



THE
GROUCHY

Lumberjack's Bride

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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the grouchy lumberjack's bride

the mountain men of saddle creek

book two

Kat Baxter



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the grouchy lumberjack's bride

A FRENEMIES-TO-LOVERS/MARRIAGE of **Convenience/Curvy
Girl Romance**

Jade

Once upon a time Cain Bishop and I were inseparable. All through high school we were two peas in the proverbial pod, but then I did something he'll never forgive. Now, he's going to lose custody of his half-sister unless he comes up with a bride, STAT. I'll do whatever he needs, even be his wife of convenience. I'm prepared for him to be indifferent or platonic, but nothing could have prepared me for the hungry way he looks at me.

Cain

There was a time, when I was young, that I would have done anything to make Jade Larson my wife. Even knowing she's way too good for me; a curvaceous princess used to the finer things in life I'll never be able to give her. When she went behind my back and did something I can't ever forgive, I forced myself to walk away from her, but I never stopped wanting her. Now, I have to swallow my damn pride and marry her for the sake of keeping custody of my half-sister. How am I supposed to keep my hands off Jade once she's my

bride, when every instinct I have demands that I claim her,
body and soul?

The Grouchy Lumberjack's Bride

Kat Baxter

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chapter **one**

Jade

About a year ago...

I am in Hell.

I'm not gonna lie; it smells delicious. Feels even better wrapped around me.

I sneak a glance upward, and yep, this is definitely Hell.

Hell is dancing in the arms of the man who hates me. The man who used to be my best friend back when we were kids. Back before I ruined everything.

And now, here we are at the wedding reception for two friends, forced to dance together like Cain doesn't hate me. The reception is being held in the backyard of the groom's sister. It's dusk, and the sprawling oaks are lit with enough fairy lights to supply an entire generation of tweenaged girls. The temporary dance floor is scattered with rose petals and sprigs of lavender.

So basically, everything is perfect for the first dance of a couple in love. And pure torture for a woman dancing with the

man who was once her best friend/secret crush. Especially if that man now hates her.

I look at Cain from under my lashes to see him scowling at me. “You could try to look less like touching me makes you want to vomit.”

Those indolent whiskey-colored eyes narrow at me. If eyes could smirk arrogantly, his do. “I know you like to be in charge, Jade, but try not to tell me what to do. Besides, this is my usual expression.”

“Oh, I see. Now you have a resting vomit face. But only with me because I swear you smiled at Andrea Cooper.”

He quirks an eyebrow as if in question.

“Andrea Cooper, Cain! You hate her.”

“I’ve been known to reassess my opinion of people based on their actions.”

I roll my eyes and pretend his words don’t hit their mark—stabbing me deep in the center of my heart. As if I needed the reminder.

I don’t.

Once, we were close. Two peas in a pod all through high school. And now he hates me because I did one little thing he can never forgive.

“I know you’re never going to forgive me or whatever, but have you been there to see him recently? He’s doing very well.”

“Of course I have. He’s my father.”

I want to ask how it’s going. If things are the same between Cain and his father as the last time I saw them

together. But the truth is, it's not my business. I gave up that right when I did what I did. I lost my best friend and my partner in crime.

And I'd do it all over again because it was the right choice.

I don't regret my actions, but I resent the hell out of the consequences of those actions.

The weight of his huge palm pressed against my lower back as we dance seems like a tactile reminder of all I've lost. We've danced together many times—every school dance starting our sophomore year. Back then, we were as thick as thieves, and Cain volunteered as tribute to be my protector.

As far back as I can remember, I was told that boys would only want me for one thing—no, not *that*, which boys evidently didn't want from me. No, they only wanted my money. That's the shitty thing about growing up in a small town where everyone knows exactly how much your grandparents are worth. When everyone knows how much you'll inherit someday. So, instead of dating like a regular teenage girl, I spent all my time hanging out with Cain. My best friend. My constant, brooding shadow. The one guy I could trust because I knew he wasn't interested in me that way.

He'd been slightly smaller back then. Less of this looming giant with his long brown hair hanging loose about his boulder-sized shoulders. Less of the sharp glint in his eyes. He's always been a bit of a scowler, but there was a time I thought it was a playful and intentional smolder. I fancied I could see the glimmer of amusement in his eyes. That I alone saw the true Cain beneath the scowl.

Now, there's no playful glint. No humor. Just an impervious wall of distrust.

“Well, this will all be over soon, and you can go back to hating me.”

“Never said I hated you, Jade,” he murmurs.

Him saying my name, all husky and deep and close to my ear, sends shivers of desire through my body. I squeeze my eyes shut lest I reveal my true feelings. I’ve held them close to my chest even though we haven’t been friends for years.

I am an idiot!

When my closest friend Madison fell in love with Cain’s closest friend Caleb, they chose us to be their attendants for their wedding. Cain’s life on Saddle Ridge keeps him separated from the town most of the time, but Caleb still considers him his closest male friend. So we agreed to put our war aside for the weekend and stand up for our friends while they married.

Clearly, Cain is nearing the end of his patience for this endeavor.

Another apology sits on my tongue like the lingering aftertaste of cough syrup. But I don’t say the words. It wouldn’t matter. Cain, my once gentle giant of a best friend, can no longer stand to be in the same room with me.

I need this damn dance to end soon before I start crying. Yep, this is Hell.

chapter two

Cain

I am in Hell.

Nothing has ever felt more right than holding Jade Larson while we two-step across the temporary dance floor in the backyard of Caleb's childhood home. She still smells the same. Despite the blend of roses and lavender scenting the air, every breath I take is full of her, an addictive combination of rosemary and mint that reminds me of Juicy Fruit gum.

My insides tighten with hunger, and fuck if that doesn't piss me off.

Jade is my former best friend. The woman who wrapped me tight around her little finger through high school and then betrayed me in my darkest hour. I do not need to be reminded of the kiss we shared right before it all went to Hell—a kiss that turned me inside out but made her deception so much worse.

But I'd be a fucking liar if I said I don't miss her—the press of her soft, plump curves against me and how she smells like nourishment and lust at the same time.

I miss *her*.

Miss her laugh, so open and free, as if she doesn't care that people think she's too loud. And why should she? That big, bold laugh is the best sound in the world. It's been nearly five years since I heard it.

I won't tell her any of this, though. She sure as fuck doesn't need to know I still think about her every damn day. That the thought of seeing her walk down the center aisle of First Baptist Church, Saddle Creek, doesn't do things to me. Make me long for a life that could have been. If only she hadn't done what she did.

Sure, I could forgive her, but the damage has been done. I can't trust her anymore. So what's the point of forgiveness?

It doesn't matter that I want to pull her closer, bury my face in her blonde curls, and inhale the scent of her fancy shampoo and conditioner until it's imprinted on my lungs.

"You'll be rid of me soon enough," she says, her voice tight and tinged with sadness.

I see my half-sister, Sasha, watching me dance with Jade. Even at ten, she's got hearts in her eyes like a cartoon character as she stares at us.

As soon as this song ends, I know she'll pounce. But I also know there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Sure enough, as the last note plays, Sasha is right there, practically hanging off my arm.

"Who are you? I didn't know that Cain had a girlfriend," she says in the sing-songy way that only pre-teen girls can pull off.

Jade smiles at my little sister—the same friendly smile she has for anyone who enters her orbit—and holds out a hand. "I'm Jade. You must be Sasha. I've heard so much about you."

Sasha beams brightly. “Hi, Jade. What a cool name.”

Jade chuckles. “Thank you.”

“Hey, Cain, can you help with the garter toss?” Caleb calls from the edge of the makeshift dance floor.

