her table in two long strides, and she grabs her coffee cup as if she's going to stand.

I place my hand on her arm, stalling her. "At least finish your drink. If you want to leave after that or want me to leave, I will."

Felicity nods.

"Want a donut or something? They've got great pastries here," I tell her.

"No," she says with a tight chuckle. "I haven't managed to get rid of the freshman thirty, so I sure don't need any sugar."

"You look great, Felicity." I let my eyes roam over her form. I can't see much with her sitting there, but I want her to know I like what I see.

She takes a sip, then hums. "So, how are your nuts?"

I wink. "Little sore. Not gonna lie. They'd probably feel a bit better if you kissed them."

Her laughter swirls in the air around me. "Don't hold your breath."

"Have dinner with me."

Her laughter dissolves instantly. Those endless blue eyes widen, and she shakes her head. "I can't."

"Lunch, then."

“No, uh, I have a man. A friend who’s a man. A boyfriend,” she finally says.

“In Austin?” I try to ignore that the single bite of my donut has turned to ash in my stomach.

“Nope. He’s here.”

“Saddle Creek? Do y’all work together then? Move here together?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “He’s a local. It’s new. But we’re together for sure.” She stands. “I gotta get back to the office. Nice catching up with you.”

“Right.”

I’m fairly sure she’s lying. Why? I don’t know, but I’m not giving up on her that easily. Without a doubt, we belong together.

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chapter **four**

FELICITY

“I need a huge favor.”

“What’s that?” Jared asks, filling the vintage brand chewing gum display by the register.

“I need you to pretend to be my fake boyfriend.” I say it so quickly it comes out in a jumble of syllables.

Jared stands to his full height and stares at me. “Do I even want to know why?”

“The why seems irrelevant. Either you’ll do it or not.”

He continues to stare at me. “Have you been gone from here for so long that you’ve forgotten we’re related?” He waves his hand between us. “Felicity, you’re my cousin.”

“This is a small town. People don’t care about stuff like that,” I say dismissively.

“Stuff like incest?” His brows raise, practically crawling into his hairline. “Pretty sure they do. I know I fucking do.”

“And it’s not like we’re first cousins. Besides, it would help get Audrey’s attention. Make her good and jealous.”

Jared's thick arms cross over his chest. "Why would I want to make Audrey jealous?"

I narrow my gaze at him. "Do you not know *why* you would want to do that?"

"I don't want to do that."

I quirk an eyebrow at him and mimic his arms-crossed posture. I've been back in town for less than a week, and even I sense the tension between Jared and Audrey. I'm not exactly known for picking up on social cues, so if I'm picking up on the tension, there's legit chemistry. "I think you might."

"You're crazy," he says, pointing a meaty finger at me.

"So is that a no on pretending to be my boyfriend?"

"Yes, it's a no! Now tell me why you think you need one."

I exhale slowly. "It would make it easier to deal with Garrett."

"Why? What did you tell him?"

"That I couldn't go out with him because I had a boyfriend."

"That's dumb."

"Thanks."

"So why not tell him the boyfriend lives back in Austin?"

"Because I said he lived here in Saddle Creek."

Jared looks at me like I've sprouted another head. "Why the fuck would you do that?"

"I panicked, okay? I didn't know what to say, and he put me on the spot."

"The spot for what?"

“He asked me out.”

“And?” Jared prods.

I shrug, unwilling and unable to explain the turmoil that Garrett asking me out stirred up inside me.

“And coming up with this asinine story was better than going out with him or telling him no?”

Obviously, I wish I’d just told him no.

In a perfect world, he wouldn’t have asked. I would’ve felt nothing in response. I could’ve given him a polite, indifferent reply, and we both would have gone about our lives.

But he asked. I panicked. I felt ... things. I panicked some more. I lied. I lied some more. And now I’m in this ridiculous situation. With Jared still giving me *that* look. The one that implies he sees right through me and knows exactly how daft I am.

“I cannot go out with Garrett,” I snap.

“Why not? He’s delicious,” Audrey says as she enters the room.

Jared glares at her.

“Better than your grumpy ass,” she mutters. “At least Garrett is friendly and smiles once in a while. Uses more than one syllable words.”

See? This is what I mean about the tension between them. Crackling!

I look down at my phone to avoid eye contact with either of them.

“If you need a date, Felicity, there’s no shortage of hot, single guys here. They’re not all as brave as a fireman like

Garrett, and some of them no doubt have rocks for brains”—she shoots a glare at Jared—“but you can certainly find a date.”

I give her a hopeful smile. “Don’t suppose you have a brother?”

She chuckles. “I do. Andrew Riggs is my older brother.”

“Oh, shit. The movie star? I didn’t even realize that was your last name.”

Audrey snorts. “Well, he’s not the movie star. His ass is. But yeah, that’s him.”

“He was ahead of me in school, but I remember him being a decent guy.”

Jared snorts but says nothing as he returns his focus to the display of gum like it holds the secrets of the universe.

“Will it do me any good to encourage you to give Garrett a chance?” Audrey asks.

I shake my head. “No, but I do thank you for trying to help. Garrett and I have a not-so-friendly past, and I’d prefer not to dig up old skeletons my first week back in Saddle Creek.”

Audrey rubs her hands together. “Ooh! Skeletons? That sounds interesting.”

“Trust me. It’s not. Just an ordinary tale of a girl with a crush on her best friend’s boyfriend. It was a classic girl-likes-boy, boy-is-too-nice-and-unwittingly-leads-her-on story.”

Beside me, Jared gives a huff.

I ignore him because Jared is always huffing about something.

But Audrey elbows him in the side. “What?”

He looks up at me, scowling. “That’s not how I remember it, is all.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure my memories are more vivid. Seeing how it was my life.”

He snorts. “It didn’t happen the way you think it did.”

I prop a hand on my hip. “Oh, so you think you know something I don’t?”

Jared shrugs.

“Okay, fine, oh, wise and all-knowing Jared, tell me what really happened.”

He pins me with a look. “You talk to Garrett about this yet?”

“No.”

“Well, you need to.” Before I can protest, Jared holds up his hands in a sign of surrender. “I’m not meddling in this mess until you’ve talked to him.”

“Hey, gorgeous. Fancy meeting you out here on the street,” Garrett says.

I roll my eyes while simultaneously fighting a stupid grin.

Don’t do it, Felicity. Don’t fall for his easy charm again. Last time, you had to leave town with your heart in pieces.

“Do people still say ‘fancy’ in that way?” I quip.

“Oh, I do. I’m also a fan of ‘dig it’ and ‘groovy’ if you’re looking for other phrases to toss about for fun.”

This time, I do laugh because I just can't help it. "Why are you like this?"

I find myself walking side-by-side with him down Main Street in our hometown.

