

Reinventing
Claire

by

Darlan Milk

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Reinventing Claire

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Reinventing Claire

ONE

You would think Charlie would show me a little sympathy and wait for a day or two to tell me he wanted a divorce. But Charlie never was good at waiting.

I should have known in the morning that my continual misfortune was some sort of omen, a warning from some greater-being that today would get even worse. My breaking point hit me when the heel snapped off my favorite pair of shoes during lunch. I hunched under my desk, trying not to cry as I attempted to super glue them together and praying I could just go home to my husband. Lucky me, my boss called me into her office, promptly fired me, and I could go home just like I wanted. Except now I was unemployed, and I had to change a flat tire on the gravel covered shoulder of the freeway first.

I called Charlie on the way home, and he promised to leave work early and take me to dinner. 'To forget the day with a nice night out,' he said. Little did I know he had his own agenda for the evening.

There we finally sat – Charlie and me, at my favorite Italian restaurant, Linguini's. The plan, or so I thought, was to drown my sorrows over a bottle of wine and a plate of the best manicotti in town.

“I can’t believe it. Not living up to my potential! What the hell kind of speech is that to fire someone with? Is it like the ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ excuse for employers?”

“You win some, you lose some I suppose,” Charlie said, filling my wineglass for me.

“Six years there and nothing but glowing reviews, and she says I’m not living up to my full potential. And I said ‘Thank you’. Who the hell says thank you for being fired?”

“You weren’t thinking straight. Go easy on yourself, Claire.”

“Well, I should be positive and look for that silver lining right?” I said, raising my glass in a halfhearted toast. If I had known what Charlie was about to spring on me, I probably wouldn’t have been smiling.

Charlie sat there, slowly spinning his wineglass on the eggplant colored placemat.

“Is your lasagna okay honey? You’ve hardly touched it. Here, have some of mine instead,” I said, already cutting off a portion of my manicotti.

“Claire, I want a divorce.”

I froze, the hunk of manicotti on my fork in mid-air over his plate. “What—what did you say?” I barely managed.

He took the forkful from my hand and set it on his plate. “I said I want a divorce,” he repeated in that dry, lifeless tone he always used when trying to be serious.

“Divorce?” I said, as if repeating it would somehow make it not real. “But you—we’re having dinner and...” I muttered. I tried to fill my glass again, but my shaky hand hit the rim and sloshed wine all over the white tablecloth.

“I met someone else. And she makes me...well, happy. It’s like, like I’m alive again!” He smiled, blotting the wine I spilled with a napkin in his calm, tidy way.

“Someone else? Alive again? What is that even supposed to mean?” *This has to be the worst joke ever. When will he give up on trying to be funny on bad days?* “This isn’t funny, Charlie. I’m not in the mood for bad jokes.”

“I’m not laughing, Claire. I’m trying to come clean—”

“Come clean? I just got fired, Charlie. We’re having dinner. What do you mean someone else?”

“We’ve been together over a year now. I met her at a conference, and we kept running into each other after that. I didn’t

intend to. You would like her though. But, well, we want to get married. So I want a divorce.”

I would like her. Has he gone mad? He can't get married; he's already married. “A divorce...” I whispered to myself, the words dragging across my dry tongue like sandpaper.

“To new beginnings!” He tried to chuckle, but sat staring at me for a moment with an unnerving glean in his gaze. “New beginnings...” He patted my hand as he stood. “Goodbye Claire,” he said, pursing his lips into the worst sympathetic grin I had ever seen. He turned and left me there, alone.

I sat there for, I don't even know how long, repeating the words in my head. I kept thinking he would come back and sit down, that he didn't just tell me he wanted a divorce. We would make fun of my former employer and her pear-shaped bubble butt and finish dinner.

I raised the cold manicotti to my lips, trying so hard to believe it didn't happen, that it was another ordinary evening out. But after a while I realized he wasn't coming back. His plate of half-eaten lasagna across from me reminded me I was alone. The big, wet red stain next to my hand where I spilled the wine after his announcement pounded the moment into severe realization.

“You guys want some boxes?” the waiter asked me, shaking me back into reality.

“He wants a divorce,” I said looking up at him with tears filling my eyes. The poor guy stood there for a moment, his wide eyes staring at the floor, before he seemed to scoot away. *A divorce? Will he be at home waiting for me, or did he...He probably went to her place.*

I started crying. And not the weepy, sniffle kind either, where you delicately blot a hanky to your eye. No, the snorty, heaving sobbing you only want to do locked in your bathroom with the shower running so no one can hear you. He wanted a divorce. He left, and *oh God, I left my wallet in my other purse! How am I going to pay for dinner? Did he take the car? I can't pay for a taxi.* I envisioned myself getting hauled off by the police, failing at an attempted dine-n-dash, crying as I called out for Charlie. I was never very good at rebellion.

A customer handed me her napkin, rubbed my back a little and said, “Are you okay honey?” I think I said something to her, but I don't really know what. Probably something profound like I said to the poor waiter. “I, my husband—and I—” I filled the napkin she

handed me with snot, and then another one. I muttered something else as she excused herself and flagged down a waiter.

After some apologetic mumbling to the waiter about not having my wallet with me, the manager called me a taxi despite my crying that I couldn't pay for it. He slipped the driver a wad of cash. I should have told him I only lived five minutes away and could walk if my feet weren't so sore, but instead I slid into the backseat without so much as a thank you. The driver asked me 'Where to' about three times before I managed to get my brain to cooperate with my mouth. I just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible but couldn't manage 'Just drive.'

"761 West 24th Street, please," I said, clutching the box of leftovers against my chest like a lifejacket.

The taxi stopped in front of my house, a sage-green Victorian with all the gingerbread house trimmings. We spent years working on that house, getting paint colors approved from the historical society, spending Saturdays at English Gardens for peach-colored rose bushes for the side patio. It was our baby. All the lights were off, and his car wasn't in the driveway. The whole house seemed to sag, the color dripping off the wood siding and vanishing into the grass.

