



*The Baby
Contract*

HEARTS OF FERN HOLLOW

AVERY SNOW

The Baby Contract

A Hearts of Fern Hollow Novel

Avery Snow



Heartstrings Press

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Trigger Warnings

Please note that the following pages contain:

Death in the Family

Infertility

Emotional Abuse

Mentions of Past SA



It's time for me to hit the road and leave the city.
My home.

Time to go home to Fern Hollow.

I take Route 224 out of Portland and up toward the Cascades, through the flat country toward the mountain peaks. This is where I grew up, in a small town surrounded by evergreen forests, where the air smells of pine and the river runs clear and cold.

As I drive, memories of my childhood flood my mind. I remember playing hide and seek in the woods with my friends, fishing in the creek for trout, and exploring the abandoned houses on the outskirts of town. I also remember the day I left, ten years ago, to chase my dreams in the big city.

I was so ready to leave—convinced I would never look back.

But now, as I approach Fern Hollow, I feel a sense of contentment wash over me. The town hasn't changed much since I left, but I have. I've seen the world, experienced

heartbreak and triumph, and now I'm ready to settle back into a simpler way of life.

I pull up to my childhood home, a cozy two-story house with a wrap-around porch, and feel a sense of relief. The house is exactly as I left it, with the same furniture and photos on the walls.

Exactly as I left it...except that Grandpa's gone.

I step inside, breathing in the familiar scent of my childhood. Memories of Grandpa flood my mind - his gentle smile, his warm embrace, and his endless stories about the town's history. It was just the two of us when I was a kid, my parents gone too soon, his wife too.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I realize that I'll never hear his stories again.

I should never have left. I should have come home earlier.

I told grandpa that I didn't like that persistent cough of his but he just dismissed me. I should've known he wouldn't go see a doctor by himself, and by the time I got back to town, it was too late.

But all of that is in the past now, and my latest visit home, as bittersweet as it was, showed me one thing for sure: Fern Hollow is where I belong.

I make my way up to my old bedroom, where I find a note on my bed. "Welcome home, sweetheart. I left something for you in my study. Love you more."

Oof...that's always what he said to me. *Love you more.*

I think he did, otherwise I would never have gone to Portland.

I blink away tears as I clutch his note to my chest. My heart races when I make my way down to Grandpa's study. The door creaks open, and the familiar smell of old books and leather envelopes me. I see his old leather armchair, and the table where he used to write his stories.

On the table, I find a worn leather journal with my name on it. I pick it up, feeling the soft leather cover and flipping through the pages. Grandpa's familiar scrawl greets me, and I feel a lump form in my throat as I read the words.

I wanted you to have the cabin. Welcome home, bunny.

I read on, all the memories he shares of us cooking together, watching old movies, weathering snow storms and lightning strikes. I start to cry as I read, covering my mouth with my hand and wishing he was here.

Because I didn't plan on staying here - I thought I might just flip and sell the cabin.

But now...I'm not so sure.

I miss Grandpa. I miss my life. And things aren't good in Portland. I want something simpler.

I thought the city was all I wanted, but my ex, Harvey, has been horrible. We were going to get married, we were going to have a baby...and then we tried, and I couldn't.

I couldn't get pregnant.

And Harvey blamed me. He said it was because I was too fat, because I didn't take care of myself. Even when I was the one carrying our household and trying to make ends meet, he blamed me.

We had tedious sex over and over, and we *couldn't have a baby*. Six months of IVF and nothing.

I thought I was good, I was *ready*. Because Grandpa and I were always alone, just the two of us, I wanted a big family. I always wanted a family.

When I started to worry about grandpa, Harvey told me that I was exaggerating, that it couldn't be as bad as I thought. "Your grandpa sounds fine to me," he said, one time, over a meal. "He's just old."

I should've never listened to that jerk.

I should've come home months ago.

I miss my family.

I lean back in Grandpa's chair, closing my eyes and letting the tears flow freely. I'm so tired of the noise and the chaos of city life. And the infertility treatments have taken a toll on my body and my spirit.

But here in Fern Hollow, I feel a sense of peace. And now that Grandpa's left me the cabin, I have a place to escape to, a place to heal.

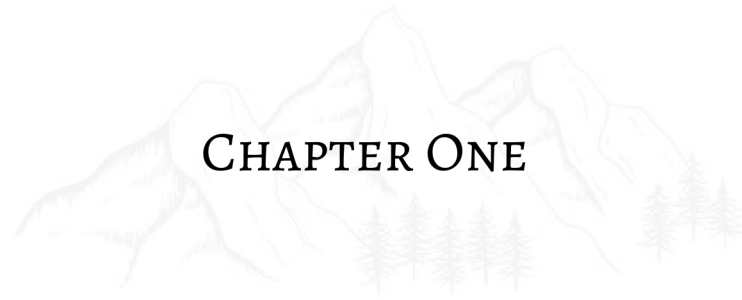
I wipe my tears and take a deep breath, realizing that my decision has already been made. I'll stay in Fern Hollow and

start a new chapter. I'll fix up the cabin, start a garden, and write my own stories.

With Grandpa's journal as my guide, I'll embrace the simple life and honor his memory. I'll listen to the wind in the trees, the rustling of the leaves, and the chirping of the birds. I'll find solace in the quiet and the beauty of nature.

As I leave Grandpa's study, I realize I don't need a baby. I don't need a family...no matter how badly I want one. I definitely don't need a man.

I just need a home.



CHAPTER ONE



There's only one restaurant in Fern Hollow: the Snowcap Diner.

It's where everyone gathers after church on Sundays, where Grandpa used to take me for lunch after school as a kid, where all roads converge between here and the coast. It's also where I've eaten every morning, afternoon, and night for the past week as I try to figure out what to do with this cabin.

It's falling apart...and I have absolutely no skill when it comes to DIY.

I've watched the videos. *Hours* of HGTV.

But I'm starting to realize I need help.

As I sit in my usual booth at the Snowcap Diner, staring at the photos of my dilapidated cabin on my phone, I can't help but overhear a group of construction workers in the booth one over. They're laughing loudly and joking around, but their talk turns serious when they start discussing a particularly difficult job they just finished. From what I can hear, it's some old

cabin out in the woods - and they just flipped it for an improvement of \$200k.

“I don’t know how we would have gotten through that without him,” says one of the workers. “He’s a genius with a hammer and nails.”

It’s not like I have anything to lose in asking about this mysterious contractor. For God’s sake, *I* need a genius to help me out. And if I’m gonna live in this cabin, I need a lot of help.

I will myself to pop over the edge of the booth and speak up, my nerves rattling in my chest. The guys don’t notice me until I clear my throat, feeling entirely out of place.

“Who’s him?” I ask.

The workers turn to look at me, surprised that I’ve been listening.

“Our boss,” says the first worker. “He’s the best contractor in the county.”

Seriously? I can’t believe my luck. Maybe this is the help I need.

“Can you give me his number?” I ask eagerly.

They hesitated for a moment, exchanging a look. I don’t know what that means, but I don’t really care.

“Look, he could be the biggest asshole out there and I wouldn’t care,” I say. “I really need help with my cabin. If he’s a...I don’t know, a nailing genius, then I want him.”

The guys snicker. I realize what I just said.

Off to a great start, Claire.

Then one of them scribbles a number down on a napkin and hands it to me, along with the name *Gray*.

I take the napkin with a grateful smile and thank the workers before returning to my own booth.

My heart is racing with the possibilities of finally getting the help I need. As I finish my meal and gather my things, I can't shake the idea of Gray out of my head. Who is this guy? What makes him such a genius? Why were they so *weird* about him?

And most importantly, will he be able to help me fix my cabin?

He'd better, after that excruciating interaction.

I leave the Snowcap Diner with a newfound sense of hope and purpose. As I make my way back to my car, I pull out the napkin and stare at the number written on it. I take a deep breath and dial the number.

After a few rings, a deep voice answers - a voice that sends a shiver down my spine.

I'd be lying if I said he didn't sound hot. His voice is deep and gravelly and it immediately sends a shiver down my spine.

"Gray speaking."

Get it together, Claire. This is a business transaction.

I clear my throat, "Hi, my name is Claire Sawyer. I got your number from some construction workers at the Snowcap

Diner. They said you're a genius with a hammer and nails and I could really use your help with my cabin."

His voice rumbles on the other end of the line. "Where's it at?"

"Fern Hollow," I say. "Just up 244, out by the waterfall?"

"Oh shit," he says, a smile in his voice. "You must be Dave Sawyer's little girl, huh?"

He knew Grandpa? I freeze in the middle of the street, considering this weird twist of fate.

Someone honks.

I stumble out of the way.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," I breathe. "Sorry—I just didn't know Grandpa had any friends. He was always a bit of a recluse."

"Well, so am I," Gray says. "Used to run into him sometimes fishing on Echo Lake out by the waterfall. He was a good guy."

I bite my lip, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Yeah...he was."

"Well, I can come out and take a look at your cabin tomorrow," Gray says. "Just finishing up a job tonight, then I'll be back in Fern Hollow tomorrow."

"You're local?"

"As of a couple years ago, yeah," he says. "Say...noon? Will you be around?"

I nod, even though he can't see me.

"Yeah," I say. "It's a date."

The other line goes dead. My heart pounds. I wonder if I've taken a step too far, especially when he just said he's a bit of a recluse...

...but he laughs quietly.

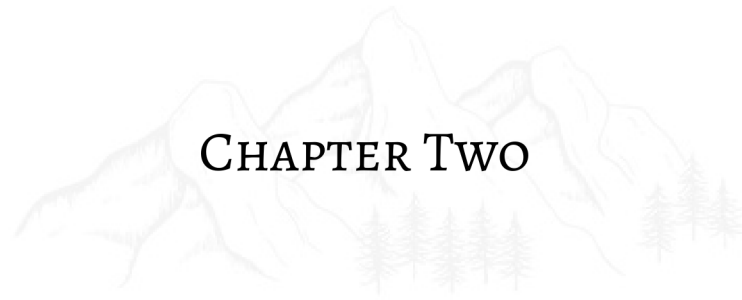
"Yeah," he says. "It's a date. See you at noon."

Then he hangs up.

I stand in the sunlight in downtown Fern Hollow, not quite ready to get in my car. I breathe in the fresh mountain air, feeling like I'm on the brink of something.

It's *definitely* just renovating the cabin...that's for sure.

But I can't help but feel like Gray has something in store for me.



CHAPTER TWO



I drive down 244 toward old man Dave Sawyer's old cabin, and all I can think about is my dearly departed friend.

When I got to Fern Hollow, I was completely alone. My past had finally caught up with me and I had to drive all the way across the country to escape it. Finding myself in the Pacific Northwest was a pleasant surprise, but I didn't have anyone.

Dave was my best friend. We were a bit of an odd couple, sure—he was 75, I was 30 and just out of prison. But he helped me get back on my feet, and he was the only one who seemed to get what I'd been through.

Now his granddaughter is living in his house, where we used to watch football and drink beers.

And I have no fucking idea what to expect.

He talked about her a lot. He told me she was smart, that she didn't come home very often. *She* was what Dave was most proud of.

Now he's dead, and she has everything he ever owned.

Everything he cared about.

The gravel crunches under my truck's tires as I pull into the driveway, then drive up to the house. I get the familiar feeling I would when I came to visit Dave—like I was coming home. It feels more like his place than hers, and it's weird to think about the fact that he won't be there when I knock on the door.

It's been a few months and I haven't come back here. There's been no need to. I thought seeing this cabin would only make it harder, and I was right. Even though I'm only here for a job, just seeing the cabin makes my heart race.

This might be harder than I thought.

I turn off the car and shove my hands in my Carhartt jacket, strolling up to the front door. I'm about to knock when I hear a small sound, like a bee buzzing in my ear...

...then I realize it's a human voice.

A girl.

“Can somebody help me?”

I try the door and find it open, the knob turning and the door pushing open to let me in. I walk into the familiar living room, glancing around for the source of the voice.

“Uh...hello?”

I make my way towards the kitchen, my heart pounding in my chest. As I turn the corner, I see her—the girl from Dave's stories, his granddaughter.

He never mentioned she was *gorgeous*.

Short and curvy, with chestnut brown hair that spills down her back. She has wide, voluptuous hips and incredible tits, wrapped up in jean shorts and a t-shirt she's tied at her waist. She doesn't seem to notice I've found her, her hands on her hips as she stares at the sink.

And I get why.

Water is spilling over the rim of the sink and onto the floor. She strips off her shirt as I stand there, stunned, and tries to use it to clean up the mess in nothing more than a lacy pink bra.

Fuck me...she's stunning.

"Knock knock," I say awkwardly. "Uh...handy man here."

She glances back at me, undisturbed by her state of undress.

"Thank God you're here," she says. "I'm just...okay, clearly I'm grappling with a crisis."

"What's wrong?" I ask, stepping towards her.

"I don't know," she says, sounding panicked. "It won't turn off. I don't know how to fix it."

I step closer to her and try to look at the sink, but all I can see is her. The bra doesn't have any liner—dear lord, it doesn't have anything but lace, and that pink lace clings to her perfect tits.

I quickly look away, feeling embarrassed. This girl just lost her grandfather, and here I am, checking her out.

“I’ll take a look at it,” I offer, trying to sound helpful. “Do you know where the shut-off valve is?”

She’s quiet for a second, then shakes her head.

“Just...under the sink, I think,” she says. “But I can’t seem to find it.”

“Okay, I’ll find it,” I promise. “You just...uh...why don’t you go get changed?”

I sound like a moron, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“Thank you,” she says, turning away from me. “I really appreciate it.”

My eyes follow her, taking in the way her hips sway with each step. And I can’t help it—I blush furiously. I’m sure she can feel me staring at her, and I have no idea what to do.

She disappears into the next room, and I wait a few seconds before turning my attention to the sink.

I spot the water shut-off valve, and reach in to turn it off. That was an easy fix, but I guess it wouldn’t be easy for someone who’s never fixed a damn thing in her life. Before she left, I know Dave took care of everything around the house.

So she’s a typical city girl...but I’m willing to forgive her, since she looks like a goddamn goddess.

I start cleaning up while I’m waiting for her, grabbing the mop from the closet. She comes out a few minutes later dressed in a yellow sundress, this time bra-free—which somehow makes it worse than when she was half-naked and drenched. Her hair is

tied up in a messy bun, revealing the elegant slope of her neck, a little tattoo of a heart beneath her ear.

And...fuck me. Her eyes are so blue that I can't see anything else.

"Thanks," she says. "My superman. I owe you."

"It's nothing," I say. "Although...I *am* gonna charge for the renovation."

"Oh! Right," she says. "So you must be Gray?"

"I'm Gray," I grin. "Grayson Cooper. And you must be Claire Sawyer?"

"That's me," she says. "Uh...if you just want to follow me, I'll show you the place."

I don't mention that I've been here a million times. I don't know how it would feel that I probably knew her grandpa better than she did. And besides, I don't mind following those swaying, voluptuous hips up the stairs.



CHAPTER THREE



Okay, so the handyman is smoking hot.
...which I should have expected.

He has a muscular frame, broad shoulders straining the fabric of his dark jacket. His jawline is so chiseled it could cut glass, the start of a beard framing those perfect angular features.

He wears his dark hair short, probably so it's out of the way when he's working.

And I could stare at him all day long.

But he's seen me practically naked, which means he's definitely not interested.

Harvey always said no one would want me. I'm inclined to think he was right. And I was perfectly fine living out the rest of my days in peaceful solitude here in Fern Hollow...until I met Gray.

Now I want Gray railing me over the kitchen counter, and that's not exactly good.

I just met him like two minutes ago and I'm already having crazy fantasies about him.

I need to get a grip.

I take him upstairs to show him the leaky roof, where a bucket sits under a steady drip in the master bedroom. This is the first—and biggest—problem, since I have to sleep here. Gray crosses his arms and looks around, his eyes narrowed.

“You got a stepladder?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure...just give me a second.”

I run to find the stepladder I bought at Home Depot on my way out of Portland, but by the time I haul it back up the stairs, Gray is already checking out the problem. I stop in my tracks, my eyes wide as I stare at him. He's yanked over a rickety old wooden chair and is standing on it, peering up at the hole in the ceiling. His t-shirt and jacket ride up to reveal a V of muscle running down past the waist of his jeans, and a line of curly black hair that terminates in...

Whoa.

I am *thirsty*.

“You got that stepladder?” he asks.

Oh my God, he knows I'm here.

“Uh, yeah!” I say.

“Bring it over here and come on up,” he says.

I grab the stepladder and climb up next to Gray. We're now so close that our bodies touch, and I can feel the heat emanating

from his skin. He smells like sawdust and sweat, and it's intoxicating.

"Looks like a pretty bad leak," he says, pointing to the hole above us. "I can fix it for you, but it'll take a while."

"How long?" I ask.

"A couple of days, maybe," he responds, not looking at me.

"Okay," I say, trying not to sound too eager. "Just let me know if you need anything."

He nods and starts to climb down. As he does, his hand brushes against my thigh, sending a jolt of electricity through me. I bite my lip to keep from moaning.

Get it together, Claire.

"What else is wrong?" he asks.

"Like...a million things," I mutter. "Let me show you."

We go through each and every problem: the leaky roof in multiple rooms, wallpaper peeling away from the walls along with the sheetrock, the toilet that rocks on its pedestal. There's of course the issue with the faucet in the kitchen, too, and some loose boards in the wraparound porch connected to the master bedroom.

We don't even go outside. I don't want to show him the doors of the shed falling apart, or how the fence is sinking into the ground. I need to fix the inside of the cabin first.

"Jesus," Gray says as we walk out onto the porch. "I wish I'd known it was this bad. Dave never said anything."

I bite my lip. “You knew him pretty well?”

Gray shrugs. “I’ve done some work for him before. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah,” I say, feeling a twinge of sadness. That’s what everyone always said about my grandpa, that he was a recluse but a good guy.

When he died suddenly a few months ago, he left me with this old, rundown farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. It’s all I have of him, so I want to honor it. I want to honor him.

“I’ll get started on these repairs right away,” Gray says, interrupting my thoughts. “You gonna be okay here alone for a couple of days?”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, trying to sound confident. “I’m used to being alone.”

Gray looks at me for a long moment, his dark eyes searching mine. “Well, if you do get lonely, you know where to find me.”

I feel a blush rising up in my cheeks. “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

He grins and heads back inside, leaving me standing on the porch, feeling more alive than I have in years.

Maybe Harvey was wrong after all. Maybe I can find love again.



CHAPTER FOUR



I cancel all my plans.

Sure, I had other gigs, other houses to visit. My crew is annoyed that I moved everything back on the schedule, and they're begging me for work, but I insist on handling the Sawyer cabin alone.

I want more time with Claire.

And call me a selfish son-of-a-bitch, but it's worth it.