"So, tell me more about your boyfriend," he says.

I shake my head. "No. There's no reason for that."

"Why?"

"Because you and I are not friends."

"Ouch." He puts a hand on his chest. "That one hurt. I know we haven't kept in touch since you left after graduation, but it doesn't mean I don't consider you a friend."

"I'm sure Kathleen would have all kinds of things to say about that."

His eyes go hard. There's no other way to describe it. "I'm sure she would. But I don't give a fuck what Kathleen has to say."

Something in the fierceness of his tone strikes a chord in me. It's so unlike him. Garrett is the most easygoing guy in the world. The kind of guy who never has a bad thing to say about anyone. But there's nothing easy-going about this sudden hard edge.

Maybe he finally saw her for the conniving person I knew her to be. I don't know. I heard they broke up, but I stopped paying attention to news about Garrett Whitmore a long time ago—around the time of my high school prom.

"Well, I'm just saying that if this boyfriend of yours hasn't given you a gold band of some kind, I feel I should be able to toss my hat in the ring, so to speak." He pauses to look at me.

“Go out with me, Felicity. Let me show you what we could be together.”

His voice is so earnest. I want to say yes. I want to say screw the past and let’s see where this goes. But I know better. I know how things go between Garrett and me, and I’m not going down that road again. “I’m not going to go on a date with you.”

“So y’all are serious? If you tell me you’re serious and in love with this mystery boyfriend, I’ll back off.”

“It’s not that. But I’m not going to date two people at once. I’m not the type to lead someone on.”

“Okay, so we won’t go on a date. But let me buy you a cup of coffee. It’s technically not a date if it’s only liquids.”

I stop and look at him. “Did you just make that up? Right now?”

His lips quirk in a grin, and he shrugs. The whole movement is all “aww, shucks, ma’am,” and sadly, it’s totally charming and endearing.

“Pretty sure coffee is still a date. Besides, I don’t have time for coffee.”

He frowns at me, looks at the shop we’re standing in front of, then looks back at me with raised brows. “Isn’t this the coffee shop? Why are we having this conversation outside the coffee shop if you don’t have time for coffee?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. Think, Felicity! “I’m meeting him here. That’s why?”

Garrett grins and rubs his hands together. “Great. I can meet him too.” He opens the door.

“Wait. What?”

He motions to the opened door. “After you.”

“I want to know what the hand rubbing was about. Are you a cartoon villain?”

He laughs. “Nope. I’m just excited to meet the man who has stolen you from me. Need to size him up and see what I’m up against.” He looks around the coffee shop.

I do the same and am mortified when the booths and tables are filled with Saddle Creek’s seniors. Not of the high school variety. But of the gray-haired, cane-wielding, “what did you say?” kind. Clearly, I can’t pawn myself off on any of these elderly gentlemen and pretend we’re dating.

How is this my life?

“So...” Garrett winks at me. “I know, based on the number of women in this town who hit on my dad and Doc West, that plenty of women in their twenties and thirties don’t mind an age gap. But I’m thinking this takes it a little too far.”

I blow out a noisy breath. “He’s not here yet. He’s probably running late. So you should just go about your day. No need to wait for him.” I try to shoo him away, but of course, he doesn’t budge.

“I don’t mind waiting. I’ve been waiting for you a long damn time, Felicity. I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

I roll my eyes. “This is ridiculous. Why can’t you let this go? Why can’t you stop pretending that you’re into me?”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“It’s happened before.”

He opens his mouth to respond, and his phone buzzes. He pulls it out of his pocket, and his jaw tightens. “I have to go, but we’re not done with this conversation.” He turns, then

pauses. “I don’t think there’s another guy. A boyfriend. I think you made him up because you’re afraid to go on a date with me.” He runs his hand down my arm and then links our fingers. “I think you’re afraid I’ll sneak in if you let your guard down. I think you’re afraid to give us a shot.”

I swallow hard. “There is no us.” My words come out in barely more than a whisper.

“You keep telling yourself that.”

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

chapter **five**

FELICITY

A knuckle raps on my office door and I look up to see one of my bosses, JD Granger, standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Felicity, can you chat?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

He pulls my door partially closed, but doesn’t snick it shut.

“Uh-oh, am I in trouble?” I ask.

A shake of his head and a chuckle let me know that this isn’t going to be a reprimand.

“How’re you settling in? Have everything you need in the office?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s been great. It’s almost just like Austin. Until I go outside.” I chuckle.

“Oh, that’s good. I still haven’t managed to convince Chelsea to move to this office.”

“She’s running things pretty much in Austin,” I say of JD’s assistant.

He nods. “She’s incredibly competent.”

“What’s going on, JD?”

He blows out a breath. “Hayes and I were talking and you don’t seem happy. You’re a great employee, one of our very best, and we want you to be happy. We’ve seen you at work when you’re happy and something is not working for you here. So what can *we* do for you?”

“Wow,” I say dumbly. “That’s very kind. It’s not work. I’m just struggling to get back into the swing of things. Being back home.”

“Things rough with your mom?” JD asks.

I laugh. “My mom is having the time of her life. Meanwhile I’m in my childhood twin bed taking care of her two geriatric cats while she’s on a cruise.” Then I wince. “I don’t mean to sound grateful. My mother worked her ass off to put me through college on a single mom’s salary. I just thought I’d be coming home to hang out with her.”

“I completely get what you’re saying. I mean I moved home and both of my sisters are married, which is weird because frankly I wasn’t sure they would ever find anyone. And I’m so damn happy for both of them because they deserve to be loved and blissfully married,” he says the last word through his teeth. “Just like Hayes.”

“Why’d you move back here then? You were happy in Austin, right?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah, I was. But I’d always planned to move back here. I thought it would be to help Emmy and Lily, but turns out things are swapped with that. They help take care of me now. Saddle Creek is home though, ya know?”

Saddle Creek is home. Why did that feel so right when he said it like that?

“Sorry, I got derailed by my personal drama.” He chuckles. “Back to you. Your productivity is down this week, which is understandable since you just moved in and you’re still getting settled. And frankly you’re already more productive than most of the other analysts who do a similar job. I just want to make sure there’s nothing we can do to make things easier on you.”

“Well, unless you want to pretend to be my fake boyfriend so I can get this other guy to back off, then I don’t think you can help.” I laugh.

But JD is not laughing with me. He’s frowning. “Is someone harassing you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. He’s harmless, I can promise you. He’s just asked me out a couple of times and in a panic I told him I was dating someone and...”

“You’re not,” JD adds.

“Exactly.”

“You sure he’s not being inappropriate in any way with you? Because men should know to take no for an answer.”

“He’s the exact opposite. Charming. Adorable. Sweet. I’m just—” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I can take you on a fake date if that’s what you need to get him to leave you alone though,” JD says.