"Lady, you gonna get out or what?" the driver said, leaning over the back of the seat.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I said as I scooted across the dirty vinyl and opened the door. He peeled off and left me standing on the curb. I guess tonight was a good night to ditch me. *How can I go in there*, I thought, staring at my suburban beauty.

I trekked around to the backyard, by the Koi pond Charlie built last summer for my birthday, to get the spare key from under the sapphire looking rock. My keys were in my other purse too. I didn't think I needed them with Charlie driving. I walked back to the front door and let myself in.

The foyer felt cold, broken, and lonely. Just like me. It was like standing in a stranger's house. I crept into the living room, half expecting to see Charlie sitting there in his leather recliner, reading Forbes and waiting for me. But the room was vacant, just like my thoughts.

The house never seemed so empty, not even the day we bought it. We had broken open a bottle of champagne in the barren living room to celebrate our new path in life. I wanted to cry. I wanted to

call my sisters. I wanted to go find Charlie. *Maybe if I call him...* I sank into the sofa, still clutching the takeout containers in my arms, and sat in the cold silence of a broken marriage.

The answering machine startled me. *Did the phone even ring?*

“Hi, it’s Claire and Charlie. We’re not home right now...”

I shot up from the sofa and ran to the phone, hoping it was Charlie, crying and begging to come home.

“Hello?”

“Hey Claire Bear, I got your message. I can’t believe that bitch!” my sister said.

“Oh...Sam, I uh—”

“I could storm right down there, poke her in the eye with—”

“Sam, it’s really not a good time,” I said, my lifeless hand barely holding the phone.

“What’s the matter? You sound weird?”

“Nothing I, it’s just been a long day.”

“Well no shit. You got fired.”

“Sam, please,” I said, rolling my eyes. *I should have let the machine get it.*

“I can tell something’s wrong. What is it? Is Charlie giving you shit about it? Look, just tell him—”

“He’s not here Sam.”

“Where the hell is he? I thought you guys were going out to dinner?”

What time is it? It feels late. I glanced at the cable box, only seven o’clock.

“He, um, he had to go into the office.” I couldn’t handle Sam right now. God love her, but she would be like a crazed badger on the rampage if I told her the truth.

“Really?”

She knows me too well. “He forgot some files he needs to go over tonight I guess.” *That sounds believable, right?* “Big meeting coming up—”

“He could at least take you with him. Leaving you alone after the day you had, I tell you—”

“Sam, I’m tired,” I said, rubbing between my eyes. My head hurt like a jackhammer had been pounding on it all day so I dug through my purse for the Tylenol. I struggled with the damn childproof lid as I pressed the phone between my shoulder and ear. “Can we please do this tomorrow?” I said as the bottle broke open,

sending little white pills flying into the air. *Damn it*, I thought as tears filled my eyes again.

“Oh, all right. You sure you’re okay, you don’t sound—”

“I’m fine. I’ll call you tomorrow.” I bent over, picking up two pills off the floor.

“Okay, night, Claire Bear.”

I could tell her tomorrow, when I was done crying and could handle her berating my soon to be ex-husband. Not caring how early it was, I went upstairs to our bedroom. It was beautiful; I loved our bedroom. I decorated it in this sweet, country, shabby-chic motif. A big, puffy white comforter with a pastel flower print was the perfect touch with the gold headboard I bought. I found this gorgeous wrought-iron dress form at an estate sale. I’d never touched a sewing machine in my life, and would probably blow the stupid thing up if I tried, but the dress form looked great tucked in the corner by the window.

I loved coming in here at the end of a long day, curling up beside Charlie and listening to Jazz drizzle into the room from the bar down the street. It didn’t feel right in here, not now. It was one thing to go to bed alone when Charlie was on a business trip or after we had one of our stupid arguments and he slept on the recliner, when I knew it was only a matter of a day or two before he would be back in bed with me.

I couldn’t curl up in *that* bed, knowing he’d never sleep with me in it again. I grabbed a sheet from the hall closet and headed for the futon in the office, the one place neither of us ever slept. Maybe tomorrow this would make sense. Maybe Charlie would realize his mistake and come home with caramel lattes and a bag of apple muffins from Kate’s Kitchen. Some women got flowers when their husband screwed up, I got coffee and muffins. But I would gladly take it, if it meant he was coming home.

I changed into a pair of yoga pants and a blue tank top, pulled the sheet over my head and hoped tomorrow could somehow undo today. My heart jolted when I heard the phone ring, and I tossed the sheet off as I bolted up and fumbled across the desk for the phone. I knew it wasn’t Charlie. Charlie wasn’t coming home again. I curled up, buried my face in the lumpy spare pillow and let the scrunched up cotton muffle my frantic sobs.

Two

“I hope you’re not still sleeping. You know just because you lost your job doesn’t mean you get to be a lazy ass all day!” Holly hollered as she let herself in the front door.

I had been awake for hours. After I woke up, on the futon and not in bed beside Charlie, I couldn’t pry myself up to face the new day. I had no job to go to and no husband to spend time with. What else was there to do except stay in bed and cry or sit on the couch with Ben & Jerry’s and eat myself into oblivion.

“Don’t make me have to come up there and find you. I brought goodies, and you can’t have any if you don’t get down here Claire,” Holly said from the landing. I could hear her walking to the dining room and unloading her massive purse on the table.

I wasn’t ready to tell her what happened last night, wasn’t prepared for the onslaught of phone calls from my family when she told everybody the news. She probably wouldn’t make it out of the driveway before she set up a conference call on her cell phone. I couldn’t imagine what my life would be like without my ever-present, loving family by my side. But sometimes it suffocated me. Like a warm, comforting scarf shielding you from the harshness of a winter’s day, but it’s crushing your airway so you want to rip it off and damn the cold. Like today, when the only thing I want is to be alone and feel bad for myself.

“Claire?”

“I’ll be down in a minute. Hang on!” I shouted, throwing the sheet off of me. I took a long, deep breath, bracing myself to tell her what happened, bracing myself to have to say it out loud. I walked to the railing, Holly waited at the bottom of the stairs, hand on her waist and hip cocked to the side as she looked up at me.

“Jesus, you look like shit,” she said, scrunching her eyebrows as she looked me over.

“Gee, thanks Holl. Nice to see you too.”