I turn to my sister, but she’s forgotten I’m alive. I blow out a breath and leave her with my former best friend.

chapter **three**

Cain

Current time...

It's poker night at my buddy Linc's house. I know as soon as I get there that something is different. Off, somehow. First, he's got girly beer here. Second, his fridge is stocked with tin-foil-wrapped platters.

"What the fuck is this shit?" I ask, holding up the beer bottle with the artsy logo.

Linc is about to answer me when the other two in our poker group arrive.

"You're such a fucking idiot," Landry says as they bust through the doorway.

"You better bite your tongue, boy, because I can and will kick your ass," Grayson threatens his younger brother.

I'm still holding up one of the bottles from the fridge.

Landry storms over and grabs the bottle from me. "It's an IPA."

Grayson makes his way over to the fridge. “What the fuck, man?”

The guys pull out the platters, drop them on the countertop, and rip off the foil. We all stare at the contents. Perfectly cut vegetables and fruits drape artfully with cheese cubes and... I’m pretty sure those are roses made from salami slices.

I arch a brow and look at my buddy. “New hobby?”

“Natalie!” Linc hollers.

“You’ve got a chick here?” Landry asks with a goofy grin.

Linc exhales slowly. “She’s old man Carson’s niece, and she’s staying here for a couple of days.”

Grayson releases a low whistle as the curvy, brown-skinned beauty comes out of the back of Linc’s cabin,

Landry mumbles something under his breath about a walking wet dream.

“Damn, how long you been hiding her in your bedroom?” Grayson asks.

“Show her some fucking respect,” Linc snaps.

His entire demeanor changes when he faces Natalie. His gaze softens as he looks at her. The grizzly bear transforms into a teddy bear.

Natalie’s gaze shifts to the counter where we’ve pulled out the food, and she smiles. “You found the charcuterie boards. Although, they’re more like charcuterie platters than boards. They didn’t have a good selection of wooden cutting boards or trays at the store.”

“I can make you some,” I offer before I can think twice about it.

Linc glares at me, and just like that, the bear is back.

She barely looks in his direction since her eyes are locked on my face. Her lip quivers in a tiny movement I would have missed had I not been staring at her. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, shortcake. Everything is perfect,” Linc reassures her. “We’re just dumbass mountain men and need you to explain a few things to us.”

She smiles again and stands beside the counter. “So this is the savory board. A selection of specialty meats and cheeses with nuts and some crudities.”

Landry raises an eyebrow. “Crude what?”

“Cut vegetables,” Linc explains.

“This is the dessert board with fruits, chocolates, and bite-sized treats,” Natalie continues.

“*You* bought the beer,” I say, finally understanding.

“I did. It’s supposed to be very hoppy.”

“The fuck?” Grayson murmurs to his brother.

“Just make your plates,” Linc snaps at us.

Landry looks confused. “We’re using plates?”

Linc sighs. “Try to pretend you weren’t raised by feral wolves.”

When we’re all finally loaded with heavy plates of fancy food, we end up back at the poker table.

“Shortcake?” Grayson smirks as he looks at Linc.

He shrugs. “She’s Charlie’s niece. I’m just being nice.”

“*Nice?*” Landry scoffs. “I didn’t think you knew how to do *nice*.”

Linc scowls. “Fuck you.”

“See?” Landry holds out his hands as if showing proof.

Grayson eyes him thoughtfully. “What’s with the cutesy nickname?”

“She’s short. It’s no big deal,” Linc says evasively.

We finally move on to the game, but my brain is stuck on Linc’s nickname for Natalie. For some reason, it makes me think of Jade, which is fucking annoying.

I know why, though. Nicknames mean something. If Linc doesn’t realize that, he will eventually. When you have the urge to call a woman something cutesy, you may as well turn in your man card because you’re fucking whipped.

I mean, look at me. I called my best friend “Peanut” because she was petite, curvy, and obsessed with peanut butter. God, I used to love watching her eat peanut butter straight from the jar. Her controlling grandmother was always trying to get her to count calories and shit like that, so they never kept peanut butter in the house. But I loved Jade’s gorgeous curves and bought her a jar of peanut butter to keep in her locker at school.

It was one small thing I could do just for her. Something no one else could do. It’s stupid how providing for her made me feel like a man.

Now we can’t even be in the same room together.

I haven’t seen her since Caleb and Madison’s wedding nearly a year ago. Well, I’ve seen her at the grocery store, and

when I pumped gas, she drove past in her bright blue electric car. She's the reason a town as small as Saddle Creek has a charger for that sort of vehicle. Pretty ironic considering Jade's money comes from her grandfather's massive oil company.

Natalie emerges from the direction of Linc's bedroom and stands next to my chair. "I thought I recognized you earlier but couldn't place you. Then you said something about making me charcuterie boards, and I didn't put two and two together until I was back in the room scrolling on my phone. I know the internet fame brings you only positive attention, but how do you handle being the Shirtless_Lumbersnack when you're out in public?"

The room is still and quiet, and the guys look at me.

I stare at Linc. "What is she talking about?"

"No clue." He glances up at her. "Shortcake, no one here is internet famous. These fuckers don't even know how to use social media."

Landry snorts. "I've got that hook-up app."

We all ignore him.

Natalie shakes her head. She points directly at me. "No, *he* is the Shirtless_Lumbersnack." She hands her phone to Linc.

He stares at the phone and then starts to laugh. "Oh, shit. Man, tell me this ain't you." He passes her phone over to me.

I stare down at the small screen. It's a video of me chopping into a massive chunk of wood. It takes me a couple of moments to place the video. It's the one I used to make the sculpture of the longhorn that is now housed outside a building on the University of Texas campus. There's some pop song playing in the background. At one point, I whip my sweat-

soaked t-shirt off my head and toss it behind me into the yard amidst the wood chips.

I know for damn sure I didn't take this video. I didn't even know it was being filmed. And there's only one other person who was there that day. My pesky half-sister spent all afternoon sitting nearby, scrolling away on her damn phone. That's what it looked like she was doing anyway.

"Son of a bitch!" I tug on my hair. "I'm going to kill her."

"You have a ton of followers asking you to open a paid page for fans," Natalie says.

"What's that?" Grayson asks.

"Uh, well, it's more than being shirtless. But it's where the real money is," Natalie explains.

I can't process her words. "I'm gonna fucking kill her." I shove the chair back and stand.

"Remember, she's just a kid," Linc warns.

"A kid who's been taking videos without me knowing. Little shit."

I storm out of my buddy's house and jump into my truck. Sasha is spending the night at her best friend, Taylor's house. Since Taylor's dad, Grady, met and married pop sensation Jess Munoz, Sasha wants to be over at their house all the time.

It doesn't take me long to drive down the mountain into town and head toward the Whitmore property. I jump out of my truck to see Jess and Grady sitting on the porch.

Grady frowns. "Everything okay, Cain?"

"For y'all, yes. I need my sister, though." I tilt my head back and bellow her name. "SASHA!"

A minute later, she comes flying out of the screen door. She takes one look at me, and her smile disappears. “Cain?”

Shit. I scared her. “It’s not Dad if that’s what you’re thinking,” I say, trying to gentle my voice. Angry or not, she’s a kid, and I couldn’t deal if she were afraid of me. I blow out a breath, trying to rein in my anger. It doesn’t take long because the thought of her being afraid of me is enough to do it. “Get in the truck. You can get your stuff tomorrow.”

She gives Taylor a backward glance before sulking to the truck.

Grady bounds off the porch to my side. “You good, man?”