“Are you sure? Because I was mostly kidding considering you’re my boss.”

“No problem there. We don’t have any anti-fraternization policies at the company.” He holds his hands up and shakes his head. “Not that we’ll be fraternizing.”

I laugh. “It’s fine, JD, really.”

“How about we go out for dinner and we can make it look like a date in case anyone tells him?” he suggests.

“This won’t get in the way of your social life?”

He huffs. “All I do is work. I left my social life back in Austin and frankly I’m too tired to go out drinking like I used to. And I’m over the whole one-night-stand hook-up thing.”

“You sure?”

“If it’ll give you peace of mind, then yeah, let’s do it.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Am I going to ridiculous extremes to not go out with Garrett? Yes, yes, I am. But that man has the power to break my heart for good and I’m not ready to face that right now.

JD stands. “I’ll text you the details.”

“Sounds good.”

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chapter **six**

GARRETT

It is wrong to crash another man's date. I know this. Yet, here I am, with my sister in tow.

“Good thing Fletch is at the station tonight, huh?” Daphne says.

“I suppose. I'm going to regret asking you to do this with me, aren't I?”

“Probably. But I am going to enjoy the hell out of it.”

“Awesome.”

“I remember liking Felicity. I was pretty young though. Not even in high school yet,” Daphne says.

“You did like her. The few times she came over then you were all over her wanting make-up tips and asking questions about hair products.” I chuckle. “I'd actually forgotten about that.”

“You're probably just trying to block out everything involving the evil one.”

I bark out a laugh then shoot my sister a look. “I know she's not a nice person, but you can't call Kathleen ‘the evil one.’”

“Why not? You knew who I was talking about.”

“Because it’s not nice.”

“You don’t have to always be the nice guy, Garrett. When we get to Gator’s, you can march yourself up to their table and tell him to fuck off. That Felicity is your woman and you’re not putting up with this nonsense.”

I’m quiet for a minute as I let my sister’s words settle into me. I could do that. But I probably won’t. I just want to see them together. I’ll know if it’s a real date or not if I can see them.

“I know you’re not going to do that,” Daphne says. “Because you’re not that guy. You’re the very best of mom and dad, you know.”

I reach over and grab her hand. “Shit, Daph, don’t make me cry like a damned baby before I get there.”

She squeezes my hand back and then I’m parking in front of Gator’s, home of the best Cajun food you’ll find west of the Louisiana border.

JD and Felicity should be well into their “date” by the time Daphne and I arrive. We’ve barely walked into the door and I already see them. Sitting at a table for two in the window that overlooks the sprawling back of the restaurant grounds where they’ve hosted weddings and other events before.

They’re both laughing and I’m caught in a trance staring at them trying to determine if that man has caught Felicity’s heart. It would break mine to know that, but if he made her happy, I’d be okay eventually.

Daphne and I worked up two plans for tonight. Plan A, we get a table hopefully near there’s so I can be sorta eavesdrop

on their date. Plan B, I speak to them briefly and we order food to go.

I grab my sister's arm. "Plan B. I'm going to need some bread pudding with my order." Then I turn and head towards Felicity and JD's table. "Hey, you two."

"Fancy seeing you here, Garrett," Felicity says.

She smiles up at me and she's so breathtakingly beautiful in that moment that I'm nearly at a loss for words. She's got a slate-colored sweater, shirt thing on that gives a tasteful but delicious view of her cleavage. It definitely brings out the grey in her striking eyes. Her dark hair falls around her shoulders in ebony waves.

"You look so beautiful," I say before I can think otherwise. Then I try to recover and hold my hand out to JD with what I hope is a genuine smile. "JD, good to see you, man."

"You too, Garrett." He glances at Felicity.

I put a thumb over my shoulder. "My sister, Daphne, and I came to pick up some food to go."

"Best food in town," JD says.

"Looks like you've got the best company in town too," I say because I am a fucking moron. I knock my knuckles on their table, and step back. "Y'all have a good night. See you around." I wave to a few people across the restaurant, then make my way over to my sister.

"How'd it go?"

"I am a fucking Golden Retriever."

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chapter **seven**

FELICITY

“So, I take it that Garrett Whitmore is the man that keeps asking you out?” JD asks.

I sigh. “Yes. I didn’t realize y’all were friends.”

“Not friends, but we do know each other. I think I’m closer to his brother, Grady’s age. Can I ask why you don’t want to go out with him? He’s a really great guy.”

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me. And you know, honestly, it’s what I would have said about him too. Before something stupid happened in high school and I guess I’m holding a grudge.” I wince.

“I tried to pierce my ear with a safety pin in high school,” JD says. “We aren’t the smartest creatures at that age.”

I laugh at that. “That is a really good point.”

Maybe I should stop being so stubborn and at least tell Garrett the truth. We don’t have to date, but maybe we could be friends again.

I leave my “date” with JD—which was more like a work meeting—and head straight to the address JD mentioned.

Evidently, Garrett bought the old Hightower house and is doing all the work himself.

I remember the Hightower house from when I was a kid, a creepy old Victorian on the corner of a block with a wrought iron fence wrapping around the entire property.

When we were kids, we'd all dare each other to go Trick-or-Treating there. But after old man Hightower died, the house just sat there crumbling under the weight of the hot Texas sun. I always loved this house, even when it was spooky and kids had to dare me to walk past it. Even when it was empty and seemed destined to be torn down.

Even at its worst, the house fascinated me—with its vast wrap around porch, curved glass windows, and third story widow's walk. There was something about it that seemed equal parts elegant and ridiculous.

Knowing that someone is taking care of the house and nurturing it back to life fills me with joy. Knowing that it's Garrett who has taken on the crazy, quixotic task?

I don't even know what to do with all the emotions that makes me feel.

It's dark outside so I probably can't fully appreciate the work that Garrett has done on the place, but I immediately notice the front yard is trimmed and tidy.

As far as I can tell, the gingerbread trim has been stripped and sanded but not repainted. But the slats making up the house look like they might be a crisp white.

I park my car and turn off the engine, staring out the windshield.

A knock sounds on the window next to my head, scaring the hell out of me. I shriek and turn, finding Garrett standing

there. Half-naked, sweaty, shirtless Garrett. My mouth goes dry, and my eyes are probably popping out of my head like a cartoon character.

Still, I blatantly check out the masculine torso outside my car door. The muscles are not surprising. Garrett was a football star in high school, so he's always been a big guy. It's the ink combined with the muscles and the light sprinkling of brown hair. It's a blatant reminder that he's no longer a high school kid. Nope, he's fully grown and stupidly attractive.

He opens my door. "Not that I don't appreciate that look in your eye, but to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Have you always talked like that?"

He grins and gives me that "aw, shucks, ma'am" shrug he seems to have mastered. "Come on. Get out of the car, and I'll show you around."