“You know what I mean. You’re gorgeous, but you look like shit.”

“It was a long night.”

“Yeah, I know. Sam called me and said something was wrong but you wouldn’t dish it,” she said a few feet behind me as we walked to the dining room. I could feel her eyeing me, wondering why I wasn’t dressed or at least in my usual nightgown. I don’t think there’s a single facet of my life, routines or personality that’s a secret to my sisters.

“Really, she called you? Of course she called you. God Sam...” I said, sitting on the window bench with the Styrofoam cup of coffee she handed me.

“Well, it’s a good thing. Look at you. What’s the matter?” Holly said, sitting across from me.

For a moment something about her struck me. She was sitting in the morning sun, the gentle hue enveloping her slender figure and her mousy brown hair curled into soft waves. She wore a white tank underneath a sheer, floral print blouse and cute khaki shorts. I don’t know how she pulled it off so effortlessly, looking gorgeous with two kids and a part-time job. Holly, my angel.

I sighed and looked down at my curled up legs. I heard the words in my head, but nothing came out of my mouth. ‘Charlie has been cheating on me, and he wants a divorce,’ my brain said, but my lips couldn’t move. I just stared at her, empty.

“What? What is it?” Holly said, her voice smothered with worry.

I took a big breath. “Charlie wants a divorce,” I said, finally able to force the words out of my mouth.

Holly stared at me, like she had just seen someone fall out of a Ferris Wheel. “What? What do you mean he wants a divorce? That’s ridiculous!”

“He met some woman at a conference. They want to get married,” I said, not realizing I curled my lip as I spoke.

“Married! What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Frantic, she stood and started pacing around the dining room table, like a little hamster in their wheel – around and around.

“Someone else—” she scolded no one. “I mean, really, what the—” She had both hands on her hips, tapping her foot in a perfect pissed-off mom stance. She reminded me of Mom the first time Sam dyed her hair purple, furious that Sam made her the laughing stock of the congregation.

It was no secret; I knew my sisters thought I married down. They accepted Charlie as part of the family only because they wanted me to be happy. But with the sudden development of him *actually* behaving like a prick, he’d be lucky if he got off of work today and didn’t find my sisters standing by his car, armed with baseball bats and spray painting ‘BASTARD’ on his windshield. I wished I could be mad like Holly.

“You know, I always knew that son of a bitch—no, no...” Holly stopped herself, sat back down, and took my hand in hers, patting it as she said, “There’s no need for I told you so, I’m sorry. None of that matters now. All that matters is taking care of you.” She tried to offer a sympathetic smile, but I could see the rage brewing in her emerald eyes. I figured I had maybe until lunchtime before Sam came barging into my house with the number for a hit-man.

“So, what did he say? What are you going to do? Has he been here or called you?”

“I don’t know Holl. He told me at dinner and then just left me there. I didn’t have my wallet or—”

“Why didn’t you call me?” she said with huge, fiery eyes. “I could have told Mark to stay home with the kids and come got you. What did you do?”

“I made an ass out of myself in the restaurant.” I told her.

“Oh, honey—”

“I don’t know if the manager felt bad for me or just wanted me the hell out of his restaurant. I guess I must have looked a mess. They even paid for a cab for me,” I said. I set my coffee on the table as I stood, walked to the other side, and started rifling through her purse.

“That was nice of them, but Honey you should have called me, I would have come and gotten you.”

“I don’t think I was really thinking at the time,” I said, pulling out her secret stash of cigarettes from her purse. I quit six years ago, for Charlie. “All I kept thinking about was how I was going to pay for dinner,” I said with a cigarette bouncing between my lips. I paused, lit it, and sat down at the table.

“Has he talked to you at all? What—what’s the next step?” Holly asked, walking to the china hutch to pull out an old ashtray for me.

“I haven’t heard from him. I thought—hell I don’t know what to think now.”

“Oh, honey. We’ll, well, we’ll figure something out,” she said in that sweet, soothing tone only mothers have. “It’ll all work out.” She sat beside me, wrapped an arm around my shoulder and gave me a gentle squeeze. “We’ll figure it out.”

Holly stayed with me for over an hour, letting me finish most of her cigarettes as we drank coffee and picked at the bagels she brought over. She gave me a few numbers for attorneys, but that’s all I could manage. What the hell do I know about getting divorced? My parents are still happily married, and I come from a long line of Catholics; you don’t get divorced no matter how miserable you are. Divorce was a foreign concept to me, something that happened to other people, not my Charlie and me.

Before Holly left she convinced me to at least take a shower. ‘You’ll feel better,’ she said. I didn’t believe her, but as I stood there, eyes closed and letting the hot water drizzle down my face and body, I did feel better. Well, cleaner at least. I heard my cell phone vibrating on the sink and cringed. The barrage of phone calls had started. *It has to be Sam*, I guessed. Mom would still be at the Senior Center with the other ladies from the neighborhood. My phone started beeping. Sam left a voicemail. I had about twenty minutes before she’d call again.

I dried off, wiped the steam off the mirror with my hand and stared at myself through the smeared streaks for a minute. My eyes were puffy, the edges of my eyelids still red from a night of crying, but at least my nose had lost the Rudolph hue from using an entire box of tissues. I squished my finger into the dark circles engulfing my eyes, it was like poking a gel-filled bra. I slipped on a pair of jean Capris, my favorite gray tank top, and black flip-flops and started

drying my hair. My phone lit up with ‘Sam’ on the display as my head was upside-down over the hairdryer. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t put off answering it forever.

I brushed out my long, black hair and pulled it up into a ponytail. I dabbed on some eyeliner hoping it would make my eyes look less terrifying. It didn’t. I looked like a bloated, discolored raccoon. The phone started vibrating again.

“Hey Sam,” I said, leaning over the sink as I brushed on some mascara. My vain attempt at looking normal proved useless for making me *feel* normal. Any hint of normalcy vanished last night.

“God Claire, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for an hour!”

“I was in the shower, I guess—”

“Holly called me. God, I can’t believe it. Are you ok?”

“Yeah I figured—”

“Of course you’re not okay. Your husband’s left you,” Sam said to herself. I could hear the whoosh of wind in the phone.

