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KAT BAXTER

Santa is on his
own naughty list
this year.

Grumpy

SANTA

grumpy santa

Kat Baxter



contents

[Grumpy Santa](#)

[The Effect...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[The Cause...](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[The Consequences...](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[The Conclusion...](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[Excerpt from A Very Cheeky Christmas](#)

[About the author](#)

grumpy santa

Audrey

I've been in love with big, brooding Jared Sawyer ever since he hired me to work in his hardware store. He scowls a lot and growls more than he talks, but there's something about him that makes me feel like I'm right where I'm supposed to be. After one explosive night in his arms, I'm even more certain we belong together. But then he never mentions the way he kissed and held me, or the naughty things he whispered in my ear.

How is it possible that what felt like forever was just a one and done?

Just when I'm sure that the only consequences of our night together are awkward silences at work, I find out Jared left me with more than a broken heart.

Grumpy Santa

Kat Baxter

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the effect...

chapter **one**

Audrey

Just when I thought I couldn't be more awkward around Jared—AKA my boss, AKA my secret crush, AKA my one and done—here I am reaching new lows of awkward. Talking about my inconsistent periods in front of him.

“So you're saying you haven't had a cycle in nearly three months?” the nurse asks. She squints at her tablet screen, then glances back to me. Her eyes briefly flick to the beast of a man standing at my side.

He hasn't said any words since barking orders at the emergency room staff that I needed to be seen immediately. So, since they brought me back to a curtained off room for an examination I keep saying I don't actually need, Jared has stood like a great sentinel, big beefy arms crossed over his impossibly broad chest, scowl daring anyone to go against his wishes.

I'm not gonna lie, I'm kinda eating up the attention. He's not pouring it directly on me. Not like the night that shall not be discussed. Half the time I'm convinced that night was a complete figment of my filthy, depraved imagination.

“We can't do an X-Ray then until we can confirm that you aren't pregnant.”

The giant beside me shifts, but says nothing.

“It's super unlikely,” I say. I mean, I've gone as long as seven months

before without having a period. My hormones are wonky.

“Are you sexually active, Ms. Briggs?” the nurse asks. Again, her eyes flick to Jared.

“Uh, sort of.”

The nurse nods like that confirms everything. “We’ll do a blood test. It’s faster and more conclusive.” She disappears from the room for a few minutes, presumably to get the supplies she needs.

Because of course I have to have my very first pregnancy test in front of the only man who’s actually seen me naked. I release a shaky breath. I want to say something to him. I want him to say something to me. Or reach out and grab my hand.

I mean the odds are really low that I’m pregnant. First off, who gets pregnant the very first time they have sex? Yeah, that statistic is probably really low. Also, I have Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome which means my lady hormones are usually out of whack, resulting in random periods, lackluster egg quality and obnoxious chin hairs I have to pluck in my car in the daytime because it has a mirror and good lighting. There are a handful of other bothersome traits that go along with my condition, but doctors have been telling me since I was a teenager that my ovaries don’t look good and so, yeah, it seems really unlikely I’m pregnant.

But I still have to go through this with Jared at my side. The only man *who could have* knocked me up. Yet, neither of us has said a single word about that night nearly two and a half months ago. We’ve talked about other things: the new restaurant being built just outside of town, our favorite football teams, the grossest flavor of ice cream at Sprinkles (apricot), not to mention the day-to-day minutia of our jobs.

We’ve covered a lot of ground, but not a word has been said about our one night together. It’s like it never happened.

He hasn’t touched me again or kissed me. There’ve been no dirty words growled in my ear while he slams into—

“Here we are,” the nurse says as she sweeps into the room.

Thankfully she interrupts my disastrous train of thought. Not before my pussy flooded with arousal though. Please God, don’t let them have to do a pelvic exam.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the nurse pokes the needle into my arm. “The doctor wants to go ahead and do a full blood panel to check on all the things while you’re here.”

“That doesn’t seem necessary,” I say. Paying for an expensive blood test is not in my budget right now. Could my parents or brother help? Sure, but I hate to ask. “I’m perfectly healthy, aside from the PCOS.”

“Yes, which can lead to hypertension and Type II Diabetes, not to mention elevated cholesterol levels.”

“I’ve got it,” Jared says, his voice low and deep.

I glance up at him, and those honey-colored eyes of his search my face. “That’s not your responsibility.”

“You got hurt on the job. I’m your boss. That’s my shop. I pay. End of discussion.”

The nurse hums but doesn’t say anything and then she’s slapping on a cotton ball and medical tape. “I’ll be back as soon as we have the more pressing test result. If you want to be alone or want us to call someone for you, let me know.” Again, the older woman looks up at Jared.

“I’m good. We’re friends. Work together,” my words peter out because I’m tired of explaining who Jared is to me. People ask me that question on the regular.

Y’all are so funny together.

You sound like an old married couple.

I just have to grin through my heartbreak and reiterate that we just work together, that we’re not a couple. I’ve often wondered if townspeople ask him when they see him alone like they do me. But I’ve never dared to ask.

“How’s your knee?” Jared asks.

I shrug. “It still hurts, but it’s fine. All of this seems like overkill for just a small tumble. It’s not the first time I’ve fallen, probably won’t be—”

The door opens and someone pushes in some sort of fancy looking laptop on a rolling cart. A guy wearing pale green scrubs appears. He looks like he’s barely eighteen with reddish hair and face full of freckles. He rolls the machine right next to my bed.

“I’m Quinton and I’ll be your ultrasound technician today,” he says. “Can you pull up your shirt and lower your pants and underwear enough to expose your stomach?”

Jared growls.

The tech takes a nervous step back, looking like he’s swallowed his tongue.

Again the door opens and the nurse reappears. “Well, Ms. Briggs, it appears as if you are pregnant.” She nods to the ultrasound tech. “Quinton, you can begin.”

I hear the nurse’s words, but this just can’t be happening. Wait. I need everything to slow down. I can’t be pregnant. Doctors have told me since I started puberty that my odds were low. The man-boy looks up at Jared as if waiting for permission.

“I’m sorry, can we go back a step, please. You said I’m pregnant?” I ask.

Jared hasn’t moved or made a sound. He’s just staring at my stomach. Considering I don’t recall a time in my life when my belly has been flat and not squishy with rolls, I don’t particularly relish attention in that area.

“Here, let me help.” The nurse comes over, holding something that looks like a hospital gown, but unfolds like a thin blanket.

My heart is beating so loud and fast that I think maybe they can all hear it too.

The nurse lifts my shirt to just below my bra and then using the blanket, tucks my leggings and panties down below the bottom curve of my stomach.

Awesome. So now it’s like accentuating my fat. I exhale slowly.

Yeah, now is probably not the time to be worried about how my belly looks, because ... um ... how the hell am I supposed to process all of this?

Part of me wants to jump up and down, waving my hands like a referee calling a time out. Because what in the name of cookies and cream ice cream is happening here?

I'm ... what now?

Pregnant?

But I don't have time to rewind the conversation or even pause it, because the nurse is looking at Quinton and me as she asks, "Are you sure you don't want to call anyone else? The father, perhaps?"

But by now, Quinton has the jellied-up wand pressed to my stomach and he's poking around.

I can't even catch my breath to ask all the questions that are reeling through my mind. All I can do is stare at the blurry grey screen. Flashes of red and blue appear in random splotches. He clicks a few times with his other hand and then there's the rapid whoosh-whoosh-whoosh sound echoing in the room.

"That's the baby's heartbeat," he says.

Tears roll from one eye to the next with the angle of my head. My vision blurs.

Quinton says more words about measurements and weeks, but it's like he's speaking a foreign language.

The thought that keeps running through my mind is that this has to be the very worst way to find out you're pregnant.

chapter two

JARED

I think I might be hyperventilating.

I force myself to remain still though. If I move, I might strangle that skinny fucker who's running that wand thing over Audrey's stomach.

Right now Audrey is freaking out a little. And who the fuck could blame her? Our lives are about to change forever.

"Were you going to tell me?" I ask.

I shake my head. "It's not—"

"Don't you fucking say it's not mine, Audrey."

"Sir, if you upset her, we're going to have to escort you out," the nurse says.

I turn to the nurse. "That's my baby. I'm not going anywhere." I cross my arms over my chest and stare at the older woman.

Audrey's hand brushes my arm and just like that, the beast inside me calms, the rage and frustration dissipate.

"Maybe we could have a few moments alone," Audrey suggests.

The nurse nods. "Of course. Press the call button if you need anything." She gives me one more glance before ushering Quinton out of the room. The last thing she does is set a printout of the ultrasound on the table next to

Audrey.

My heart pounds and the bridge of my nose stings. Like I'm going to—what?—cry? I don't fucking think so. I haven't cried in years. And I'm sure not sad.