A pair of protective goggles are pushed up into his hairline, and a fine sheen of sawdust speckles his bare skin like some sort of manly glitter.

Good grief, how do I turn off this part of my brain?

I do what he suggests because I need to tell him the truth about not having a boyfriend or give in and go out with him. One or the other.

Damned if I don't want to do the "other.". Of course, that's probably the pervy, horny part of me speaking because I think he may look even better from behind. I've always loved a well-defined, muscular back. The wide shoulders and the narrow waist. His jeans ride low on his hips, and when he walks, I get a peek at the waistband of his underwear.

I try to convince myself that he's wearing tights-whities like it will somehow diminish his attractiveness. But I know,

without a doubt, that he'd even make those look sexy.

He leads me through the iron gate and closes it behind me. A large oak tree towers over me to my right with heavy, swooping branches. Perfect for climbing. But I'm way past the age of climbing trees.

"How long have you owned this? I ask.

"Um, I bought it three years ago, I guess."

"And you live here all by yourself?"

"Yeah. I have a lot of rooms I can fill."

I smile. "You planning to start a halfway house?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of falling in love and making a lot of babies."

That sentence shouldn't be the least bit arousing. Yet I find my nipples beading painfully inside my bra at his words. I swallow. "A lot, huh? How many is a lot?"

He looks over his shoulder at me, and his eyes drop briefly to my stomach. "As many as my wife will give me."

I follow him around the side of the house and into the backyard, where he's got one of those hanging lanterns lighting up a sawhorse and some lumber.

"I'm replacing most of the molding inside," he explains, nodding to the woodwork. "Just have another few cuts to make tonight, and I'll be done. I try not to run the power tools out here too late in case it annoys the neighbors."

"Have you always wanted a fixer-upper?"

"I've always liked working with my hands. My schedule at the firehouse gives me time to work on other things, so it seemed like a good fit."

“Well, I’ve only seen the outside, but the yard looks amazing. I bet you’ll have tons of kids Trick-or-Treating on Halloween night.”

He grins at me. “Want something to drink?” He nods to the porch behind me. “I’ve got a cooler up there. Help yourself.” He lowers his safety goggles. “Let me finish with this so I don’t forget what I was doing.”

I step onto the porch, and a breeze flutters through my hair. After grabbing a bottle of water, I sit in one of the two heavy Adirondack chairs. I can see myself sitting on this porch with a cup of coffee, looking out at the well-maintained landscape behind the house. It’s unsettling how right this moment feels.

I watch Garrett doing manual labor, the play of his muscles in his back as he bends over the saw horse.

Pretty sure that noise I just heard was the unlocking of a new kink.

The question is... is it shirtless home improvement on the whole or just Garrett Whitmore. I squeeze my eyes shut so my brain won’t answer that question.

He makes a cut on a board, followed by another, jotting down a note in the small spiral notebook he pulls from his back pocket. His determined stride toward the porch puts my entire body on alert. I ignore the pang of disappointment that rockets through me when he goes to his cooler and gets a drink before lowering his broad body into the adjacent Adirondack.

We sit in companionable silence for a while, drinking from our chilled bottles of water.

“JD is a good guy,” Garrett finally says.

I chuckle. “You know, he said the same about you.”

“That’s always good to hear.”

“Seems like everyone around here thinks you’re not just a good guy but the best guy,” I say.

“Everyone but you.” His words linger in the quiet around us.

“What if I’m the one who’s wrong?”

He glances at me. “How do you figure?”

There’s nothing accusatory in his expression. Instead, he has subtle lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes. Permanent etches into his skin are concrete proof of how much this man smiles.

It hits me then and nearly knocks the wind from me. I’ve been playing the victim. I almost groan as the realization settles into my bones. Garrett didn’t wrong me. Yes, he was friendly. Yes, he flirted. But he never made *me* any promises. I heard the rumor he was going to ask me out, but it never happened, and I’ve blamed him for years.

I snort. *Over dramatic much, Felicity?*

“I’m just saying that maybe I perceived things a certain way, but it’s not actually how it happened.”

“I feel like you’re speaking in riddles,” he says with a chuckle.

“Jared says I’m wrong about you. He says I don’t know the full story about Kathleen and everything she did. We could pretend I haven’t been back in town for nearly two weeks, making a mess of things. We could just catch up. Like old friends.” I offer him a grin.

I’m gifted with a genuine smile in return. “We can do that.” He holds a hand out to me. “Welcome home, Sassy

Pants.”

I laugh because it’s been years since he’s called me that. “I’d forgotten about that nickname.”

“I hadn’t. The truth is you don’t know the full story about Kathleen. Still, nothing she did or said changes that I dated her. On and off for nearly a decade. That’s on me.”

“So, will you tell me? What happened? Because from my side of things, it looked and felt like you and I were on track to becoming more than friends. I heard rumors you were going to ask me to Homecoming, and the next thing I knew, you were dating my best friend.” I barrel on before he can answer. “I know this is all water under the proverbial bridge, so we don’t have to rehash it if you don’t want to. And frankly, you don’t owe me an explanation. I’m sorry that I’m only realizing that now.”

“I want to tell you. Kathleen should have come clean to you herself, but it took her nearly nine years to tell me everything.”

I nod. “Well, Kathleen was always self-centered. It didn’t bother me through most of our friendship because I was comfortable being in the background. I didn’t need to be in the spotlight like she did. I was content to carry her water, so to speak. Until you.”

Garrett sighs. “I’m sorry if I screwed up y’all’s friendship.”

“Oh, please. It was never more than a mean girl and her minion. Well, that and our moms were friends, which is how things truly got started.”

“I was going to ask you to Homecoming. I made the mistake of asking Kathleen’s opinion on something. Frankly I

don't even remember specifically what it was. Something about your favorite color or song, probably. In any case, she told me that you didn't see me like that. To you, I was more a brother or cousin like Jared. Then she told me that even if I did ask and you said yes, it wouldn't matter. She knew I was looking for forever, and she said you were hell-bent on leaving this town as soon as you graduated, so I'd be lucky if I made it to prom night with you."

Even hearing those words from his mouth for the first time, I can imagine Kathleen saying them.

"For the record, I never saw you as a brother or cousin or anything like that. I liked you. A lot."

He swallows, and I watch his Adam's apple roll in his throat. "I wish I hadn't been a pussy and asked you to the dance."

"Instead, you took Kathleen." Saying the words came with an echo of the pain from that night. Seeing my best friend dance with the boy I'd crushed on so hard.

"I did. I was seventeen and an idiot. I guess I wanted to believe the best of her. And she was right about one thing. I was looking for forever, and you did leave as soon as graduation was done."

"So why didn't you marry her?"