“Where are you?” I asked, closing my eyes and crossing my fingers she wasn’t driving over here.

“I can’t believe he did that, told you at dinner like it was no big deal and just up and left you there. That bastard.”

“I know, I—well, I never thought—”

“Of course you didn’t! Who would? I mean, he’s super boring and all that, what accountant isn’t, but you know he never really seemed the type,” she said. I could see her in my mind, sitting at her desk, sewing up a voodoo doll and stabbing him with her envelope opener as she talked to me.

“Holly gave me some numbers...attorneys. I guess I should—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve already called one for you, great guy. This girl, Marcy, I work with, her bastard of a husband ran off with his secretary. I know, right? Like out of Days of Our Lives or something...”

I sat down on the foot of the stairs, head tipped up and looking at the ceiling, almost praying she’d shut up and leave me alone.

“So, anyway,” Sam said. “She went through all this last summer, so I was talking to her about you after Holl called. She gave me the number for her guy, ruthless son of a bitch—”

“I don’t want to be ruthless Sam—”

“She got the summer house, the investments, oodles of alimony and child support. Well you won’t need that, no kids and all—”

“Sam, I’m not—”

“But he’s real good, so I got his number and set up an appointment for you.”

“Aw, Sam, come on. At least let me try to wrap my head around this first. I’m at least entitled to a day or two before I decide anything, aren’t I?” I said, burying my head in my hand and rubbing my temples.

“Well, it has to be done, Claire. Beat him to the punch, you know. Don’t let him get his hands on anything,” Sam said.

I could almost hear her nodding her head in agreement with herself. I let out a huge sigh. *Either be miserable or embrace their overbearing concern.* “When’s the appointment?” I said through an exhale.

“I’m on my way to come get you now. Be there in fifteen. Figured we could get in and out before Mom calls you, you know. That way you can let her know what we’re doing.”

What WE are doing? What we? I’m the only one whose husband left them. What WE? I contemplated jumping in my car and taking off before she got here. But then she’d call the police, the local news, and God knows who else.

“Do I have to change for this? I’m only in Capris and a tank,” I said, wishing I had at least taken the time to do something with my hair.

“No, no, that’s fine. You don’t need to impress the guy. Just make sure the check clears.”

Oh no, check clears...What about the money? What if he’s taken it out already? No, Charlie wouldn’t do that, would he? Well, I thought he would never cheat on me either...

“I need to stop at the bank on the way, if there’s time,” I said. God I hated even having to think these things, let alone do them.

“I’m at Philmont Street now. I’ll be there in like ten.”

Three

I tried my damndest to convince Sam to stay in the lobby, but she's too stubborn, like all of us McGibbin's women.

"Right this way, ladies. Mr. Haskell will be with you in a few minutes," the receptionist said and led us to a small conference room. "Please help yourself," she said, motioning to a coffeepot and tray of bottled water. She reminded me of our aunt Beth; tall, skinny, wearing a long skirt, and hair pulled into a bun. Sam nudged me on the shoulder and leaned in. "Aunt Beth, right?" she whispered with a giggle.

Coming from the grandeur of the lobby, with polished marble floors and granite counters, I expected more than a tiny, almost barren room. A huge window overlooked a small park in the cluster of skyscrapers, the only pleasant feature of the room. The bright afternoon light made the cherry stained furniture look almost blood-red. An overpowering smell of apple cinnamon made my stomach turn. I looked around as I sniffed and saw a bowl of potpourri on the credenza behind us.

"Little much, don't you think?" Sam whispered, curling her lip as we eyed the bowl.

The air lay heavy on us, like a forced stillness of being in the library, as if we had to whisper or the receptionist would jump out and shush us. I bit my lip, clasped my hands together on my lap, and started shaking my foot. My heart beat so hard I expected it to fly

out, making a squishy sounding thud as it landed on the oak conference table, scooting as it still pounded.

Sam put a hand on mine. "It's going to be fine," she said, rubbing her thumb on the top of my hand.

I nodded at her. We heard the doorknob click; we spun around and I started squeezing her hand. My heart pumped faster. *This is really real, isn't it?* I thought I was going to faint; I could see the little dots in my vision as I looked at the lawyer, the black circle closing in around him as he walked around the table.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said with a smile and set down a leather binder as he sat.

I closed my hand even tighter around Sam's. She reached her other hand over and patted my knee. Tears started welling up in my eyes. *Please God, don't start crying. At least let me get through the introductions.*

The lawyer must have noticed my emotion's unraveling, probably not a very uncommon occurrence in a place like this I supposed. He reached behind him and grabbed a box of tissues. He bent his thin lips into a small smile as he scooted it across the table for me.

"Thank you," I said behind a quivering smile. "I'm sorry," I said, dabbing my eyes.

"Quite all right. I might think twice about what kind of person you are if you weren't upset," he said with a wink. He looked like a sweet man at least, even though Sam said he was ruthless. I could picture him dressing up as Santa for kids at Christmas. He had a round, blushed face, wispy white and gray hair, and a round belly squished inside a navy suit jacket.

"So, Mrs. Nobine, is it?" he asked, glancing up from a notepad at us both.

"Yes," I managed.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm sorry it's under such circumstances," he said, extending his hand to me.

"Yes, a pleasure," I said. *A pleasure, really?*

"So you must be Sam, the sister?"

"Yes, I made the appointment, for my sister Claire here," Sam said with a bright, charming smile and shook his hand.

"So, let's see here, Mrs. Nobine. So, you're getting divorced. When did you separate?" he said as he thumbed through some papers.

I cleared my throat, but my voice still cracked as I tried to talk. “Last night,” I said.

His look shot up from the notepad, just as surprised as I was to be sitting in a lawyer’s office the very next day.

“I know. I wasn’t quite ready for—”

“I figured it best. You know, get things started, so the bastard doesn’t run off with everything,” Sam said, leaning forward as she spoke to him.

“Sam!” I snapped, glaring at her before turning back to Mr. Haskell.

“What? Well, it’s true,” she said, returning the glare.