Not even a little bit.

"I don't understand," Audrey says to no one in particular. "How did this even happen?"

"I think we both know how this happened, *Knödel*. We were there."

Her hazel eyes flick to mine and I swear I see her pupils expand.

Then all I can think of is that night. The noises she made. The way she took me—all of me—begging for more.

Fuck.

I cannot get a fucking boner in the middle of the emergency room right after we found out we're having a baby.

Baby.

Holy shit. I'm going to be a father.

Panic rises like bile in my throat, threatening to choke me. I don't know the first thing about being a father. Never had one worth a damn. Mine was gone by the time I was twelve, before that all he did was drink and knock me around a bit.

"I didn't know, Jared, I swear. I would never keep something like that from you. From anyone."

"There is no one else," I growl.

"That's not what I meant, and you can stop being such a grumpy ass. You're not the one that's going to swell up to the size of a bloated prize pumpkin."

I fight the twitch at my lips. My Audrey. My *Knödel*. Unlike a lot of people, she doesn't capitulate to my scowls and growls. She's not afraid of me, not bothered by any of my moods. She's steadfast, and I wish I knew the words to say to her right now.

Which is nothing new. I'm not good with words. Or feelings, for that matter. So I never know how to tell her the things I want to. Why would this moment be any different?

"Sorry," I say.

She glances up at me and just nods. Her hand falls to her exposed belly, then she lifts it again, glaring at her hand. "I'm all sticky from that jelly stuff."

I move to the sink and dampen some of the hospital grade paper-towels, then make my way back to her side. Gently, I wipe her soft, pale skin as clean as I can.

God, I want to lay my head right there on that rise at the bottom of her stomach. I want to lay there and wrap my arms around her body and hold her like that forever.

But I don't have that right.

Not yet.

Audrey deserves a man who can pamper her and lavish her with romance. I'm not that man. But maybe I can learn.

Because that's my baby growing in my woman's belly and I'll be damned if I let another man sweep in and lure her away with poetry and flowers.

the cause...

chapter **three**

Audrey

A little over two months ago...

I'm so done with trying to date.

Men are dumb and let's face it, none of them are him. None of them scowl at me quite like he does. No, they try to flirt and say stupid things they think will make me spread my legs for them. But I'm just not interested.

Especially in the tool I met tonight for drinks. His name is Braden—or something equally douche-y. He's not from Saddle Creek, just works at one of the ranches here. In his spare time, he likes to taxidermy roadkill.

I wish I was kidding.

He told the entire story about finding a raccoon in nearly perfect condition—his words, not mine—and he stuffed him real good. Yep, he said all of those words directly to my boobs.

He could have at least glanced up at my face once to pretend he wasn't a total perv. But nope.

Like I said, total perv.

And not in a good way. And, yes, there is a good way to be pervy. When it's the right guy.

Meanwhile, I wish Jared would talk to my boobs. I wish he'd motorboat

them. Ugh, I'm pathetic. Who falls in love with their boss?

Especially a big, grumpy, growly boss, who never smiles and grumbles orders?

Jared's like one of those dogs that bark loudly, but then roll over for belly rubs. Not that Jared has ever rolled over and asked me to rub anything. I mean I would. No questions asked.

What I'm trying to say here is that his facade is all frowns and glares, but he's got a heart of gold, that one. I've seen it so many times over the last few years that I've worked in his shop.

Like the time that he replaced all of the tires on my old Honda sedan. He acted like he'd just found the tires in his back yard, but I knew better. He's generous to a fault. But it's not me. I'm not special.

He's that guy that helps old ladies carry their groceries into their houses. The guy who offers to repair the old gazebo in the town square, then refuses any payment other than banana-nut muffins from Gladys Murphy. He's the guy who secretly mows people's lawns when they're sick. Just an all-around good guy. A piping hot cinnamon roll ready to burn your mouth, but with an ooey-gooney center.

I blow out a breath as I cross the street, then head to the alleyway behind Bolts. That's the name of Jared's store and the place I've called a home away from home for the last three years. Since he begrudgingly hired me and I became his right hand...er, man.

Then proceeded to fall irrevocably in love with the broody giant. I didn't mean for it to happen, but as my mama always says, you can't help it when you find your narwhal.

Okay, that probably doesn't make any sense to anyone outside of my own family. It's something my parents came up with. When they met and fell in love, lots of couples were starting to meet via online dating. There was a lot chatter about finding the illusive unicorn—that one man or woman who just had it all.

My dad, though, said that all the searching for the rare unicorn was just setting yourself up for failure. So instead, he looked for his narwhal. Still mythical, still majestic, still just as fantastical, but also completely real and attainable. You just might have to work a little to make it happen.

Recently my big brother found his narwhal. I haven't met her in person yet, but they're moving here after the first of the year. We've video chatted and Andrew is so in love with her, it just oozes out of his skin. It's adorable. Maxine is hilariously dry and snarky, just what my goofy brother needs.

The lights are out in the shop. I use my key to let myself in. I'm too restless to try to go home and go to bed. Besides, if I'm alone, I'd rather be here where I can get some work done. We've got inventory coming in for the holidays over the next couple of months and I noticed the other day that our supply shelves are all mixed up and out of order.

So, I can work on that.

A wall of hot air meets me as I enter the darkened back room of the hardware store. Jared has the system programmed so it doesn't continue to blast cold air conditioning when no one is here.

Despite the fact that it's early October, this is Texas, and well, it still feels like summer here. And I can't change the programming because then Jared will know I'm here. He gets weird about me being here when I'm alone.

I already feel like I'm sweating so I slip off my shoes and then take off my blue jean miniskirt and my bright raspberry peasant blouse. Normally I don't dress up so much, but I was trying to put myself out there, as my mama says I need to do.

She tells me, "Darlin, I think you're pretty as a picture with your pigtails and your overalls. But men are like fish, they need something shiny to catch their attention."

So I put a necklace on, with a sparkling pendant that hung just at the entrance to my cleavage. Obviously the reason why Brandon—no, that's not right, Brenton?—well, whatever his name was, it's obvious that pendant kept

his eyes locked on my girls.

I make my way, barefoot, into the main room of the floor to ceiling shelving wearing nothing but my underwear. I do tend to dress very bland. I favor jeans and overalls and t-shirts. I have a sizable collection of low top Chucks, which I think go with everything, in practically every color. I'm a no frills kind of girl. Except when it comes to my bras and panties.

I like soft, luxurious fabric that whispers across my skin. I put on my favorite playlist on my phone and climb the ladder to get to the top shelf. I know that particular shelf is the worst.

I laugh when one of my favorite Christmas songs starts to play. It's October, not at all too early to start getting into the holiday spirit.

chapter **four**

JARED

Sometimes if I've met some buddies at Ace's bar and grill and I've had one too many beers, I go back to the shop and sleep on the old sofa I keep in the back room. I live a few miles outside of town, and I'm not drunk by any stretch—I think I'd get alcohol poisoning before that would happen—but I am tired. Too tired to drive well on dark country roads with suicidal deer.

But as soon as I step into the back door of my shop, I know something's not right.

First of all, I hear music. It's not particularly loud, but it's definitely coming from the maze of shelving to the right of this area we use like a break room. Secondly, I see clothes tossed on the very couch I was planning to sleep on. Women's clothes.

Fury burns through my body. I'm going to fucking kill her if she brought a man here to fuck in my damn store. I storm forward to find her and whatever fuckboy she's brought into my goddamn domain. My hands flex at my sides.

Then I hear her giggle. My head turns to the area where the sound came from and I nearly swallow my tongue.

She is a curvy goddess wearing nothing but tiny scraps of hot pink fabric.

It looks silky to the touch. *She* looks silky to the touch.

I move without realizing it until I'm standing behind her. There's no one else here that I can see, and she's clearly working on something, perched up on that ladder. Her plump ass wiggles as she moves to the music, which sounds like a burlesque version of *You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch*.

Her hands grip the sides of the ladder and she bends slightly, still dancing.

I'm not sure what is happening right now. Why is she practically naked and dancing on a ladder in my store?

Maybe I hit my head on the way here and I'm actually unconscious on the street. This is clearly just a fantasy I'm having while my brain hemorrhages.

I reach down and palm my dick that is painfully pressing against my blue jean zipper. That erection sure feels fucking real. Goddammit, she's even better than I'd imagined.

She makes a noise and then her balance wobbles. I'm next to her in a second. Our eyes meeting briefly in the round safety mirror. Then my arms catch her and pull her the rest of the way off the ladder. I've got her cradled against my body like she's everything I've ever dreamed of.

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes wide as she peers up at me. I want to press her against the wall and tear her plump little body apart with my lips and teeth.