He laughs. "So many reasons. My family never liked her. I was never in love with her. We got on okay for a while. Then we drove each other crazy. The first time I broke up with her was nearly two years after we started dating. We stayed apart for years after that. Then, one stupid night, I had a bit too much to drink, and we hooked up. Then she told me she got pregnant, so we got back together."

“Shit. I didn’t know any of that.”

He lifts one of those bare shoulders, and I want to trace the colors of ink decorating his tanned skin.

I lean closer and realize what the tattoo is. “Um, is that the fireman cat from Richard Scarry?”

He tilts his head, glancing at his shoulder, and grins. “Yep.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Okay, I clearly need a tour of all of your ink, but let’s get the rest of this conversation over with.”

“We can absolutely do that.”

It occurs to me at that moment that I may have just asked to see him naked, and from how his pupils swallow the color of his eyes, he’s on board with that plan.

“Where was I?” he asks.

“Pregnant?”

He rolls his eyes. “Right. She wasn’t pregnant. She was trying to get me back, I guess. I don’t know why. We were never in love. Not really. I mean, I cared about her since she was a big part of my life for a while. But I was never *in love* with her, and I know she never loved me.”

“How do you know that?” I can’t help but ask.

“Because she was never faithful to me. She had other guys on the side the entire time we were together. It’s why I broke up with her the first time. I found out she slept with this guy from Kerville’s football team.”

He sighs, and there’s so much weight in that single noise. So much heaviness and emotion that all I want to do is crawl

into his lap and hug him. I've never sat on a man's lap, and I'm not about to start tonight, but the urge is there, nonetheless.

“I told her I wouldn't marry her until we were able to do a paternity test. I never touched her that entire time. Eventually, it became clear that she wasn't pregnant.” He shakes his head. “I don't know if she ever was, to be honest. But our last fight is when everything came out about you.”

“Me? But by then, I'd been in Austin for years.”

“Doesn't mean anything had changed for me. She knew that. She was always insanely jealous of you.” He drains his water bottle and chucks it into a plastic recycle bin on the other side of him. “For good reason too. It was always you that I wanted. She was never my first choice.”

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chapter eight

GARRETT

I watch Felicity suck in a breath, and her eyes widen.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asks.

“Anything.”

“Why did you kiss me that day after the rescue training?”

My cheeks heat as I think about that entire day. “I kissed you because I’d wanted to do that for years. But I do have a confession to make.”

“You didn’t know it was me, did you?”

I laugh. “It’s so much worse than that.”

She surprises the hell out of me when she stands and walks over, climbing into my lap. Immediately, my arms go around her as she leans into my chest.

But the moment this woman settles into my body, everything around me stills. There’s an overwhelming feeling for a brief second that everything is right in the world. Wars stop, famines fade, and diseases are cured. It’s an absurd thought, but that’s how right Felicity Greer feels in my arms.

“Not only did I know who you were, I planned the entire thing. Well, not that kiss. That was pure instinct. But the whole emergency training situation was for me.”

She turns her face and looks up at me, and those fucking blue eyes pin me with their vibrancy. “What were you trying to do?”

I lean forward and press a kiss to her hair, inhaling the sweetness of her shampoo. “Impress you. I knew you’d moved back, and I wanted to start over. I wanted you to see me in a different light than in high school.”

She laughs. “So you figured dressing up in your hot fireman uniform would be the way to do it?”

I shrug. “That was my hope.”

“I may—for a brief moment—have thought you looked like you’d walked off the pages of a fireman calendar.”

“Oh, yeah?” I can’t help my wide grin.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t let it go to your head, Hot-shot.”

“I’m just trying to get the girl.”

Our gazes lock, and this time, it’s her that kisses me. Her arms wind around my neck as she re-situates herself on my lap. There’s zero chance she won’t feel the erection to end all erections now poking her in the ass.

Her lips part, and her tongue slides across mine. I tighten my hands on her, and we’re full-on making out. Kissing Felicity is better and hotter than anything I’ve ever done with another woman. Acknowledging that solidifies the belief that this woman is meant to be mine.

I bought this house for her. Maybe I didn’t acknowledge that until this very moment, but it’s the truth. I knew she had a

fondness for this old Victorian.

She ends the kiss, and we're both breathing hard, staring into each other's eyes.

"We could go inside," she suggests.

"Yes. Definitely."

Felicity stands from my lap, and I don't bother trying to hide my hard-on as I come to my feet. Her eyes take a leisurely stroll down my body, and fuck if it doesn't feel like an actual touch. Then she licks her lips, and I nearly spill in my fucking jeans like a goddamn kid.

I grab her hand and pull her with me. "I haven't started working on the upstairs yet. So I've been using one of the parlors down here as a makeshift bedroom because it has a bathroom right next to it."

I turn to her, and she runs her hands up my chest. The motion scrapes sawdust up my torso, reminding me I was a hot, sweaty mess when she arrived.

I still her hands. "I should probably take a shower and wash all the wood and dust off me. And, uh, I'd invite you to join me, but the shower is the size of a coat closet." I pull her into the room I'm sleeping in for the time being.

"Oh, my God, your bed is made," she exclaims.

"I turn to face her. "Is that bad?"

Her laughter floats through the room, and holy shit, I'm such a goner for this woman. Everything about her lights up when she laughs. Her eyes get brighter. Her smile is blinding as her lips part, and color blooms in her cheeks. Listen to me, I've become a fucking poet. Not a very good one, but whatever.

“No, it’s not bad. It’s just such a good boy thing to do.” A wave of sadness crosses her features. “I’m sorry I misjudged you for so long.”

“Hey, no. That’s not what happened.” I pull her into my arms again. “We were kids, Sassy. Maybe, I would’ve fucked it up if we’d gotten together in high school. Maybe this is how our story was supposed to go all along.”

“You’re so certain?”

“About you? I am now. I may have doubted for a while after you moved away, but now you’re home... now you’re in my arms, I’ve never been more certain about anything in my entire life. I’ll give you whatever time you need, Felicity, but I intend to make you mine in every sense of the word.”

“I don’t think I need any time.”

I slam my mouth onto hers for a heated kiss. “Quick shower. Make yourself comfortable.”

I turn away from her before I touch her again and take the fastest, coldest shower of my life. I’m so fucking turned on that I don’t want anything to shoot me off. I rinse off one more time, ensuring I get all the shampoo out of my hair so I don’t do something stupid like get it in my eyes.

I don’t even bother drying off. I wrap the towel around my waist and head back into the bedroom.

I find Felicity in my bed. Her shoulders are bare, and a pile of clothing is on the floor.

“I probably shouldn’t be presumptuous, but I assumed we were going to have sex,” she says.

“Oh, we’re having sex,” I promise.

“That’s not why I came over, though.” She bites down on her lip. “Also, I lied about the whole having a boyfriend thing. JD went out with me as a favor. He told me I was being an idiot for not giving you a chance.”