“A little unorthodox, but not the strangest thing I’ve heard,” Mr. Haskell said with his sweet, Santa smile. “So he’s left you for another woman, is that correct?”

“That’s what he told me. He wants to get a divorce, so they can...” I swallowed hard and tried to ignore the nausea. “So he can marry her.”

“Any kids?”

“They never got around to it. *Charlie* didn’t want any,” Sam said. *I wish she stayed in the lobby.*

“Do you own a home or rent? Have a retirement plan, anything of that sort?” he asked, not looking up as he jotted down notes in the leather binder.

“Yes, we have a house and a 401K. No other investments though. Um, two cars. Mine only has two more payments, but Charlie has one year left on his lease, I think,” I said. It was as if someone else was talking for me, rattling off a laundry list of things about our marriage in the driest, most unattached manner possible. “His parents have a will, and their house is left to both of us. I don’t know if that’s supposed to be included?” I said, nodding to his notepad. I was there, but it wasn’t really me; it was like a bad Lifetime movie. I never imagined something like this happening to me.

“They can figure that out themselves. Your bank accounts, is everything in joint names?” he said, looking up at me for a moment.

Tears wanted to fill my eyes again. I pressed a tissue to them and prayed to God to make it stop. I needed to get through this damned meeting.

“Yes, everything is joint. House, cars, we share—”

Sam interrupted, “We stopped at the bank on the way over, and Claire took out some cash. Don’t want the bast—Charlie emptying it and leaving her with nothing. She got fired yesterday, you see,” Sam said. It amazed me how she casually spilled my life on the table so matter-of-factly.

“Wow. Fired and this all in one day, eh? That had to be a tough one,” Mr. Haskell said and poured me a glass of water.

“Thank you,” I said, abruptly gulping down half the water. “It’s been hard. I’m not sure I’ve really wrapped my head around it all you know? But Sam here, God bless her,” I said, half glaring, half smiling as I squeezed the blood out of her fingers. “She thought it best I came in today.”

“Well, depending on what type of man he is, it could have waited for a day or two, I’m sure,” he said, looking at Sam.

Thank you! “Should I have not taken the money out?”

“Presuming you didn’t empty any accounts, its quite normal for one party to take some money to support themselves in the meantime.”

“I told her to just close the damn thing out. He’s got money, and I’m sure his little *thing* has a job. Let her support his ass,” Sam said.

“Sam, please!” I said as I spun my head toward her, glowering hard into her eyes. “Jesus, would you just shut up for five minutes?” I said, watching her wither in the seat like a scorned child. “I’m sorry,” I said, turning back to Mr. Haskell.

He nodded. “Quite all right. There’s going to be some things for you to do before we can really get the ball rolling. I’ll need you to gather some information for me. Financials mostly, credit card statements, your investments, deed to the property...”

His voice trailed to white static in my ears as he spouted off a list of things Charlie and I spent years building together. His lips moved, his hand writing down a divorce to-do list, but I heard nothing. The room started moving beneath me. It tipped upward, and I heard the slow clinking of a roller coaster as it climbs the first hill. *Clink, clink, clink, clink.*

“Now as far as alimony goes, what is typically done...”

From some faraway place, the breeze felt cold on my face as my cart reached the top of the hill. My gut rose up into my throat as I tipped forward and whooshed down the endless track. The room tipped and turned, spun upside down and twirled.

“...evidence would be helpful.”

My head almost slammed forward as the room came to a halt.

“I’m sorry. Evidence?” I said, snapping back into the moment.

“Any evidence you might be able to dig up that he was cheating, for however long. Receipts for flowers not given to you, unusual trips, things of that nature. It usually helps to swing things your way in the event of things getting nasty.”

“Nasty?” I said. I couldn’t possibly imagine Charlie being nasty.

“It happens from time to time, but let’s hope your divorce goes smoothly.”

The word seemed so heavy when he said it. *Divorce*. It dropped on the table like a cinderblock. I almost flinched at the imaginary bang of my future.

“Now, I’ll just need a retainer to get things rolling. Two thousand is my standard. Then I can head downtown and file a petition.”

“Umm, is cash all right?” I said as I reached under the chair for my purse. I was nervous about writing a check, afraid Charlie would see it on the statement and know I had seen a lawyer. I don’t know why it made me feel guilty, seeing a lawyer after *he* left me.

I leaned over to Sam and whispered, “I need to stop at the bank again. That’s all I took out.”

After the meeting ended, we stopped so I could withdraw more money, but only what would have been a month’s worth of income that I earned, per Mr. Haskell’s instructions. For six years, everything had been ‘ours’. Saying ‘my money’ or ‘his money’ felt foreign and wrong to me, but Sam tossed it around like candy, almost like she was happy he was gone. I hated her for it, taking the end of my marriage in such smooth strides. Didn’t she know this was the end of me, the end of everything I knew?

Sam dropped me off at home, promising to call me later and check on me. Which meant she would come up with some believable excuse to stop by the house, an ‘I was in the neighborhood’ kind of thing. Sam was always good for that. Finally, in sweet seclusion, I found myself wandering to the screened-in back porch.

The house felt warm and welcoming to me again, like my body had finally taken a breath after the last exhausting twenty-four hours. I sat down on the coral blue rocking chair. I had stenciled cherries

on the headrest a few weeks ago, to match the old side table I had found. Charlie said it turned out great. I sipped a Pepsi and tipped my head back as I closed my eyes and took in the heat of an early summer.

Jazz music from the restaurant around the block calmed my heart to a slow, rhythmic thump. I felt the music and let it consume me. I let the soothing beat push the hurt and confusion out of my mind and only heard the sweet notes of a love song. My head slowly bobbed; my toes gave in and tapped along.

“Claire! Claire, baby, where are you?” Mom said from inside the house.

In one breath the sweet calm flushed itself out, and I tensed at her doting tone and dreaded her babying me.

“I’m out back, Mom,” I hollered. I heard her frantic footsteps charging toward me.

Mom let out a huge gasp stepping onto the porch. She spread her arms wide and said, “Oh, baby. My poor baby. Come here, sweetie!”

My eyes rolled as I stood. I managed a small smile at her before she pulled me into a tight hug.