I should put her down, but as I spin us away from the ladder, my hands grip her soft flesh. When I realize I'm very nearly squeezing her ass, I set her down.

I pull off my backwards ball cap and rub my head before I put the hat right back where it was.

"What the fuck are you doing here? And what are you wearing?" I snap.

Her shoulders slump slightly, but her chin tips up in defiance. "You don't have to make fun of me."

Goddamn. It's so hard not to look at all her exposed skin. So much on

display. I can see pale skin in my periphery, but I keep my fucking eyes on her face. She's not even wrapping her arms around herself, not even attempting to cover her skin.

"I wasn't making fun," I say. "It's dangerous to be on a ladder without anyone else around. If I hadn't been here to catch you, you could have hit your head and died."

Her hands fist at her rounded hips. "Well, if I hadn't seen you grab your dick over your jeans, I wouldn't have gotten distracted and nearly fallen!"

Defiance flares in her eyes. I lose the battle in that moment. My gaze drops to the bright pink bra that hugs her large, perfect tits. Lowers still to the indentation of her waist that leads to the thick flare of her hips. She wears matching pink panties that have some kind of strap design encircling her body right below her belly button. Her creamy thighs touch, hiding her sweetness from me. I want to part them, run my hand over the panel of silky fabric covering her pussy to see if she's wet.

Is she shaved bare, or neatly trimmed? Will the hair match the pale blonde on her head?

"Is that why you were grabbing yourself?" she asks, her voice breathy. "Do you like what you see, big guy?"

My nostrils flare, but I have no response.

She steps closer to me, then boldly reaches out and runs her palm over my denim clad erection.

I groan, then grab her wrist.

"Don't tease me, Audrey."

"It's not teasing."

"Who the fuck did you put that on for anyways?"

"For me," she says.

That pleases me. Knowing she dresses for herself.

She lifts a shoulder, drawing my attention back to her breasts. "I like wearing pretty underwear."

My mouth goes dry. “You always have stuff like this on underneath your regular clothes?”

She nods. “Yes, though it’s not cheap so my sets don’t always match because I buy them when they’re on sale.”

I nearly reach into my wallet and hand her my credit card. *Buy the whole fucking store*, I want to tell her.

Her fingers curl against my hardness. “Please, Jared.”

My gaze flies to her face. Her lips are parted and her eyes are nearly black with desire.

“What do you need?” I find myself asking.

She reaches behind her, unhooks her bra, then lets the pink fabric fall off her shoulders. Her breasts are heavy, the palest of pink colors her hard little nipples.

“Touch me.”

I grab her hand and bring her out of the shelving, back to where the sofa sits conveniently waiting. I’ve only ever used it for sleeping when I don’t want to drive home. I sit on the piece of furniture, it groans under my weight.

I grip her hips and pull her forward until she’s straddling my lap. I have so many things to say, but I don’t want to break whatever spell we’re under.

My hands slide up her torso to her naked tits, weighing them in my palms. I’m a big guy—tall and broad with hands that can easily palm a basketball. The full weight of her breasts filling my hands makes me growl.

I scrape my thumbs across her beaded nipples, and she arches into my touch, whimpering.

I’m going to come in my fucking pants. Whatever. I just want to touch her. Bring her pleasure. Watch her come undone.

Then she leans against me and her lips are on mine. I stop breathing as she licks into my mouth. Once our tongues touch, I can breathe again. As if this kiss resuscitates me. Surges life back into my charred, withered soul.

I unleash myself on her then, kissing her with every ounce of pent-up

desire I've harbored for this woman the last three years. She is the air I breathe. The very life blood flowing through my veins.

She squirms in my lap, then drags one of my hands to the front of her panties. I might not have a lot experience, but I don't need further instructions.

I slide my thumb against the front panel of her underwear and she's wet through the fabric. I growl into her mouth, intensifying our kiss while moving my thumb across her silk-covered clit.

Her fingernails dig into my shoulders, and she bucks against my hand. She breaks our kiss, her breath mingling with mine as she rests her forehead against mine.

"Jared," she whispers. "Oh God." Then she breaks and her body shudders against me as she comes.

It's fucking gorgeous. She's fucking spectacular.

"Panties off," I growl.

She raises to her knees and peels them off.

I shift our positions so I'm laying back on the couch and she's still straddling me.

"On my face. Gotta taste you." I unfasten my jeans to give my dick some breathing room, but I don't think it'll help. It feels impossibly hard, like I'll never not be hard again.

"What?" she asks, her voice unsure.

"*Knödel*, sit on my face. Now."

Her knees come up beside my ears. I wrap my arms around her legs, hugging her to my head. God, she smells amazing.

She's apprehensive as she moves towards me, but I grab her body and slam her pussy down on my mouth, my tongue immediately breaching her tight channel.

Maybe I really am dead because this is fucking heaven. I want this every day for the rest of my life. This woman on my face, riding out her pleasure.

I swirl my tongue up and around her clit and she mewls in response. One of her hands threads through my hair, holding my head in place. Then she rocks herself against me.

“It’s so good, Jared”

My name on her lips sounds like a prayer.

“Your beard. Your lips and tongue. Fuck, even your nose. I’m not going to last,” she says.

“Fucking come in my mouth. I want every last drop. Drown me, *Knödel*.”

I suck her clit into my mouth.

“Coming,” she moans.

And she does, her orgasm drenching my beard. I lap at her until she collapses down on my chest. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close me.

I desperately want to fuck her. To slide inside that hot, wet pussy and pound into her until my balls are drained. But I refuse to ask for that. This was about her pleasure.

Then I feel her hand slide into the front of my boxers and I freeze.

When her fingers brush against my cock, she gasps.

“Oh my,” she says. She leans up and looks down into my face with a crooked little smile. “What have we got here.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “We don’t need to.”

“Oh we most certainly do,” she says. She stands from my body, then looks down at my tented underwear. “How do you walk around with that thing?”

“It’s not normally like that,” I grit.

“Are you telling me you’re a grower, not a shower? Because that thing is enormous.” Her hands go to my waistband, pulling it up and down. “I’ve got to see it.”

“Yes, my dick, the freak show.” I open my eyes to watch her.

One finger slides against the precum beading on the tip. I hiss through my

teeth.

“Not a freak show, big guy. Just a big, gorgeous dick.”

I snort. “Seen a lot of them, have you?”

“Not in the flesh. Just this one. But I’ve watched enough porn.”

“You have?”

“Sure,” she says with a shrug. “Who hasn’t?”

I watch her try to wrap her hand around my girth, but her fingers don’t touch. This is the part where she’s going to freak out and leave. Tell me there’s no way it’ll fit and she’ll run out of the door.

Instead, she surprises the hell out of me by leaning forward and fitting the whole head in her mouth.

“Audrey,” I groan as her tongue sweeps across my frenulum. “Goddammit, your mouth is so sweet. Look at how you take me. Such a good fucking girl.”

She moans, then releases me with a pop. Then she’s straddling me again, lining up that perfect pink hole with my monster cock. She doesn’t question, just lines us up and starts sinking down.

I grab her hips.

“I’ve been so empty for so long, Jared.”

“I’ll fill you up.”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“You’re not worried I’m going to hurt you? Tear your pretty pussy apart?”

She shakes her head, it forces her body down another inch. “Not worried, but yes, tear me apart.”

“It’s gonna hurt,” I warn, giving her another chance to change her mind. Already, I’m ready to blow my load. Her slick heat is engulfing the head of my dick and it’s the best thing I’ve ever felt.

“I want it. Fill me.” She rocks herself on me, bouncing and lowering herself even more.

I look into her gorgeous hazel eyes. “You sure?”

“Do it, Jared, fuck me. Break me. See just how much of a good girl I can be.”

“Fuck,” I groan. Then I tighten my hands on her hips and jerk myself up, disappearing inside her all the way to the hilt. I might already be coming, but I don’t fucking care. I search my girl’s face, looking for a wince or tears, but she’s got her head tossed back as if she’s in ecstasy.

I reach between us, looking at her lips spread wide across the trunk of my dick. “Such a good girl. Look at you taking my dick.”

“So full,” she says. She braces her hands on my chest, then starts to move, riding me.

I keep my hand where it is so she grinds against my thumb with her every downward movement.

“You like fucking that fat dick?” I ask.

“Yes. God, yes. I feel like you’re gonna split me in half. In the best way.”

Her full tits bounce as she rides me. Nothing has ever been more beautiful.

“This pussy is perfect for my cock. So fucking perfect. You’re going to make me come so hard, *Knödel*.”

I see her body growing fatigued, so I pump up into her. My eyes nearly cross, it feels so good. So hot. So slick. So goddamn perfect.