“I’m relieved to hear that y’all aren’t a couple. And I’m very thankful you told me before I texted him and told him y’all were broken up because you were mine now.”

Felicity leans up on her elbows, and the sheet dips into her cleavage. “Is that what you were going to do?”

“Absolutely. I would never touch you if you had a boyfriend. It would kill me to walk away, but I couldn’t do that.”

“So if I were dating this super-hot fireman, you wouldn’t touch me?” she asks, flinging off the covers to reveal her naked curves.

“Goddamn it, Felicity. You better be talking about me,” I growl.

I drop my towel and climb onto the bed directly on top of her. Her body unfurls for me. Her thighs spread, her arms embrace me, and that fucking hot little pussy opens so my rock-hard dick rests against her soaked, searing folds.

“I’m talking about you,” she confirms. She tries to buck her body beneath mine, searching for friction.

I groan. “I have a confession to make.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Is it bigger or smaller than you orchestrating an entire rescue training exercise to get my attention?”

I laugh, burying my face in her neck. “I don’t know. You’ll have to be the judge of that.”

“It’s getting harder to concentrate on words, Garrett.” She rocks herself against me.

“You have no fucking idea how hard it is, Sassy.”

“Pretty sure I can feel it. So get on with this confession of yours.”

“I don’t want to be your boyfriend.”

Her body stills completely.

“Whatever you’re thinking, forget it. I don’t want to be your boyfriend because I’d rather be your husband.”

“Oh, my God,” she whispers. “Is that your formal proposal?”

“Nah. I’m sure I can do better than that.”

“Okay. I’ll wait to give you an answer, but right now, I’d like you to fuck me.”

I push up so I’m on my hands and knees. “I’m going to fuck you. Don’t worry about that. But first, I need to lick your sexy little kitty and see if I can make her purr.

She whimpers as I crawl down her body. There’s no self-consciousness in how her legs part to make room for my shoulders. Or the way she rocks her pelvis toward my mouth.

The trimmed triangle of black curls above her mound is a sexy reminder that Felicity is all woman. Her soft, voluptuous curves pillow my body as I lean forward and lick her from slit to clit.

“Holy fuck!” she shrieks.

The tangy taste of her bursts on my tongue, and I bury my face in her pussy. I grip her ass, lifting her to feed on her cunt.

Goddamn, it'll be a fucking miracle if I don't come all over the bedsheets.

While I lick around her slick channel, she arches off the bed. When her fingers thread through my hair, I'm done for. I need her to come so I can slide inside her body.

I insert two fingers, fucking in and out of her gently while I circle the tip of her clit with my tongue.

"Garrett," she whispers.

Her nails scrape against my scalp and I moan into her pussy, sucking her clit into my mouth. I curl those two fingers forward, searching for her G-spot. She lets me know I've found it with a guttural groan.

"Fuck, Garrett. It's so good. Too good, I can't..."

She pulls on my hair, but I suck harder and pin her hips with my free arm.

When she shatters, her orgasm squirts into my hand. I continue my rhythm until she stills beneath me. Then I lick her clean, sipping at her nectar.

I place a chaste kiss on the top of her mound, climb her gorgeous body, and press my dick inside her. She's incredibly tight and so damn wet. I still before I'm all the way inside. "Shit. I don't have any condoms. I completely forgot. I'm so sorry, Felicity."

She shakes her head. "Pill. We're good. I'm clean."

"I'm clean. I haven't been with anyone in nearly a year."

Her legs lift, wrapping around my waist as she pulls me into her body. Sinking inside her is nearly a spiritual experience. *Flesh of my flesh* repeats in my mind. I am home.

Ignite
MY HEART
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

chapter **nine**

FELICITY

Having Garrett buried all the way to the hilt inside me feels like having sex for the first time. Forget that my one other partner was a mistake in college and incredibly brief.

This is how it should have happened.

With this man.

Emotion fills Garrett's eyes as he looks down at me. "I love you, Felicity. I have since I was a kid. I know we have some getting-to-know-you-again stuff to do, but I don't want to live another day without knowing you're mine."

I cup his cheek, holding his gaze. "I'm yours, Garrett."

He pulls almost all the way out and pumps back into me. "Again," he demands.

"I'm yours." I hold his body as tight as possible while he fucks in and out of me.

"I love you," he says again.

"I love you, Garrett."

That sends him over the edge of control. Gone are the steady, rhythmic thrusts, replaced by sharp snaps of his hips as

he bottoms out inside me. He's almost feral as he loses himself inside my body. It's a heady experience, and evidently, my lady parts like it a lot because I climax without warning. Hard. I sob as pleasure surges through every cell. I've never had an orgasm like this, and it's nearly blinding in its power.

"Oh, my God, Felicity. Fuck," Garrett moans as he shudders and spills inside me.

This is so not what I thought would happen tonight. I thought I'd come over, we'd clear the air, and I'd leave knowing he wouldn't ask me out anymore. I wouldn't have to pretend I didn't want him and that he didn't steal my heart all those years ago.

"I would have worn sexier underwear if I'd known this was going to happen," I say, still trying to catch my breath.

His rough chuckle feathers over my throat where his face is buried. He lifts his head, looking at me with so much affection that my heart almost bursts.

"For the record, I don't give a fuck what kind of underwear you have on. You are the sexiest woman I've ever known, and I'll believe that until the day I die." He gives me a sweet kiss and rolls off me. "I'll be right back."

I lift on my elbows to watch his naked ass walk from the room. He has a tattoo on his right side that's sorta on his ass, sorta on his hip. But it's too small for me to see well from here.

When he heads back to me, he has a wet towel to clean me up. A dry towel hangs over his shoulder.

I frown. "What's that one for?"

He looks at the bed, then at me. "I don't want to sleep on the wet spot, but I'm not going to ask you to do it. So I

brought a towel to lie on. Now, roll over to the other side of the bed.”

I laugh but make a motion with my finger for him to turn around. “First, let me see that tattoo on your butt.”

He turns and gives me a glimpse of the ink. It’s like a little portal on his body with a stereotypical alien peeking out.

My lips quirk. “You have aliens that live in your ass?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I thought it was funny.”

“You’re adorable. Do you know that?” I chuckle as I move to the other side of the bed.

He gives me a look that speaks of tolerance. “Are you going to tell me I’m like a Golden Retriever?”

I look at him blankly. “What? Why would I do that?”

He lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know. People say I have Golden Retriever energy. But I don’t know what that means. Growing up, we only had working dogs on the ranch and barn cats. Most of our pets were more of the horse and cow variety.”

“I see. And you think people are being insulting when they say that about you?”

“Maybe. Are those dogs stupid or something?”