There's enough work to be done on the house that it'll last me a week or two if I drag it out. The things that are pressing will get done first—that leak in the roof, for one.

I hate that she's sleeping in a room so wet when it rains, especially as the rainy Oregon fall comes creeping up on us. I wish old man Sawyer had told me all this stuff was broken; I would have been happy to fix it for him. I'm not surprised he didn't, he always struck me as a proud man, but I wouldn't have minded helping him out.

God knows he helped me out when I most needed it.

But Dave is gone, and now somebody has to take care of his granddaughter—the apple of his eye. I can at least do that for him.

I'm more than willing to step into that role.

Since I moved up to Oregon, I've been alone. It's been just me and my work, but just being around Claire has changed that. There's something about her that draws me in, something that makes me want to protect her and make sure she's okay. Maybe it's the way she looks at me, with those big brown eyes that seem to see right through me. Maybe it's the way she smiles at me, a little shyly, like she's not used to being around someone like me.

Whatever it is, I can't resist it.

I'm eager to get over to her place when I pack up the truck the morning after I first met her, bringing all my spare stuff with me. I should probably charge her for the supplies I'll need for this job—it's gonna cost me a pretty penny—but I already know I won't charge her an extra dime. A girl like that, with a body like that and an infectious smile...?

Hell, I would do this for *free*.

I start fantasizing as I drive up 224 to the Sawyer place, thinking about what I'd do to her if I met her at a bar and if I wasn't working with her. Maybe it's wrong of me, but I do a hell of a lot of daydreaming when I'm out on my own—and it's not like she'll ever know about my dirty fantasies. I think about how I'd take off her clothes piece by piece, then lay her out in front of me. I've got a big oak kitchen island at my

place—she'd look nice on it, naked and begging. Jesus, I bet she tastes fucking incredible.

I swerve when a fox runs across the path, shaking my head vigorously.

Get your head out of the gutter, Gray.

She's sitting on the porch with her head in a book when I pull up, her bare feet propped up on the railing. Her eyes lift to my truck, and a smile spreads across her face. Damn, that smile could light up the whole town.

"Hey there," she calls out as I get out of my truck.

"Morning, Claire," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Ready for me to get started on the house?"

"Definitely," she says, setting her book aside and standing up.

"I'm excited to see what you can do with it."

I'm excited to see what she can do with me.

Fuck...if only.

I clear my throat and focus on the task at hand, grabbing my tools and heading up to the roof. As I work, I can't help stealing glances at her. She's sitting on the porch swing now, swaying back and forth as she talks on the phone. I can't hear what she's saying, but I watch her lips move, imagining what they'd feel like on mine.

By the time I climb back down from the roof, I'm sweating and my mind is on only one thing. She was wearing a cozy sweater when I arrived, but she's shed it as the day gets

warmer, down to only a thin white t-shirt with some kind of company logo on it. I've stripped down to just my jeans and toolbelt myself, the summer sun beating down on the roof.

Her jaw drops when she looks up from her book, and I can see the clear signs of attraction there. Maybe I should make overtures...or not. I don't deserve a girl like this, there's no fucking way.

She's beautiful, but she's still Dave Sawyer's girl. I wouldn't want to hurt her, and this woman doesn't know my past. She deserves someone better than me.

"You uh...you look hot," she mutters softly, looking me up and down.

I snort, resisting the urge to prod her for the comment. "Yeah, it's warm up there."

Her eyes dart around. "You—do you want a drink? I mean, not to go out or anything, just to have. To cool off. Sorry."

"I would like that," I grin.

I follow her inside as she leads the way, her hips swaying with every step. This ain't the kind of girl who typically hangs around in Fern Hollow; she's a city girl through and through, used to wearing heels, walking with a purpose and with looks that kill. I banish the image I get of her in nothing *but* heels, even though she'd look damn good in black patent leather stilettos.

I'm a monster. Fuck me.

“Options are a little limited,” she says, opening the fridge. “I’ve got gas station beer and some lemonade I picked up at a farmer’s market on my way out here. Other than that, you’re stuck with water.”

“Beer me,” I say.

She laughs over her shoulder. “Gotcha.”

She takes two out and places them on the counter, then starts to dig through the kitchen drawers. “I swear I had a bottle opener last night...”

“No worries,” I say. “I’ve got it.”

I grab one bottle and pop the cap on the edge of the counter, then I do the same with the other. Claire watches me with an impressed look, her pouty pink lips parted in concentration.

“Can you show me how to do that sometime?” she asks.

“Gladly,” I say. “It’s really not that hard.”

I pass her one of the bottles and she takes it with a grateful smile.

“Hey,” I say. “Cheers...to you making this place your home. I know it’s not under the best circumstances, but here’s to you, Miss Sawyer. Welcome back to Fern Hollow.”

I hold out my beer and we clink our bottles together.

“Gee, thanks, Mr. Cooper,” she says.

We take a few drinks in silence, watching each other over the rims of our bottles. I can feel the tension between us, the unspoken desire that hangs in the air. I’m sure she can tell I

want her, and I've caught more than a few looks from her... but I'm holding myself back.

It's mostly respect for her old man. The guy was my closest friend in Fern Hollow, and I won't disrespect his granddaughter. Of course, that doesn't mean I won't act on how I feel—just that I'm going to treat her like a goddamn lady and take my time.

"Gray...can I ask you something?" she says, her voice soft.

"Sure, anything."

"Why do you insist on doing this alone?" she asks, gesturing to the house. "I mean, it's a big job, and I don't want to put you out or anything. I figured the roof would be a job for a crew, and I know you've got them on hand. I mean, I met them."

"Having a crew here would be expensive, Claire."

"I can afford to pay your rates," she says. She doesn't sound offended, just confused.

"I know. It's not about that," I reply. "Part of me feels like I'm doing this for Ol' Man Sawyer. We were friends, and I never realized just how bad the cabin had gotten toward the end of his life. I wish I had. If I did, I would've helped him. No, Miss Sawyer. This one is on me. I don't mind the work. Plus, I like the challenge. And, to be honest..."

I pause, wondering if it's too early to shoot my shot. But goddamn it, I'm not going to be able to spend two weeks working on her house while I'm lusting after her.

And it's not like telling her I'm interested is disrespecting her. If anything, she seems like the kind of woman who appreciates honesty. I've always been a straightshooter and I'm not going to stop that now.

So I just say it out loud, sparing us both the burden of waiting any longer. "I want to spend more time with you," I say.

Her cheeks flush pink and she looks down at her beer. "Oh."

"I know it's probably not the smoothest thing to say," I add with a chuckle. "But it's the truth."

She sets her beer down, licking her lips. "You're not...you're not messing with me?"

I shake my head, taking a step closer to her. "I wouldn't do that to you, Claire. I'm serious. My mama raised me to be a straight shooter."

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine for any hint of deception. When she finds none, she nods slowly.

"I...I don't know if I'm ready for anything like that," she admits. "I've kind of had some stuff happen—stuff that made me leave the city. I should've left earlier but...my last relationship didn't work out. It was rough."

"That's okay," I say quickly. I understand having to leave and not wanting to talk about it. I've done that myself. "I'm not trying to push you into anything. I just wanted you to know how I feel."

She nods again, a small smile playing at her lips. "I appreciate your honesty," she says.

“Of course,” I say, taking a sip of my beer. “So...what do you say we finish these beers and get back to work?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she says, picking up her bottle.

We finish our beers in comfortable silence, enjoying each other’s company without the pressure of needing to say anything. When we’re done, we head back outside and get back to work. I wrap up on the roof a few hours later, and when I descend the ladder, she’s waiting in her fuzzy sweater again.

“Hey,” she says. “I was thinking about what you said, and I think...”

She pauses.

I give her an encouraging smile. “You can talk, Claire. I don’t bite.”

She shakes her head. “You’re just—you know what, screw it. Do you want to get drinks tonight?”

I raise my eyebrows. It’s not really ordinary for the roles to be reversed when it comes to who asks who out on dates around here...but I like her. She’s bold, and somehow shy at the same time.

And who the hell am I that I could possibly say no?

“Course,” I say. “The Snowcap? I’ll swing by and pick you up around eight o’clock?”

Claire gives me a sweet smile.

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s a date.”



CHAPTER FIVE



I haven't been on a real date in six years—what Harvey and I were doing absolutely doesn't count—and it's just now hitting me that saying yes to Gray was a mistake.

For one thing, I'm out of practice and I've never been a flirt. Most nights, I prefer to stay in and cozy up with a good book. When I lived in Portland and worked at Glitter Bomb, I normally worked all day and tried desperately to rest at night. I even saved up a little nest egg for the baby that Harvey and I were trying to have.

But the bottom line is that I. Do. Not. Go. Out.

Except tonight, because you don't just say no to a man like Grayson Cooper.

Which brings me to the second thing: that Gray is *way* out of my league.

I try on about ten different outfits before I decide on a green V-neck dress with flutter sleeves. It's probably a little fancy for the Snowcap, but I want to impress Gray—and I know he's going to look like a million bucks no matter what he's

wearing. I put on a little make-up, not too much, and look at my reflection in the mirror.

I look good. Not great, not yet. I'm about to change again, having a few minutes to spare, when I hear a knock at the door.

He's *early*?

Fuck.

I race down the stairs, wishing I had a little more time to waffle over what I want to wear. When I open the door, I see Gray standing there with a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand, just like in the movies. He's wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up and jeans that hug his muscular thighs. His dark hair is still messy, but looks like he at least tried to tidy it.

Of course...effortlessly sexy.

The opposite of me.

I can feel my face turning red as I take in his appearance, feeling overdressed and out of my element. Maybe I should have gone with sneakers and jeans instead of heels and a dress. Everyone's going to be looking at me at the Snowcap—and not in a good way.

“Hey,” he says, his blue eyes lighting up as he hands me the bouquet. “These are for you.”

I take the flowers, feeling a little shy. “Thanks,” I say, trying to smile. “They're beautiful.”

“Just like you,” he says in return. His eyes drag down my body, lingering on my chest. I know my boobs at least look good with the v-neck—and Gray makes it clear that he recognizes that. “That dress suits you.”

I feel a little flutter in my stomach, something that hasn’t happened in a long time. Maybe he really does like me after all.

The Snowcap is full, as it always is on Friday nights. It is, of course, the only bar in town, so there’s not really anywhere else for people to go. Gray opens the door for me then guides me over to an intimate circular corner booth, sliding in to sit next to me as the waitress comes over. I can’t help but feel self-conscious compared to her, a fit blonde that clearly knows Gray.

“Hey, Gray,” she says with a sweet smile. “Haven’t seen you around lately.”

“Been working out of town,” he says. “This is Claire—Dave Sawyer’s granddaughter, out renovating the Sawyer house. You met her yet?”

We’ve definitely met, but the waitress doesn’t seem to remember me.

“Don’t think so,” she says. “Welcome to Fern Hollow!”

“Thanks,” I murmur, my voice hollow. “Uh...I’ll have a vodka soda?”

“And a beer for me,” Gray says.

The waitress takes our order, and I can't help but feel envious of how easily Gray interacts with her. I've always been awkward around strangers, never knowing what to say or do, and being around Gray—someone so smooth and confident—only makes me feel more self-conscious. I try to take a sip of my drink to calm my nerves, but my hand is shaking and I end up spilling some of it onto the table.

“Are you okay?” Gray leans in, his hand on my thigh. I can feel the warmth of his touch through the fabric of my dress, and I shiver in response.

“I'm fine,” I say, trying to hide my embarrassment. “Just a little nervous, I guess.”

“Don't be,” he says, his voice low and reassuring. “You're a bombshell in a town full of plain old people. They should be nervous around you.”

Wait, what?

I bite my lip. “You really think so?”

He puts his arm around me. “Do I look like a man who would lie to you?”

He looks like he would do all kinds of things to me, but lying's not one of them.

“So what do you like to do?” I ask, breaking the tension. I feel like he's going to eat me alive—and I don't think I would mind that at all. “Fern Hollow is so small that it seems like there's nothing going on.”

“That’s kind of what I like about it,” Gray shrugs. “I’m a simple man—I like fishing, hiking, things like that. And I like spending time with beautiful women.”

I feel my cheeks flush. “Well, I’m not exactly the outdoorsy type.”

“That’s okay,” he says, his voice low and intimate. “I’m sure we can find plenty of things to do indoors.”

There’s something about the way he looks at me that makes me feel like he’s undressing me with his eyes. It’s like he can see right through me, and I’m not sure if I’m scared or turned on.

All I know is that I want him—badly. More than I’ve wanted anyone in years, more than I *ever* wanted Harvey. Gray awakens something in me that I haven’t ever felt, and I don’t know how to tell him that I’m ready to jump his bones if he’s up for it.

Before I can say anything else, the waitress arrives with our drinks. She sets them down on the table and gives Gray a flirtatious smile.

“Anything else I can get you, Gray?” she asks.

“No, we’re good for now,” he says, his eyes never leaving mine.

The waitress gives me a cursory glance before turning away, and I can’t help but feel like she’s judging me. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I can’t shake the feeling that I’m out of my element here, that I’m not good enough for Gray.

But then he leans in, his lips brushing against my ear, and whispers, “You’re beautiful. Don’t let anyone make you feel otherwise.”

I shiver in response, feeling the heat rising in my cheeks. Gray has a way of making me feel like the only woman in the world, like nothing else matters but the two of us. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and take a sip of my drink.

“So, tell me more about yourself,” Gray says, his hand still resting on my thigh. “What do you like to do?”

I hesitate for a moment, trying to think of something interesting to say. “Well, I used to work at Glitter Bomb in Portland,” I say finally. “It’s a—”

“Cosmetic company,” he cuts me off, shocking me.

“Okay...how on earth do you know that?” I ask, laughing. Sure, Glitter Bomb is a big deal in the makeup world, but big, manly Gray is the last person I expected to know about it.

“I did some work on their corporate headquarters in Portland years ago,” he said. “Back when it was still a startup. What did you do for them?”

“God, it’s so much more boring than you probably think,” I sigh. “I was a lawyer. I used to negotiate contracts with their brand reps.”

Gray gives me a half-smile and sips his beer. “I knew you were smart,” he says with a wink. “Why’d you leave?”

It’s a deeper question than I’m ready to answer. I suck in a breath and bite my lip. Gray’s eyes go wide as he watches me.

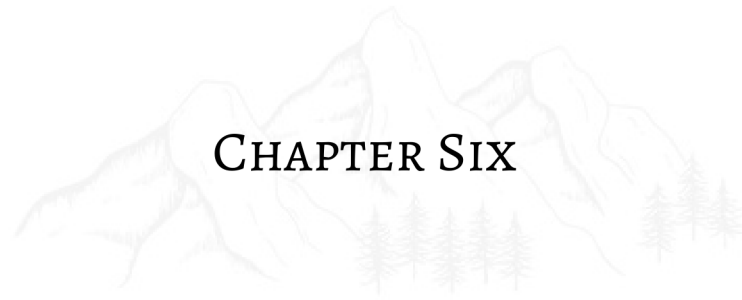
“Hey, uh...sorry,” he says. “If you don’t want to tell me that’s okay. I know what it’s like to have to leave somewhere you thought was home.”

I meet his blue eyes.

And even though I’m afraid it’ll send him running, I want to tell him everything.

“Well, it’s kind of a long story,” I say.

“We’ve got all night,” he replies. “And I’m all ears.”



CHAPTER SIX



Claire spends the next hour telling me all about her life in Portland.

For a while, I don't get it—why she left the city, I mean. It sounds like she was happy, successful, rich enough with her corporate law gig to afford a nice apartment downtown. Sure, her ex was definitely an asshole but she was strong and independent. She had it all going for her.

She didn't need him at all to make it in Portland.

Then she gets to the part about when she and her ex started trying to have a baby...and that's when I start to see what happened.

“Harv didn't want to get married,” she said, shaking her head and biting her lip. “But I always wanted a family, because growing up, it was just me and my grandpa, and that was...it got lonely, even though he was great. So me and Harvey made a compromise—I told him I wouldn't press him anymore about getting married if he agreed we could have a baby.”

I blow out a breath, rubbing my jaw hard. The audacity of that asshole to refuse to marry this goddess...I can't believe it. Who wouldn't want her when she had so much to offer?

I would *love* to spend eternity with her.

"I don't know, Claire," I tell her. "Sure, we just met, but I know a red flag when I see one, and that guy seems like was covered in them."

Claire takes a big sip of her drink, gulping it down. "And it gets worse," she says, shaking her head. "He told me he would only do it if I agreed to assume all the cost and complete care of our baby. So I did what I do—I drew up a contract and basically made him my sperm donor even though I thought we were in love. I was such an idiot..."

I don't let her see it, but my fist clenches under the table when I think about what that guy did to her. I can't imagine...

"Then we started trying," she says, and her voice gets hollow. "We had so much bad sex."

She sees my face and laughs quietly, but even in the dim light of the Snowcap, I can see the blush on her cheeks.

"It wasn't like that. It was *so* much bad sex. I didn't get pregnant. He never cared about me, and like, he fulfilled his contractual obligation. And that's all he did, if you get my meaning. But even that didn't work. So I started IVF...and it made me so sick, it was so hard, so stressful. When that didn't work either, I was heartbroken."

Okay. I decide right then and there that, if I ever meet this guy, I'm kicking his ass.

"But Harvey, he didn't care," she continues. "He didn't want to have a baby anyways, he just said it to keep me around. And when I was no longer useful to him, when I got to be too much to deal with, he just...left. When grandpa was in the hospital. At the time, I couldn't even process it, because I was so worried about grandpa. But now...I was such an idiot."

I reach over and take her hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm so sorry, Claire," I say sincerely. "No one deserves to be treated like that."

She looks up at me, and I see the pain in her eyes.

"I just want a family so badly," she whispers. "And I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm not getting any younger, and with my job, it's hard to meet someone who wants the same things I do."

I don't know what comes over me, but before I can think, I hear myself saying, "What if I could help you?"

She looks at me, confused. "What do you mean?"

I take a deep breath, feeling my heart race.

"You want a baby?" I ask. "I'll give you a baby."

I might not have known her for long, but I would give this woman *anything*.

Claire's big blue eyes stare at me with something like shock, her pink lips parting. God damn, I want to kiss her. I wonder if

she'd let me right here, right now, at the bar.

But then she speaks, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You can't be serious,” she says.

“I got nothin' better going on,” I say, trying to play it cool. And it's true—I've got nothing better to do than fuck this gorgeous girl senseless until I put a baby in her. Maybe I've just had too many beers, but it's starting to seem like more and more of a good idea. “You could write a contract for it and everything, if that makes you happy.”

“You don't get it,” she says. “I just told you I'm infertile.”

“Ah...but you didn't, did you?” I say, clicking my tongue.