I blow out a breath. “Yeah. I’m pissed, but I’m not going to do anything to her if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not.” He gives me a small smile. “Some days are more trying than others.”

I release a sigh. “Tell me about it. I’m beginning to think we need a support group for parents of teenage girls around here.”

I keep my mouth shut once we’re in the truck’s cab. I don’t know what to say that won’t terrify Sasha, so I say nothing as I drive up the long dirt drive from the Whitmore Ranch back to the main road.

I’m not always smart about people. In fact, I’d say I’m as dumb as the next Texas mountain man when it comes to the emotions of teenage girls. But even I can watch videos on YouTube about abandonment issues. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Sasha has a crap ton of them.

Sasha’s mom, Courtney, left as soon as Dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. She filed for divorce while the rest of us

were still scrambling to figure out what Alzheimer's would mean for his future.

Dad got custody of Sasha in the divorce, even though it wasn't long before he couldn't manage the job. Sasha lived with her maternal grandmother for a while, but about a year ago, she packed up and moved to one of those neighborhoods for active seniors north of Austin. Not the kind of place that would welcome a twelve-year-old girl.

So, Sasha came to live with me. I won't pretend it hasn't taken some adjustment. It has. Sometimes she's sassy as fuck and annoying as hell. Other times, I can tell she's waiting for me to walk away like every other adult in her life has.

After several minutes of silence, she asks quietly, "If it's not something about Dad, then what—" She swallows audibly. "Something with Mom? Or Grandma?"

My hands tighten around the steering wheel. "Nothing like that, kid."

"Then what?"

Fuck. I don't know how to broach this topic.

"I found out about the—" I don't know what to call the account, so I wave my hand in a vague gesture. "That lumber snack nonsense."

"Oh." Another bit of silence follows. I can almost hear her mustering the courage to be a smart ass about it. "What about it?"

Yeah. There it is.

"Did you really think I'd be okay with that shit?"

"I don't know why you wouldn't be. It's gross, but women seem to think you're hot."

I scrub a hand down the back of my neck, keeping my eyes pinned to the road in front of us. “That doesn’t excuse—” Fuck. I’m flying blind here. “Aren’t you too young to have an account like that?”

“The account isn’t mine. Technically, legally, it’s yours.”

“What? They just let anybody open an account? They don’t—I don’t know—ask for proof of identification or something?”

I’m pretty sure I’m asking all the wrong questions, but what’s new? If there’s one thing I’m shit at, it’s understanding women’s motives. Sasha is only twelve, she counts as a woman.

“O. M. G. You need to join the twenty-first century. Aren’t people of your age supposed to be on Facebook or something? Or maybe you still have a MySpace account?”

“People my age?”

“You know, middle-aged?”

“I’m twenty-seven. Not forty-seven.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and slides down in the seat, propping her feet on the dashboard. “Whatever.”

“Feet on the floor, princess. If we got in a car accident like this, you’d break both your legs.”

She snorts. “Like I said. Middle-aged.”

But she puts her feet on the floor, and that’s enough for me. I’ll take the wins where I can.

“Maybe I am middle-aged, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. You’re too damn young to be on social media, let alone running an account like that.”

“You don’t want me to run the account anymore? Fine.”
She’s all bluster and defiance now. “I’ll shut it down.”

“Yes. I do want you to shut it down. Right fucking now.”

She clucks her tongue in disapproval. “Language, please.
My innocent, naïve ears.”

“Shut it down.”

“Fine.”

I glance over to see her pulling her phone out of her back pocket and clicking away on the screen. “Jesus. You have that shit on your phone?”

“Obvs. Where did you think I had it? On some ancient desktop computer somewhere?”

“When I got you that phone, I thought it was set up so I had to approve every app you downloaded.”

“Right. Like I couldn’t hack my way around that. You leave your phone all over the damn house. You only have a four-digit passcode, and it’s the same passcode for everything. If you expect me to respect your rules about technology, you need to be a little more tech-savvy. You practically begged me to hack into your phone and grant myself access to whatever apps I want.”

Shit. I *am* middle-aged. How the hell do parents do this shit?

They’re older than I am, right? So how the hell do they stay on top of technology that evolves faster than their kids?

Guess that’s more shit I’ll have to watch on YouTube tonight.

“Just delete the damn app from your phone. Or whatever the hell it takes to cancel the account.”

“Fine.” She practically snarls the word, then adds in a syrupy-sweet voice. “What do you want me to do with the ad revenue?”

“Say what now?”

“Well, you have over two million followers across three different platforms. When the channel started blowing up, I figured out how to monetize your popularity.”

“You monetized... What the fuck are you saying, girl?”

“I’m saying people pay to advertise on your YouTube account. And we have affiliate links to various tool companies.”

My head is spinning way too fast for me to be driving. I pull onto the shoulder and turn on my hazards. Scrubbing a hand down my face, I turn to look at my younger sister. “You’re telling me you’ve been making money off these things?”

“Obviously. Pay attention.”

“How much money?”

The moon shines through the windshield, casting just enough light on Sasha’s face for me to read the trepidation in her expression. She can fake that badass attitude a lot better in her voice than she can in her eyes. I see her swallow, then type on her phone for a minute before she turns the screen to face me.

It’s open to a financial app, and the number on the screen is enough to make my mouth dry.

It's not a crazy amount of money until you consider that it all comes from digital content generated by a twelve-year-old girl. Until you consider that it's money I didn't know existed ten minutes ago.

I scrub a hand over my face again. "The fuck."

"How mad are you?" she asks, her voice suddenly small.

"I don't know how to answer that." I blow out a breath, trying to wrap my head around what she's done. "Jesus, kid. What were you thinking?"

She turns to stare out the window, and I see her jaw working. A long minute passes before she says, "Raising a teenage girl isn't cheap. It's a burden. I know that."

I sure as fuck never said anything like that to her, so I imagine that bullshit came from her maternal grandmother.

Suddenly, a whole host of weird things I've noticed about Sasha flicker through my mind. How she never asks for new clothes. How I sometimes find food stashed in her drawer. How hard she works to get perfect grades in school and how it never seems to be enough for her, even though I'm blown away by how smart she is.

It damn near guts me to think she's been holding all this alone. That this shit has been going on in her head, and she never voiced it out loud.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

I should have gotten her a therapist as soon as I took custody. I would have, but she seemed so ... fine. She seemed just fine.

“You are not a burden. And it’s not your job to worry about money. That’s my job.”

“I know you don’t make much—”

“I make enough.” Not so much from my wood carvings—at least not until recently—but I work in construction. Since Texas seems to be in a never-ending real estate boom, construction pays damn well. Do we live lavishly? No. But we do just fine. At least, I thought we did.

It kills me to think of this kid worrying about money. Worrying that it takes too much money to raise her. That she’s not worth the cost.

I turn in my seat to face her. “Sasha, I want you to look at me.”

She glances in my direction, and I see the glint of tears in her eyes.

“No. Look at me properly. I need you to believe me when I say this.” I wait until her eyes meet mine before I say, “Raising you is worth it.”

“But—”

“No buts. Raising you is worth it. Whatever it costs. If I didn’t have enough money to take care of you, I’d find a way. You’re my sister. We’re family. I can provide for you.”

Fuck if this whole conversation doesn’t cut me to the quick. If it doesn’t dig into all of the tender spots of my ego that Jade bruised all those years ago.

But this isn’t about Jade. It’s about Sasha.

“As far as I’m concerned, that money is yours. We can put it in the account for college. We can save it for when you turn

eighteen. Hell, you can give it to that raccoon rescue place you're always talking about. Whatever you want."