“Oh God, it’s too much,” she says.

“No, baby, you were made for this. For me. Now come all over my dick.”

She screams as she crests and I’m right there with her. Pounding up into her while her pussy has my dick in a chokehold and my balls empty inside her.

I fall asleep with her in my arms, convinced that this is a beginning of something perfect. Which just shows what an idiot I am. Because when I wake up in the morning, she’s gone. And she never says so much as a word about our night together.

the consequences...

chapter **five**

Audrey

It's been two weeks since my boss and I did the dirty in the back room of the shop. Knowing how that tightly trimmed beard feels between my thighs keeps me up at night.

As with every morning for the past three years, Jared stands behind the worn wooden countertop, big, bulging arms crossed over his barrel chest. He glares in the direction of the back of the store—where I am—but he hasn't seen me yet.

His best friend steps up to the counter and that's my cue. "Morning, sunshine," Garrett says.

Jared slowly turns to face his friend. "Fuck off."

"Thanks, big guy," Garrett says.

"Delightful, isn't he?" I ask as I step in beside my boss and one time lover. I glance up at him and give him a sticky sweet smile.

He doesn't say good morning to me.

So I hip-check him. Which is really just me hitting his thigh with my hip because he's tall and I'm not. We don't exactly line up.

You sure lined up just right on the couch in the back room.

That horny little voice has been working overtime since our encounter.

“Did you not have enough children cross over your bridge this morning?” I ask Jared. “Need another snack?”

Garrett laughs. “The customer service is why I come to this lovely establishment. So, is my sink in? Is that why you called?”

“No sink yet. Just thought you might like to know about Felicity,” Jared says.

Garrett glares at him. “What about her?”

I listen to the men chat back and forth while I pretend to look through our custom order forms.

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

I look up to see Garrett bent over, hands on his knees, breathing slowly.

“Is he having a panic attack?” I ask Jared.

“Fuck if I know.”

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

“Japanese crested dogs,” I say. “That was a pretty accurate description of them.”

“Thanks.”

“So, who is this Felicity?”

“The one he fucked up with,” Jared explains. “Which he could fix if he stopped 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.

Like suddenly he’s the man to toss out relationship advice? He’s never been in a relationship. At least not that I’ve ever seen.

Garrett follows the big guy, peppering him with questions.

Jared spins, and Garrett crashes into him.

I laugh because it looks like something from a cartoon.

“Calm the fuck down, Garrett. Christ on a cracker, man.” Jared takes off

his ball cap, rubs his head, then puts it right back in place. “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,” Garrett says. “Because now I can prepare. Plan the perfect way to sweep her off her feet.”

“You’ve got this, Garrett,” I encourage from across the store. “Everyone in town loves you. You’re sweet and funny and smoking hot.”

I hear Jared’s growl from here.

“Get to work, Audrey. I don’t pay your ass to flirt with the customers.”

I roll my eyes. Someone took their asshole pills this morning.

Jared is still muttering to Garrett, but I can’t hear him since he’s all the way in that back room. Then he stomps back out carrying two mugs of coffee.

Well, maybe not all of his asshole pills. Just one.

He sets a mug in front of me, and judging by the color of it, I know he made it just how I like it. Way too much cream and sugar.

“I’ve loved this woman since I was fifteen,” Garrett says. “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,” Jared says.

“Motivational speaking doesn’t seem to be your forte, big boy,” I quip.

Jared growls in response.

And my damn nipples tighten. Just another reminder that sleeping with my grumpy, sexy boss might not have been my smartest decision.

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

“Completely different,” Garrett says. “I have years of training and practice for burning buildings. I know exactly what to do when that happens. I know the plan.”

“So make a plan,” I say.

Garrett nods. “Yeah. Okay. I can do that. I can make a plan.

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

“Well, maybe if you’d stop glaring and growling at people, they’d listen to you.” I stare at him above the lip of my coffee mug.

chapter **six**

JARED

I'm bent over at my front counter refilling the vintage brand chewing gum when my cousin, Felicity, appears at my elbow.

"I need a huge favor," she says.

"What's that?"

"I need you to pretend to be my fake boyfriend," she says so quickly I nearly miss her words.

I stand upright. "Do I even want to know why?"

"The why seems irrelevant. Either you'll do it or not."

"Have you been gone from here for so long that you've forgotten we're related?" I motion between us. "Felicity, you're my cousin."

"This is a small town," she waves a hand dismissively. "People don't care about stuff like that."

"Stuff like incest?" I ask. "Pretty sure they do. I know I fucking do."

"It's not like we're first cousins. Besides, it would help get Audrey's attention."

I still at the mention of my assistant's name.

"Make her good and jealous."

I school my features to hide from my cousin whatever it is she thinks she

knows. “Why would I want to make Audrey jealous?”

Felicity peers up at me. “Do you not know *why* you would want to do that?”

Of course I know why. I’m not a fucking moron. But it troubles me that my cousin knows this when she’s been back in town for less than a week. “I don’t want to do that.”

She arches an eyebrow at me, watching me carefully. “I think you might.”

I point a finger at her. “You’re crazy.”

“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.”

She blows out a breath. “It would make it easier to deal with Garrett.”

We discuss her fucked up relationship with my buddy, and I’m present. I’m in the conversation. But I’m also on high alert. Looking for Audrey.

Where is she today? She texted me this morning and said she’d be late coming in because she wasn’t feeling well.

Is she okay? Does she need help with something and she’s not telling me. I hate that things are awkward between us now. It’s been a little over a month since I was inside her, and now we’re just back to being co-workers and not discussing how she came all over my beard?

“I cannot go out with Garrett,” Felicity says.

“Why not?” Audrey says.

She’s here. She’s okay and I don’t have to close the shop and go hunt her down to check on her. My relief is palpable, until I hear her next sentence.

“He’s delicious.” She steps behind the countertop.

I glare 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.”

I stare back at her wanting to tell her it doesn’t matter how delicious she thinks Garrett is, she can’t have him. She belongs to me. But I can’t say any of that.

"If you need a date, Felicity," Audrey continues. "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 me—"but you can certainly find a date."

Felicity smiles. "Don't suppose you have a brother?"

She chuckles. "I do. Andrew Briggs 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."

I snort and pretend to focus on the display of gum.

"Will it do me any good to encourage you to give Garrett a chance?"

Audrey asks.

"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."

I release a breath.

Audrey's elbow jabs me in the side. "What?"

"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," Felicity argues.

I snort. "It didn't happen the way you think it did."

"Oh, so you think you know something I don't?"

I shrug.

"Okay, fine, oh, wise and all-knowing Jared, tell me what really

happened.”

“All-knowing Jared,” Audrey repeats with a chortle. I’m ready to turn to her and remind her just how all knowing I am when it comes to her body and how and where to touch her.

the conclusion...

chapter seven

Audrey

Current time...

I lean against the passenger side door, gripping my phone. My instructions are to take it easy—maybe no more ladders, and to ice my knee. I also got a prescription for prenatal vitamins because I’m pregnant.

Let’s all take a hot minute to let *that* soak in.

I’m pregnant.

Per-reg-nant.

My oven has been bunned.

My up has been knocked.

It’s inconceivable. Or rather *conceived*.

How did this happen? I mean, yes. I know how. But I’d been told over and over again that it might never happen for me and that if it did happen, it would take a lot of work and special treatments and weird diets involving slimey foods and odorous teas that some “expert” said might help. (Trust me when I tell you there’s a lot of bizarro information online about it.)

I thought getting pregnant would be a full-time job.

But nope. Apparently all I needed was Jared and his super sperm?

Oh! What are my parents gonna say?

They'll be happy. Of course they will. But they'll also be disappointed that I'm not married and that I won't be getting married any time soon.

I feel fairly certain Jared is going to ask—or demand—that we tie the knot because that's just the kind of man he is. But having a baby with him is one thing. Being in a one-sided marriage with him is quite another.

I sneak a glance at his stoic features while he drives. He's quiet, as usual. Jared isn't much of a talker. It's never bothered me that he's not chatty. Not like his friend, Garrett, who is most definitely a talker. With Jared, things are comfortable. He speaks when he has something to say; the rest of the time he's content to listen.

I sigh. Why does he have to be so handsome and such a good, good guy?

My heart would break over and over again until I was nothing but an empty shell.

I need some advice, but I've got to lay this info out carefully. Otherwise it'll be blasted on the Saddle Peek, and I won't be able to control the spread.

I pull up my most recent group chat with my favorite girls. Despite the fact that they're all married now, they still include me in most things they do.

Just rip off the bandage.

Me: Jared and I hooked up.

Harper: When? I demand all the details!

Savannah: About damn time!

Olive: So how big is he? Baker is sizable. Not that I have anything to compare him to.