“Nope, you told me your piece of shit ex had slow swimmers and couldn't get you pregnant. I presume you did your due diligence when it came to figuring out what was going on?”

She nods.

“Did he?”

“Yes, but...”

“But he's no longer in the picture,” I say. “So that means only one thing.”

“Which is what?”

“That you have absolutely no reason not to have a baby with me. Unless you're afraid...”

“I'm not afraid of anything,” she says, her eyes flashing, annoyance flashing in them. “But I can't believe you'd just offer this to me, but you don't even know me.”

I lean closer, seizing her hand.

“I don’t know you? That’s funny, because I think I know everything I need to know about you.”

“What the hell does that even mean?”

I start to tick things off on my fingers. “You’re a corporate attorney. You’re idealistic, but you sacrificed your own dreams for the sake of a life that wasn’t right for you. You’ve always wanted a family because you know how hard it is to be alone.”

I lean back and shrug.

“You seem like more than a decent human being to me.”

Claire runs a hand through her long curly hair. “Well, I guess I never really thought about artificial insemination,” she says.

“Ain’t nothing artificial about what I’m offering you, darlin’,”

I tell her.

“But you...you’d have to have sex with me,” she murmurs.

I smirk. “Oh, no. I would? That...I never considered that,” I tell her. “Yeah. I know. That’s what’s so great about this deal.”

Claire scoffs. “Gray—you’ve been really nice, but let’s be serious. Look at you. Look at *me*. There’s no way you—”

I slam my drink down and snatch her hands up in mine, looking into her eyes. Yeah...I’m definitely feeling dramatic. But she deserves dramatics. “I asked you out, didn’t I?”

“Because you were friends with my grandpa,” she concludes.

I drop one of my hands to rest on her thigh, sliding it under the hem of her dress.

“Don’t bring him into this,” I mutter. “I would be fucking ashamed if he knew the things I wanna do to you.”

Her mouth parts in a round, pink *oh* of shock. Her face is flushed, her breath heated, and her bare flesh feels so damn good under my palm. I press my thumb into the flesh of her thigh and she shudders.

“You really weren’t messing with me,” she says quietly.

“Not one bit,” I say. “So do we have a deal?”



CHAPTER SEVEN



I ‘ve either gone completely off my rocker or I just heard this gorgeous man just offered to get me pregnant.

“So do we have a deal?” Gray asks, his hand on my thigh. The pad of his thumb is rough, drawing tiny little circles on my sensitive skin. When he’s doing that, my answer is an immediate yes, but I can’t make decisions when I’m tipsy and turned on.

I try to focus on his words, but every time his thumb brushes against my skin, I lose track of the conversation. “A deal? What deal?” I ask, trying to sound casual. “This is just a conversation. For a deal, we need more than that. A contract, or...”

“Don’t play coy, Claire. The deal where I get you pregnant,” Gray says, his voice low and gravelly, his fingers slowly sliding up my leg. “I can tell you want it, and I want it too.”

I swallow hard, my heart racing in my chest. *This is crazy*, I think to myself. I barely know this man, and yet the idea of having his baby is incredibly arousing. “I don’t know,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. I’m so wet from just his words, and

if he keeps going, he's definitely going to find out what he's doing to me.

Gray leans in closer, his lips just inches from mine. "Come on, baby," he says. "It'll be fun. And who knows? Maybe we'll fall in love along the way."

Something about his words strikes a chord in me. Maybe it's the way he says "fall in love" like it's the most natural thing in the world, like we're *supposed to*.

And I've never really believed in fate, but that's why I let him kiss me.

After the way he's been talking to me, I figured the kiss would be intense, but I wasn't quite prepared for what Gray gives me. He leaves one hand on my thigh as he uses the other to take my chin in his fingers, pressing his lips to mine. I sigh against him and he deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth right here in the middle of the diner.

Harvey always made me feel like he was ashamed of me...but Gray is already showing me off in front of the whole town.

And he's so hot, I know everyone's going to be talking about this tomorrow.

I lean into the kiss, letting myself embrace his touch, his affection. We kiss for a few more minutes like that, our drinks forgotten, until Gray suddenly jerks himself away.

"You keep making those little sounds and I'm gonna get hard right here in this diner," he growls. "Do you even know how bad I want you?"

I giggle like a lovesick girl, blushing deeply. “Gray...”

“I’m gonna make you another offer,” he says. “And you don’t have to say yes, and I won’t be hurt if you’re not interested. But how about we give it a test drive, see if you like how I ride?”

I stumble over my words at that—the way he *said it* gets me so wet that I’m going to soak through my panties. “Are you sure?”

Gray shakes his head and laughs. “Claire—ground rules,” he says. “You’re not allowed to second guess me anymore. When I tell you something, I’m shootin’ straight. I won’t ever lie to you or play tricks on you. That’s not the man I am.”

“Any other ground rules?” I ask.

“Not any I care to discuss here,” he grates out, glancing around the room. “Can I take you home?”

I glance around at the diner, at all the people who keep glancing over at us. This feels like a huge crossroads—like whatever I do next will have a before and after.

Before Gray is behind me.

After Gray is ahead.

“Yeah,” I say. “Let’s get out of here.”

Gray reaches into his pocket and yanks out his wallet, then tosses some cash on the table. The next thing I know, he’s pulling me to my feet and holding my hand as we leave the bar, walking across the parking lot and through the glow of

streetlights. He guides me to the passenger side of his car, but instead of opening the door, he pushes me against it and starts kissing me again.

I'm breathless by the time he finally pulls back, though he's still boxing me in by the car. "Second ground rule," he says. "You tell me what you like. Don't let yourself get shy about it. I wanna know what makes you come, because I want you to get the full, luxury experience if we're only gonna do this once."

I know for a fact we're doing this *more* than once. I've never been more confident of anything in my life. But words fail me when I try to respond.

"Okay," I say simply. "Anything else?"

Gray gives me a grin. "I think that about covers it."

He reaches around me and pulls the door open, and I climb into his truck as he goes around to the driver's side, then we're coasting up the mountain to the cabin.

My body is buzzing the whole way, my brain focused on everything Gray said tonight. Does he really want me that bad? I guess I have to trust him, and he said that was one of his rules...which reminds me he might have others. That he's bossy.

That I actually really like it.

I want to kiss him some more. I want him to touch me like he did in the diner.

I want Gray to make me feel safe, like I'm protected.

I want him to be the father of my baby.

The more I think about it, the more I realize it's the perfect solution.

"What's going on in that mind of yours, Miss Sawyer?" he says, glancing over at me.

"Don't call me that," I laugh. "It sounds so...formal."

"I like it," he laughs with me. "It makes it sound like we're working together."

"Working on what?" I ask, my stomach flipping over.

Gray flashes me a crooked smile. "Workin' on getting you knocked up."

I can't stop the hysterical laugh that bubbles out of my chest, feeling like I'm hallucinating. This is the weirdest thing I've ever experienced, and the booze and adrenaline and arousal combine in a potent cocktail.

"Hey, I didn't agree to your deal yet," I say. "Test drive, remember?"

Grey nods. "Right. Test drive."

His truck's tires throw up gravel as he turns down the driveway, the headlights lighting up the front of the familiar old house. My nerves skyrocket as we get closer to the house, especially since Gray rushes to turn off the truck and come around the passenger side. I left a lamp on in the house, and it looks warm and inviting.

Almost as inviting as Gray's smile.

“You ready?” he asks, taking my hand.

I let him pull me from the car and into his arms. “Let’s do it,” I say, breathless.

Okay.

Trial starts now.



CHAPTER EIGHT



There's this version of me—sensible Claire, the corporate lawyer from Portland—who seems to have vanished completely, melting under Grayson Cooper's stare.

And I don't really care that I'm leaving that girl behind.

We're slow to go back in the house, my hand wrapped in Gray's, my breath shallow in my chest. I'm so nervous that I can barely keep it together, but Gray keeps giving me encouraging smiles, reminding me that he wants this just as much as I do, that there are no strings attached.

This is a test drive.

I'm about to ride the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

As we step inside the house, Gray pulls me closer to him, his hands gripping my waist as he presses his lips against mine. I'm lost in the moment, my senses utterly consumed by his touch. Every inch of me is on fire as he deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring every corner of my mouth.

I moan softly, unable to resist the overwhelming desire that washes over me. Gray's touch is intoxicating, and I feel myself

already wet with anticipation. I want him with an intensity that I've never felt before, and I know that he wants me just as badly.

Gray unbuttons his shirt and yanks it off his broad shoulders, tossing it across the floor. I gape at the hard muscles of his chest, his abs, the deep V going down beneath his waistband. He reaches down toward my knees, like he's about to scoop me up—and I press my hands against his chest.

“You don't want to do that,” I murmur, my words slurred by lust. “I'm bigger than you think I am.”

He chuckles against my lips. “Darlin', so help me, I will carry you up these stairs like the goddess you are. Trust me.”

Trust him? I don't even *know him*. But I find myself nodding anyway, letting him pick me up and hold me to his chest.

“See?” he says. “Easy as pie.”

He carries me up the stairs, secure in his hold, then heads to the bedroom. He lays me down on the bed, his hands roaming over my body as he begins to undress me. I'm trembling with anticipation as he slips off my dress, revealing my bare skin. I didn't think this would happen, so I'm just wearing a plain white bra and granny panties, but he acts like it's the sexiest lingerie he's ever seen.

Grayson's eyes roam hungrily over my body, the heat in his gaze making me feel more beautiful than I ever did with Harvey. He boxes me in with his arms, leaning over me, peppering kisses across my breasts.

My mind is racing as I lay there, his lips sending shivers down my spine. I know that I shouldn't be doing this, that it's reckless and dangerous, that this guy wants to knock me up... but I can't help myself. Would it be so bad if I had a baby with this gorgeous man?

I want him to knock me up. If the possibility is even there, I want to take it. Plus, there's something about Gray that draws me in, that makes me feel alive in a way that I haven't felt in years.

He slides his hand down my body, pausing to cup my breasts through the fabric of my bra. I arch my back, pressing myself against him, wanting more. He seems to sense my desire, pulling away from me just long enough to lean down and kiss me again.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I'm gasping for breath. He looks down at me, his eyes dark with desire.

"You're so beautiful," he says, running his hand down my body and reaching around to the clasp of my bra. "Can I take this off?"

I feel a flush spread across my cheeks, and I can't help but smile as I nod. I've never felt this desired before, and it's intoxicating. Gray unclasps my bra with ease and pulls it from my shoulders, his eyes sparkling with desire as he stares at my boobs.

"I've gotta get a taste of you, gorgeous," he murmurs. "But I want you to tell me what you like while I do. Tell me how you like to be touched, what you crave...and I'll do it all."

I inhale sharply as he wraps his lips around one of my nipples, sucking and teasing with his teeth. I tangle my fingers in his hair and keep him there, moving from one breast to the other, unable to speak.

“Talk to me, Claire,” he growls. “I’ve gotta know what you want me to do.”

“Just...this,” I say. “This is good.”

”*Jesus*, your body is perfect,” he says. He licks my nipples, rakes his teeth over my skin, squeezes my breasts. “I can’t believe anyone wouldn’t want to make you a mama.”

I need him touching me more, I need us both naked. “Will you...”

I pause.

I’ve never just *asked* for that before.

“Tell me what you need, beautiful,” he says. “Second rule.”

“Will you eat me out?” I blurt out.

Gray chuckles. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

He reaches down and, in one swift movement, practically tears my panties off. I bite my lip as he descends between my legs, his mouth pausing on my pussy. I can feel him breathing me in, savoring that first taste.

Grabbing his shoulders, I pull him toward me, needing to feel his mouth on me. He doesn’t disappoint, his tongue immediately finding my clit. He licks me hungrily, his big hands holding my hips to the bed. I gasp as the pleasure

washes over me, and I try to speak, but my words are jumbled, half-formed as he presses me against his mouth.

I'm panting, my body glistening with sweat as I lay back, letting him have his way with me. He opens me up, simultaneously sucking and licking my clit, his tongue flicking along the sides.

I'm not sure how much more I can take. I'm so close, the tension in my body coiling up with every lick, every kiss. I've never felt anything like it before, and I can't get enough of his mouth on me. He's got me right on the edge, and I'm about to fall over the cliff. My breaths are ragged.

I can barely speak. "Gray...please..."

"Please what, darlin'?" he says, his warm breath sending shivers across my skin.

"I..."

He licks me again, harder, his mouth moving over my pussy. I'm so close, so close...

"I...need..."

"Tell me," he growls, sending his tongue across my clit.

"I need to come."

"Good girl."

He laps at my pussy one last time, and I'm gone. I come hard, bucking my hips, moaning as the orgasm washes over me. Gray doesn't let up, dragging a second wave out of me before he gets to his knees at the end of the bed. His hands are on me

again, plucking at my nipples, roaming over the rolls of my waist, the swell of my hips.

“Your shithead ex would have to be insane to let you go,” Gray growls. “Fuckin’ hell, I could spend all night licking that sweet pussy...but you want something else, don’t you Claire?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “I want your cock.”

Gray scrambles for the button of his jeans, his zipper, shedding his clothes as quickly as possible. He rustles in his pockets for something, and I see him pull out a condom—but I sit up and say, “Wait!”

He looks over at me, his eyes heated.

“Yes, Claire?” he asks.

“I want you to come inside me,” I whisper. “And we can...we can negotiate the terms tomorrow.”

I feel so dirty discussing a *sex contract* with a near-stranger—but Gray crawls back onto the bed, positioning himself over me and dragging his cock up my seam.

“Claire,” he grits out. “I need you to confirm one more time that this is what you want. Because if you say yes...I’m not stopping until you’re knocked up. I’m gonna fuck you so hard you can’t see straight, and by the end of it, I’m gonna put a baby in you.”

My pussy clenches, and Gray gasps out a breath as my lower lips kiss the head of his cock.

“Do it, Gray,” I whisper. “I want you.”

Gray pushes into me, hard. I gasp as he fills me, stretching my already-sensitive pussy. He pauses, breathing, his hands on my hips.

“This is what you want?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Please...”

He grunts and sinks deeper, pushing my body into the bed. I gasp again, falling back against the pillows, finally trapped by his body. He braces himself over me, his eyes locked on mine.

“Fuck, Claire,” he groans. “You were made for me.”

He thrusts into me, his cock pulsing, my whole body rocking with the force of his movements. I feel full of him, his cock hitting every inch of my walls, stretching me just that much more. He drives into me, over and over, and I’m moaning louder than I ever have, out of breath, mindless. I don’t know how Gray keeps talking, but he does...and it just makes it all more intense.

“You feel that, darlin’?” he asks, his lips against my ear, his hot breath puffing against my neck. “I’m fucking you so deep. And goddamn, you’re ripe and lush and ready to be knocked up, aren’t you?”

“Fuck...” I gasp.

“I hope you’re ready for *weeks* of this,” he says. “Weeks of me bending you over whenever you feel like it, on the bed, on the kitchen counter, outside on the porch...I’m gonna make you mine in every way that counts, and then you’re gonna have my baby.”

“Oh my God!” I scream.

I’m coming around him, an endless cycle of arousal and orgasm, aftershocks that leave me breathless. Gray suddenly gets to his knees and yanks my ass into his lap, holding my ankles up in the air...and he comes.

I feel him flood me as he groans, but he doesn’t pull out—he thrusts a few more times instead, making sure I’m full of his seed. Even when he softens, he stays there, pulling me up to straddle him and placing a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “You stay just like that...and I’ll stay as long as you want me.”

I almost tell him we should just say fuck it to the contract; that as far as I’m concerned, this is it. I’m his, through and through, even though we’ve just met.

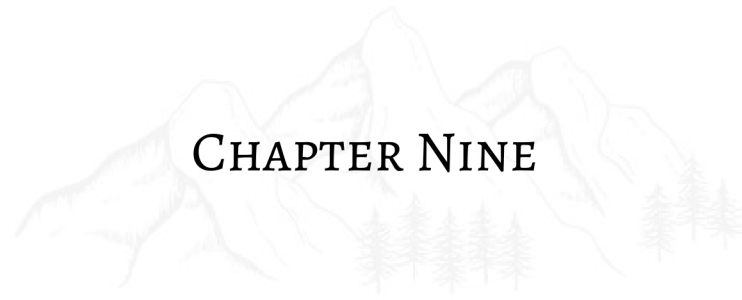
But sensible Claire comes back...and she remembers that men have always done her wrong.

“I’ll draw up the contract tomorrow while you’re working on the house,” I whisper. “We can sign it over dinner and then... and then we can get to work.”

He gives me a wicked smile. “Sounds good, Miss Sawyer. I can’t wait to knock you up.”

I just smile back, laughing softly as I rest my head against his shoulder.

I can’t wait to have his baby.



CHAPTER NINE



Claire is wearing an afterglow I can barely resist when I show up at her place the next morning for work, early as usual. She's much more collected than she was when I left her to drive home last night, wanting to give her space to process what we'd just done.

I wanted to stay all night long, but I had to go and take care of my dog. There's also the fact that I didn't think I'd be able to stop myself from having her, over and over again, if I stayed the night.

I'm only a man, after all.

I'm relieved, at least, to find a smile on her face when she opens the door, her face flushed.

"Hey, Gray," she says. "I just made some coffee if you want a cup."

"I'd love that," I reply with a lopsided smile.

As I step inside, the scent of freshly brewed coffee mixed with her vanilla fills my senses. I realize it must be her body wash, which makes me want to taste her all over again.

I follow Claire into the kitchen, my eyes trailing down her curves as she moves. She's wearing a t-shirt and navy yoga pants that do everything for her generous ass, her hips swaying as she walks. I can't help but imagine taking her right here, on the kitchen counter.

I want to explore every inch of her body. I want to feel her lips against mine, I want to press her against me, I want to savor the sugar on her lips.

But I don't. Because I'm a civilized human and she's only asking me if I want coffee.

On the other hand, a man can look.

Claire hands me a steaming cup of coffee, her fingers brushing against mine. I feel a jolt of electricity pass between us, and I know she feels it too from the way she bites her lower lip.

I take a sip of the coffee, relishing its bitterness. "This is good," I say, meeting her gaze.

She smiles, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I'm glad you like it."

Fuck it.

I can't resist any longer. I lean in and capture her lips with mine, tasting the coffee on her tongue. She kisses me back for an all-too-brief moment, then puts her hand on my chest.

"No more kissing until we get the contract signed," she murmurs. "No matter how much I want to."

I pull away, resisting the urge to keep kissing her.

“You make the rules,” I say. She does, my mama taught me to be a gentleman, and I’m happy to let women lead. “So...where is it?”

Claire leads me to the little dining nook, where she has the contract laid out on the rickety old table. “It was a little weird to write,” she says. “Since...you know. I basically had to negotiate a normal contract with more sex.”

“I hope you made room for a lot of it,” I tell her.

She flushes bright pink.