She gives me a jerky nod. And then her lips twitch. "What if I want to keep filming?"

"No way."

"Hear me out. Running a social media account is a viable profession. I'm gaining valuable work experience."

Jesus, this kid. This fucking kid. "Why don't we talk about it later? In the light of day."

I can tell from the grin on her face that she thinks she won. Maybe she has.

chapter four

Jade

I'm at this week's book club meeting, and although I loved the book—a science fiction romance about a frozen planet with possessive aliens—my heart isn't in it tonight. I don't know why. I usually live for Wednesday nights. Girl time. A chance to geek out on our favorite romance novels. Wine and cookies. What's not to love?

We used to meet at the public library, but since the bookstore re-opened, we've been meeting here. Sisters Esther and Astrid own the bookstore, but only Esther works here. Astrid is a rocket scientist or something. She's arguing with Esther about the mode of transportation in the book because the technology isn't scientifically sound.

“Y'all! Did you see the newest in *the Saddle Peek*?” Cleary Miller asks excitedly.

She's one of our newer members, but since moving here to Saddle Creek—after a whirlwind marriage to tattoo hottie Ian Miller—she's settled right into this group. It helps that she writes amazing romances under the name Anita Dix.

“The thing about Cain?” Harper Crawford asks.

Well, now, I'm paying attention. “What thing about Cain?”

“Check this out.” Cleary clears her throat dramatically and begins to read. “*‘Did you know we have our very own social media sensation living right here in Saddle Creek? That’s right, are you even on the internet if you haven’t heard of the Shirtless_Lumbersnack? Well, I’m here to tell you that is none other than Cain Bishop.’*”

That doesn’t make sense. The Cain I know would never put himself on social media, especially without a shirt. Still, it doesn’t stop me from going to the Saddle Peek to find the link.

“Oh, my God,” my cousin, Daphne Whitmore, says beside me.

More comments ripple through the crowd of women. I stare at my phone and can’t quite believe my eyes. I’ve seen Cain without a shirt—we used to go swimming in the pond on my family’s property. But he’s mesmerizing in motion, wielding axes, chainsaws, and other tools he uses for his art. The play of muscles under his tanned skin has me riveted to my screen.

I let the reels play, one after another. He’s got more than a million followers. In the current video, he stops and takes a huge swig of water from what looks like a recycled milk gallon. Water sloshes down his bare chest, and I follow the droplets, resisting the urge to zoom in when it gets to his low-slung jeans.

For fuck’s sake. We’re all perving on him. I’m probably the worst. Many of the women in this room are married, or about to be, so their gawking could be considered harmless.

But I am legit staring at my former best friend with panty-dampening lust.

chapter **five**

Cain

It's been over a week since I learned about my internet celebrity status. Sasha and I have come to an agreement of sorts. She can continue, but I don't want to know about it, and it can't interfere with her schoolwork. It's awkward as fuck knowing that people are staring at my body while I work, but the project has given Sasha a bit of a purpose.

While it may feel like she's pimping me out, I prefer to look at it like this: she's resourceful and has mad technology skills. I make a mental note to have a conversation with Birdie Crawford and Emmy Miller. Both ladies are in the computer field and may agree to mentor Sasha.

I work shirtless because we live in Texas, and it's hot as the damn sun sometimes. And if people like looking at me because I'm a big hairy mother fucker, who am I to deny them?

Sasha doesn't have school today, so I told her we'd go for breakfast at Ruthie's diner. We're halfway through our pancakes—banana and chocolate chip for Sasha and granola with blueberry for me—when I see a familiar face walking past the diner window.

The food in my mouth immediately turns to ash, and a knot forms in my belly. I try to swallow to give Sasha a heads-up, but I'm not quick enough.

"Sasha, my darling," Courtney coos next to our booth.

My sister stills before slowly looking up at the woman. "Mom?"

"It's me, baby." Courtney holds her arms open in a gesture that could mean she wants a hug, but I'm wagering it's more of a ta-da moment. Like her presence here is anything to celebrate.

I glare up at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a woman come to see her daughter without having a reason?"

"Some women, yes," I say. "You? It's doubtful."

She sniffs and looks back at her daughter. "We need to discuss this living situation you have with my kid."

I narrow my eyes at her. "What about my living situation with my sister?"

Courtney sniffs. "I don't think a single man should be living unsupervised with a teenage girl."

I'm about to ask what the hell she's implying when Sasha bolts to her feet. She stares at her mother for a moment before blurting, "Excuse me. I need to go to the restroom."

"You know you're not welcome around here," I snap at Courtney once we're alone again. "I told you that the last time I saw you. When you showed up drunk at my cabin. Remember that?"

“You said I wasn’t welcome on your property, but this is a public place, and you can’t kick me out.” She puts her fists on her hips and shoots me a glare.

Ruthie, the owner of the diner, comes over to our booth. “Cain, is there a problem?” She rolls her eyes in the direction of Courtney.

“No, Ruthie. She’s not staying long. Just wanted to swing by and say hello to Sasha.”

Ruthie eyes Courtney for a few breaths, then nods. “You let me know if you need any help, darlin.”

“Will do.”

“You might have all the women in this town fooled. Hell, the whole damn world it seems enamored of your sweaty self. But you don’t fool me.”

Ah, so that’s what this is about. She saw the post in *the Saddle Peek*, or someone told her about it.

I cross my arms over my chest, not caring if it makes me look bigger and more intimidating. I’ve never hit a woman and don’t intend to start, but if anyone deserves a smack or two, Sasha’s mom is the one. How many times can she abandon her daughter without consequences? The first time should’ve done plenty of damage. Although, I guess it did, just not to Courtney.

“If you’re here sniffing around for money, Courtney, you can turn yourself around. Any and all of the proceeds from that little endeavor are going into a fund for Sasha’s college.”

She gives me a chilling smile. “Let’s just say I’ve spoken to a lawyer friend, and it doesn’t look good. You’re a single man and only one step from getting naked on camera.” She

clicks her tongue as if I'm a naughty child. "Not a good environment for my girl to grow up in."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I hiss.

There are a thousand things I want to say in response to her accusations. And a thousand more unpleasant things I want to say about her as a person. I want to ask her if she knows how much damage she's done to Sasha. I want to tell her that no lawyer in their right mind would side with Courtney over me if it came to a custody battle.

I want to say that, but I don't because what do I know about what a lawyer would or would not do?

I don't know jack shit other than that I need to talk to a lawyer before this goes any further. Because there's no way I'm letting this woman anywhere near Sasha.

chapter **six**

Jade

Living in a town like Saddle Creek certainly keeps you on your toes. You never know what's going to happen when you walk into Ruthie's diner for a muffin and coffee before work.

For example, the last thing I expect today is to walk in and see that bitch, Courtney whatever her current last name is, standing beside a booth where Cain and Sasha are seated. Courtney looks trashy (as always), Cain looks pissed off, and Sasha looks like she's about to burst into tears or punch her mother.

Oh, Lordy, am I glad I never had any confrontations with my mother in Ruthie's diner when I was twelve.

And then, as if my thoughts have conjured the ghost of intergenerational drama past, Sasha spots me. Her eyes go wide and then narrow.

I see the mischief she's plotting from half a room away.

She bolts in my direction, scurrying across the room. Cain and her mother are deep in conversation and don't notice where she goes when she leaves their table.

In the time it takes her to reach me, I don't look at her but keep my gaze on Cain. I don't know what he and Courtney are talking about, but I know that look. It's his "I'm-about-to-burn-shit-to-the-ground" look. I've been on the receiving end of that look.

Sasha stops right in front of me, her eyes wide and desperate. "I need a favor. A big one."