“Oh, baby, I’m just so sorry,” she whispered, gently pressing her hand on the back of my head and guiding it to her shoulder.

“It’s fine Mom, it happens, right?” I said, trying to resist the warmth of her embrace.

“Shh. Come here, baby. My sweet, sweet baby,” she whispered, holding me a little tighter.

I wanted to be annoyed, bothered by the constant intrusions and the endless questions I knew were coming. But moms have a way of getting everything out of you with a simple gesture, and I couldn’t hold off the love of her arms and began melting inside them.

“Oh, God, Mom, I, I—” I started bawling into her shoulder, letting everything go I had held in all day.

“Shh. That’s it, baby. Let it out, sweetheart,” she whispered, running her fingers through my hair as I soaked her blouse.

It felt like I was twelve again, curled up inside her arms, bawling after Jimmy Dramton stood me up for the spring dance. But it was my husband who left me, not my childhood crush.

Mom leaned back, rubbing the teary mascara out from under my eyes. “I know, baby I know.”

I lifted up my tank and finished wiping the running makeup on its seam as I turned and plopped back into the rocking chair. “Mom, I just don’t know what happened,” I said, resting my elbows on my knees as I leaned forward.

Mom sat in the rocker beside me. “I don’t know, baby. All I know is sometimes men do bad things, sometimes men leave.”

“I mean, we weren’t spicy or anything, but we never were. But we never really fought, you know. We were good, our marriage was good. I just—”

“Don’t try to figure it out, baby. You’ll run yourself in circles like a dog chasing its tail. You won’t ever be able to figure out what he was thinking,” Mom said, rubbing my arm as she talked.

“I just, what am I supposed to do now, Mom?” I said, turning my head and looking up at her worried face. “What do you do when you thought things were good, but then your husband leaves you? And I lost my job—” I tried to rub the tension from my forehead. “What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Mom tucked strands of hair behind my ear, pressed her soft, wrinkled hand to my cheek and raised her lips to a small smile. “Oh, baby, I wish I had the answers for you I really do.”

“What the hell do I do now?” I said and started crying again. “Charlie was what I lived for. Charlie was what—” I buried my face in my hands, silently sobbing into them. “He was everything, and he didn’t even give me the chance to—”

“He doesn’t deserve you, baby,” Mom said, pressing a hand to her cheek, trying to be strong for me.

“God, Mom, don’t start that crap all right? I love him and thought we were good together. I thought—” I thought he was my forever. My life was Charlie. Seldom was I Claire; I was always Charlie’s wife. I revolved everything around him and that is how I thought it would stay. “I just want him back!” I cried out with a wave of tears forcing themselves out.

“Oh, baby,” Mom said, leaning over the armrest and rubbing my back. “You’ll get through this, I promise. We’ll all get you through this.”

“Mom, this is hard enough. I don’t want the whole damn family in my business too,” I said, pleading into her eyes.

“What would you rather do then? Claire, you can’t go through this alone.”

“That’s exactly what I want. I just want to hide in the house and be left alone.”

“You know you can’t go through life like that, baby. We’ll get you through this, honey,” she said, pressing her hand on my cheek.

I tipped my head against her hand, lightly pressing her hand between my cheek and shoulder.

“I just don’t know what happened, Mom. I really, I didn’t see this coming.”

“Oh, baby,” she said, raising her other hand to caress my cheek. “None of us did, sweetie, and there’s no way you could have.”

Four

Seven days had passed since Charlie left me. One week to the day since my life had utterly crumbled in ways I never thought possible and forever ruining my favorite restaurant. I tried to pretend he was on another business trip, that it would be just a little while longer before he was home again. I didn't get any phone calls, any spontaneous 'I miss you' texts or 'I love you' emails. My tricks weren't working. I knew I was alone.

The world seemed to go quiet on me. If my phone rang at all it was my sisters or Mom, but never my Charlie. And it came as no surprise that even Daddy hadn't said a word to me about it. He sort of slapped my shoulder as he walked by. I expected him to say something like 'Buck up, little camper' and hand me a beer. Daddy wasn't very good with showing emotions.

However I spent the last week on the verge of being a blubbing, frantic mess at any given time. I found myself creating new habits, taking ridiculous precautions to save myself from falling apart. I even separated my clothes from Charlie's, hoping to spare myself any reminder of him that might send me into another bout of insane sadness. Yet there it was, in all its sweaty, dirt covered glory; his Chicago Cubs t-shirt balled up inside a load of my blues. Gross as it sounds, the lingering scent of him shoved me over the edge into melodramatic balling in the laundry room. Holding it, I almost survived, but one accidental whiff, and I was done for.

I tried to deny what happened and pretend his being gone was normal, but life has a way of slapping you back into reality. I realized that when I almost called Charlie at work because I couldn't find the hammer in the shed. Phone in hand, I remembered I no longer had the right to call my husband about such things.

Seven days since he left me, a new anniversary for us. I was out back, weeding along the back fence trying to keep myself busy and my mind focused on anything other than my marital demise. Over the past few days, I cleaned and organized everything I owned. With nothing left in the house to tackle, I moved my anxiety out to the yard.

My glove covered hands clenched the stem of one of those big, ugly weeds with the soft thorns on the stem when my cell phone rang in the grass behind me. I sighed as I pulled off the gardening gloves. *I should just let it go to voicemail. It's probably just Sam anyway.*

I wiped my hand on my shorts, picked up the phone, and put a hand over my mouth at the word 'Charlie' on the display. The lit up name sucked all the air from my lungs. I cleared my throat, brushed my hair away from my face, and tried to remember the feeling of confidence. I didn't want him to hear me being hurt.

"Hello?" I said, as if I didn't know who was calling.

"Hi, Claire. It's um—"

"Charlie, hello," I said. I cocked my shoulders back to force the posture of a strong woman, but I wanted to cry and beg him to please explain why I wasn't good enough.

"Hi, Claire," he said again. He sounded different to me, still like my Charlie, but different somehow. "Listen, I, um, well, I was calling to see if I could come by the house."