We sit down, and I begin to read through the document. As I do, I can’t help but steal glances at Claire. I’m still reeling from the night before, and I can’t shake the feeling that I need to be near her.

“You look distracted,” Claire says, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips.

“I am,” I admit. “I can’t stop thinking about last night. You’re also much more fun to look at than a contract.”

“Me neither,” she replies, reaching across the desk to take my hand. “But we have work to do.”

I nod and try to focus on the contract, but it’s difficult with Claire’s hand in mine. I take a deep breath and begin to read more closely. As I do, I realize that there are a few areas where we need to make some changes.

“Hey, Claire,” I say, looking up at her. “This says I don’t have any financial responsibility for our kid...?”

“I figure the baby will be mine,” she says, all business as she pulls her hand away. “And if you want to...well, you can leave. You can do whatever you want.”

“I’m not just gonna get you pregnant and dip,” I mutter, a little offended as I rake my hand through my hair. “The kid’s yours, of course, but I gotta provide some kind of support.”

“You really don’t have to,” she says. “I don’t want to be a burden and I make more than enough on my own. She’ll want for nothing—I’ll make sure of it.”

The way she’s already decided the baby will be a girl—her certainty that this is going to happen—sends a thrill through me. “You think it’ll be a girl?”

Claire laughs quietly. “I hope she will. Just putting it out in the universe.”

I sigh, looking down at the contract. Yeah, I wanted to fuck her, and I would love to get her pregnant...but I can’t help but feel like a piece of meat. Not that I want her to know that. She’s been through enough.

“As long as you’re comfortable with it,” I say, “I assume you know best.”

Claire nods, and we work through the rest of the contract, making a few adjustments. Like...I don’t want to sign away my rights completely, if she decides she hates my guts. I want to be able to see the kid, even if I won’t be able to sue for custody. We agree that I can start a savings account for our

child. It's weird hashing all of this out in such strict legalese, though, especially when I'm already falling for her.

As we go, I can't help but feel a sense of connection to her. It's not just about sex—there's a child involved now, and that changes everything.

When I sign on the dotted line, it feels like I'm doing way more than offering to have sex with this gorgeous woman. I'm starting a life with her.

And even though I've only known her for a few days, I'm confident it's gonna be a great life.

Once we've finished, Claire stands up from the table and stretches, her t-shirt riding up to reveal a sliver of her round stomach. I can't help but stare, imagining the curve of her belly as she carries my child.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks, catching me in the act.

I look up at her, my heart racing. "Just...thinking about the baby."

She smiles, her eyes softening. "You seem awfully confident."

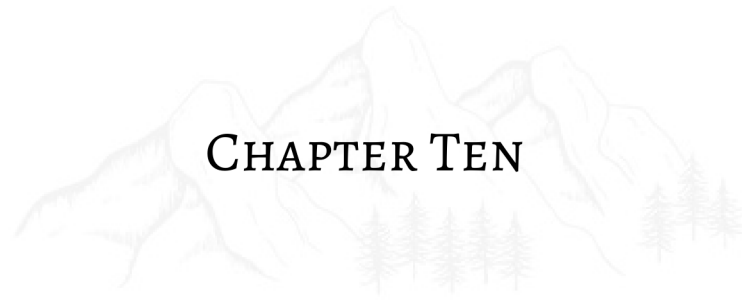
"I am," I tell her. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you were already pregnant."

Claire bites her lip and laughs. "I mean...it was only once."

"And that's all it takes," I say. I stand up and slide my hand around the small of her back. "So now that all the legal stuff is done, can I kiss you again?"

She nods.

“Yeah,” she says. “You can kiss me as many times as you want.”



CHAPTER TEN



It's hard to focus on anything but Gray while we both get to work on the house.

I'm busy painting, he's busy fixing the porch. He's shirtless—because of course he is—and I watch through the window as I paint the master bedroom a bright yellow. As I admire his muscles and broad shoulders, Gray suddenly turns and catches me staring. My cheeks flush with embarrassment and I quickly turn back to my painting, trying to hide my arousal.

But Gray doesn't seem to mind. In fact, he walks over to the window and leans in, his gaze fixed on me. "You know, you're a distraction," he says with a smirk.

I can't help but laugh nervously. "Sorry, I'll try to focus on my painting."

Gray shakes his head. "No need to apologize. I like being the center of your attention."

My heart races as he leans closer, his heat emanating off his body, the window ledge between us. I can smell his musky scent and it sends shivers down my spine. I know I should

focus on getting the house livable—at least during the day—but I want to get to the babymaking already.

Jesus...I can't believe I just thought that.

Suddenly, Gray takes the paintbrush from my hand and holds it out behind him, luring me closer with a lazy grin. “What color are you gonna paint the nursery?” he asks.

My smile fades, remembering how I used to ask these same questions with Harvey. That didn't work out well—and Gray sees my hesitation.

“Claire,” he says, “you're allowed to dream.”

I sigh. “I know. It's just that I've been through so much the past few months with trying to conceive, with Harvey, with Grandpa...”

Gray's expression softens, and he takes my hand. “I know it's been tough, but I've got you, darlin'. And we're going to have a baby together. Then, we—” he pauses, swallowing hard “—you can make new memories with your daughter.”

Something about the way he says “together” sends a bolt of desire through me. Suddenly, I'm not thinking about the nursery anymore. I'm thinking about Gray's strong arms wrapped around me, his lips on mine, his body pressed against mine.

Without thinking, I reach out to tangle my fingers in his hair, kissing him hard through the window. He drops the paintbrush on me, sending yellow paint over my knuckles. I'm getting paint all over him, all over me...and I don't care.

Finally, we break apart, panting and laughing. “You should probably finish painting,” Gray says, his eyes still dark with lust. “And *I* should fix this porch before one of us falls through.”



I somehow manage not to seduce Gray while we work on the house, but it’s not easy. Every time he brushes up against me or flashes me a smile, my resolve weakens. By the end of the day, I’m practically vibrating with desire.

We sit on the porch steps, sweaty and exhausted, watching the sunset. Gray cracks open a beer and hands me one. “Cheers,” he says, clinking his bottle against mine.

“Cheers,” I reply, taking a long sip.

We sit in silence for a few moments, listening to the chirping crickets and the distant hum of the occasional car on the highway.

“Claire,” he says quietly. “I know we said this is just about the contract. That it’s just about the sex. And don’t get me wrong, I am *real* excited about the sex. But I want you to let me court you.”

I snort, almost spitting out my beer. “I’m sorry?”

He shoves me gently. “Don’t laugh,” he says. “I know it’s old-fashioned, but I’m from Texas. We do things a little different down there.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Different how?”

Gray leans in, his breath hot on my neck. “We take care of our women. We buy them flowers, open doors for them, take them dancing. We court them until they’re ready to get married, then we marry ‘em and treat ‘em like queens for the rest of our lives.”

I can feel my heart racing in my chest. This is not what I expected—and it’s not something I ever wanted, but hearing Gray say it makes my whole body tense up.

“And why would you want to do that with me? We’re going to have a baby. We’re not getting married.” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. I know it’s a fantasy, and I’m a practical person, but wouldn’t that be nice? If I got to have my own little family, a little kid on Gray’s shoulders as he takes them hiking while I lag behind and ask them to wait up, taking too many pictures.

Nope. Not gonna let myself daydream about that.

I’m only going to daydream about the babymaking part of this.

“Because you’re special, darlin’. You’re strong and independent, and you don’t need a man to take care of you. But I want to be the man who does anyway. I want to make you feel cherished. Whatever our contract is, Claire, you deserve that.”

I take a deep breath, feeling like I’m about to jump off a cliff. “Okay,” I say softly. “Okay, let’s do it.”

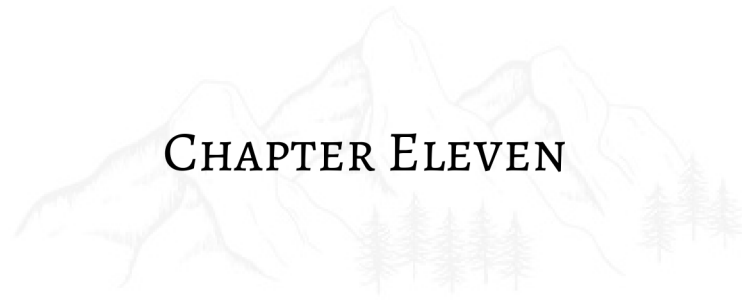
Gray grins, and suddenly he’s leaning in to kiss me. It’s slow and sweet this time, and I can feel a promise hidden within it.

We pull away, and he holds my hand tightly.

“I’ll take good care of you, Claire,” he says, his eyes dark and intense. “I promise.”

And with those words, everything changes. The contract is still there, but now there’s something else too. Something deeper, more profound. I’m not sure what the future holds, but for the first time in a long time, I feel hopeful. And safe.

We sit there, watching the sunset, our fingers intertwined, and I know that no matter what happens, Gray’s got my back.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



I hate leaving Claire behind—even if it’s only for a few hours—but I have someone else to take care of.

Two hours after I finish up work with her for the day, I drive on back from my remote cabin with my best friend in the passenger seat. She keeps her head out the window, her tongue lolling outside.

My best friend—Luna—is a grey rescue pittie I adopted in Portland after I first got out of prison five years ago and moved up here.

I didn’t tell Claire what I had to go home and do other than shower and spruce up, and I know this is the last test I have to figure out if she’s as right for me as I think she is.

Claire is sitting on the porch when I get back, her face in a book as usual. She looks up and gives me a broad smile as my truck’s headlights spill across the driveway, and then she puts the book down on the porch swing beside her. Claire heads over to the car, and my dog, Luna, whines and wags her tail at the sight of a new person.

I look over at Luna and point my finger at her. “Now you behave yourself, little missy,” I say. “I really like this one.”

Luna woofs softly in response.

Claire’s almost to the door, wearing a light blue dress that sways when she walks, her curls tumbling over her shoulders. She’s so gorgeous I can’t stand it.

I step out of the car, my anxiety rising that they might not like each other. Sure, Luna is only a dog, but she’s really my best friend, and I’ll be heartbroken if Claire doesn’t like her.

“Hi,” Claire says softly, standing on her tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek. “Dinner’s ready.”

How am I supposed to focus on dinner when all I want is her?

“Thanks, darlin’,” I say. “But first, I wanted to introduce you to someone.”

Claire’s brow furrows. “You brought someone with you?”

I grin. “Uh...yeah.”

I go over to the passenger side and open the door, and Luna comes hopping right out. Claire gasps and covers her mouth, then kneels as Luna ducks her head and trots over, wagging her tail. Claire immediately starts scratching Luna’s head, the dog licking her face—and Claire doesn’t seem to mind at all.

“Oh my God!” she says. “Why didn’t you tell me you have a dog?”

“I mean...I’ve been a little distracted,” I say with a sheepish smile, shoving my hands in my pockets. “And not everyone

likes her. They think pitties are dangerous, aggressive...but she's not any of those things."

"No, I love her," Claire says. "What's her name?"

"Luna," I say. "Also known as Bacon, because she's such a ham. Also known as the bestest girl...because she's the best."

Claire turns her attention back to Luna. "That's right! You're the best girl, aren't you? Aren't you?"

Luna melts, slumping to the ground and rolling over on her back. She wags her tail as Claire rubs her belly, and I watch the two of them together, thinking I could be happy with a life like this.

And for the first time, I wonder what I'm gonna do if I lose her.

If I fuck things up with her...like I always have before.

I shake the thought out of my head, determined not to let my past mistakes ruin this moment. Instead, I focus on Claire and Luna, happy to see them getting along so well.

"You two make quite the pair," I say, grinning.

Claire looks up at me and smiles, her eyes bright. "I love her, she's so sweet."

"And she's protective," I say, nodding at Luna. "She'll keep you safe."

"I think I feel safer already," Claire says, standing up and brushing off her dress. "So, are you ready for dinner?"

“Yeah,” I say, “and I brought some kibble too, since I figured Luna and I might stay the night if I want to get the job done.”

Claire laughs, biting her lip.

“Yeah,” she says. “Come on inside.”

As we sit down at the dinner table, Luna curls up at my feet, contentedly chewing on her kibble. Claire has prepared a roast chicken with a side of potatoes and green beans, and I can’t help but feel grateful for her hospitality. She’s also a great cook—one more point in the *perfect woman* column.

“This is delicious,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “I got really into cooking during the pandemic. Mostly for myself. Learned how to make all kinds of things... but I especially love baking.”

I chew thoughtfully. “What’s your favorite dish?”

“It’s silly,” she says, “but...biscuits and gravy. Big helpings.” She kisses her fingers.

And I fall more in love.

We continue to make small talk during dinner, Luna occasionally snuffling at our feet or nudging us for attention. It’s a simple and comfortable evening, and I feel my guard slowly lowering with each passing minute.

I should tell her about my past.

It’s the first time I’ve thought about it since I’ve met her. I haven’t told anyone who I am—*what* I am—not even Dave,

even though he was the closest thing I had to a friend. But with Claire, I want to tell her everything.

With the contract, though...I worry it would be too much.

I don't want to scare her, not when she's trying to get pregnant.

I'll tell her later.

I promise myself that.

After we finish eating, Claire clears the plates and I help her clean up. Luna follows us to the kitchen, her tail wagging eagerly.

"I have to say," Claire says, drying off a plate, "I never thought I was a dog person until I met Luna."

I gape at her. "Seriously? You're a natural. She warmed up to you right away."

Claire shakes her head. "I don't know. We never had one growing up, and then Harvey said it was too expensive, they're dirty...but I always wanted one anyway. We would go to the farmer's market and see the rescue dogs, and there was always a puppy I wanted to take home or some old mutt that needed saving."

"The more you tell me about this guy, the more I understand that he didn't deserve you," I tell her.

Claire's eyes meet mine, and I see a flicker of emotion in them. "Thanks," she says softly, then clears her throat. "But let's not talk about him. I don't want him to ruin our night."

I nod, understanding. “Agreed.”

We finish cleaning up and then settle on the couch, Luna snuggled up between us. Claire turns on a movie, and we watch in comfortable silence as the credits roll. Eventually, Luna crawls into Claire’s lap and I move closer, my arm around Claire, feeling like life couldn’t get more perfect.

When the credits roll, I look over at her. She’s sitting blissfully stroking Luna’s back, but she meets my gaze as I swallow hard.

I pat Luna. “Hey, Luna,” I say. “Go to your bed.”

She picks her head up and looks at me.

“Go to bed,” I repeat with a laugh.

She goes to the dog bed I brought in with me right away. It leaves me and Claire alone on the couch, and I run my fingers over her jaw before tilting her head up to mine.

“I’m contractually obligated to fuck you tonight,” I murmur.

“Just wanted to remind you.”

She smiles up at me, her touch light as her hand settles on my knee.

“How could I forget?”

CHAPTER TWELVE





If there's one thing I know how to do, it's make a baby.

As a former law student, I'm a meticulous researcher—and when Harvey and I started trying, I did *all* the research. I read every book, I watched every tutorial, subscribed to every blog. I learned exactly which multivitamins to take, which positions to use, how to make sure sperm made it all the way to the egg.

So I know exactly what I want when Gray tells me it's time to get to business.

I guide him up to the bedroom, my heartbeat quickening as he follows me. I prepared ahead of time tonight, wearing my sexiest set of white lingerie under the blue dress I put on for dinner. I shed the dress as soon as we get into the master bedroom, the smell of paint still crisp on the air, a window open to let in the cool night breeze. Gray watches, biting his lip and rubbing his jaw as I let the dress fall to the floor.

“Fuckin’ hell, Claire,” he murmurs. “You know I already thought you were the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, right?”

I'm actually starting to believe him.

"I wanted to impress you," I whisper.

He takes a few steps closer. "You've already impressed me, darlin'," he says. "You know I wouldn't just offer to put my baby in anyone, right?"

I shudder at the way he talks about it—like I'm his to be bred. But I can't deny the heat that rushes through me at the thought of it. The way he looks at me like I'm his, like he wants to claim me as his own.

I take a deep breath and close the gap between us, my hands reaching up to rest on his broad shoulders. "I know," I say softly. "I want this, Gray. I want you to put your baby in me."

He grins, his hands sliding down to my hips.

"That's my girl," he murmurs, pulling me closer until our bodies are pressed together.

I can feel his arousal against me, hard and insistent. My own body responds, aching with need. I reach down between us, rubbing my hand over his jeans. He's hard as a rock underneath, and I revel in the power I have over him.

He groans, his head falling back as his hands grip my hips tighter. "Fuck, Claire," he says. "You're gonna kill me."

I smile, his words making me even more wet when I feel like I'm already dripping.

"Now...you know the rules," he says. "You tell me what you want. I do it. So tell me what you want."

I keep rubbing his cock, wishing I could just get past this part. Most of the time, I like being in control, but last night...last night, I liked it when he used me. I liked it when he told me how to move, what to feel, where and when he wanted me.

So I tell him that. “This is gonna sound weird,” I say, “but...I think I want you to use me. I want you to...to breed me.”

I’m going to go on, hoping I don’t sound like an idiot, but Gray’s hands grip my hips hard as he meets my eyes.

“Say it again,” he growls.

My eyes go wide.

“Bre...breed me, Gray,” I whisper.

He lets out a feral growl and takes my panties off in one fluid movement, leaving my bra on so my tits are pressed together. Gray grabs me and practically tosses me to the bed, then picks up a pillow.

“Raise your hips, gorgeous,” he says.

I do as I’m told. He puts the pillow under my hips, then another one, until I’m angled up toward him. Gray strips his shirt off and comes closer, then pulls out his cock to rub against my folds. I groan and try to move—but he pushes me gently back down.

“I want to get you pregnant,” he says. “So I’m gonna fuck you just like this—with your hips up in the air and your legs spread. And then when I come, you’re gonna hold it inside... and I’m gonna push any cum that drips out back in. You understand me?”

I nod, breathless.

He cradles my thighs in his hands, his cock just at my entrance. “And this isn’t a one time thing,” he says. “We’re gonna do it again as soon as I can get hard for you, baby—which’ll be soon, because you’re the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever fuckin’ seen.”

He thrusts hard until he’s buried inside me, and I wail into the ceiling. Out here in the woods, there’s no one to hear us, so I get as loud as I want.

“And when I fill you up the first time, we’re gonna do it again,” Gray says. “And again. And again. Until you’re fuckin’ swollen with my baby.”

He starts to thrust, slow and deep. I whimper, my eyes rolling back in my head. No man has ever talked to me like this—no man has ever wanted me like this.

“Do you understand me, Claire?” he growls. “When I’m done with you, you’re gonna be carrying my child. You’re gonna get big with my baby and you’re gonna fuckin’ love it. You’re gonna want to do it again and again.”

“I...” I gasp. “God, yes!”