Oh, damn it all.

I do *not* need to get involved in this mess. I don't want anything to do with whatever is going on here.

But then I look at Sasha and the tears in her eyes.

I know—everyone in town knows—that it's been years since Courtney showed up in town. Years since she's seen Sasha. That she walked away from her daughter and a sick husband and never looked back.

Everyone in town knows that. But not everyone in town knows what it feels like to be the daughter in that scenario.

I do, though.

My wild-child mother ran off to live her life and left me to live out my childhood with my elderly grandparents. She traveled around Europe doing who knows what with who knows who. Every once in a while, I catch sight of her on the arm of some rockstar in a gossip magazine.

Shit like that messes with your head.

So when Sasha asks for a favor, what do I say?

"Anything," I say quickly. "What do you need?"

Now, she looks ready to cry. She's all trembling lips and damp eyes. "Thank you!" She throws her arms around me and

hugs me so tight. And then whispers, “Just follow my lead.”

She pulls me over to the booth where Cain and Courtney are facing off in time for me to hear the words, “Single man” and “not fit.”

Before I can put two and two together and come up with a romance trope, Sasha pushes me forward and says, “But he’s not single! He and Jade are engaged!”

“Well, isn’t that convenient,” Courtney sneers.

I go all in when I commit to something, so I climb onto Cain’s lap without another thought. “You know our history, Courtney. It can’t be that surprising.” I run my hands under his hair along the nape of his neck and swear I hear a low growl at my touch.

Maybe he’s warning me off so I don’t go too far.

His arms band around my hips, and he nuzzles the side of my face. “People in town have been saying for years that Jade and I are inevitable.”

“See?” Sasha says with a smirk that all tween girls seem to perfect before they’re officially teenagers.

Meanwhile, I’m regretting my current position. The actual physical one. Sitting on Cain’s lap with his big, muscly arms pressed to my front and his solid, muscly torso against my back. I’m surrounded by the feel of him, the sweet scent of his pancakes, and that warm, earthy smell that’s always been him. Like clothes dried in the sunshine.

“Well, how nice for you.” Courtney turns to Cain. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer. Sasha, you want to give your mama a hug?”

Sasha looks to Cain.

“Up to you, princess,” he says, the deep baritone of his voice vibrating against my skin.

“Not right now. Thank you, though,” Sasha says, her voice as sweet as the homemade maple syrup coating their plates.

“Might want to work on her manners, Cain,” Courtney snips, then walks off.

The three of us wait until the door closes before any of us speak.

“I’m sorry I lied,” Sasha says, her eyes filling with tears.

“Don’t be silly, sweetie. It’s okay,” I say, scrambling off Cain’s lap.

I stay on his side of the booth and try to put space between us, but he’s manspreading, and the outer weight of his thigh rests against mine.

“Sash, give us a minute, will you? Why don’t you go up to the counter and ask Ruthie to pack up some slices of pie for later,” Cain says.

“Pancakes and pie?” she squeals. “This is the best day ever.”

I take the opportunity with Sasha leaving the table to move across from Cain. “I’m sorry. She cornered me and begged for help. I had no idea what she was going to say.”

“It’s fine. I think Courtney surprised all of us.”

I frown. “Why is she here?”

“I take it you know about the Shirtless_Lumbersnack?”

I grin because I can’t help it. “That name is everything.”

He shakes his head. “That entire account is all Sasha. I knew nothing about it until a week ago.”

“Damn. Smart girl.”

He smiles, his face beaming with pride for his sister. “The smartest.”

“Courtney thinks there’s money involved.”

He nods. “There is. But it’s getting put into an account for Sasha’s education. She earned it.”

“Is there any ground for Courtney to stand on? You’re Sasha’s legal guardian, right?”

He sighs and scrubs a hand down his face. “Not exactly. We never did any paperwork, and Courtney never terminated her rights. Moms trump brothers in the eyes of the law in lots of courtrooms.”

“How is it possible you didn’t have any paperwork? Have you talked to Blake about this? He just fought and won his custody battle, so he probably knows all the ways to fight this.”

“No paperwork. Dad had full custody. When he was institutionalized, he lost that. Courtney’s mom took Sasha during that time.” Cain blows out a breath. “I wanted to take her, but I didn’t have the money to fight a court battle.”

“Money should never be what stops you, Cain. I’ve got more than I’ll ever need. Let me pay all the legal costs.”

“I’m going to let you do more than that, Peanut. You’re gonna marry me, and we’ll adopt Sasha together. Then her security will never be a question.”

Oh, damn. I might need those paddle things to restart my heart. Because I think I’m flatlining. Did he just say I was going to marry him?

chapter **seven**

FROM THE SADDLE PEEK...

Call your bets in, it's finally happened. Cain Bishop and Jade Larson have finally tied the knot! If you've been in our small town for long enough, you know these two have been dancing around each other since they were kids. There's just something in the water here in Saddle Creek... true love always wins.

chapter **eight**

Cain

Talk about a fucking whirlwind. The past week has been that and more.

A week ago, I was blissfully single.

Okay, not blissfully. I was grumpily single.

Now, I'm married to the woman most likely to drive me fucking crazy. The only woman I've ever wanted. And here I am, in her fucking debt again.

Five years ago, Jade went behind my back and set up a trust to cover my dad's medical expenses. I've lived with that for six years, knowing she did something for my dad that I never could. Knowing I could never repay her.

And now there's this. Now, she's saved Sasha. One more thing I can never repay. Am I grateful?

Fuck, yeah.

I'm beyond grateful.

But it kills me to owe so much to Jade that I will never be able to repay. It kills me that I can't have her. That I will never be good enough for her. And it kills me that I've never been

able to walk away from her. Not emotionally, at least. And now she's my wife? The woman I'm supposed to live with?

And I'm pretty sure a pair of twelve-year-olds orchestrated the whole series of events. Sasha obviously didn't ask her mother to come to town sniffing around and looking for kinks in our armor. But Sasha and her best friend forever, Taylor, were full of plans and shenanigans after that.

Which is why I'm currently unpacking a series of baskets full of food and gifts left on my cabin porch for our "honeymoon at home." My wife isn't here yet. She insisted on working despite it being our wedding night. She doesn't need a job, yet she goes into Madison's Mercantile shop every day and works.

It's almost irritating how attractive I find that quality. She could be sipping wine on a beach somewhere, but instead, she goes to work every day.

But back to my sister and her partner-in-crime... after the diner, plans were made. Somehow, Sasha convinced me it would be a great idea for her to go with Taylor, Grady, and Jess to Los Angeles for a week. Jess is filming a music video or something. Ultimately, the decision was easy. Sasha will have constant protection. Not only is Grady a brute of a man, but Jess has her own security team.

So I helped my sister pack and let her go off with her best friend on her stepmom's private plane. The amount of tween girl giggling probably propelled that plane all the way to California.

My phone buzzes, and I look down to see a text from Caleb.

CALEB: Heard you got hitched.

ME: I'm sure the whole town is talking about it.
Did you win money?

CALEB: A gentleman never tells.

ME: Fucker.

CALEB: What are you doing, Cain?"

ME: What do you mean?

CALEB: You and I know you've been in love with Jade for years. Then she did something, you stopped talking to her, and now you're married?

ME: It's for Sasha.

CALEB: Sure. Tell yourself that if it's what you need to do.

ME: WTF do you want, Caleb?

CALEB: I want to know what happened between you and Jade five years ago. I wasn't here then, and all you ever told me was that you couldn't trust her anymore.

I sit at my small kitchen table, the one I made with my own two hands, and start typing out a response.