Harper: That's my brother! Gross! Overshare, Olive.

Savannah: I kinda wanna know too. I mean Jared is a beast of a man.

I shouldn't be surprised they've asked this. I've been to their girls' nights and they're always talking about their sex lives. I know more about Johnny Crawford—whom I grew up with—than I ever wanted to know.

I sneak a glance at Jared. He looks like he always does. One hand on the steering wheel, backwards ball cap sitting on his dark brown hair. His beard is thick, but trimmed tight to his face. How does he look so calm right now when my insides feel like they've been tossed into a blender?

I refuse to drop my gaze to his lap where I know he has an anaconda between his meaty thighs. I shiver at the thought of how good he felt sliding in and out of my body.

Get it together, Audrey. You cannot fall into that trap again.

Me: Big. He's really, really big.

But also perfect. I exhale a shaky breath. So very perfect.

Me: This is only part of the story.

Harper: When did this happen?

Me: A couple of months ago.

Savannah: And you're just telling us now?

Olive: Ouch

Harper: So, wait a minute. Y'all have been together for months and you waited this long to tell us?

Me: We're not together.

Olive: What?

Me: It was just a one night thing. We've never even talked about it.

Harper: Asshole!

Savannah: I'm pretty sure Ren could kill him and make it look like an accident.

Olive: Baker will help.

Olive: But also, what do you mean you never talked about. You shagged a couple of months ago and then what? You've just gone about working together as if you haven't seen his dangly bits?

I snort a laugh.

Me: Y'all are nuts.

Me: He doesn't need to die.

Me: And yes, that's pretty much what happened.

Harper: Was it not good? Is that why you haven't talked about it?

Me: No. It was amazing.

Olive: Did you spend the whole night together?

Me: We were at the shop. I left while he was sleeping.

Harper: Maybe that's why he hasn't talked about it.

Savannah: Yeah. He might think you think it was a mistake and that's why you left.

Olive: Or he could think it wasn't good for you.

Me: That's not it.

Harper: How do you know?

Me: I just know. We're not like that.

Olive: But you were. That night?

Me: Yes. That was different though.

Savannah: Have you tried to talk to him?

Me: Not exactly.

Me: There's more.

Me: I'm pregnant.

Three dots appear, then disappear, then reappear. I glance out the window to see that we're not going into town.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"My house."

My stomach knots. "Why?"

"We need to talk."

"Right now? There's nothing to discuss. I'm still processing."

"You can process at my house."

"Aren't you processing?" I ask.

"Nothing to process. Just have to discuss next steps."

Next steps?

Yep. It's exactly what I thought. He's going to want to put a ring on it.

Unfortunately the "it" in question has nothing to do with me. It's not me or my finger he cares about. He's just in it for the baby bump.

Maybe I should see if Ren is available. Ugh, what am I saying?

Savannah: How do you feel about that?

Harper: Does Jared know?

Olive: Are you okay?

Me: He was with me when I found out. Kind of a long story.

Me: I'm with him right now.

Harper: Do you need anything?

Me: I don't think so. He's taking me to his house. I'll let you know if I need someone to come get me.

Savannah: We love you.

Olive: When you're ready, we're going to be so bloody excited about that wee one.

I wipe my eyes and flip my phone over so I can't see the screen.

chapter **eight**

JARED

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. I know she's crying and I don't know what to do about it. I could ask her if she's okay, but obviously she's not. Though I know she'd tell me that she's totally fine. She'd probably chalk her tears up to hormones or something.

Being around Audrey now is like having whiplash. Before our night together, we were friendly. I mean we bickered a lot, but I always secretly liked the way she gave me shit. Or really, just that she didn't put up with mine.

Then that night was more than I could have dreamed of. She'd been bold and needy and demanding and fuck, it was everything I'd wanted. We'd made a mess of each other, then fallen asleep on that old sofa.

I had fully intended to wake up earlier than her and sneak out to grab her breakfast—her favorite donuts and hot tea. Even though it had still been dark when I woke, she'd been gone.

We'd been closed that next day for work. By Monday when she'd come in, she was sorta her old self, only with less teasing. She'd been quieter; hadn't looked me in the eyes much either.

Despite the fact that I wanted to pull her into my arms and demand an

explanation, I let her take the lead. Maybe she'd just been lonely, and she'd needed... what? For me to take her virginity in the back room of my store? Did she know that she essentially took mine as well?

I turn down the gravel road that leads to my house. It's a tiny, craftsman style farmhouse that's nearly a hundred years old. When I bought it five years ago, it had been empty for a while. I've slowly been renovating it: redoing the old pecan floors, updating the kitchen and that kind of thing. I've nearly completed the renovations, but I haven't added on any square footage. It never occurred to me until today that I might need more space. That I might have someone to share the house with.

Audrey has never been to my house. I've never had any women at my house except a couple of weeks ago when my cousin Felicity came by.

"This is your house?" Audrey asks, her voice breaking through my thoughts.

"Yeah."

"That little front porch is screaming for some lighted garland. Do you have any Christmas decorations?"

I just grunt in response because no, I don't. We never had much when I was a kid. When I would visit my Oma's house, she always had lots of decorations. And her house smelled of mulled spices and those *zwetschgen knodel* that she knew were my absolute favorite.

"I still don't understand why we're here. We could have this conversation anywhere," she says as she climbs down from my truck.

I don't say anything as I unlock my door and hold it open for her.

Lola comes running towards us, her fluffy tail in the air. She meows as she comes, probably complaining about the fact that I'm late getting home.

"Oh my goodness, who is this beautiful baby?" Audrey coos.

I pat my chest and Lola jumps into my arms. "How's my pretty girl?"

"You have a cat!" Audrey says.

I scratch under Lola's chin and she purrs loudly.

“And she’s huge like you.”

“She’s a Maine Coon,” I explain.

“Is she friendly?”

“Yes.”

“She’s beautiful.” Audrey steps closer and pets my cat between the ears.

“Why do you have a cat?”

“Cats are cool,” I say. “And easier to have than dogs since I’m at shop so much.”

“I bet you miss Daddy when he’s gone all day, don’t you, pretty girl?” Audrey asks.

Our eyes meet and Audrey realizes what she said.

“Daddy,” she says again.

I nod.

Lola jumps down and heads off into the kitchen.

“Come on,” I say.

Audrey follows.

“You hungry?” I ask. I feed Lola and refresh her water, then turn to face Audrey. I’m hit in the heart with how good she looks just standing in my kitchen.

“I know what you’re planning,” she says.

I raise my brows. “Interesting. Because I don’t have any plans. Other than we need to figure this out together.”

She nods. “Have you told anyone?”

“Haven’t had a chance. I’ve been with you the whole time. Did you text your folks?”

“No. I think I want to tell them in person.” She leans against my kitchen counter. “I was texting my girlfriends.”

“You told them?”

“Yeah. I had to tell someone. That okay?”

I frown. “Of course.” I stand in front of her and grip her arms, giving

them a light squeeze. “This might not be how we planned things, but this is something to celebrate, *knödel*. We’re going to have a baby.”

“Are you scared?” she asks.

“Fuck yes, I’m scared. My father was the worst, and he was gone by the time I was twelve.”

“Who did you live with after that?”

“I bounced around a bit. Sometimes my Oma though. She was my favorite.” My hands rub up her arms. I want to pull her to me, wrap my arms around her.

“I’m not going to marry you, Jared.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“But you were going to,” she says.

I shrug. “I might have at some point, but not tonight. We don’t have to get married right now. But you will move in with me.”

Her mouth opens. “What?”

“You heard me. A pregnant woman should not live alone. You will live with me and I’ll take care of you and the baby.”

“Jared, I don’t think that’s necessary.”

I ignore her protest and point to her stomach. “Can I?”

“Of course.”

I drop to my knees in front of her and do what I’ve wanted to do since we found out about the baby. I put my lips to her belly. Then I glance up at Audrey. “You think they can hear us?”

She nods, her eyes filled with tears. “Harper said Johnny talked to her belly the whole time she was pregnant with the twins.”

“I’m going to love you so much, little one. You’re gonna have the very best mama and I’m going to learn all I can to be a good daddy.”

chapter **nine**

Audrey

A sob gets caught in my throat at Jared's gentle, heartfelt words. To be on the receiving end of this man's love must be overwhelming.

At the sound I make, he looks up at me. So damn handsome. But even more amazing than his face and ridiculous body, is that heart of his.

He sees my tears and comes to his feet, then picks me up and carries me out of the kitchen. We end up in a bedroom—I'm assuming it's his when I see the size of the bed, covered in the no-nonsense navy blue quilt.