I can feel his shaft throbbing inside me, his cock swelling—I know he’s close.

“Gray...” I gasp. “I’m...I’m...”

“Come, baby,” he pants. “You can do it. You’re gonna come around me, aren’t you? And your body’s gonna hold my cum,

right? You're gonna fuckin' love carrying my baby, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

My orgasm shatters over me, and Gray keeps thrusting, grinding his hips against me. I can feel him slamming into me, grinding into me as he pushes me over the edge. I can feel his cock throbbing, filling me up—

"Fuck, yes," he moans. "Fuckin' breed you, gorgeous—just like you fuckin' asked."

His cock throbs and pulses, and I can feel it pressing into my sweet spot as his cum pumps into me. He keeps thrusting, milking himself as he covers my insides with his cum. My body clenches and I wrap my legs around him, keeping him buried inside me as he slumps over me to kiss the tops of my breasts, my neck, his hands roaming all over me...

We lie like that for a second, my head spinning from what he just did to me. The things he said...it sounded like he really wanted them. Not just that this was a contrast. Not just a business transaction.

There's a part of me that wants to believe that he's not just doing this as a favor, or because he was friends with my grandpa. The way he talks about me makes me feel so beautiful, so wanted. It's easy to let my imagination get lost in his words, his hoarse voice wrapped around my veins and seeping into my dreams.

But I'm not going to let myself do that. He might like having sex with me, but I'm not just a foolish girl. And we have a contract.

Gray slowly extracts himself from me, standing to his full height. I try to get to my elbows to look at him, because he's so pretty I don't want to miss a single glimpse—but his hand is on my shoulder, pushing me back, and his other hand slides over my pussy.

His fingers slip in, pushing his cum deeper.

Just like he promised.

Okay, so maybe I *am* going to let myself dream a little.

"I'm gonna give you a family, Claire," he growls. "But you gotta stay put, because you told me you wanted to be bossed around...so I'll boss you."

I groan, my pussy fluttering around him, sucking his cum deeper.

"That's right," he murmurs. "Good girl. Now stay like that, and don't you dare move."

I hear him walk away, staying on my back with my hips propped up on pillows. Gray comes back a few minutes later, then he scoops his hand around the back of my head as he sits on the bed beside me.

"Drink up, darlin'," he says, putting a glass to my lips. I take a sip, not even realizing how thirsty I was. "Yeah...you gotta stay hydrated, right?"

He takes the glass away, then he grabs a sweater and helps me put it on. I find myself cozy and warm—but with my legs still up, letting his seed take root.

“Are you comfortable?” he asks, laying beside me.

I look into his green eyes.

And I start to cry.

Gray’s eyes go wide, his brow furrowing. “Wait—no, what did I do?”

I sniffle, swiping at my tears, feeling like an idiot with my hips up in the air.

“You didn’t do anything,” I choke out. “It’s just that no one’s ever...ever taken care of me like this before. And I don’t...”

I trail off, squeezing my eyes shut.

“I’m sorry, I think you kind of fucked me into hysteria? What the hell?”

Gray stares at me for a moment longer.

Then he laughs.

“You scared the shit out of me, darlin’,” he says, reaching out to thumb the tears from my cheeks. “Didn’t realize I could fuck a girl so good she cries.”

I laugh with him, my tears fading. “Seriously, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says. “I’m...flattered, I guess. God, this is really happening. I can’t believe I just did that to you.”

I start to answer, but he cuts me off by dragging his thumb over my lips.

“You’re my woman,” he says. “I’m gonna take care of you. Alright?”

I don’t know what he means. With the contract, all we’re obligated to do is get pregnant, then he can leave.

But I let myself lean into it.

I let myself want him.

I can let myself daydream when I see him. It’s nothing more than that. There’s no clause against daydreaming.

“Alright,” I whisper.

And he takes me into his arms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN





I keep working on Claire's house.
I keep trying to get her pregnant.

We fall into a pattern—one I'm not anxious to get out of.

I finish fixing up the porch. I fuck her over the railing in broad daylight, her tits in my hands, my cock buried inside her.

I move a handmade kitchen island into the cabin, because she loves cooking. That night, I lay her out on top of it and I lick her until she comes.

She starts putting in a garden for the spring. I find her outside, hands and knees in the soil, and I bare her ass and spank her while I take her from behind.

And Claire...she fucking blossoms in Fern Hollow.

Like the flowers in her garden, she comes to life as the weather gets warmer. I know it's the place, the house, her freedom from her old life and the city—but I hope it's also me. I like keeping her in a hazy afterglow, pink and gold, her brown curls spilling down her back. She gets wilder, too, like the city had locked her in.

We're brushing our teeth one morning before work—before I start fixing up her house again and she starts on her consulting tasks for the day—when she cracks open a drawer and gestures at it. I look down with a frown, and Claire gestures again after she spits out her toothpaste.

“It's yours,” she says, “if you want it.”

I cock my head. “Are you sure?”

She nods with a smile. “Positive.”

That's just the beginning of it, too. I make her mine when we're twisted in the sheets each night, and she makes me hers in every other way. At the dining table, where she always sets a place for me. In the bedroom, where she buys me a new pillow. In the living room, where she spoils Luna with a new dog bed and so many toys the dog doesn't know what to do with herself.

For some reason, her love for the dog is the thing that makes my heart ache most. Luna was a fighting dog rescue, and she had a lot of work to do to get where she's at now. But Claire embraces her with open arms.

I wonder if she could embrace me that way if she knew my past. If she knew I'm a felon.

That I almost killed a man.

I'm considering telling her one night a month or so into our arrangement. I roll up to the driveway after a gig at somebody else's house—because the crew demanded I start doing something other than favors for my girlfriend—and I start

sweating as soon as I turn off the car. Tonight's the night. I'm going to tell her everything about who I am, how I got here, the path that led me from Texas to Oregon five years ago.

I walk fast up the driveway, eager to tell her while I still have the heart. But as I come in the door, she's nowhere to be found. Neither is the dog, which is weird, but they're usually inseparable. I put my jacket down on the back of one of the kitchen chairs and look around, anxious to find out where she is.

"Claire?" I call out. "You here?"

The house is quiet for a minute, the old grandfather clock on the wall by the stairs ticking away.

Then a small voice comes from upstairs. "Up here."

I climb the stairs, my eyes falling to the master bedroom. She's not in there, though; the bed is neatly made, the curtains blowing in the dusk breeze. I turn around and look the other way, and that's where I find her: sitting in the middle of the wood floor of the guest room. The sun is setting outside the window, the plastic drop cloth on the edges of the floor rustling in the wind coming in from outside. Claire's back is to me, her hair nearly down to her waist, her hands clasped in her lap.

I step forward slowly, frowning as I get closer. I don't let on about it, but my heart is fucking pounding; I'm terrified. I have this horrible sense that she's hurt, or sick, or that she's gotten bad news.

For her part, she's quiet. I realize Luna is sitting beside her, her head propped on Claire's thigh, and the dog's tail thumps against the floor as I come closer.

Then Claire looks over her shoulder, her face in golden profile. She's crying.

"Shit, Claire," I murmur. "Are you okay?"

She sniffs, her face cracking into a smile. "Yeah," she says. "Um...will you come sit with me?"

I nod. "Course."

I walk over and take a seat on the floor beside her, sitting cross-legged. She doesn't say anything, the silence agonizing; but she at least takes my hand, squeezing it gently. As always, my skin lights up at her touch, sending a wave of warmth and comfort through me.

"What's going on?" I ask. "Gotta admit...I'm a little freaked out."

The tears aren't flowing or anything. But she's clearly been sobbing, her nose red, her eyes puffy.

"Sorry," she laughs. "I think I'm still processing."

"Processing what?"

She holds my hand tighter and finally meets my eyes. There's this incredible, unreadable expression in them—maybe terror, maybe joy, but an undeniable spark. Claire gestures around the room with an idle hand. There's a pen in it, I think. Maybe she was journaling.

“What color do you think?” she asks.

I give her a confused smile. “For?”

“For the nursery.”

Understanding comes slow, because she had to bury the damn lede. My jaw drops as she holds out the pen—and I realize it’s not a pen, but a pregnancy test. I take it from her without a word, and I look down to see those two little bars.

Positive.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispers.

She’s smiling, and I can’t help it. I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my lap, holding her tight. Luna is in the way, so I shift us around to my side and Claire laughs. I kiss her and she kisses me, and that’s how we stay for a long time.

After a while, Claire looks up at me, her eyes wet with tears.

“I’m pregnant,” she breathes. “I can’t believe it.”

“I can,” I tell her. “You were born to be a mom, Claire.”

My heart is in my fucking throat, and I have to take a deep breath because it’s lodged there. I can’t swallow, and my blood is pumping hot and fast through my veins.

“My god,” she whispers. “I’m going to have a baby.”

I realize what she means and my whole body relaxes. Because we’re not together...and I know I want to be. But we’re not fighting it, either. That’s what we always said, isn’t it? Or at least, the version of it that we count.

I think about her when I’m away from her.

I think about her when we're together.

She's inside me, in my bones, in every cell.

I love her—and I know she's going to be an amazing mom,
whether I'm in the picture or not.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN





I thought it would take a lot longer than this, but Gray already got me pregnant.

So...what now?

We sit on the floor of the nursery—the *nursery*, because we're going to have a baby—for almost an hour. We start to talk about the color, the decor, the furniture. He tells me he wants to make a crib himself, and the future unwinds in front of us. It seems so clear. Me and Gray together with our little family.

I didn't ever see this happening for me after going through IVF with no luck.

Harvey made it clear I was worthless. That I would have been a horrible mother anyway. Even if I had gotten pregnant, he wouldn't have been involved.

We were in a relationship and he wouldn't have been involved.

Gray and I only have an *arrangement*.

But everything is different with Gray...

“So what now?” Gray asks, voicing what I’m thinking. His voice is gruff, low—like he’s barely holding it together. “I guess you don’t need me to uh...”

I interlace my fingers with his.

“Stop, Gray. I need you,” I interrupt, squeezing his hand. “I want you to be a part of this. I want us to do this together.”

He looks at me, his eyes softening. “Really?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, biting my lip. “Really.”

Gray leans in, pressing his lips to mine. It’s a slow, tender kiss, full of promise and hope.

We break apart, and Gray pulls me into his arms. “Good,” he says. “I was really hoping to hear you say that.”

My heart flutters in my chest when he speaks. We sit there, holding each other, and I know we’re going to make it work.

We’re going to be a family—me, Gray, and our little miracle.

He finally stands up, reaching his hand out to help me to my feet. Luna sits up and wags her tail, looking up at us.

“Hear that, girl?” Gray says, a broad smile on his face. “You’re gonna be a big sister.”

Luna’s tongue lolls happily and she trots over to get some pets from Gray. He keeps hold of me with his other hand, though, pulling me into his arms as he looks down at me.

“I’m making you dinner tonight,” he declares. “Something special to celebrate.”

“I’d like that,” I say softly, leaning my head against his chest.

I grin up at him, feeling a flutter in my chest. It’s like I’m seeing him in a new light—as a partner, a father, someone I can rely on.

I didn’t know this man could get more attractive but...fuck. I think he just did.

I’m gonna need to adjust the contract if we keep up like this... because I want him in my child’s life.

And more than that, *I* want him. Not just for our baby. For me.

We leave the nursery, hand in hand, and I feel a sense of excitement building in me. Sure, there will be challenges ahead, but I know we’ll face them together.

As we walk down the hallway, Gray leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Hey, maybe we should practice making babies again tonight.”

I laugh, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks.

“Maybe we should wait until after dinner,” I tease.

Gray grins down at me, his eyes shining.

“Can’t wait,” he murmurs before pulling me into another kiss.

I melt into him, feeling a sense of happiness and contentment wash over me.

Everything is going to be okay.

Gray sits me down at the kitchen island, treating me with the softness of something fragile. Then he starts to rummage

through the cupboards, searching for ingredients. I watch him move around the kitchen, appreciating the way he seems so comfortable in this space. I can't help but hope that this is what my future looks like—Gray cooking in our kitchen, me watching him while holding our baby.

“What are you making?” I ask, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

“Something special,” Gray replies with a grin. “I’m no chef, but I can whip up some mean grilled cheese.”

I chuckle, watching him pull out the bread and cheese from the fridge. He starts to slice the cheese, placing it onto the bread before putting it in the frying pan.

As he cooks, we talk about our future. Gray tells me about his plans for the crib, how he wants to make it from scratch. I can already picture it—a beautiful wooden crib, made with love from the man I love.

I haven't told him yet.

But I think I'm going to...tonight. It feels right.

“Maybe we can take a trip to the hardware store this weekend,” I suggest, feeling a sense of excitement at the idea of building something together.

“Sounds like a plan,” Gray agrees, flipping the grilled cheese.

“And we could pick out some paint for the nursery.”

I nod, feeling a sense of joy building in me. This is what I've always wanted—a partner to share my life with, to build a family with.

Gray places the grilled cheese onto a plate, sliding it in front of me. “Bon appetit,” he says with a flourish, his southern twang making a welcome appearance. I dig in, and I find that he really does make a mean grilled cheese.

We eat together in silence. I’m famished after the day I had—taking the test, having a good cry, wondering how to tell him. This has all gone so much better than I could have even dreamed.

“Hey, Gray,” I start when I’m done with my sandwich, “I think...I think we should consider re-negotiating our contract.”

He goes still, and I can tell he’s nervous. “Anything you want, Claire.”

I reach over and take his hand, squeezing it gently. “I meant what I said upstairs. I want you in the baby’s life. I want...I want us to be a family.”

He gapes at me for a second, his mouth falling open.

Then he stands up abruptly and scoops me out of my seat, holding me tight. He spins me around as I laugh, wrapping my arms around him.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been hoping you’d say that,” he murmurs into my hair. “Jesus, Claire, I didn’t...this started out as sex for me, sure, but you’re something special.”

He puts me down and stares into my eyes.

“I love you, Claire,” he says, his voice low. “I know it’s only been a couple months, but I love you so damn much. I hope

I'm not coming on too strong—”

“We’re having a baby together, Gray,” I laugh. “It would be impossible to come on too strong...especially because I love you too.”

Relief floods his face, and he pulls me into a deep kiss. It’s like everything has fallen into place—our love, our family, our future.

We pull apart, and Gray looks at me, his eyes shining. “I can’t wait,” he says. “To be a dad, to be with you, to build a life together.”

I smile up at him, feeling a sense of joy that I’ve never known before. “Me too,” I whisper.

We spend the rest of the night talking and planning, feeling like we’re on top of the world. I can’t believe how much has changed in just a few short months—I went from feeling lost and alone to having the love of my life by my side, and a little one on the way.

As Gray wraps his arms around me, I close my eyes and let out a contented sigh.

This is what happiness feels like.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



It's the day of Claire's first ultrasound and I'm scared as hell.

We sit in the waiting room of the only clinic in Fern Hollow—Dr. Banks' place. She's a nice lady, younger than expected, blonde. She stitched me up more than a few times after construction accidents, and I know she'll take good care of Claire, but I'm still nervous.

As we wait in silence, Claire fidgets with her fingers, her eyes glued to the floor. I reach over and take her hand in mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She looks up at me and forces a small smile.

"I'm scared," she whispers.

"I know," I reply. "But whatever happens, we'll get through it together."

She nods, but her eyes still betray her anxiousness. I wish I could take away her fears, but I know it's not that simple. Claire told me this is the first time she's ever tested positive,

but the first few weeks are really sensitive and things could go wrong.

I wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, but I don't know, so I just held her hand instead and made sure to drive her to the doctor myself. I wasn't going to let her do this alone.

After what feels like an eternity, the receptionist calls out Claire's name. We stand up and follow her down a brightly lit hallway, passing by a woman carrying a baby of her own. Claire's eyes linger on the kid, and I squeeze her hand once again.

"That's gonna be you by the end of the year," I murmur. "Smile on your face, a healthy baby in your arms."

"I hope so," she whispers.

"I know so," I smile.

Dr. Banks is waiting for us in her office, a warm smile on her face. She greets us both and gestures for us to take a seat.

"Hi, Claire," she says. "It's so nice to finally meet you. And Gray—always a pleasure."

"Hey, Dr. Banks," I say, trying to smile through my anxiety. I don't want Claire to know how nervous I am. "Just excited to finally meet the kid."

"I know it can be overwhelming, but everything's going to be just fine," she says. I guess she can sense how freaked out we are; she probably meets with parents like us all the time. "And please, you can call me Reagan; no need for formalities in a town this small."

“Thanks, Reagan,” Claire says. “I have to admit, this is pretty nerve-wracking. I didn’t even think it would happen, and now it finally is and I feel like every little discomfort is something wrong with the baby.”

“That’s just how it goes,” Reagan says. “But don’t worry too much. Let’s get you a peek at your little one.”

Claire nods, and Reagan gestures for her to lie on the bed and pull her shirt up. Her belly is just barely swollen, but it makes me proud to see what I’ve done to her—what we did together. Reagan applies a layer of gel on her stomach and I hold my breath.

“Here we go,” Reagan says as she turns on the ultrasound machine. “Let’s see what’s going on in there.”

The room is silent except for the sound of the machine. Reagan looks intently at the screen, and Claire and I stare at it too, trying to make sense of the blurry shapes.

And then, we see it. A tiny little shape, wriggling on the screen. I can’t believe it—that’s our baby. Our kid. I feel a lump in my throat as I watch it move, and Claire’s hand tightens around mine.

Reagan smiles. “There it is,” she says, pointing at the screen. “Everything looks good—the heartbeat is strong, and I don’t see any problems. Gestational age tracks with what you said. I’ll have the nurse call you and give you some dietary information, but...”

Claire lets out a huge sigh of relief, and I feel like I can finally breathe too. The doctor could be saying anything and I don't think either one of us would be able to hear her. Seeing our baby up there on the screen makes everything feel real, and I'm overwhelmed with emotion.

"Thank you so much, Reagan," Claire says, her voice thick with tears.

"You're welcome," Reagan says with a smile. "It was my pleasure to show you your little one."

As we leave the clinic, I can't stop looking at the picture Reagan printed out for us. It's such a small thing, but it means so much to me. We're really doing this—we're going to be parents.

Claire walks alongside me, her hand still in mine. We don't say anything, but we don't need to. I can feel her excitement and happiness radiating off of her, and it makes me feel like I'm on top of the world.

As we get into the car, Claire turns to me, her eyes shining with tears. "Thank you for being here with me, Gray."

"Always," I say, leaning over to kiss her. "I'm not going anywhere."

We buckle in and I start up the truck as Claire gazes at the picture. "I wish Grandpa was around to see this," she says. "He would be so excited."

I glance over at her as we turn onto the main drag, headed back home. "Do you have any other family you could share it

with?”

She shakes her head. “It was always just me and him.” Her brow furrows and she looks at me.