My heart jumped. Maybe he wanted to try to patch things up. "Yes, of course, Charlie. I don't have any plans." *Did that sound desperate? Oh, please, don't sound desperate.*

"I was hoping I could get a few things. I've been wearing the same clothes for a few days now and—"

"Oh..." I said, knowing it reeked of defeat.

"Is, is that okay, Claire?"

I wanted to scream at him that it wasn't okay. That it wasn't okay that he left, that it wouldn't be okay if he came by unless it was to stay.

"Yes, of course. What do I need with your clothes anyway?" I said with a strained laugh. *Now I wish I had said I was busy.* "What

time were you thinking? I have plans later today,” I said, which wasn’t a complete lie. I did plan on forcing myself to eat, and CSI is on tonight.

“Oh, well, I thought you didn’t have—”

“It’s not until later. A girls’ night out sort of thing,” I said and kicked a rock into the Koi pond. *What a stupid lie.*

“Oh, all right. Well, we aren’t too far away. I could come by in twenty minutes or so. Is that all right?”

We? He must be with her. Seems stupid I had forgotten he left me for another woman, but somehow I did. Denial can be a powerful thing, I suppose. “Sure, not a problem. I’m just working on my resume right now anyway,” I lied. I wasn’t even sure if it was still on my laptop.

“All right, well, see you in a bit then. Goodbye, Claire.”

I hung up the phone, defeated and stunned, and noticed the dirt caked on my knuckles squeezing the phone. My t-shirt was smeared with grass stains and dirt. I tugged on its hem and thought, *I must look horrendous.* I don’t know why, but I ran into the house to the upstairs bathroom. I yanked my clothes off and started scrubbing my face and arms in the sink, glancing at the time on the cell phone as I rinsed. *Fourteen minutes left.*

I left the dirty clothes spread across the bathroom floor, ran down the hall naked to the bedroom and grabbed the first cute thing hanging in the closet. I slipped on a lavender, spaghetti-strap sun dress. Charlie always loved how my shoulders looked in it. *Perfect.* I pulled the ponytail holder out of my hair and whipped a brush through the tangled strands of black hair. A quick look at the time again. *Eight minutes.* “Shit, shit!” I said, spinning around and dropping to the floor to look under the bed for my favorite ankle wrap sandals. I looked at the alarm clock. *Six minutes.* “Shit, shit, damn it, Claire!” I scorned myself, got up, and started rifling through my closet, hurling shoes over my shoulder to somewhere on the floor behind me.

“Oh, thank you, God!” I exhaled, pulling out my wedge sandals. I sat on the floor and wrapped them around my ankles, then shot up, stood in front of the dresser mirror, and gave myself a quick once-over. “Good,” I panted. “This might work,” I said, turning to the clock. *Two minutes.* I ran down the hall to the office as I slipped my silver, hoop earrings on. Stopping in the middle of the office, chest

heaving, I panted as my pulse throbbed in my throat. I wiped a trail of sweat along my forehead and tried to take a few encouraging breaths. I didn't want to look flushed and dripping sweat. I wanted to be calm and sexy, like a Claire he hadn't seen in years. I closed my eyes and took a slow breath. "It's going to be fine, Claire," I whispered and then heard a knock on the screen door.

I strolled out of the office, praying I wouldn't tumble down the stairs in front of him because of my damned nerves. *Did I put perfume on? I hope I don't smell like weeds.*

"Charlie, hi," I said with a pleasant smile, taking casual strides to the door. "Please, come in," I said, opening the door for him.

"Claire, hi. Wow, you look great," he said, somewhat breathless.

"Oh, no, I was just—" I said, messing with my hair as I turned my head away from him a little, desperate to impress my husband.

"I've, uh, I've got some boxes with me on the porch. I promise I'll be quick as I can," he said, opening the door and grabbing a big pile of folded boxes from the porch.

I hoped so bad when he saw me it would be like this magical vision to him and he would have forgotten why he was here, that he'd be so taken aback by me that it overwhelmed him with urges not felt since we were in college.

"Oh...Sure," I said. Without the fanciful imagery swirling in his stare, I was out of ideas. "I'll just be out on the porch," I said with a tortured smile. Then I went outside and sat on the porch swing. "There's packing tape in the hall closet if you—" I rolled my eyes. *Of course he knows where the tape is, you idiot. Why don't you just go upstairs and fold his clothes for him too!*

"Yup, I got it," he hollered. I heard his feet clunking up the stairs.

I smoothed my dress out over my shaking knees and tried to sink into the idea that my Charlie was upstairs packing his things, packing to leave me for good. I looked up and blinked as I took a breath. I didn't want him to see me cry. I had cried enough for him already. I glanced over at his shiny, black Malibu and saw a woman sitting in the front seat. "Oh, God. He brought her here!" I whispered to myself, looking away and hoping she didn't see me notice her.

Charlie loaded a few boxes into his car. As the car door opened, I heard him say, "Just one more box, then we'll go."

I bent my lips to an awkward smile as he walked by me again and back into the house. I couldn't breathe. Time stopped. I must have been sitting there for hours, with his girlfriend watching me I was certain. I could feel her eyes on me as I stared at my pink toenails wiggling in the sandals.

Charlie came back to the porch with a box in his hands. "Well, that's the last one for now, I guess. You know, until we're—" He stopped himself as he set the box down and rubbed the back of his neck. It was the first sign he had shown of having *any* feelings about our separation.

"Are you sure you have enough?" I asked as I stood, still trying to take care of him, I guess. The wind shifted directions, blowing his subtle scent against my face, and my knees start to quiver.

"It's plenty for now. I, uh, I got the papers from your lawyer," he said, looking down at his feet.

"Yeah, well, I figured one of us should get the ball rolling," I said, trying to laugh, as if the death of our marriage was somehow a funny situation.

The passenger door of his car opened, and I looked over and saw her getting out. Charlie tensed up, and I almost rubbed his shoulder wanting to comfort him. The woman started walking up to the porch.

"Oh, Charlie, is that? Please, don't tell me—" I said, turning toward him with panicked, pleading eyes.

He locked his eyes on his feet, slid his hands into his pockets and shuffled a foot around. "Yeah, um, I was going to tell you—"

"Claire...Claire, I'm not sure what to say—" Monica said.