He lays me down, then climbs into the bed next to me. He opens his arms and I immediately curl into him, resting my head on his massive chest. I sigh, letting some of the stress from today melt away.

I feel the safest I've ever felt, wrapped in his arms. Despite the fact that my life flipped upside down today.

"I can give living here a trial run, I suppose," I say.

"I make excellent grilled cheese sandwiches."

"I might take you up on that."

"You sure you're not hungry now?" he asks. One hand rubs up and down my hip.

"No. I'm comfortable." Why does this feel natural?

“Do I make a good pillow?”

I laugh. “Not really. You’re far too hard to be a pillow.” My mention of his hardness has my gaze falling to the bulge behind his zipper.

He knows I’m looking so he reaches down and adjusts his jeans.

“Why are you hard right now?” I can’t help but ask.

“Because having you this close does that to me.”

The deep rumble of his voice vibrates against my ear. I realize in this moment, this is my most favorite place in the world. Snuggled up next to him with the rich timbre of his voice echoing through my body.

“Knowing that you’re growing my baby is also an incredible turn on,” he admits.

I tilt my head to look at him and our eyes lock. He bends and then we’re kissing. I reach up around his neck and pull him closer to me. His tongue slicks over my lips and into my mouth. He growls into my mouth and rolls me so that I’m on my back and he’s partially on top of me.

His lips trail down my throat.

“Why aren’t we always kissing? We kiss well together,” I say arching into his kisses.

He licks that tender part just below my ear. “Because you left. I filled you with my cum, and then I fell asleep holding you. When I woke up, you were gone.”

I reach for the hem of his shirt to reach under it. I need to feel the heat of his skin. “I didn’t want things to be awkward between us. I didn’t want to see your face if you woke up and regretted it.”

He leans up and looks at me, his whiskey-colored eyes molten with desire. “Regret you? Never.”

Finally my hand breaches the layers of his shirts and I press my palm to his back.

I pull him back to a kiss and try to maneuver my body beneath his. I want to feel the weight of him pressing me into the bed.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about that night. The way you took my cock,” he murmurs. “The way you taste.” He inches down my body until he reaches my jeans. Then he’s flicking them open and peeling them down my legs.

“I’ve thought about it too. A lot.” I sit up and take off my shirt, then my bra. “I want to see you this time. Take off your clothes.”

He stands from the bed and pulls off his ball cap, setting it on the tall chest of drawers across the room. Then he’s toeing off his boots and removing his clothes, one item at a time. It’s like a silent strip tease.

I lean up on my elbows watching him. He is massive everywhere. Muscles upon muscles, tall and broad and so beautiful my mouth goes dry. He doesn’t have a defined six pack on his stomach, no, that’s a solid slab of sinew. A smattering of brown hair covers his chest and belly. I want to rub my cheek against it.

Finally he’s completely naked, and damn, he is masculine perfection.

“I touched myself when I thought of us together,” I admit.

He wraps a fist around the heavy root of his dick. “You’re so sexy,” he says.

Then he’s climbing on the bed and wedging his shoulders between my thighs. I grip the bedding, waiting for that first touch. He spreads my pussy lips, and then his mouth is on me. His beard abrades me, but in the best way possible. His tongue teases at my entrance, circling around and then sliding in and out, ever so gently. I buck and rock, trying in vain to get his mouth on my clit.

He chuckles. “*Knödel*, you are impatient.”

“I need you to lick my clit.”

“I know how to make you come. And I will decide when it happens. Be a good girl and be patient.”

I whimper at those words.

“Your pussy floods when I call you ‘good girl.’ Do you have a praise kink, my *knödel*?”

“I don’t know. I just like it when you say it.”

He sticks his tongue out and licks a line straight up to my clit all the while watching me with his golden eyes.

I shudder.

“I know what you need, Audrey. Trust me.”

“I do.”

He goes back to eating me, and it’s so good, I think I might actually die.

“Please make me come,” I beg.

He peers up at me. “Do you want to come on my mouth or my cock?”

“Your cock. I want your cock.”

After giving my clit one last swirl of his tongue, he crawls up my body. I spread my legs to cradle his thick body. I feel the press of his erection.

“I don’t want to put my full weight on you. Don’t want to hurt the baby,” he says. He gets himself into a sitting position, then maneuvers my body so we’re sort of in a dual lotus position, my legs over his, our chests together, his hot dick pressing against my open core.

Then he’s lifting me and notching his erection at my entrance. And then, slowly, we let gravity fully impale me on his cock.

“Goddammit,” he says, his eyes closed. “Made for me. Your tiny hole takes my thick cock so well. My beautiful, good girl. My *knödel*.”

His dumpling.

I know that’s what it means, and in this moment, it doesn’t give me pause. Normally it chafes a little, that little nod to me being plump. In this moment, though, it feels like us.

He uses his massive strength to fuck into me and I wrap myself tighter around him. My legs cross behind his body and pulling us this close together has my clit getting just the attention she needs. With every thrust the root of him presses against my needy button. It’s not going to take me long to fall apart.

“Jared, you feel so good. How is it this good?”

“Because we were made to do this together,” he says.

Two more thrusts and then I shatter. My orgasm bursts through me and I ride the pleasure.

“Christ, Audrey, your pussy is choking my dick. Fuck, I can’t hold on.”

He comes inside me with such a torrent it prolongs my climax. I shudder in his arms.

It’s then that I realize what he said. “We were made to do this together.” Not “We belong together.”

chapter ten

JARED

Audrey fell asleep nearly as soon as I was done cleaning her up. I tucked her in and pulled on some sweatpants before heading out into the living room. I spot Audrey's purse on the entryway table. There's a sheet of paper sitting on top of it and I realize it's the ultrasound.

I pick it up. It's a grainy image, but I can make out the peanut-shaped object. At the top of the sheet, it says "Baby Briggs" and "11 weeks, 2 days."

I make my way to the kitchen to stick my baby's first picture up on my fridge. *Briggs*. I do want to change that. For Audrey too, but right now she says she doesn't want to marry me.

I can wait, I remind myself.

I snap a picture of the image with my phone and make it my wallpaper.

After making myself a sandwich, I go into the living room and start researching books on pregnancy and babies. By the time I've finished with my dinner, I've ordered more books than any one couple probably needs.

Everything is good right now. The way it's meant to be. My woman is naked and sated in my bed and she agreed to move in with me. We can go get some of her stuff tomorrow, start packing things up. Those little cabins that Harper's family rents are always in demand so she shouldn't have any trouble

breaking her lease. If she does, I'll pay out the remainder of it and call it done.

I stare at my screen and pull up my texts with Garrett. He's my closest friend so it seems only fitting that I tell him first.

Me: Hey. You busy?

Garrett: No. I'm off today. What's up?

Me: Something happened between me and Audrey.

Garrett: About fucking time. Been waiting for you to pull your head out of your ass for a long time.

Me: Yeah, yeah.

I know people in town talk, and I've gotten my fair share of questions about the nature of my relationship with Audrey. Why didn't I ever make a move before that night? Why did I wait for her?

Oh yeah, because I'd convinced myself I was meant to be alone.

Garrett: Congrats, man. I know you've wanted her a long time.

Me: You did know that?

Garrett: Uh yeah. It was pretty obvious.

Me: Have you known anything about her?

Garrett: What do you mean?

Me: Like how she felt about me.

Garrett: Sure. Everyone in town knows y'all are crazy about each other.

Garrett: You bicker like an old married couple.

But she doesn't want to marry me. *Why doesn't she want to marry me?* I need to know that answer so I can fix whatever it is.

Me: She's pregnant.

Garrett: Fuck. Really? When did y'all find out?

Me: Earlier today. We haven't told her parents yet, so maybe keep it to yourself.

Garrett: Yeah man, I've got you.

Garrett: So y'all are not together? Officially?

Me: I think so. She's in my bed.

Me:

Garrett: Holy shit, man! That's so cool.

"You're just sharing pictures of the baby to people?" Audrey's voice comes from over my shoulder.

Lola mews at her, then jumps down off my lap.

"You didn't nap for very long," I say.

"I had to go to the bathroom." She glances at my phone. "Did you post it on the Saddle Peek too?"

"It's Garrett. If you don't want me to tell anyone else, I won't," I say.

She winces. "It's not that. I'm sorry. I know I told my friends."

I grab her hand and pull her into my lap. "Then what's the matter?"

"It's just a sticky situation. The more people who know you knocked me up, the more that are going to make assumptions.

“What are these assumptions?” I ask.

“I mean they already do about us. But they’re going to think we’re together. That we’re a couple. A real couple. Not just two people who work together and who have fucked.”

Her words are a knife to my heart. “Is that what we are to you?”

She shrugs. “I don’t feel like we have to put a label on it.”