I nod. She’s right, old man Sawyer would’ve love to see his granddaughter fall pregnant, and I’m hoping I can honor his memory by taking care of her. That’s all I want to do, take care of Claire and our kid for the rest of my life.

“Gray, do you have any family? I know we’ve been busy with other things, like the house and uh...the sex,” she laughs. “But I feel like you never talk about your family. All I know is that you’re from Texas and that you had to leave it all behind.”

I stiffen slightly, not wanting her to see my reaction. My family is a sore subject, but she deserves to know.

And then maybe it will give me an opportunity to tell her everything else.

Because I still haven’t told her my worst secret.

“I come from a big family,” I say. “Four brothers, one sister. Lots of cousins.”

Her eyes widen. “Gray—I can’t believe you never mentioned it! Do you want to send them the photo of the ultrasound? Have you even told them? Do you want to wait to announce? I know some people prefer...”

I shake my head when she trails off. She must see the weary expression on my face. “Haven’t spoken to any of my family since I came up here six years ago,” I reply. “Things got tense

between us. I'm the middle child and I always just...had this tendency to disappoint them."

Her face falls. "Oh," she says, and despite the disappointment I think I see on her face, she squeezes my leg reassuringly. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"Claire," I say, "I want to tell you everything...but not today. Today I want to enjoy just being with you and thinking about our future."

She smiles, her hand on my knee. "Me too."

For the rest of the drive, we talk about our plans for the baby. We discuss names and possible nursery designs. Claire tells me about her dream of opening a little boutique in town, and I tell her about my plans to expand the construction business.

When we get home, we put the ultrasound picture on the fridge, and I feel like I'm on top of the world. Everything feels right—like finally, after all these years, I've found my place.

But as we settle into bed that night, I can't help but think about what I haven't told Claire. My family, my past, my secrets.

I know I need to tell her. But I don't want to ruin this perfect moment. Not yet.

Instead, I wrap my arms around her and hold her close, feeling her warmth and the steady beat of her heart. That's all that matters right now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN





I don't think I've ever been this happy.

I have my childhood home—fully renovated and beautiful. Gray is talking about tearing down the fence and building a new one that completely surrounds the property so the kid will have plenty of space to play outside unsupervised.

The fact that we're even having this conversation blows my mind.

I have a man who loves me, a baby growing inside me, a life ahead. Gray encourages me to follow my dreams, and I get to work starting my own little version of Glitter Bomb here in Fern Hollow.

Spring turns to summer, the weather gets warm. Birds sing in the trees outside our window every morning.

This morning, I'm wrapped in Gray's arms on a lazy Saturday morning. The sun is shining through the curtains, casting a warm glow on our bed. I can't help but smile as he strokes my hair gently.

“I can’t believe how lucky we are,” Gray whispers, kissing my forehead.

I nod “I never thought I would have this kind of happiness,” I admit.

Gray’s face softens, his hand moving to cup my cheek. “You deserve it all and more,” he says, leaning in to kiss me softly.

We spend the morning wrapped up in each other, enjoying the quiet moments that we don’t often get with our busy lives. But as the sun climbs higher in the sky, we decide to get up and enjoy the day.

We take a walk through the woods that surround our property, hand in hand. The leaves rustle in the gentle breeze, and I can hear the distant babble of a brook. There’s a waterfall just up the trail here, and Gray guides me toward it.

The baby’s started kicking softly, little flutters of movement in my belly as we look at the gorgeous waterfall. It tumbles over the moss-covered rocks, down into a gorge below. There’s a doe and fawn drinking from the small lake at the bottom.

“She’s kicking,” I murmur, looking over at Gray. His eyes light up and he comes to stand behind me, putting his hands on my belly.

“I can feel her,” he whispers in my ear. “I think she likes it out here—my little hiking buddy.”

I melt at the image of Gray hiking out here with our child, a little boy or girl scampering over the rocks. I picture them with

Gray's dark hair and my blue eyes, the spitting image of their dad.

"We're gonna make a pretty baby," he says, his voice rough. It turns me on right away, a shiver crawling up my spine. I bare my neck to him and he kisses me softly. "Are you thinking about it right now?"

"Yeah," I breathe. "All the time."

It's true—I'm thinking about our baby all the time...and even making another baby with him just as soon as we can. Ever since he told me he had a big family, I've wanted to do that for both of us.

His hands slide under my t-shirt and up to my breasts, playing with my nipples through my sports bra. I'm so sensitive that it lights a fire across my skin, making me arch against him.

"Gray, I don't think I just want one," I murmur. "I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but I want to make a family with you."

"You know how much it turns me on to hear you say that?" he growls. "Jesus, Claire...I think I've gotta have you right here in the woods. You wanna practice?"

"Yes," I breathe. "Yes, Gray..."

His other hand slides down to my pants, yanking down the elastic waistband until I'm bare to him. He pulls my breasts out the top of my bra too. It feels so dirty to be out here in the woods, his hand on my breasts and the other on my pregnant

belly, grappling with his pants to get his cock out. I gasp when I feel him slide against me, bending me over a rock.

“Fuck, you make me think the dirtiest thoughts,” he growls, his hands on my hips. He hasn’t entered me yet, still teasing me with his cock, dragging it through my wetness.

“Tell me,” I gasp. “Say it out loud.”

He pushes himself in to the hilt, groaning as he does. I arch my back and he takes my breasts in his hands, rolling my nipples with his thumbs.

“I love these gorgeous tits, Claire,” he says. “I love how big they’re getting, how they feel in my hands. I could suck on your tits all day.”

“Fuck, Gray...”

He sets a slow pace, his hips working against me. He feels so good inside me, pressing in just the right spot.

“I love these hips,” he says. “These wide, gorgeous hips. You were made to be a mama, Claire, and I’m gonna give you as many babies as you want.”

I always thought this would be the kind of talk I would hate in bed...but coming out of Gray’s mouth, it’s perfect. It turns me on so much it’s almost too much for me to handle.

“I love how fucking wet you are for me, baby,” he says. “How you want my cock all the time.”

I gasp as he hits me in just the right place, grinding against him as I ride out my orgasm. He’s slow and steady, looking up

at me as he moves back and forth.

“You’re so sexy, Claire,” he says, his eyes burning into me. “I love fucking you. I love seeing you with your fucking tits hanging out, bent over for me like this. I love feeling you come for me.”

I clench around him, my body seizing with my orgasm. He groans and pumps into me harder, thrusting in and out until he’s grunting and spilling his hot cum inside me. He thrusts into me a few more times and then he’s still, gasping.

We’re both breathing hard, stepping apart to put ourselves back together. Gray wraps his arm around me and we stare out at the water, dazed. The doe and her fawn have gone now, and all that’s left is the sound of the rushing water as it tumbles over the rocks.

“I love you, Gray,” I whisper, leaning my head on his shoulder. He presses a kiss to my forehead and smiles. “I love you, Claire.”

We walk back to the house, giddy like kids, holding hands. I left my phone on the counter, and I walk over to check it before we head up to get in the shower.

And I see a name in my missed calls that sours my whole day.

Gray sees the look on my face and walks closer. “What is it, baby?” he asks, frowning.

“It’s um...” I pause, wondering how he’ll react. “I have a missed call from Harvey. And a voicemail.”

I can see the fury in Gray's face. His fists clench at his sides.

"Please don't be mad," I whisper.

His eyes go wide. "Shit...sorry, Claire," he says. "I'm not mad at you at all—I trust you. I just...really hate that guy."

I laugh, chewing on my lip. "Yeah, me too," I say. "I'm afraid to listen to the voicemail."

He puts out his hand. "Wanna do it together?"

I nod. "If you wouldn't mind."

Gray takes the phone and activates my voicemail, then puts the phone on the counter and sets it to speaker. We both stand there in silence, waiting for Harvey's voice.

"Hey Claire," he says. "I know you probably don't want to hear from me, but I'm just calling to say I'm moving to Seattle. Got started cleaning out the storage unit this week and some of your shit's in there. If you want it, you have to come get it."

"Fuckin' asshole," Gray curses.

"Anyway, call me back within three days if you plan on coming to get it and I'll meet you there to unlock it. See ya."

The line goes dead and I look up at Gray.

"Yeah, I really hate that guy," he says.

I laugh. "He's a real piece of work."

"Do you have anything in that storage unit that you want that bad?" Gray asks.

I think about it for a second. I left some things that grandpa gave me in that storage unit; a wooden lamp he'd carved himself which Harvey said was tacky, a few photo albums from way back in the day with some of my oldest friends, and a few letters from my parents. Other than things with emotional value, most of my medical records are there, and it might be worthwhile to go get them. I just didn't think I would ever need them again when I wasn't getting pregnant and I thought I was never going to get pregnant. "There are a few things," I say. "I can't help but feel like he's doing this to get under my skin."

"It's only a two hour drive down to Portland; I could go for you in the truck."

"No, I'll go with you," I say, then I smile. "Is it wrong that I want to show Harvey what I've got going for me?"

Gray's face breaks out in a smile. "Not at all, darlin'," he says. He takes me by the hands and steps in to kiss me. "Let's take a weekend trip and show the bastard what he gave up."

A faint, light-colored illustration of a mountain range with several peaks and a line of evergreen trees in the foreground, centered behind the chapter title.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I can tell Claire is nervous as we head down to Portland to meet Harvey that weekend. I understand why, and I wish that she'd have let me drive down by myself...but she was probably right to come with. If I went by myself, I don't think I would be able to control myself in terms of not kicking the guy's ass.

I still might. With her permission, of course.

"Don't stress about it," I tell her as we pull into the parking lot of the storage unit. "Plan's simple—like a heist. We get in, I load up the truck, we get out. And you get to show Harvey what he's missing out on."

Claire shakes her head. "This was a mistake. He never cared about me before, I don't know why he would care now. Things are just...things."

I stop at a stop sign and put my hand on her knee. "Claire, look at me."

She does.

“This ain’t about your ex,” I say. “This is about you. What you need to make *you* happy. If you don’t want to talk to him, you’re welcome to stay in the car and I’ll deal with him. You’re also entitled to get back your belongings, especially if they matter to you. You’re doing the right thing.”

She nods. “I’ll see how we feel when we’re face to face.”

We keep driving until we come to the right unit, where a white BMW is parked outside. A skinny, clean-cut guy with blond hair leans against the car, his eyes narrowing as he takes in the truck.

I park and leave the car running as I get out. “You Harvey?”

“Yeah,” he says. His eyes dart toward Claire, who’s looking anywhere but at him. “Who the hell are you?”

“Claire sent me to pick up her shit,” I say. “You wanna let me into the unit so we can get this over with?”

Harvey jerks his head. “She’s not going to get out and say hi?”

I scowl. “Open the damn unit, and don’t even try talking to her.”

Harvey grumbles as he leads the way to the unit, fumbling for the key. I give Claire a reassuring nod before following him inside.

The unit smells musty and unused, and I have to push aside a few cobwebs to get to the boxes labeled with Claire’s name. Harvey hovers behind me, his eyes fixed on my back.

“You know, I always liked her,” he says. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

I grunt. “This isn’t about whether you liked her. This is about you being man enough to keep up with someone like her. You couldn’t, and now she’s moved on.”

Harvey glares at me. “Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

I hoist up one of the boxes, not even looking at him. “The guy who’s taking care of Claire now.”

I start loading the boxes onto the truck, relishing in the sound of them hitting the bed. Harvey tries to make small talk, but I ignore him. Soon, he leaves me alone—and I realize with a jolt that he’s talking to Claire.

She’s still in the car, the window rolled down. “I don’t really want to talk,” she’s saying. “I’m just here to get my stuff, then you’ll never see me again.”

“You show up with some meathead and don’t expect me to try and talk to you?” Harvey says. “What? Did you bring this guy here to make me jealous? Well, I’ll have you know I’ve moved on to, and I’m doing so much better than I ever was with you —”

He lets out an *oof* as I grab him by the scruff of the neck and turn him around, slamming him against the truck with my arm on his throat. Harvey’s eyes are wide, his mouth gaping.

“What did I say about talking to Claire?” I growl.

“Holy shit, dude, calm down,” Harvey stammers. “I didn’t do anything to her.”

“You almost destroyed her, you useless piece of shit,” I say.
“But I’m here to tell you that you lost out on a hell of a woman, and I’m gonna give her everything you couldn’t.”

I don’t even hear Claire get out of the car, or feel her hand on my shoulder. I don’t notice her at all until Harvey’s eyes glance over my shoulder, then down at Claire’s belly.

“You’re pregnant?” he gasps. “Fuck, Claire, you…how long has it been, four months?”

“Gray, let go of him,” Claire says behind me. “We’re leaving.”

I release my grip and Harvey falls to his knees, coughing and rubbing his throat. He gets to his feet as I open the door for Claire to let her back in, but she hesitates at the door when he calls her name.

“Claire, you have to tell me if you’re pregnant with my baby,” he says. “I’ll take you to court.”

“The baby is Gray’s,” Claire shoots back. “He fucked me better than you ever could.”

“It’s *his*?” Harvey says, getting to his feet. “Claire, you were living in my apartment only a few months ago. You were sleeping in my bed, you fucking slut—”

I see red, and before I know it, my fist collides with Harvey’s face. I hear the crunch of bone and know I’ve broken his nose—and I shake my hand as I pull back, ready for another fucking round.

But Claire grabs my wrist.

I turn around to look at her.

She's crying.

My temper settles and I realize what I've done. "Shit, I'm so sorry Claire," I say. "I...we should go..."

"Yeah, we really should," she says, her face stony. She gets in the car and slams the door, and I join her a second later. I'm still in shock as we pull away, Harvey shouting through Claire's open window.

We ride in complete silence for half the trip, Claire's stuff rattling in the bed of the truck. I don't know what to say to fix this, to set her at ease. I'm so scared I just fucked things up with her, my temper getting the better of me and ruining my life like it always has before.

Not to say the guy didn't have it coming.

I'm glad I broke his nose.

"Claire," I say quietly, "I don't know what to say but that I'm sorry."

"He was being a dick," she replies just as softly. "He's always been a dick."

"But I didn't need to do that," I say. "I just...he called you that and I couldn't stop myself—"

Her hand finds my knee. "I know you're not violent," she says.

Fuck, if she knew about my past...

“I’m just worried that he might press charges,” she continues. “It should be fine, he doesn’t know your name and I could get you off easy, but—”

I take a harsh breath, unable to stop myself.

“What?” she says.

I have to come clean. If it’s going to come out anyway—if the cops come looking for me—it isn’t like I’ll be able to stop her from finding out.

“I have a criminal record, Claire,” I say, trying desperately to keep my voice steady.

Her face falls. “For...for what?”

I swallow hard. “Jesus, I don’t want to tell you. Please let me explain before you freak out.”

“You’re making it worse,” she says.

The trees slide by outside the windows. I focus on them instead of my pounding heart, but it doesn’t help. We’re out in the middle of nowhere and I need to calm down, to talk to her, to hold her hand while I tell her this.

“It was for aggravated assault,” I whisper.

Claire gapes at me.

“Pull over,” she demands.

I do as she says, slowing the car and pulling off on the shoulder. I look over to find her opening the door before we’ve even fully stopped, and I reach for her.

“Claire, please let me explain,” I start.

She slams the door.

I jump out and run after her, where she's stomping up the street. It can't be fun; she's already showing a lot and I know her feet have been swollen. She's slow enough that I catch up easily, reaching for her arm and taking her by the wrist.

"Claire—"

"Don't touch me!" she cries, shaking me off. "Gray...what the hell? You're a felon? How did this stay out of all our conversations, all the times you..." She pauses. "Oh my God, I'm having a baby with a felon, I was such an idiot. Harvey was right, oh my God, I..."

"Claire, please listen," I say. "I wanted to tell you so many times, but every time, it seemed less important than whatever was going on. I thought I'd come clean on our first date...but you told me about Harvey and I didn't want to distract us from that. And then there was the contract, and then I was convinced I was going to tell you one day after work and you told me you were pregnant and I..."

"There have been so many opportunities, Gray! When you were working on my house, when we were out walking Luna, when we were watching TV!" she says. "That isn't an excuse!"

"I know," I say, "and you have no idea how much I regret not telling you. I just got so scared of losing you that I couldn't bear the thought of it, and we were so happy that I just thought..."

“You just thought what?” she says. “Did you ever even plan on telling me?”

I zip my lips shut, ducking my head. I’m watching her slip away, and everything I say makes it worse.

“Claire,” I say quietly. “I promise I’ll tell you everything. No more secrets. No more lies. If you let me drive you back to Fern Hollow, I’ll get it all out on the way, and then you can decide if you want me to stay or not.”

She stares at me, her arms crossed over her belly. She’s so beautiful in the summer sun, her hair up in a messy, curly ponytail, wearing a loose pink t-shirt dress. I try to commit the sight of her to memory.

I can’t lose her.

I can’t.

“You have an hour,” she says. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN





I try really hard not to panic when we get back in the car, but it doesn't work.

It feels like Gray has completely changed in the blink of an eye—like the gentle, kind man I knew was a lie. The only thing reminding me that it's still him in there is the way his hands shake as he puts them on the steering wheel, pulling back onto the highway toward Fern Hollow.

“Before I start,” he says. “You should know that...that Cooper isn't my real name.”

My eyes widen. It felt like it couldn't get worse—but I don't even know his name. He signed a *contract* under that name. “What is it?” I ask.

“Hart,” he replies. “Grayson Hart. But I haven't gone by that name in a real long time. Grayson Cooper is currently my *legal* name, but it's still not my real name.”

I don't know if that makes anything better. “How long?”

“Fifteen years,” he mutters. “Two in juvie, five in prison, six here in Oregon.”

“Juvie?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I was sixteen when I went in. Sentenced as a minor.”

As strange as it is, that changes things. It means the guy who beat someone up wasn't a grown adult making a conscious decision; he was just a kid. Still, it scares me, especially after I saw his violent streak with Harvey.

“What happened?” I ask.

Gray's jaw tenses. “It's an ugly story.”

“I want to hear it. I *deserve* to hear it.”

He sighs. “I was at some hick party with my kid sister,” he says. “She was fourteen. And she...she was being assaulted. I was inside, getting a drink, and then I went outside to the bonfire and the sheriff's son had my little sister, my kid sister, pinned against a birch tree and...he had his hand over her mouth. I didn't even try to get him off her. I just saw red. I couldn't stop myself. I nearly killed him.”

I gasp, my hand over my mouth. “Gray, I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn't,” Gray murmurs. “I didn't tell you.”

“Was she okay?”

“I don't really know,” Gray says. “I only spoke to her once, at the trial. Like I said, kid was a sheriff's son and they wouldn't let me talk to my family.”

I can't take my eyes off of him. All this hurt, and he didn't feel comfortable telling me.

“It doesn’t sound like it was your fault,” I say softly. “You were defending your sister.”