ME: You know my dad's diagnosis was late. I mean, he was younger than he should have been for Alzheimer's, but we didn't find out until it was advanced.

ME: Because Courtney is a selfish cow. She was hiding things and stealing his money.

ME: We didn't get time to figure out a treatment plan. He needed full-time care, but his wife had already divorced him and left him alone with their six-year-old daughter.

CALEB: Sorry, man.

ME: Yeah. Fucking sucks.

CALEB: Your dad was always awesome.

ME: Still is. Somedays.

ME: Anyways, we couldn't afford the constant care he needed. In one of his more lucid moments, he asked Jade to do the favor to end all favors. Of course, she said yes.

CALEB: So she paid for him to move into that place?

ME: Yes. And has the funding hooked to a trust that will pay for him until he dies.

CALEB: Was it because she did it behind your back?

ME: No. It was that she tried to distract me. The night before he ended up moving, everything was still up in the air. So much uncertainty. I was considering selling my cabin and moving in with him.

ME: Jade and I were hanging out, and she was helping me brainstorm ideas. She never said a word about the fact that she'd already paid for everything.

ME: Instead, she kissed me.

ME: Rocked my fucking world, and I thought we were finally—FINALLY—on the same page.

ME: Turns out it was just a way to distract me from the truth.

CALEB: Negative, Ghost Rider. That is incorrect.

I stare at my phone and frown. Since when does Caleb talk like that?

CALEB: That was Madison, btw. She grabbed my phone right out of my hands.

ME: Give it back to her. I have questions.

CALEB: 'Sup?

ME: You're ridiculous.

ME: But what do I have incorrect about that night? Tell me she didn't pay for my dad's care and the move and everything else.

CALEB: Can't do that. It's the truth. It's her love language, dumbass.

CALEB: It's why she bought me my store. When the previous owners jacked the rent up, Jade bought it. Now, she's my silent partner.

ME: I did not know that.

CALEB: Of course, you didn't. Because you've been a dumbass and ignored her the last several years.

ME: Madison! Get to the point. What am I incorrect about?

CALEB: Why she kissed you. Sheesh. Men are dumb.

ME: You've mentioned that. A few times.

ME: Spell it out for me, Mad.

CALEB: She kissed you because she figured you'd get pissed about her paying for your dad, so she wanted to take her shot while she still had a chance.

ME: Are you saying she kissed me because she had feelings for me?

CALEB: Duh!

I stare at my phone and will those words to make sense. She wanted me too? That can't be right. Why didn't she say something?

I cut her off like a severed limb the next day as I stood beside the moving van that took my dad and his few belongings to the memory care facility, Fuck if that's not what it felt like—the phantom pain of removing her so harshly from my life.

Fuck!

A car door slams outside. My gut tightens, and I stand to go to the door. She'll likely need help carrying things inside.

When I open the screen door and step barefoot out onto the porch, she's bent over the front trunk of her Tesla—the Frunk, to be exact—and that ripe, round peach of an ass is right fucking there. She's wearing yoga pants and a T-shirt and dressed down like this, she looks hot as fuck.

It immediately reminds me of how she felt in my arms in the diner the other day. That plump bottom was nestled on top of my dick, and I had to think of all kinds of things—mostly

Courtney—to keep my chub from going fully erect. She wouldn't have missed that.

“Need help?” I ask.

Jade squeaks and bangs her head on the lid of her car compartment. She pops up, holding a duffle bag and a picnic basket. “No, I've got it.”

I ignore her, step into my yard, and pull the items from her arms.

“The basket was a gift from the Blue Haired group. They came into the shop today to wish us well,” she says.

“Had several packages on the porch when I got home this afternoon.”

“Sasha get off okay?”

I snort. “She's living the high life in a private jet and staying at a fancy-ass hotel in Hollywood.”

The minute we step into my cabin, Jade's face pales. “I just remembered; you only have two bedrooms.”

I drop her bag on the floor, set the basket on the table, and close the distance between us. “That going to be a problem, wife?”

She bites down on her bottom lip. “I think we need to talk.”

chapter **nine**

Jade

Why is he calling me “wife?” And why is he standing so close to me? His pupils are blown wide as he leans in and inhales deeply. Is he sniffing me?

“Fucking Juicy Fruit,” he growls.

Goosebumps spread over my skin. My nipples pebble hard in my bra. His warm breath dances along my collarbone, and my neck tilts, giving him better access to the sensitive flesh.

What is he doing? Why is he all up in my space?

“I get that you want to practice, or whatever, so our intimacy looks natural, but no one is here right now, and we have time to work out the rules.”

I swear he licks my neck, but I must be imagining it. Still, there’s no stopping my body from reacting. My eyes flutter closed, and I whimper.

“You want to establish some rules, Peanut? Is that what you’re saying?”

Another phantom lick. “Yes. I think we should figure out our exit strategy.”

His hands go to my hips, and he squeezes, his fingertips digging into my flesh. My body is on high alert. On fire for a man who has always felt like home to me.

“For when custody is finalized,” I continue, “and you don’t have to worry about appearances so much.”

“It’s our wedding night,” he murmurs.

That’s when I finally come to my senses. I put my hands on his massive chest and push him back. “Is that what this is? You thought it would be a hilarious way to punish me? Get me all hot and bothered? And then what? You walk away? Turn on the TV and ignore me again?”

“Punish you? For what?” His voice is raw.

I swallow hard. “For paying for your dad. I love him, too, you know. He was a huge part of my life. Is! He *is* a huge part of my life.”

For the first time in as long as I can remember, Cain looks at me with unfettered affection. “I know you love him. He loves you, too. And I know the truth about all of it.”

My heart takes a nosedive into my belly and seems to bottom out. “What truth?”

“That he asked you. That he was lucid enough to call you to his side and beg for your help so he wouldn’t bankrupt me.”

I release a watery laugh and realize I’m crying. Awesome. I exhale a slow breath. “He said he knew it was only a matter of time before we realized we were meant to be together, and he was hoping I’d consider it taking care of my family.” The last word comes out as a sob, and I slam my hand over my mouth.

“Hey,” he says, his voice so gentle. He pulls me into his body and wraps himself around me in a hug.

Relief, so hot and palpable, flows through me, instantly relaxing my body like some sort of homeopathic Xanax.

He rubs a soothing hand up and down my back. “We’ve wasted so much time.”

I want to ask him if that means he finally forgives me and if he’s ready for us to be friends again. We kinda have to be now that we’re married, right?

“All this time, I thought you kissed me that night to soften the blow for what was coming the next day. I thought you were intentionally distracting me.” He pulls back, gripping my biceps and holding me in place. “Is that what it was? Tell me, Jade, why did you kiss me?”

Warning. Warning. Warning.

I’m surprised smoke isn’t coming out of my ears and he can’t hear the bells ringing in my head. “What do you mean?” Yes, I’m stalling. Whatever.

“You were trying to tell me something with that kiss. What was it?”

Don’t admit the truth.

The words are on repeat in my brain like my new mantra. I still don’t know what he’s playing at. Is he trying to reconcile our friendship or punish me in some way?

Do I want to be friends again? Yes. So much. But I’m tired of wanting things from him that I don’t get to have. I’m so tired of him rejecting me. I’m so tired of being the bad guy.

So, instead of being honest, I shake my head. “Distraction. Didn’t mean anything.”

He nods. “I see. So if I kissed you now, it wouldn’t mean anything, right?” He releases a low chuckle. “I think you’re lying. I think that kiss meant more, and we both misunderstood.”