“We could just be a couple. Solve all of those problems and would-be pesky rumors.”

She looks up at me. “I told you I don’t want to get married just for the baby’s sake! Same goes for being together and not married.”

“I’m fine waiting as long as you need me to, Audrey, but there are things that need said. Make no mistake about this. You and I, *WE* are together. We’re going to be living together. We’re having a baby together.”

“None of those things makes us an actual couple!”

“I don’t follow.”

She exhales. “I know you’ve heard me talk about it and maybe it’s dumb, but I come from a family who believes in ‘the one.’”

“The narwhal thing,” I say on a nod.

“Yes, the narwhal thing.”

“And you don’t believe I’m your one?” I ask.

She glances away from me and that knife in my chest digs deeper.

“I know you deserve better than me,” I begin. “A man with a family like yours. Maybe someone more friendly, less of a giant. I don’t really know what you dreamed of as a little girl. But I can promise you this, no other man could ever love you the way that I love you.”

She gasps, her eyes watery. “But you call me the equivalent of lumpy pastry,” she says.

“What?”

“Your dumpling. I know what *knödel* means.”

“My Oma was the only person who showed me love and kindness when I

was growing up. I didn't get to stay with her long, but long enough for her to discover that I loved her *zwetschgen knödel*. They were these amazing plum dumplings and eating them felt like love."

She stares up at me. "So you don't call me that to tease me for being squishy and lumpy?"

I cup her beautiful face. "I call you that because the moment I met you, I felt that same sensation. The feeling of being where I belong. The feeling of home. You are my love."

"What about the baby?"

"I love the baby too."

"No, I mean, I don't want that to be why you're saying all of this."

"I should have said all of these things a week after we met. But I'd convinced myself that I could never have you. That you would never want me. I didn't think I could give you what you need."

"Because of your shitty dad?" she asks.

"Partly, and because of my brief history with women before I met you."

"Can you explain?"

"I took your virginity that night in the back of the shop," I say.

She grins. "You did a very thorough job of it too."

"You took mine that night too."

"What? How is that possible? Have you looked in a mirror recently? You're perfect."

"With a monster for a dick." I exhale. "This all feels so dumb now. But the truth is, I tried. Twice before. Once in high school and then one other time before I moved back here. It would take one look and the women were done. Not interested. I foolishly thought this meant something about me."

"What did it actually mean?"

"That my body was made especially to fit yours."

"You are outrageously large."

"I haven't heard you complaining when you've been coming all over it."

She shudders.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I say.

“Which one?”

“You don’t believe I’m your narwhal?”

“No, I did. I do. Meeting you the first time was like getting hit in the head with it. But I questioned my instincts when you never seemed interested. It would be the saddest of all to find your one, but for them to not return your feelings.”

“I agree. Are you going to admit it now?”

“Admit what?”

“That you’re in love with me too.

She rolls her eyes. “I’m stupidly in love with you. Happy?”

“Very.”

“You’re going to make us get married now, aren’t you?”

“Do you want to get married?”

“Of course I do. I just didn’t want to be an obligation.”

“Never an obligation. A choice. My choice. Again and again. And my partner. In all things,” I say, then kiss her forehead.

“Then we definitely need to talk about me getting a raise at the shop.”

epilogue

Audrey

Two weekends later I find myself in the living room of my childhood home, sitting side-by-side with Jared across from my parents.

He wanted to tell them immediately, but I wanted some time for just the two of us to settle in to being a real couple.

It's been amazing. The sex is unreal. According to one of the main pregnancy books that Jared bought us, it is very common for a woman to have increased arousal while pregnant because of the extra blood flow to her nether regions.

I don't know if it's that or if it's just because Jared is sexy and insatiable. Yesterday before we opened the shop, he bent me over that couch in the back room and pounded into me until I was a quivering mess.

Oh damn, I probably shouldn't be thinking about that in my parent's living room. I tune back into the conversation in time to hear Jared say:

"With all due respect, sir, I don't want to be her narwhal. I'd much rather be her penguin or wolf or gibbon."

My mother hides a smirk behind her coffee cup.

"You wanna explain that?" my dad asks.

He's feigning irritation, my dad, to put Jared on the spot. Trying to be the

stereotypical father to make his daughter's boyfriend nervous. But my Jared, he doesn't miss a beat.

"Narwhals don't mate for life and scientists don't believe they're monogamous."

My dad nods as if they are two men legitimately discussing the merits of monogamous animals. What is happening right now? My mother catches my gaze and winks.

"Son, you do know that is not the reason we use that term. It was intended only to let our kids know that there's nothing wrong with having high standards." He reaches over and grabs my mom's hand. "Jennifer and I very much believe in soulmates, but we also recognize the practicality of relationships."

"Sir?"

"They take work."

Jared nods. "I've never been afraid of hard work. Obviously, you have more experience with this, but love has never been an issue. Loving Audrey is the easiest, most natural thing I've ever done. It's like breathing."

"She can be a handful," my dad counters.

Jared huffs. "Don't I know it. She's worked for me—with me—for three years, and that sassy mouth always has something to say." Then my big, bearded giant turns and looks at me and smiles. "I never stood a chance. And I've loved every minute of it."

My dad chuckles then. "What would you like her to call you then, if not her narwhal?"

"Her husband."

Jared and I part ways at the parking lot behind the hardware store. He says I should go get me a milkshake at Sprinkles, then go home and rest. He evidently has to pick up something and he'll be home soon.

I will never say no to a nap—or a milkshake—so I do as he suggests. My chocolate peppermint shake is making me and the baby happy. I'm thinking about all the decorating I want to do before Christmas when I turn down the gravel road.

Twinkle lights greet me. Hundreds, thousands of them encircle the trunks of the large oaks sitting in the front yard. There's light up garland wrapped around the porch banisters and rails. A big wreath hangs on the front door and through the big picture window I see lights on a Christmas tree.

That man. I don't know what I did to deserve him, but I'm so thankful.

But the time I park and step outside of my car, Santa Claus is standing on my front porch.

I laugh through my tears.

He comes down into the yard and his costume is nearly perfect: hat, suit, and big black boots. But instead of Santa's white fluffy beard, my man is going without the fake and using what he's grown himself.

"When did you do all of this?" I ask.

"Garrett and some of the guys from the firehouse came by while we were out and did it. You like it?"

I look around us, standing in our twinkle lit yard in front of our perfect house. "I love it. I love you."

"I love you, *knödel*."

He pulls me to him, and I look up at his handsome face. "I gotta say, this suit is really kind of working for me."

He laughs. "Good to know."

"Maybe we should go inside and see if the guys left any mistletoe around."

"First, I need you to answer a question."

"Okay," I say.

He holds up a ring. "Will you be my wife?"

"Yes!" I throw my arms around his neck. "Would it be weird if I ask you

to keep the suit on while you fuck me?”

“*Knödel*, I will fuck you any way you want me to.”



I hope you loved Jared and Audrey’s story. Want a little more of them? Click here for a **[BONUS CONTENT](#)**. Please consider **[leaving me a review](#)**.

Keep scrolling to read an excerpt from Audrey’s brother, Andrew’s book: **[A Very Cheeky Christmas](#)**

Other couples mentioned in this book:

Savannah & Ren - **[Getting Handsy With the Manicurist](#)**

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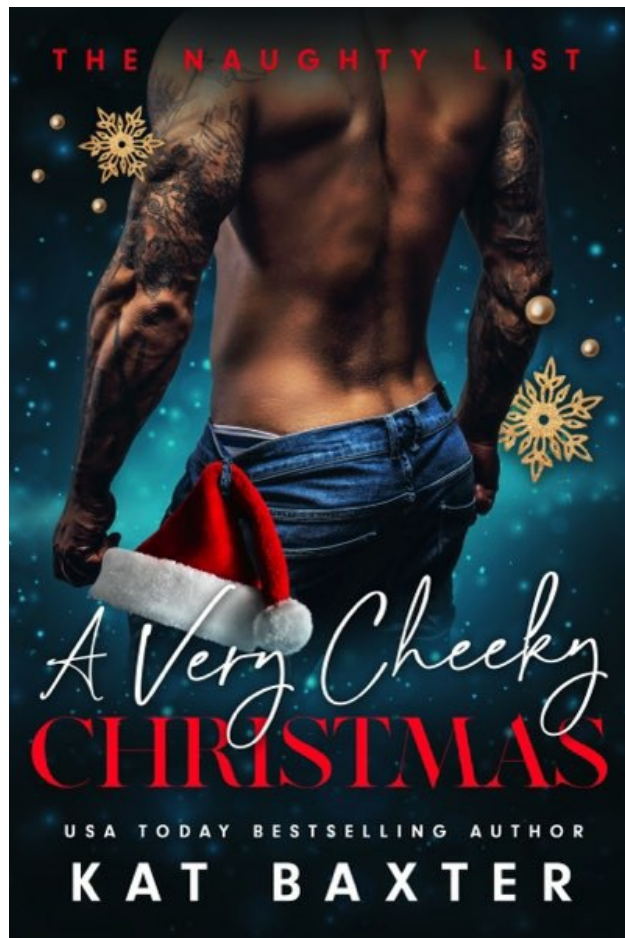
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excerpt from a very cheeky
christmas



ANDREW

I have a great ass.