Gray shrugs roughly. “I could’ve just pulled him off her and called the cops. But I wanted to make him hurt. And I did.”

We pass the Fern Hollow welcome sign, my heart in my throat. We’re ten minutes away from the house. I’m sure Gray is terrified.

“So you went to jail,” I say. “And your family...where are they now?”

“No clue,” he says. “Don’t get me wrong, they cared. They tried to come and visit me, but I was so ashamed.”

“Why would you be ashamed?”

“Because my dad was a violent man, too,” Gray says. “And I didn’t want to be like him.”

I reach over and take his hand, squeezing it gently. “You’re not like him. You were defending your little sister. You were a kid, too, you couldn’t have called the police...not if he was their son,” I say. “You’re your own person.”

He gives me a small, sad smile. “Thanks, but I don’t know if that’s true.”

“It is,” I insist. “I know you, Gray. I know the man you are now. You’ve changed.”

He takes a deep breath, his eyes still locked on the road. “I hope so,” he murmurs. “I really do.”

We pull up to the house, and I can see the fear in Gray's eyes. He's afraid I'll force him to go.

But I don't plan on doing that.

Quite the opposite, actually.

"Gray," I say, "I want you to come inside."

He meets my eyes, hope sparking. "I don't deserve you, Claire."

"You do," I say. "And I'm going to show you I mean it."

I get out of the car and he joins me inside, my boxes forgotten in the bed of his truck. Luna greets us at the door, her tail wagging excitedly, and Gray pets her idly as he follows me into the kitchen. I open my laptop right away and open up a blank document, Gray looking over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm drafting a new contract," I say. "A co-parenting contract—because this baby is as much yours as it is mine. You're a good man and I want you in my life, and I won't lose you because—"

He cuts me off by wrapping his arms around me and kissing me hard, his lips urgent against mine. I respond eagerly, my body melting into his as his tongue delves into my mouth. I feel his hands slide down my back, his touch igniting a fire in my belly.

We break apart, breathless, and I can see the passion burning in his eyes. "Claire," he says huskily. "I want you. I need you."

“But the contract—”

“The contract can wait,” he says. “I need my girl riding me right fucking now.”

I don't hesitate. I kiss him again and we melt to the kitchen floor in a frenzy of kisses, shedding clothes along the way. He's rough with me, his hands and mouth exploring every inch of my body, leaving no part untouched. I return his fervor, my fingers tangling in his hair as I push him onto the wood planks.

“I fucking love you, Claire,” he says. “I'm so lucky I found you.”

“I love you too, Grayson Hart,” I say, using his real name. “So, so much.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN





I feel like a man reborn as my cock sinks into Claire's tight, wet pussy. It feels like I've been given a second chance, like I have the life I was supposed to have. The sex is incredible—deeper than I've ever felt with a woman, better than any other time I've been with Claire.

Maybe because she knows my real name now.

She knows the real me.

But even as I fuck her on the kitchen floor, I can't believe how lucky I am. I mean, look at her. She's so damn perfect, her skin as flawless and as soft as silk. Her body is made for sin and I bury my face in it as I grip her hips and fuck her harder. Her tits are perfect—big, gorgeous tits that I can't get enough of.

I can't believe how lucky I am.

“Right there,” she begs as I pound into her. “That's the...ah!”

She cries out and clenches around my cock, so wet that I slide in and out effortlessly. I come with her, filling her up, a reminder that I have so much more to give her. She lies across

my chest and we breathe heavily on the kitchen floor, her belly between us.

I don't expect what I say next, but it comes slipping out despite myself.

"I want you to marry me."

Claire picks her head up and stares at me, her eyes on mine.

"Gray..."

"I know I don't have a ring or nothin'," I say. "I didn't plan ahead...fuck, I didn't plan for any of this. But I want you to be my wife, Claire Sawyer. I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

She laughs and smiles.

"I don't need a ring," she says. "My answer is yes. I would love it if you'd make me Mrs. Hart."



I spend the evening telling Claire everything.

I describe my family, my life back in Texas, my hometown. I tell her about my mother and my dad and my oldest brother, the one I was always closest to. I tell her everything I can think of, hundreds of details about everything from my childhood dog to where I hung out with my friends during high school.

I lay it all out for her, laying it at her feet like the most valuable gift I've ever given anyone. I tell her everything, and she listens.

It's the first time in my life that anyone has really heard me—that they know me. I didn't ever share this much with Dave, and he was my closest friend.

I've always kept my shit close to the vest, but I can't hold back with her.

“Did you ever tell Grandpa this?” she asks like she's reading my mind. “He never mentioned you.”

I wince. “I always kept Dave at a distance,” I say. “With my history, I was scared someone would find out I was a felon and run me out of town. My crew doesn't know, nobody knows... well, except you.”

She squeezes my hand. “That's going to be a problem when we take your name,” she says with a smile.

I laugh. “You sure we shouldn't take yours? You're the big corporate lawyer. I'm just some guy from Texas.”

“Call me old-fashioned, but if I'm gonna be your wife, I want to take your name. Your real name. I understand you changed your name to protect yourself but you shouldn't have had to do that. I'll look into changing your name back, it should be a pretty simple process,” she says. “And when our baby is born, I want him or her to have your name too.”

My heart is so full it could burst. “I've gotta get you a ring,” I say. “I've got some money stashed away, you can pick out whatever your heart desires—”

“I think you're forgetting something,” she says meaningfully.

I watch her as she walks over to a file cabinet in the corner, then pulls out a manila folder. I know what's inside—the contract we signed months ago when we started trying, before I realized she was the love of my life. It details how the baby is hers, not mine.

She puts it on the counter and opens it up.

“If all parties are amenable, I would like to declare this contract null and void,” she says.

I stare at her. “No...Claire, you don't have to do this. I want you to feel safe.”

“I've never felt safer than I do with you,” she says. “I know you're a good man. And don't worry...I'll draw up more contracts to keep us all safe. It's kind of what I do.”

She opens up her laptop and again starts to type a termination letter, including all the details of our contract. “All we have to do is write this up and sign on the dotted line,” she says. “Just like before.”

“What if you change your mind?” I ask.

She smiles. “I won't.”



CHAPTER TWENTY



I know Gray said he couldn't find his family, but I am *very* good at research...and I know how to find someone.

As soon as I heard Gray's heartbreaking story, I knew I had to do something to help him. He's been searching for his family for years, but to no avail. Even if he had found them, I don't know that he would've reached out.

But he kept hitting dead end after dead end, and I can't help but think that he think that as a sign. However, I'm not one to give up easily, and I'm determined to put my research skills to good use.

I start by going through all the information Gray has on his family. He gives me their last known address, the names of his parents and siblings, and even a few old family photos he had from his prison days. I spend hours pouring over public records, searching social media, and even calling the city council in his hometown in Texas.

I keep searching as we plan our wedding—and as my belly gets bigger. Days turn into weeks, and just when I'm about to give up, I stumble upon a lead.

I find a phone number for a woman who lived in the same city as Gray's family, and her last name matches his mother's maiden name—*Cooper*.

My heart races as I dial the number, hoping beyond hope that this is it.

To my surprise, a woman answers the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi," I say, suddenly nervous. "I'm looking for Teresa Cooper?"

She clears her throat, and I can hear the southern twang of her accent with just one word. "You've got her."

How do you tell a stranger that you're about to marry the son she hasn't seen in a decade? That you're having her grandchild? I hold my breath for so long that she speaks again.

"You still there?"

"Yeah," I say. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm calling on behalf of someone who's been searching for his family for a long time. His name is Grayson Hart, and he's been trying to find his mother and siblings."

There's a long pause on the other end of the line before she speaks again. "Gray? That's my boy's name."

I can't believe it. "Yes, that's him. He's been looking for you."

Teresa's voice cracks as she speaks. "Oh, my Lord. I can't believe it. Is he okay? Is he safe?"

"He's safe," I reassure her, "and he's doing well. He's...he's actually about to become a father."

There's a silence again.

Then I hear a sniffle, and I realize she's crying.

"I'd love to see him," she finally says. "I've been praying for him every day since...since he left."

I can hear the emotion in her voice, and my heart aches for her. "Well, that's actually what I'm calling about," I say. "We're, um...we're getting married, and I think he would love for you all to come."

I hear a young woman's voice calling out and then a shuffle, Teresa's voice muffled on the other end.

"I'm on the phone!"

A silence

"You'll never believe it, Sadie—it's about Gray! He's gettin' married to this lovely young woman on the phone!"

I laugh softly to myself, in disbelief that I managed to find them in time. The wedding is in two weeks, and we were starting to lose hope that we would track them down.

I can't wait to tell him.

"What's your name, darlin'?" Teresa says, coming back to the phone.

"Claire," I say. "Claire Sawyer. I'm so excited to meet you all."

The phone goes muffled again. *"Her name is Claire!"*

I cover my mouth and laugh as Teresa gets back on the phone.

"Sorry, sweetheart, we're a little excited. Where are y'all at?"

I've gotta let the kids know when and where and...is Gray there right now?"

"He's at work right now," I say. I find myself a little frustrated that he just happens to be downtown today, working on a new project. "But I've got your number and I promise I'll have him call you as soon as he gets home. The wedding is up here in Oregon, I can absolutely fly you up—"

"Not to worry, I'm already booking tickets for me and Gray's sister," she says. My heart twists—this must be Sadie, the girl Gray went to jail trying to help. She would be...what, twenty-eight now? "And...booked. Now onto the car..."

I listen as she organizes their whole trip, chatting with her for upwards of an hour. Sadie even hops on the phone for a long-distance meeting, sounding happy and bright.

As I hang up the phone, I can hardly believe what just happened. I found Gray's family. After all this time, he'll finally be able to see his mother and sister again, and maybe his brothers too. And the fact that they're coming to our wedding—it's just too perfect.

I can't wait to tell Gray the good news.

When he gets home later that evening, I greet him with a kiss and a smile. "I have some amazing news," I say, taking his hand and leading him to the couch.

"What is it?" he asks, looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and excitement.

"I found your family," I say, grinning from ear to ear.

Gray's eyes widen in shock. "What? How? Are they okay?"

"They're great," I say. "I called your mom earlier today, and she's over the moon. She and your sister are coming to our wedding."

Gray looks like he's about to cry, and I get up to wrap my arms around him. Just like that, my big, strong fiancé, the father of my child, actually opens up and cries...and I cry with him.

I can't help but feel grateful for the power of the internet and my own determination to find them. It might have taken years, but we're finally going to reunite a family.

Just in time to start our own.

A faint, light-colored illustration of a mountain range with several peaks and a line of evergreen trees in the foreground, centered behind the chapter title.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I can't keep my feet still as I sit on the porch swing with Claire, waiting for my mom and sister to drive up. They're coming early for the wedding, a few days prior so we can catch up...and my nerves are going haywire.

We're just having a tiny little ceremony with my crew and a few friends from town, along with some of Claire's friends from Portland. The wedding isn't what's making me nervous.

No...that would be our other guests.

My family.

I was so ashamed that I never tried to reach them after I got out of prison, and it makes me even more ashamed that they've been looking for me this whole time.

As I fidget on the porch swing, Claire places a comforting hand on my arm, knowing exactly what's running through my mind. "It's going to be okay," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the sound of crickets chirping in the distance.

I nod, but my eyes are glued to the horizon, waiting for the first sign of my family's arrival. It's been years since I've seen

them, and I'm not sure what to expect. Will they be angry with me? Disappointed? Or worse, will they have given up on me altogether?

The sound of an approaching car breaks through my thoughts, wheels crunching on gravel, and I stand up, heart racing. Claire stands up with me, a reassuring smile on her face. "Whatever happens, we'll face it together," she says.

I nod, but my attention is on the rental car pulling up the drive. I can just barely make out the features of the two women in the front seat, two shadows behind them. Holy shit—they're not alone. I see my sister's features in stark clarity, and I don't know if I can hold it together.

"You've got this, Gray," Claire whispers, squeezing my hand.

Luna is at my other side, being a very good girl and sitting as her tail thumps against the porch. I don't let her go and investigate until the car comes to a stop, and my mom and sister step out.

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as they make their way up to the porch, uncertainty and fear washing over me in waves. But before I can even think about what to say, my sister is in my arms, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh my god, Gray," she sobs, clinging to me. "We've been looking for you for so long."

I wrap my arms around her, feeling a lump form in my throat as I see my mom standing a few feet away, tears in her eyes as

well. In that moment, all my fears and doubts fade away, replaced by the love and acceptance of my family.

“I’m sorry, Sadie” I say, my voice breaking. “I’m so sorry for everything.”

But my sister just shakes her head, smiling through her tears. “It doesn’t matter,” she says. “You’re here now, that’s all that matters.”

I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders as I move to embrace my mom while Sadie practically tackles Claire. Luna is prancing around our ankles, and Sadie even starts to scratch Luna behind the ears as well. Then I look past my mom’s shoulder and see two more familiar faces.

Two of my four brothers—the oldest, Caleb, and Sadie’s twin, Jesse, are getting out of the car. They’ve got big smiles on their faces, and I find that those smiles are contagious as I go to hug them too. Luna dances around our ankles while Claire follows me to hug everyone, my mom holding Claire’s arms as she looks down at Claire’s swollen belly.

“My goodness!” my mom says. “I thought I was excited to meet my grandbaby, but seeing you in person...I can hardly contain myself!”

Claire blushes, her hand protectively resting on her belly. “We can’t wait either.”

The rest of the afternoon goes by in a blur of laughter and catching up, as my family fills me in on everything that’s happened since we last saw each other. They don’t pry into my

time in prison, and I'm grateful for that. Instead, we focus on the future—my future with Claire, our plans to start a life together, and the baby who will soon be joining us.

As the sun sets and the crickets begin to chirp, we all gather around the fire pit, roasting marshmallows and sharing stories. I feel contentment settle deep in my bones, a sense of belonging that I haven't felt in years.

And as I watch my family laughing and joking around, I know that no matter what happens in the future, I'll always have them by my side.

A faint, light-colored illustration of a mountain range with several peaks and a line of evergreen trees in the foreground, centered behind the chapter title.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Gray's family is just as wonderful as I'd hoped they'd be. He's slow to open up, but he does eventually, chatting animatedly with his brothers, Caleb and Jesse. They've been traveling around the country doing work on various construction sites, and they even talk about settling in Fern Hollow for a little while. It's nice to think about having family around once the baby is born.

As the night wears on, Gray's family begins to reveal more about themselves. His sister, Sadie, talks about her job in a bakery, and the crazy cakes she's made for people down in Roswell, where she and Teresa live. Sadie's twin, Jesse, shares stories of their childhood together and the mischief they used to get into. And Caleb, Gray's oldest brother, talks about his recent breakup and how he's ready to start fresh.

As for Gray, he opens up about his fears of becoming a father. He worries he won't be a good enough role model for his child, that he'll make mistakes, and that they'll never forgive him for it. I squeeze his hands as he talks about their dad, as they all commiserate over how rough it was sometimes

growing up. But his family reassures him that he'll be a great dad and that they'll all be there to support him.

As the night draws to a close, Teresa pulls me aside in the kitchen, watching her kids talk with a smile. I stand at the kitchen counter with her, my hand resting on my belly as I feel the baby kick.

“You really love him, huh?” she asks.

I nod. “Gray is the best man I’ve ever met. I can’t imagine my life without him.”

Teresa nods, a small smile on her lips. “He’s a good man, but he’s had a tough past. You need to be patient with him.”

I guess I should have expected some pushback; things have almost been too ideal with Gray’s family. I peer at Teresa, searching her features for a sign that she’s not being sincere.

She laughs softly. “You want to ask me something,” she says. “I can tell. So what is it?”

I laugh with her. “I guess Gray got his aptitude for reading people from you. But what I’m wondering is...why didn’t you ever look for him? Gray has been up here by himself for years, just him and Luna, and I...it’s my job to make sure he’s safe. So I have to check with you—do you mean the best for him?”

Teresa gives me a sad smile. “Protective,” she says. “I should have done more to protect him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how much he’s told you, but his daddy...”
Teresa pauses. “He was a cruel man. I tried to run away, and I left the kids...”

She rubs her eyes.

“I know it’s not your fault,” I say.

“But that doesn’t stop me from blaming myself,” she says.
“For years, I thought Gray had chosen not to find us. That he was better off without us. And maybe he is...but his sister missed him. His brothers. And I would love to be in his life, if you’ll have me.”

I feel a lump form in my throat as Teresa speaks, her words heavy with emotions. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for her, leaving her children behind to escape an abusive partner. But as I look at Gray, laughing with his siblings, it’s clear that he’s found his own family again.

They’re not going anywhere. Neither are we.

“I would love for you to be in his life,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “And mine. I don’t have any family and... and I’m so grateful for you all.”

Teresa’s face softens, and she pulls me into a hug. “Thank you,” she says. “I know I can’t make up for lost time, but I’m here now. And I promise to always be here for him *and* for you.”

As we separate, I feel a sense of relief wash over me. Gray’s family is just as wonderful as I’d hoped they’d be, and it’s

clear that they all love him deeply. With them around, I don't have to worry about Gray facing fatherhood alone.

I walk over to Gray, who's strolled out to look at the stars with Caleb and Jesse. They're having a conversation about setting up shop somewhere in town. Caleb is apparently a skilled woodworker, and he's been looking for a change of scenery since his breakup. He smiles over at me when I join him, looping my arm around his waist.

"We were just talking about setting up shop in town," Caleb says, gesturing to Jesse and himself. "I think we could make a go of it."

"That sounds great," I say, glancing up at Gray. "What do you think, babe?"

Gray looks thoughtful for a moment before returning his attention to the stars. "I think it's worth considering," he says. "But we'll need to think about it more once the baby is born."

I nod, understanding that there are a lot of variables to consider. But I'm excited about the prospect of having Gray's family around more often...and getting more entrenched in Fern Hollow, helping my beloved hometown grow.

As we head back inside, I catch Sadie's eye. She gives me a wink and a grin, and I know that we're going to get along just fine.

Maybe she'll stay too. Open her own little bakery...fall in love.

Fern Hollow is a great place to fall in love.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Gray's family leaves late at night to go stay at his house, and we climb the stairs up to the master bedroom after midnight. I'm exhausted—and eight months pregnant—but Gray's just as attracted to me as he was when we met.

As we enter the dimly lit bedroom, Gray's strong arms wrap around me from behind, holding me close. His warm breath sends shivers down my spine as he whispers in my ear, "I can't resist you. I love the way your body's changed and I love watching you walk around with that baby bump. You're so incredibly sexy."

I turn around to face him, my hands resting on his chest. "I'm tired, Gray," I say with a yawn.

"I know, darlin'," he responds, his hands moving to my swollen belly. "Let me take care of you."