He moves toward me, and I retreat until the backs of my legs hit the cabinets. Stepping close, he effortlessly lifts me so I’m sitting on his kitchen countertop.

“So much lost time,” he muses, his gaze roaming over my face.

“I feel like you’re speaking in riddles, Cain. I don’t know what you want.”

“I want you, Peanut.”

“What?”

“Do you remember how your grandparents warned you about trusting boys because they would only ever want you for your money?”

I wince at the reminder. “Of course, I remember. That was practically part of our morning ritual. ‘Have a good day at school, Jade. Remember to stay away from sugar because once on the lips means forever on the hips. Oh, and in case you think any boys like you, they don’t. They just want your money.’”

“You believed them too, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. You were there. No guys ever asked me on a date.”

“Because I was standing behind you, glaring at them. How do you not know how beautiful you are?” He cups my cheek. “How do you not know that every guy in our class wanted you? And it wasn’t for your money. Seventeen-year-old boys

don't give a fuck about that. And they don't have enough functioning brain cells to plan that sort of seduction even if they were considering it." He shakes his head. "No, they wanted you."

I open my mouth to argue, but he stalls me by gripping my chin.

"It killed me knowing they all wanted you. But I knew how they felt because I wanted you, too."

"What?" I whisper.

"Tell me you didn't know how I felt about you?"

"I never knew. After I kissed you that time, you got so angry, and I thought"—I choke on my words—"I thought you didn't want me, and it was the only way you could think of to let me down."

"You thought I ended our relationship because I didn't want you?"

"No. I mean, sort of. I knew you were mad about the money. But I don't know how to be any other way. I have more than I'll ever need, and if some of it can help someone I care about, I'll never think twice about handing it over."

"Like how you bought the store for Madison," he says.

I gasp. "I didn't think anyone knew about that. But yes. The landlord was doing one rent hike after another. He was going to price her right out of the building. So I bought it. It was an investment."

"Nah, Peanut, it was you taking care of your girl. Loving her the best way you know how. Just like you did for my dad." He cups my cheeks. "I'm sorry I've been such a fucking idiot."

I'm sorry I wasted so much of our time." He presses our foreheads together. "I've missed you so goddamn much."

chapter ten

Cain

Jade's arms go around my neck, and her legs wrap around my waist. "I've missed you too. So much."

I don't wait any longer. I lower my mouth and take her lips. I growl into her mouth and deepen the kiss, sliding my tongue against hers. Then she's kissing me, making greedy little noises at the back of her throat. My cock is a steel bar in my jeans.

I grip her bottom, sliding her body so she's leaning against the countertop, and press my erection against her center. She hooks a leg around my hip, opening herself to me. Thank fuck for yoga pants. I rock my erection against the heat of her cotton-clad pussy.

She gasps and pulls back. "You're hard?"

"Yeah. That's generally what happens when I'm turned on."

"You truly want me." This time, it's not a question.

I tear my shirt off, dropping it on the kitchen floor behind me. "So fucking much."

She takes off her shirt, baring her lace-covered breasts. Then that's gone, and I'm staring at her heavy, perfect tits. My eyes locked on her breasts has her nipples hardening into tight nubs.

"Pants off," I instruct, gripping my dick through my jeans and squeezing tight so I don't embarrass myself.

She hops off the counter and is pulling her yoga pants and underwear down her thighs when I lift her and set her down in that spot again. I rip her pants off the rest of the way, then bend one of her legs to set her foot on the counter. She's bared to me then. Open and slick with her want.

My mouth waters at the sight of her pink pussy and the pale blonde hair she keeps trimmed above her mound.

"If I don't get my mouth on you soon, I'm going to fucking lose my mind," I mutter. I fall to my knees in front of her. "Look what you've been hiding from me for all these years. Fucking perfect pussy."

"Cain," she whimpers.

I say nothing, leaning forward to suck her clit into my mouth. No soft kisses or preamble; I go straight in.

Her nails rake across my scalp as she digs into my hair.

I plunge one and then a second finger into her hot, slick channel, and she practically levitates off the counter.

"Oh, fuck," she hisses.

I fuck her with those fingers and pull my mouth back to watch her. Her toes curl, and her eyes squeeze shut.

"I want you to let go and come all over my face," I rasp. "Drown me, Jade. Do it."

She whimpers again.

I lave my tongue up her pussy walls and circle her clit before pulling it into my mouth. I suck hard.

“Cain. Dammit,” she swears.

I curl my fingers inside her to brush her front wall. Her legs shake as she chants my name and rocks her pussy against my face.

Then she shatters.

Her release splashes into my mouth, and I lap her up. I’m a glutton for the taste of my girl. I place small kisses around the apex of her thighs, loving the silky softness of her skin.

My hand falls to my jeans, and I unfasten them, giving my dick some breathing room. Rising to my feet, I gather her into my arms before marching us to my bedroom—*our* bedroom.

“I can’t wait any longer. I need to be inside you,” I growl.

She nuzzles into my neck, sated and loose.

“So if you don’t want that, tell me now. Else I’m going to sink so deep inside you, you’ll forget what life was like without me fucking you.”

“Yes, do that,” she says breathlessly.

I drop her onto the bed, and she bounces.

I pull off my jeans and boxers, then fist my dick. “You want this? Want me to fuck you?”

“Yes. Make me forget, like you said.” She spreads her legs and runs a hand between her breasts and down her stomach until she’s circling her clit.

“Goddamn, you’re sexy, Mrs. Bishop.”

She cries out.

“Oh, you like that, do you? Like wearing my name?”

This time, she nods.

“When I’m done with you, you’ll be wearing my name and my cum. No one will ever doubt that you’re mine.”

“Cain, please,” she begs.

“Open your eyes and look at me,” I say as I crawl up her body. “Show me that you know who’s taking you. You want my dick, you keep your eyes on me.”

“Okay.” Her pretty green eyes lock on mine. She lifts her hand to tuck my hair behind my ear. “You’re so beautiful.”

I notch myself at her entrance and slowly slide home. This is beautiful. Us finally together. Sinking inside her is a feeling unlike any other. She fits me like a proverbial glove.

“Fucking made for me,” I growl.

Her legs hike up and wrap about my waist. “So full. You feel amazing.” Her hands rub down my bare back.

I rear back, then press forward, starting a rhythm as I fuck her hard. “Goddammit, Jade. This is my fucking pussy. No one else’s.”

“It’s all yours, she breathes. “Harder. Fuck me harder.”

I shift our positions so I’m up on my knees with her plump ass resting on my thighs while I pound into her.

“You take my dick so well. Look at that.” I rub my thumb through her slick folds until I find her clit and circle it slowly.

“Yes!” she shrieks. “Just like that, Cain.”

I grip Jade's hips with one hand and play with her clit with the other. My balls tighten, and pleasure zings along my spine. I'm getting close. I already made her come once, but I want to feel her pussy milking me.

"Together," I say. "I want you to come with me."

She nods. "I'm so close."

"Good because I can't fucking hold off anymore. You feel too damn good." I squeeze her clit. "Now. Come now."

My climax starts to pulse through me when I feel Jade's rock around me. Her nails dig into my back and she shakes, calling my name like a prayer.

When our pleasure has subsided and I can move my legs again, I go into the bathroom for a cloth to clean us off. Afterward, I crawl into bed and pull her against me so we're facing each other.

She looks up at me. "Is it weird?"

"What?"

"That you were just inside me. Is it weird that we had sex?"

"We're married now."

She nibbles on that bottom lip and nods. "So is that what we're doing? Like a married-with-benefits kind of situation? I'm not complaining. I just want to know what I'm getting into."

"Is that what you want?"