It's true. I'm not even bragging. It is, in fact, my job to have a good behind. Well, technically my work often goes beyond my booty, but my ass is what gets me the jobs. I'm a set double, body double, ass double. Whatever you want to call it.

When leading men don't want to do naked work, they call on me. I don't mind showing off my body as long as I don't have to act or show my face. Not that there's anything wrong with my face, but doing the physical work of a scene is what I'm good at.

That most recent big budget alien action flick... yeah, that was my ass. It was painted blue for the movie, but still me. Hollywood has been good to me and I've been smart with my money, investing most of it because I knew with a job like mine, eventually the work would move on to younger guys. I'm approaching forty and frankly I'm getting tired of the work.

I'm ready to find my lady love and settle down, fill our house with kids and live happily ever after. Isn't that what all these movies we make are about?

Okay, not that one asteroid movie. I wasn't in that one, thank goodness because everyone died. Talk about depressing.

In any case, I'm on set working with the director on blocking a scene. It's one of the more technical parts of my job and something I enjoy quite a bit. I'm basically like a living prop though, really used just to get the lighting and camera angles set up correctly on shots they want to try to get in one take.

"This isn't working," Luca, the director, mutters to himself.

That's when I see her. And by her, I mean *HER*. The woman I've noticed on set since we've been working for all of three days now on this new movie. It's a rushed, last minute holiday flick that seems to have everyone in a bad mood. Not me, I don't tend to get in bad moods much.

Seems like a waste of energy, especially when a cold beer and an orgasm can fix most things.

“Luca, hold up. I think I know what would help.” I step off the set and lightly jog over to her. I step right in front of her path. “Hey,” I say.

She frowns and tries to walk around me.

“Wait, I wanna talk to you.”

“No thanks.”

“Perfect, Andrew,” Luca calls. “Yes, Maxine, can you help us out for a few minutes?”

Maxine’s blue eyes widen behind her black-rimmed glasses. She gives Luca a tight smile, then shoots me a tiny glare before setting down her stuff on the concrete floor.

“What can I do?” Maxine asks Luca.

She’s clearly done with me which I find fucking delightful. I don’t know why. The fact that she’s not immediately charmed by me is refreshing, I guess. Or maybe I just am drawn to her sass. More likely I’m drawn to that plump ass of hers and her full tits; she’s all curves and softness, but when she talks, her voice is sharp and edgy. There’s also an undeniable intelligence shining in her eyes and fuck if that’s not catnip for me. Especially after living in this vapid wasteland for the last decade.

Hollywood is known for its pretty views, not for its intellectual stimulation. Not that Saddle Creek, TX, my small hometown, is an epicenter of culture. But I do miss going to the library, then walking down to Ruthie’s Diner with a stack of books to pore over while I eat one of her famous burgers.

“Andrew,” Luca barks.

“Right.” I tear my eyes away from Maxine’s curvy backside which somehow had me homesick for my favorite juicy hamburger. There’s something about this woman, I can feel it.

I make my way back into the fake living room where there’s a Christmas tree and a stack of boxes leaning against the wall. They’re empty boxes, but in the story of the movie they’re filled with all kinds of decorations for the

two main love interests to get tangled up in. Or something like that.

Luca is explaining the scene and the whole concept of blocking and the angle of the cameras and lighting. She's just staring at him like he's a complete idiot.

"I think she's got it, Luca. Let's just give it a go." I say, giving a gentle tug on the director's shirt sleeve. We've worked together multiple times before, so he knows me.

He growls, which is par for his course, but still walks off the platform and moves back to the camera area.

"Explain the set up to her while we adjust the equipment," Luca yells.

She gives me a snort of derision. "Who are you, like the main actor?"

"No, sweetheart, I'm just his set double."

Those blue eyes of hers roll. "So what is it that I need to do?"

"This is one of those scenes they want to preferably get in one take so that's why we—"

"I know what scene blocking is, jackass. Just tell me about this scene."

Fuck. Why does that sassy mouth make my dick hard? "Sure thing. The heroine is just walking through the room and a tower of boxes nearly topples over, hero rushes over to sweep her out of the way, they end up plastered against the wall together."

She glances to her left at said tower of boxes. "What are in them?"

"Nothing. But they're supposed to be filled with Christmas decorations. I'm Andrew, by the way."

"Max."

"I've seen you here, but never on any other sets. Are you a new actress?" I ask.

She snorts. "Yeah, right. Because they hire female stars with asses like mine all the time."

I look down even though I can't exactly see much of her ass from this angle. But her hips and thighs are thick and curvy. "They should, because

your body is damn near perfect.”

She laughs and the sound is pure fucking magic. It’s like a salve on sunburnt skin or water quenching a parched throat. Where has this woman been all my life?

“Oh my God! Do lines like that usually work?”

I raise a brow at her. “Who says it’s a line?”

She puts her fists on her hips. “That is blatantly... obviously a line.”

“Okay, so the boxes are toppling, and you move now Andrew,” Luca calls.

I grab Maxine and maneuver out of the imaginary harm’s way, putting her back up against the fake wallpapered wall.

“Excellent. Now step closer and brace your hands on either side of her head.”

I do as I’m told, leaning in closer to Maxine. She sucks in a breath that, had I not heard it, I might have missed. She’s not as unaffected by me as she’s pretending to be.

“Okay, if you’re not an actress, then what do you do on set?”

“I am in charge of color-coding all of the glitter used in the scenes.”

“Maxine, put your hands on Andrew’s hips,” Luca says.

She swallows visibly, but then I feel her hands on the outsides of my jeans.

“No, no! I know you’re not an actress,” Luca yells. “But can you pretend you want to be there. Grab onto him.”

Her fingers curl into my hips and fuck me, Luca doesn’t even know what he’s asking of me.

I lick my lips, flick my eyes down to her mouth briefly, then back up to her gaze.

“This is so forced and contrived. I will never understand how costars hook up so frequently,” she says, but her voice has lost some of its edge.

“Are you doubting the necessity of our fearless hero saving our intrepid

heroine?”

She rolls her eyes. “Please. If the boxes are falling and she can’t get out of the way before he has time to run across the room and save her, then maybe she deserves to get crushed.”

“Maybe shock and panic keep her from moving.”

This time she snorts. “What is she? An armadillo? Does she roll into a ball too?”

I toss my head back and laugh. “You’re delightful, sweetheart. Have dinner with me.”

Her smile disappears. “Um ... no, thank you.”

“Why not?”

“Look, I’m sure I seem like low hanging fruit on the set, but I’ve been around guys like you my entire life and honestly, I need more than a pretty face. Besides, it’s not going to hurt you to put in the effort to charm someone else.”

I shake my head in confusion. “Low hanging fruit? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means any guy who is as good looking as you can get laid any time he wants. Even in Hollywood. Still, I get it. You look around the set, try to find a woman who will take the least amount of work. The woman who’s a little frumpy, more than a little chubby and will probably just be grateful for the attention. But sorry, I will not be that woman.”

She’s got it all wrong. Everything she just said is wrong. I grin at her.

“I’m beginning to think that you might be slow-witted, as they say,” she hisses.

“A little closer, Andrew,” Luca barks.

And a little closer is all I need to completely close the distance between our mouths. I can’t help myself. I’ve got to taste for myself and see if all those snarky words make for a tart kiss. I should have known better. She tastes like cinnamon and cloves and Christmas morning.

Her fingernails—blunt though they are—dig into my hips as she tightens her hold on me. She kisses me back, her tongue sweeping into my mouth in a bold, take-charge kind of way.

She makes a whimpering noise in her throat.

Laughter sounds from behind us. Fucking Luca and the camera guys. It definitely breaks the spell though because the next thing I know, I've got a knee to my groin and two palms pushing against my chest.

I fall to the set floor with a 'oof.'

"Jackass," she mutters, then she storms off.

Luca meanders over, still chuckling. "You probably want to ice your balls." His laughter increases.

"It's not that funny. I'll just go see the medic," I say, wincing in pain.

Luca howls with laughter. He tosses his thumb over his shoulder. "Maxine *IS* the medic."

Fuck my life.

Grab your copy of [**A Very Cheeky Christmas**](#)

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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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