He guides me towards the king-sized bed, helping me lay down and tucking me in under the covers. He then strips down to his boxers and climbs in beside me, his body pressing against mine.

I can feel his arousal growing where he's nestled between my legs, spooning me, and I know what he wants. His hands roam over my stomach and he laughs under his breath.

"I can feel Little Bit wigglin' around in there," he murmurs in my ear. "She's ready to meet the family."

We don't know it's a girl—we want to be surprised—but we're both convinced.

"You know, I get that we both want a girl...but I really wanted to name the baby David after my grandpa," I say quietly. "I'm so glad we have your family; I just wish grandpa was here."

"Me too," Gray says, "but I know Dave would be happy we're together. We're gonna fill our house with family, with babies, with life...and we're gonna have the life he always wanted for you. I'm certain of that."

I smile, feeling tears in my eyes as Gray's words fill me with warmth and comfort. He leans in, kissing me gently at first before deepening the kiss, his hands roaming over my body. I feel his hardness pressing against me, and my body responds, my own desire growing.

He breaks the kiss, looking deep into my eyes. "I love you," he says softly.

"I love you too," I reply, feeling my heart race.

He runs his hand down my hip, then pulls my nightgown up to bare me to him. I press my ass against his hardness, feeling him pull his boxers down. He enters me in one smooth

movement, reaching up to grasp my breast as he breathes into my ear.

“I’m so glad we’re together, darlin’,” he gasps. “I’m gonna give you the world.”

He keeps one hand on my breast as the other moves lower, pulling my hand from over my stomach. He presses it against my sex, penetrating me with his finger.

“Baby, please...I need...I need to come...” I beg.

He moves against me, stroking his finger over my clit in time with his thrusts. My breathing quickens, and I feel the familiar warmth spread throughout my body as I approach my orgasm.

“I love you,” I whimper. “I love you, Gray.”

He pushes harder against me, and I cry out his name as the orgasm washes over me.

“Darlin’, I’m gonna...” he groans as he thrusts a few more times. A few seconds later, he erupts inside of me, holding me as close as he ever has. We move together, our breath in time, our heartbeats pounding out a steady rhythm.

Then I feel the strangest sensation.

A little pop...then I’m so wet I can’t believe it. I shift uncomfortably against Gray, self-conscious. He figures out something is wrong right away, sitting straight up.

“Uh, Gray?” I ask, my eyes wide. “Did I just um...did I just have an accident, or did my water break?”

Gray is up and out of the bed in an instant, his eyes wide.

“What?” he asks, his voice panicked. “Are you sure? Are you sure it wasn’t...I mean, are you sure it wasn’t from the sex?”

I laugh, heaving myself up from the bed with a grimace. “The doctor said that orgasms might initiate contractions.”

He blushes, and it’s so fucking adorable. My big, strong man.

“I should’ve remembered what she said,” he replies softly.

“About, uh, where to finish.”

I wave him off. “I’m sure it wasn’t from the sex, Gray. We were cutting it close with the wedding and I think I’m in labor. I mean, I’m not a doctor or anything, but it felt like my water breaking.”

And...it becomes very clear that’s what’s happening when I have a contraction. I gasp and hold my stomach.

“Yeah, that’s a contraction!” I say.

“Okay. How often are they happened?”

“Well, I...fuck...I don’t know. But they seem to be happening quick.”

“Okay. Stay calm,” he says, and it’s hilarious because it sounds like he’s right on the brink of panic. “You’re going to count while I go get you your hospital bag, okay? And I’m right here. If you need anything, shout.”

“Don’t leave me...”

Gray reaches down and picks up my nightgown, handing it to me. “Okay, okay. I’m just going to the closet, baby,” he says in

a rush. “I can’t believe...I mean, it’s happening, darlin’! It’s happening right now!”

I laugh—a little hysterically, given how freaked out I am. “Gray, will you please call Reagan?”

“Shit—yes, let me...let me get my phone,” he says.

He disappears into the bathroom and I hear him dial Reagan’s number, then return to the bedroom where I’m sprawled on the bed, wearing nothing but a flimsy nightgown.

“Reagan?” I hear Gray say. “Reagan—yeah, I think we’re in labor. I’m gonna drive Claire down to the clinic right now.”

He puts the speaker phone on and comes back into the room, and I hear Reagan’s voice over the line.

“Claire?” Reagan asks. “What do you mean, you’re in labor?”

“Um, my water broke,” I say, trying to sound calm. “I just had a contraction. I think it’s happening.”

“Okay,” Reagan replies. “So soon? You’re not due for another month. Can you breathe through a contraction? Is there any blood in the fluid?” “

“No. No blood, everything seems ordinary, just *sudden*,” I say.

“And yeah, but it’s, oh *fuck*.”

“Alright, okay. I’ll meet you at the clinic. Take a couple of Tylenol before you go for me, okay? What were you doing? Were you exercising, or anything like that?”

That doesn’t do much to calm me down. She’s not being particularly reassuring.

“We were having sex,” I say, trying to make my voice sound as normal as possible. “So I’m about as sure as I can be.”

“Okay, Gray,” Reagan says. “Okay...you need to take her down to the clinic. I’ll meet you there as soon as I can.”

Gray hangs up and looks at me.

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s go have a baby.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I 'm gonna be a dad.
I'm gonna be a dad.

I stand outside the delivery room shift back and forth, trying to force myself to breathe. I can hear Claire in labor, the occasional grunt or groan of pain. Reagan is in there with her, a nurse having joined us a couple minutes ago.

It's going to be fine...she's going to be okay.

I hear the door to the clinic open and my eyes shoot over to find my whole family headed toward me, my mom's eyes wide.

"She's in labor?" she asks. "Isn't it early?"

I shake my head. "Not enough to be dangerous," I say. "Reagan said she's gonna be fine...I'm just scared as shit anyway."

"It's gonna be just fine, darlin'," she says. "Claire's strong. You're gonna have a beautiful baby by the time you leave here, and we're all gonna welcome them with open arms."

Caleb slaps me on the shoulder. “You’ll be a great father, Gray. I know we just reunited, but...I’m certain of it.”

“You always protected me,” Sadie smiles. “You’ll protect her too.”

As the minutes tick by, the anxiety in my stomach grows. Thoughts of every possible complication run through my mind. What if something goes wrong? What if I lose her or the baby?

The clock ticks.

We pace around.

I listen to Claire in labor.

Reagan tells me that there will be many hours to go. That I could probably go home and get some rest.

I don’t want to go home and get some rest. I want to be by my wife’s side while she delivers my child.

I go back into the room to sit beside her, taking her hand. She breathes in and out, using all the best practices we read in our books...and I can’t help but look at her with awe.

As I sit beside Claire, holding her hand and watching her breathe, a wave of emotion washes over me. This woman, the mother of my child, is the strongest person I know. She’s been through so much to get here, and she’s still fighting.

And I get to spend the rest of my life with her.

I lean in and kiss her forehead, whispering words of encouragement. “You’re doing great, babe. Just a little longer

now. I'm so proud of you."

She smiles weakly and squeezes my hand as another wave of pain hits her. I can see the sweat on her brow, the strain on her face, but she never gives up.

Reagan, down at the foot of the bed, looks at us both.

"I think it's time to push!" she says.

Claire looks up at me, her blue eyes bright and watery. "Keep holding my hand," she says. "Don't leave."

"I'll never leave you, darlin'," I tell her. "Just stay right there. The whole family's here to support you."

Claire takes a deep breath and with a fierce determination, she pushes with all her might. I can feel the pressure in her hand increase as she grunts and groans through the pain. I know she can do this. She's amazing.

"Just a little bit more," I encourage her. "Our little girl is almost here."

I don't know how I know...but I do.

Our little girl is ready to meet the world.

Claire nods, sweat dripping from her forehead as she pushes once more.

"Come on, Little Bit," she breathes. "Just one...just one last..."

Reagan and the nurse stand at the foot of Claire's bed, dressed in their scrubs. I hold her hand, letting her squeeze so hard I'm afraid she might break it...

And then, just like that, I hear the cry of a baby.

I lean down and press my forehead against Claire's as she breathes in and out, her hand relaxing. Reagan is smiling, taking the baby, cutting the umbilical cord. I stay with Claire, looking into her eyes.

"You were amazing, darlin'," I say. "You did so good."

Reagan comes over to us, the baby swaddled in her arms. Our child is still crying, but we're all smiles—and I even see Sadie peeking through the door, her eyes sparkling with tears.

"It's a girl," Reagan says, handing her over to us.

Claire takes her, tears streaming down her face as she holds our daughter to her chest. I feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes as I look at our daughter for the first time. She's small and fragile, but she's perfect.

Claire collapses back onto the bed, looking up at me with a tired smile.

"We did it," she says, her voice laced with exhaustion.

"We did," I say, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "You were incredible."

I take a moment to look at our daughter, her tiny fingers curled up against her chest as she finally stops crying. The world around us fades away as I watch her, my heart swelling with love for this little life we've created.

"She's beautiful," I whisper to Claire.

"She is," she says, her eyes shining with tears.

We stay like that for a while, just the three of us, basking in the glow of our newfound parenthood. The rest of the family comes in eventually, oohing and aahing over the baby. My mom starts crying, and Caleb is grinning from ear to ear.

“She looks just like you, Gray,” Sadie says, smiling.

I can’t help but laugh. “Well, let’s hope she gets her mother’s brains,” I say, looking at Claire.

Claire rolls her eyes, but she’s still smiling. “We can only hope,” she says, holding our daughter close.

As the family takes turns holding the baby, I can’t help but feel grateful for this moment. Everything that led us here, all the struggles and challenges, was worth it. We have a beautiful daughter, and I have an amazing partner by my side.

I’m gonna be a dad.

And I made Claire a mom.

A year ago, I was all alone. It was just me and my dog out in the Oregon wilderness, my family lost, love not even on the radar. Then I met this amazing woman...and she changed everything for me. Claire has brought so much love to my life, a daughter, she’s reunited with my family.

But she’s the thing I cherish most.

The girl who changed everything.

The love of my life.

And it all started with a contract.



The ceremony was beautiful.

We had to reschedule the wedding after our daughter was born, and we spent the next few months waking up every couple hours to take care of her. My family decided to stick around, taking turns watching the baby, helping us set up the nursery. We hadn't quite finished decorating, since she came just a little early.

I get it.

Little Blythe couldn't wait to meet the world.

We named her Blythe because it means joy—and that's what she brought to our lives.

As we stood there under the arch, exchanging our vows, Blythe cooed in her grandmother's arms. It was a beautiful sound, and it felt like a blessing over our union.

After the ceremony, we took photos in the garden. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over everything. I felt like I was in a dream. My new wife, the baby, our family and friends...everyone was here to celebrate with us.

And like I said, the ceremony was beautiful. The reception was fun. It looked like a few people even hit it off, my brother and our doctor included.

But that isn't what I was interested in.

I can't take my eyes off Claire all night, glowing in her white V-neck dress with draped sleeves. She looks like a queen all night, her cheeks flushed, her hair in chestnut ringlets down her back. It's been a few months since Blythe was born, and I'm already getting the itch again.

I think she is too.

And I'm going to take advantage of this single night, when Blythe is at her grandma's place.

It's winter in the mountains, a light snow falling as we pull up to our house. I come around to the passenger side to open the door for her, then I take her hand to help her out. Before she can even put her feet down on the ground, I scoop her into my arms, curling her to my chest just like I did the first night we had sex. She kisses me as we laugh and walk toward the door, my wife in my arms.

"Just gotta put you down for a second, then I'm picking you right back up again and carrying you across the threshold," I say, putting her down. "So you stay put..."

She blushes as I fiddle with my keys. "Gray, you don't have to do this," she says. "We already have a baby, we've been living together for almost a year..."

“Oh no, Claire,” I say. “You deserve the whole production. Now don’t you dare look.”

I scoop her up again before she can look inside the door, and she laughs against my chest. “Welcome home, Mrs. Hart,” I say. “Now...*now* you can look.”

I set her down on her dainty heels, steadying her as she opens her eyes.

And her jaw drops.

Candles flicker all over the house, rose petals covering every floor, every surface. It smells like flowers inside, and the snow beginning to collect in the window frames makes it all that much more perfect. I wrap my arms around her waist as she takes it all in, her blue eyes sweeping over our home.

“Gray...” she whispers. “It’s beautiful.”

I smile at her, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. “I’m glad you like it,” I say, leaning down to kiss her neck. “But there’s more. Follow me.”

I lead her through the house, past the living room and down the hallway. At the end of the hall, I stop at the door to our bedroom.

“Close your eyes,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple.

She does as she’s told, and I push the door open. The room is aglow with candlelight, casting a soft orange light over everything. I guide her to the bed and sit her down on the edge.

“Now, open your eyes,” I say.

She does, and gasps. The bed is covered in rose petals, just like the rest of the house. There are silk sheets on the bed, and a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket on the nightstand.

I pull her into the bedroom, then sit her down on the end of the bed. Claire gazes into my eyes, her hands framing my face as I kneel in front of her.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she says. “I guess I covered it all in my vows, but Gray...I’m so happy you found me. I’m so happy you made that insane proposition. I can’t believe this all happened because of that contract.”

“Me too, darlin’,” I say. “Now...let me show you how I feel.”

I unbuckle her right shoe, white lace under my fingertips. Claire gasps at the slight motion, and I can sense her getting more turned on as I move to the left.

“I’ve been dying to strip this dress off you all night,” I murmur, pulling the hem of her dress over her knees and high up on her thighs. I can see her lacy lingerie, pink below white, and it almost drives me wild. “Lick that pretty pussy until you come. Then again...and again...”

I take her by the ankles and spread her legs wide apart, then I press my face between her thighs and inhale her scent, feeling dizzy. Claire shudders, and I part her thighs even more, craning my neck to look up at her.

“You smell so sweet,” I say, gazing at her as my tongue darts out over her lace-covered clit. “This is all I’ve been able to

think about, all fucking day.”

“I’ve been wanting you too,” she says. “Please, Gray...”

I yank her panties to the side and part her soft folds with my fingers, then I plunge my tongue deep between them. Claire wraps her legs around my shoulders and moans as I thrust my tongue inside her, licking everything I can reach. My eyes are on her pretty face as I worship her pussy with my tongue, her clit rubbing against my lips as I grind against her.

“That’s right,” I growl, holding her thighs. “Come on my tongue, gorgeous. Come for me...”

Her inner walls flutter around my tongue as I fuck her with it, tasting her arousal. She moans again, muffling the sound with her hand.

“I’m gonna play with you all night,” I whisper to her as I lick her pussy. “Make you come over and over again.”

“Gray...” she purrs. “Please...I want...”

“What do you want, Claire?” I ask. “Tell me. Rule number two, you’ve always gotta tell me what you want...”

She reaches out to touch my face, pulling me away from her. I don’t want to stop licking her, to stop making her come—but I follow her lead.

“I want you to get me pregnant,” she breathes.

He cocks an eyebrow.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he growls.

Gray stands up, towering over me as I sit at the foot of the bed. He puts his fingers under my chin to tilt my head up at him, a sly smile on his lips.

“You want me to breed you, Claire?”

I nod. “Yes. Please, Gray.”

“Stand up,” I murmur. “I wanna fuck you in this wedding dress.”

Claire gasps softly, but she stands, staring into my eyes. I kiss her hard, and she kisses me back, pressing her chest against mine as I run my hand over her stomach.

“I wanna see those gorgeous tits hangin’ outta this dress,” I tell her, reaching around to unbutton the dress just enough to reveal her breasts. “I wanna see your nipples hard, just waiting for me to suck them.”

She starts to unbutton my shirt as I talk to her, then she moves to my pants as she leaves my shirt hanging from my shoulders. I yank her tits out of the top of her dress, her nipples hard and begging to be sucked, and I lean down to do just that. Claire gasps.

“My gorgeous wife,” I tell her. “I’m about to get you pregnant again. Keep you in afterglow, ready to be fucked, until we’ve filled this house with our babies.”

I take both of her breasts in my hands and rub her nipples between my thumbs and index fingers. Claire arches into my touch as I pinch harder, then I pull her into me and kiss her

again, moaning in her mouth as my cock rubs against her stomach.

“You like that, Claire?” I ask. I’m so hard I can barely stand to tease her anymore—but fuck, it’s too fun to stop. “I’m gonna fill you with my cum. I’m gonna make you a mama again, and I know you love it.”

“Yes, Gray,” she whispers. “Yes.”

“Bend over, Claire,” I growl in her ear. “I’m gonna breed you.”

She turns in my arms and I push her to the bed, taking her tits into my hands and rolling her nipples. I yank my cock out and rub it against her folds, and I’m going to tease her some more—but she moans and rolls her hips.

“Please, Gray,” she begs. “Give me another baby. *Please.*”

I need no further encouragement.

I grab her hips, lining my cock up with her entrance and thrusting deep inside her. Claire moans, arching her back as I grab her ankles and spread her legs wider, driving my cock in and out of her.

“You love that, don’t you?” I growl. “I can always tell when you love what I’m doing to you. Your face is so fucking beautiful when you’re coming...”

I run my hands up her legs and around her hips, holding her tight as I fuck her harder and harder.

“Fuck, I love it when you’re begging for my cum. So fucking gorgeous...”

I thrust deep inside her, and then I pull back and slap her ass with one hand. She squeaks and grinds against me harder, she loves it when I play dirty like this.

“Come on my cock, darlin’,” I growl. “Come on my cock and make your husband a daddy again.”

That does her in—and I follow her right over the edge, the two of us coming together. I slow my pace as we finish, then I reach out to grab one of the pillows, tucking it under her stomach.

And I stay right there.

Lodged inside her.

Making sure everything stays inside so she’ll get pregnant... because I know how to do my goddamn job.

“I can’t wait to have another baby with you, darlin’,” I tell her, leaning over to kiss the back of her neck. “My gorgeous Claire. I love you so damn much.”

I pull her up to my chest, her breasts still in my hands, her pussy still clenching around my cock. Her white dress spills over her hips, and she looks so angelic that I almost feel wrong doing her like this.

But she looks back at me with a blissful smile...and my pride swells at making her feel that way.

“I’m so glad we found each other,” she whispers. “Now... make sure you don’t pull out until you’re sure I’m pregnant, okay?”

I laugh. “You know I get the job done.”

She laughs with me, but then she sobers, gasping softly as my cock twitches. I think I’m ready for round two—something about this woman being my wife turns me the fuck on.

“You know that’s not the only reason I love you, right?” she says. “It’s *you* I’ve wanted this whole time. Not what you can do for me...it’s all you.”

I look her in the eyes, my hands roaming over her soft curves. “I would do anything for you,” I murmur.

“I know,” she says. “Now let’s have another baby. No contract this time.”

And I make love to her until I’m certain she’s pregnant.

Because she asked me to.

Because she’s mine.

My wife. My family. Now and forever.



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