"You have to answer first. I asked the question," she says.

"Then no. That's not what I want."

"What are we doing then? What is this?"

“This is an I’m-all-in-I-gave-you-my-heart-when-I-was-seventeen-and-I’m-never-walking-away-again kind of thing.”

Wide eyes full of hope and so much love shine back at me.

“Peanut,” I say softly, “I’m in love with you, and regardless of how it happened or how long it took, I’m fucking glad you’re my wife.”

“I love you too,” she says with a sweet smile.

“Now you’ll never get rid of me.” I pull her closer and rest my face in the crook of her neck, where she smells the sweetest. “You’re stuck with me forever.”

“At least you’re good in bed.” She giggles. “I love you, Cain. I’ve always loved you. Let’s not be stupid anymore or waste any more time. Let’s just love each other until we die.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

epilogue

Jade

Six months later...

Our wedding wasn't exciting since neither of us realized it would be a legitimate union. So we're ensuring that today's ceremony is perfect. And special. Memorable, so we can celebrate it every year.

I've put on a pretty lavender dress, and Cain is wearing a sleek black suit that looks sinful on his bulky muscles. His pale purple tie softens him a little so he's less grouchy-looking. Granted, he smiles more these days. I like to think I have a little something to do with that.

"Let's go!" Cain yells from the kitchen. "We're going to be late. Whatever last-minute hair and make-up nonsense you girls have to do can be done in the truck."

I laugh as I put my earrings on. My hair is a mass of blonde curls, but it's humid outside, so there's not much to be done to fix that.

I make it to the kitchen before Sasha does. I lean up to kiss my husband, and he smiles down at me.

“You look gorgeous, as usual,” he says.

“Thank you. It would be nice if my hair could look better than my husband’s for one day in my life, but whatever.”

He laughs as Sasha runs into the room. She has a pair of purple low-top Converse tucked under one arm and a bag over the other. “I’m ready. Mostly.”

We drive into town and make it to the courthouse in plenty of time.

Sasha makes the final touches to her mascara—something I had to go to bat for on her behalf since her brother was hesitant. I assured him that mascara is perfectly acceptable for a thirteen-year-old girl.

The building is nearly full when we file into the courthouse. While Saddle Creek is the county seat, it’s still a relatively small courthouse. My heart nearly bursts as we watch our friends and family members enter the pew-like rows. There are flashes of purple on almost every person.

“Why is everyone here?” Sasha asks.

“Because today is a very important day,” I tell her. I wrap my arm around her thin shoulders, lamenting that she’s almost taller than me.

“They’re wearing purple,” she says.

“It’s your favorite and they love you.”

The judge is introduced, and the proceedings start. After lots of legal speak, the elderly judge finally looks at Cain and me. “You have petitioned to change your guardianship of Sasha Bishop to one of adoption, is that correct?”

Cain clears his throat. “Yes, your honor.”

Sasha grabs our hands as she stands between us. She smiles so big I want to squeeze her and never let go.

Courtney's threats were that and nothing more—empty threats. She tried to get money from Cain. And yeah, maybe I paid her to go away. I told her that if Sasha wanted to see her or be in contact, she would reach out. Courtney should give her daughter that much. Then, I demanded she sign the parental termination rights.

After that was done, we immediately officially petitioned for temporary custody. And now, here we are.

The judge asks Cain and me a series of questions that remind me of wedding vows—verbal and legal commitments to love and care for Sasha as our kid.

The judge smiles at our teenage girl. “Sasha, you like living with your brother and sister-in-law?”

“Yes, sir. It's the best home I've ever had. They love each other so much and love me too.”

Cain looks at me above Sasha's head. *I love you*, he mouths.

“Well, then, I don't see anything standing in the way of making the three of you a legal family with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with it,” the judge announces with a knowing smile.

Then it's done. We sign forms, and boom; we're officially Sasha's legal parents. Afterward, everyone converges on Grady and Jess's property, where a makeshift stage is set up. Jess does an impromptu concert with the help of our local country singer, Micha Stone, and everyone's favorite amateur singer, Harrison Crawford.

Cain pushes me around the plywood dance floor sprinkled with cornmeal.

I smile up at him. “You’re an amazing father.”

“I had the best example.”

“Yes, you did.” That was another reason we wanted to rush the adoption. Cain and Sasha’s dad is now in hospice care, and they don’t expect him to live much longer.

“I’m so damn thankful you gave us the years we’ve had with him,” Cain says, his voice cracking. He shakes his head. “I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t paid for his care the last several years. It gave us time to say goodbye as best we could with that fucking disease.”

“It was truly my pleasure.”

“I feel like I need to beg for forgiveness every day for the rest of our lives for being so cold to you. I was such a fucking moron.”

“Love can make you do crazy things. But I don’t need you to apologize. We’re together now, and I wouldn’t change a thing. We don’t know what would have been different if we’d gotten together all those years ago. Maybe you wouldn’t have taken in Sasha. I can’t imagine our life without her.”

Cain leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I don’t deserve you.”

“I’ll let you work for it later.”

“Are you propositioning me on the dance floor, wife?”

“I most certainly am, husband.”



I hope you loved Cain and Jade's story. Want a little more of them? Please consider [leaving me a review](#).

If you missed Grady and Jess's story, you can find it in [Dad Bod Cowboy](#). Keep scrolling for an excerpt! You can find Caleb and Madison's story in [Lone Star Sheriff](#).

There are two more mountain men coming. Be sure to join my [newsletter](#) and/or [VIP Reader](#) group to find out whenever The Growly Outcast's Promise and The Gruff Loner's Bargain will be available for pre-order.

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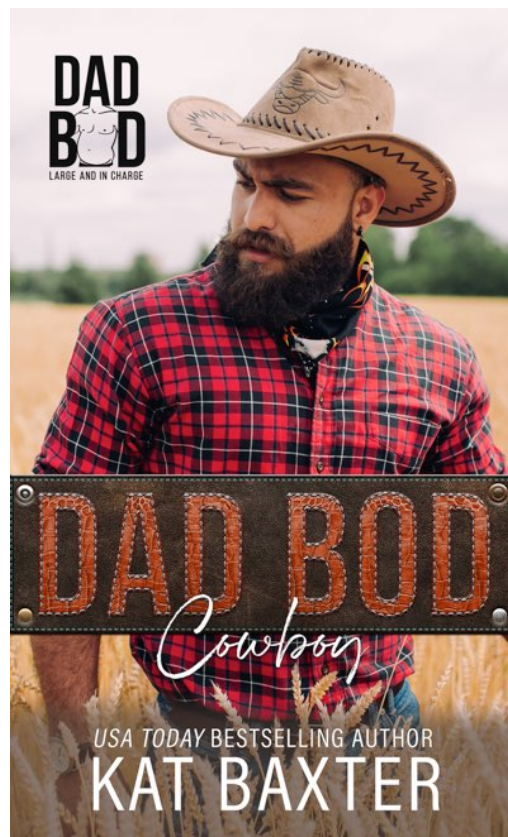
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excerpt from dad bod cowboy



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?”



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

“How does Kat Baxter make me fall in love with her characters in just 12 short chapters? It’s coz she’s a freaken magic weaver with her words!!” ~ Amazon review

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

“Swoon. I could not get enough of this story and fell in love with both these characters!” ~Amazon review

“... the chemistry between them is instant and off the charts!” ~Amazon review

“... original, hot, and a hoot!” ~Amazon review

“DAMN it’s hot.” ~Amazon review

“... sweetness, heat and humor. By the time the story was over, my cheeks hurt from smiling so hard.” ~Amazon review