I frown and wait in silence as he spreads the dry towel over the “wet spot” and climbs into bed. We roll to face each other.

“No, they’re not. I’m not an expert on dogs because my mom always wanted cats. But I have a friend in Austin who has Golden Retrievers, and they’re amazing. Smart and sweet. A little goofy, affectionate, playful.” I nod. “I can see it. But it’s not

how I'd describe you. You're so much more than those things. I mean, you being a good guy is obviously amazing. But you're also funny and sexy, and you have a dirty mouth in the bedroom, which I appreciate. I don't think a true Golden would talk like that."

Garrett's chest puffs up a little, and he pulls me to him. "I meant what I said. It wasn't just the sex talking. I'm crazy in love with you, Sassy, and I want our forever to start right now."

I nod. "Okay."

He narrows his eyes at me. "What does that 'okay' mean?"

"That I agree. Let's get started on our forever. We can fly somewhere tomorrow and get married if you want. Vegas or Tahoe or Mexico."

"You'd really do that?"

"I'm in, Whitmore. Now that you have me, you won't be able to get rid of me."

"Fuck, yes!" he shouts. "Oh, you'll like this one." He pulls his leg up to show me a tat on his ankle. It's the iconic Richard Scarry worm driving the apple car. And I fall in love with him all over again.

Ignite
MY HEART
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

epilogue

GARRETT

One year later...

“Sassy, are you ready to go?” I call up the stairs to my wife.

She mumbles something I can’t understand, and I hear her stomping feet as she comes down to meet me. “I don’t know why we need to carve pumpkins with your family. I look like I swallowed a damn pumpkin right here.” She points at her swollen belly.

I grin at her. “You look beautiful. I never thought a waddle would be sexy, but you pull it off, baby.”

She spins and jabs a finger into my gut. “Don’t think I haven’t planned ways to suffocate you in your sleep.” She turns back around and marches to the front door, muttering as she goes. “Damn super sperm just blows through my pill and everything else.”

I swallow my chuckle because I do want to keep on living in this happily ever after Felicity and I have created.

We didn’t exactly elope the next day. In fact, we didn’t leave my bed for much of that weekend. I missed the pumpkin

carving that year, which is why we need to go this time. Otherwise, I'll never hear the end of it.

Felicity holds up her phone as I make my way to the car. "We have to make a quick stop before going to your dad's."

"Sure. What's up?"

"A surprise that might be badly timed, but it is what it is. Isn't that what you always say?"

"Yes." I lean over and kiss her. "I love you. Even when you're grumpy."

She shoves at my chest. "Ugh. Stop being sweet to me. I'm a mean old pregnant lady."

"You are neither mean nor old. Knocked up, though, I did that," I say proudly.

"Yeah, yeah, Hot-shot," she huffs.

"So where are we going?"

"Hayes and Rory's farm. It's on the way, so hopefully, it won't take up too much time."

It only takes about fifteen minutes to drive out of town to Hayes and Rory Crawford's farm. They mostly house petting animals from the zoo, but Rory can't say no to an animal in need, which is why she now has a kangaroo and a couple of ostriches.

"She said to drive around to the back gate," Felicity says.

I do as my wife says, and we park close to the fence line and get out.

Hayes appears, and he's holding a big cardboard box. "Rory was gonna come out and say hi, but she's currently

throwing up her breakfast.” His tone is so cheery that it takes me a minute to catch what he said.

“Is she okay?”

“Pregnant again,” Hayes replies with a giant grin. “She’ll be okay once we get past this initial hurdle.” He nods to the gate latch. “Come on inside. We don’t want the little lady running loose.”

Little lady? I look at my wife. “What did you do?”

Felicity is already crying because that’s how she rolls these days. Either she’s grumpy, or she’s weepy. Though sometimes she’s horny, too, which I can work with. But I love her no matter what. She’s my everything.

Once the gate is closed behind us, Hayes sets down the box, and a yellow head with big brown eyes looks up at me. Floppy ears and a lolling tongue.

“Did you get me a Golden Retriever, baby?” I ask. I bring my wife in for a quick hug and bend to my haunches to see my new girl.

I pick up the puppy, and she immediately nuzzles into me, whining and licking my neck. I laugh. “I love her already.”

“The timing is terrible,” Felicity sighs. “The baby will be here in a couple of months.”

“Everything is perfect. And she’s gonna be a perfect addition to our family. We have the room, and we sure have enough love.” I stand and lean into my wife. The puppy snuffles over Felicity’s face, licking her straight up her cheek.

My wife’s laugh spills around me and lights me up.

“I love you. So damn much,” I say.

She smiles back at me. “I love you, too, Hot-shot.” She glances at the puppy. “What are you gonna name her?”

“Marmalade,” I say.

Felicity turns to Hayes. “Please tell Rory thank you for coordinating this for me. I wouldn’t have asked if I’d known she was ill.”

“We didn’t know about the baby then, so it’s okay. She’s doing well. She’s able to keep down pickles and grilled cheese dipped in ranch. This morning, I made the mistake of bringing in a cup of coffee, and that was that.” He shrugs.

Hayes reaches over and scratches Marmalade between her ears. “Goldens are the best dogs. Loyal and so sweet. Wonder if I can convince Rory that we should get one.”

“Do not be making plans for another living creature out there, Hayes Crawford!” Rory’s voice comes from an open window.

Hayes laughs. “I better go.” He waves and races back to the house.

I bend to kiss my wife. “I can’t believe you got me a puppy.”

“I knew you wouldn’t do it yourself. And it’s time you have one. Every family needs a family dog, right?” She beams at me.

“All I need is you, Sassy. The rest is just gravy.”



I hope you loved Garrett and Felicity’s story. Please consider [leaving me a review](#).

If you missed the introduction to the Whitmore family, you can find it in [**Dad Bod Cowboy**](#). You can also read Daphne's story in [**Protect My Heart**](#).

Pre-order the rest of the Whitmore books:

[**Redeem My Heart**](#)

[**Awaken My Heart**](#)

Don't worry, Jared and Audrey have a book coming very soon. Pre-order [**Grumpy Santa**](#), coming in December! And JD's book is finally on the schedule. Pre-order **Mister McStudmuffin**.

Keep scrolling for an excerpt from another book set in Saddle Creek, **Handling His Briefs**.

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HANDLING
his briefs
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KAT BAXTER

excerpt from handling his briefs



NAOMI

I sit at my desk, counting down the time to when I can leave.

Tonight, I'm finally having a girls' night out with my best friend, Mia. Normally I work late, but Mia has been trying for weeks to get me to agree to a night out.

My boss, Blake, works hard and works late, and I never mind staying to help him. I mean it's not like I have anything going on at home. Blake is an attorney in family law, which basically means that he's a divorce attorney.

Seeing the dissolving of marriages all day long, several days a week, can make a girl question romance. Me! I'm that girl. So yeah, I question the legitimacy of happily ever afters. Yet, none of my misgivings about the endurance of love have prevented me from having a big, stupid crush on my stupid hot boss.

I'm a walking cliché.

Anyways, Blake and I work side by side, all day long, sometimes seven days a week because he's stays busy. Doesn't even seem to matter that we live in a small town. Many of his clients are actually from the bigger cities, like Austin and San Antonio.

In any case, he's not here today because his nanny called in sick, so he decided to work from home. Did you catch that mention of a nanny? Yeah, my super hot boss has temporary custody of his nephew. Because evidently, the man wasn't sexy enough. Now he gets to walk around town with an adorable toddler in his arms.

So I'm blissfully working without the distraction of my model-hot boss, whom I admittedly stare at far too often.

I mean, how is it even possible that a man's ass looks that good in trousers? Not jeans, mind you, trousers. Aren't trousers supposed to be gender neutral? Not on Blake, they're not. He looks so good with his thick muscular thighs and that firm bubble butt. Okay, I don't actually know if it's firm because I've never touched it, but it definitely looks like you could bounce a walnut off of it.

Wait, that's not the right metaphor.

Whatever.

It is nice to work without the distraction of Blake's beautiful face, but I'd be a liar if I said I didn't miss him.

Which is totally legitimate because we're friends. I mean, yeah, he's stupid hot, but we're not like that. Well, I mean, *he's* not like that with me. This silly crush of mine, it'll fade someday.

Probably when he gets married to another woman and they raise his nephew together. That'll cure me of wanting him.

Mia sends me a text, wanting to know if I'm excited about getting our jam on. And I send her a wink emoji because I don't even know what that means - *getting our jam on*. Mia is a big-city girl transplant to our small town of Saddle Creek. We hit it off and she's awesome.

But you know, I'm a small-town girl to my core. Maybe she's planning for us to dance? I don't know. We're not leaving town. We're going to Aces which doubles as a great burger joint and the local bar hangout.

The office door suddenly opens. I look up to find Blake, Carter in his arms. They're both wearing blue jeans. I'm probably going to hell for this, but I don't think I'm prepared for Blake's ass encased in denim. My ovaries might explode. Or I might rip off my bra.

"Hi," I say, because I'm effortlessly cool.

He walks straight to my desk and holds Carter out to me.

"I need you to watch him because I've got a last-minute project I've got to concentrate on."

Reflexively, I take the toddler because that's what you do when someone holds a baby out to you. You hold them. Carter giggles and squirms, excited to see me. I give him a little snuggle trying desperately to ignore the pang of pain that washes over me.

Blake nods once, then disappears into his office. Before I can even turn around to check out his jean-covered ass, he shuts the door.

I look at Carter, who is now watching me with eyes that I swear are judging me. Like he totally knew I was gonna check out his uncle.

"Someday, you'll understand," I tell him. Then I frown. "Not that you'll be checking him out because that's weird and gross and why am I even trying to explain this to you?"

I set him down, then dig through the diaper bag that Blake dropped in front of my desk to see if he has any toys. There are a few things, so I grab them and toss them on the floor near Carter. He's only barely walking—I think—so he should be pretty well contained in this main front office.

What last minute project is Blake working on? Nothing that I've given him. I pull up the calendar we share on my computer screen, but there's nothing there except the two appointments I had to reschedule earlier today.

Meanwhile, Carter has picked up a soft-covered book that makes weird crinkly noises and he's staring at me with his pacifier moving in and out as he sucks. I'm an only child so I didn't grow up around younger children, but I babysat frequently. And Carter and I? We're buds.

"Naomi." I pat my chest, then repeat my name.

Carter bounces on his bottom. "Me, me, me."

“That’s right, Naomi,” I say.

With him looking up at me with those big brown eyes that are so much like his uncle’s, my heart constricts. “You’re going to be beautiful just like your uncle. Maybe someday your assistant will fall in love with you despite her great intentions.” I sigh.

I can hear Blake moving around in his office behind us; it sounds a bit like he’s rearranging his furniture. I decide it’s best if Carter and I just stay out here where we can both stay out of trouble.

I shoot a text to Mia to let her know I need to beg off for tonight.

Not a second goes by before my phone rings. Of course it’s Mia.

I slide to answer, “I know. I’m sorry.”

“What did he do this time?” she asks.

“I have Carter because Blake had something important come up and Carter’s nanny wasn’t—”

“You are NOT his nanny,” Mia interrupts me. “Also, what do you mean something important? Are you not important? For fuck’s sake, Naomi, you deserve time off. It’s actually illegal for him to prevent you from leaving.”

“I realize. But he needs me. What am I supposed to do?”

“You are his assistant, not his girlfriend.”

Mia’s words sting, but I know she’s right.

“You need to march back into his office and hand him his kid because *you* have plans and *you* don’t get to set your life on hold just because his shit doesn’t stink.”

I snort out a laugh. “That’s not how we use that saying.”

“Well, whatever. I said what I said.”

“I know, Mia, but it sounded really important. He seemed stressed. He just handed me Carter and went to his office.”

“It doesn’t matter. His emergency does not need to be yours. You just don’t want to confront him because you’re all up in your feelings for that man.”

I release a nervous chuckle. “No. No, there are no feelings. Just you know duty, responsibility, and a job. A job that pays me really well despite the fact that I didn’t get to finish college.”

Mia makes a weird noise. “Do you know what I would do if JD walked in and threw a baby at me. I’d be like, ‘fuck that noise. Sir. That’s not my baby.’ And I would leave because that’s not my job. And it’s not in my job description.”

I try to say something, but she continues. “Just because you have a vagina and a pair of tits, doesn’t mean that you know how to take care of a baby.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t know how to take care of him,” I say.

“Not the point!” Mia snaps. “Listen, love, I’m not gonna be mad or whatever if you need to cancel tonight. You’re my girl and we can move it to another time. But, you still need to stand up for yourself and create some boundaries before that man is walking all over you.”

“I know,” I say softly.

“Aww, honey, I know you are a total goner for that man. It’s ridiculous. And it’s not healthy because frankly, he’s a jerk and an asshole. And he doesn’t treat you right at all.”

“Mia, he does though. He pays me well for the job that I do.”

“He pays you well so you can be at his beck and call all the time.”

“He’s a good man. He really is. I mean, what other guy would take his sister’s kid in like this?”

Mia snorts. “Well, clearly not him because he threw that kid at you.” She sighs audibly. “Okay, I’m done giving you shit. Just let me know what you decide about tonight.”

“You’re a good friend, Mia. Truly. I’m going to investigate the situation further and tell him that I have plans I can’t change. I’ll let you know when I’m on my way to Ace’s.”

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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.

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