Watching my friend walk up the porch, I wanted to imagine huge, evil flames blowing up around her backstabbing, perfect figure. I called her last week, on the ride home after being fired, and she sounded so casual. Like the true friend I thought she was, she tried to comfort me. I guess she chose to leave out the part about sleeping with my husband.

"I just wanted to say that, well—" Monica said, her gorgeous eyes seeming timid and leery. I didn't believe it, not now. I wouldn't believe anything she spouted.

"Charlie, you could have told me," I whispered, leaning toward him.

Monica stood by my Charlie and rested a hand on my shoulder. I jerked my arm back without looking her in the eyes, smacking her hand away like a pesky wasp.

She shot a glare to Charlie. “You didn’t tell her?” she whispered through clenched teeth.

“I was just about to,” he said.

“Claire, I just wanted to say how sorry I am. Charlie and I never meant for things to turn out like this,” Monica said to me, looking genuinely apologetic.

“Sorry? You should be a lot more than sorry! He’s *my* husband!” I snapped, surprising myself.

She pressed her lips together as she took a step back. “We ran into each other at last year’s Huntington Conference, and we kept running into each other after that,” she said, looking up into his eyes with a disgustingly dreamy stare and wrapping her hand around his bicep.

“Of course you kept running into him. He’s my husband, and you’re supposed to be my friend. Friends see friends’ husbands—”

“Well, yes, that’s exactly it really—”

“But friends don’t sleep with the husbands!” I half-shouted, watching her step closer to my Charlie and wrap her other hand around his arm for protection. I almost vomited my heart onto her floral dress. “Friends don’t do that, Monica. What the hell is the matter with you?”

“I know. You’re right. But, well, we just couldn’t deny the connection we had, and well—”

“And so you’re stealing my husband, is that it?” I said, my voice growing louder. I raised my eyebrows and found myself pouring rage into her eyes. I wanted to grab her perfect blonde locks and throw her off my porch.

“Claire, look, I’m sorry—” Charlie said.

“Yes, we’re both very sorry it turned out like this,” Monica said, interlacing her fingers around his arm.

“Damn straight you should be sorry!” I screamed, thrown off by the sound of my voice so loud.

Charlie reached out but hesitated about touching my shoulder. Monica grabbed his hand and said, “We should go, honey.”

My head snapped toward her, my jaw clenched, and I screamed horrific things at her through hateful eyes.

“Go on. I’ll be there in just a second,” he said to her. He turned back to me as she walked to the car. “Look, Claire, I’m sorry. I never meant to—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Charlie. You both can just go to hell!” I yelled, crossing my arms on my chest.

He took a breath. I could tell he wasn’t angry. He dripped remorse from every perfect pore on his cute face.

“Well, about the lawyer thing. I just wanted to let you know you’ll be getting something from ours.”

Ours. That word was supposed to be for Charlie and me. Not him and that backstabbing bitch in the car.

“I’m petitioning for the house.”

“The house?” I never thought he would ask for the house.

“Monica, well, she really likes the balcony off the bedroom, the southern charm of the—”

“She’s been in our bedroom!”

His look darted to the wood plank porch.

He’s been with her in our bed.

“Well, anyway, I just wanted to let you know, so you weren’t startled when you got something in the mail.”

“You sure have one hell of a way of bracing a girl, Charlie,” I said, turning and stomping into the house, letting the screen door slam behind me. I stood in the foyer, my back turned to him with my arms crossed. I knew he was still there. I could feel him, smell him, taste the sweetness of his lips in the air. I heard his feet shuffling off the porch, his car start and the crunch of gravel underneath the tires as he backed out of the driveway.

My breath came so hard and fast it was too much to force through my nose so I opened my mouth. My arms raised and lowered on my furious chest. I couldn’t blink, couldn’t move. My feet stuck to the ground like I was super glued in place.

“I can’t believe it. My own friend,” I said through my teeth. “My friend and my husband!” I didn’t know what to do. I was so damn mad I couldn’t slow the rage down enough to hear my own thoughts. I grabbed my phone.

“You will *not* believe it,” I said as Sam answered her phone.

“What?”

“Charlie showed up to get clothes, and, oh my God, I can’t even believe it,” I said, squeezing my phone and pacing through the living room and kitchen.

“What? What happened? Hang on. Let me find my keys.”

“So, my dumbass, I get all dolled up because he’s coming over—”

“Oh, Claire, you didn’t,” Sam said in a breath.

“Yeah, so I’m standing there, trying to be cute and, like, woo my husband, you know. He’s getting boxes of clothes and stuff, and it’s apparent he’s not planning to stay, so I go sit on the porch.”

“Keep talking. I’m getting in the car now,” she said. I heard the engine start and the tires squeal.

“I go sit on the porch. Apparently, I’m just not attractive to him anymore,” I said. It was the first time I let myself think that, that he just didn’t feel anything for me anymore. I sat down on the coffee table, lightheaded and weak, staring at his leather recliner. “And then I see her in his car—”

“That son of a bitch! He actually brought the whore with him? I swear to the sweet Mother Mary, when I see that son of a bitch—”

Screeching and horns honking smothered her voice. I knew she was driving like a crazed woman now. I could see her, weaving around cars, and flipping people off as she swerved in front of them.

“And, you’re not going to believe this. I just can’t believe it,” I said, throwing my hand up in the air and shooting back up from the coffee table. I picked up a pen and started shaking it between my fingers. “So he’s getting ready to leave, and I’m realizing it’s hopeless, right. He’s not going to beg me to take him back like I hoped he would—”

“Oh, Claire Bear—”

“She comes out of the car. You’re never going to guess who my Charlie is with, never. I can’t even believe it.”

“God, I’m afraid to ask. I’m at Drexell. Almost there, Claire.”

“It’s Monica. You know, my—”

“Your friend from work?”

“Exactly,” I said, almost choking on my heart.

“That bitch!”

“I can’t even, God, that—I just, I’m shaking I’m so damn mad,” I said, watching my hand tremble in the air.

“I’m two blocks away. I’m almost there. Hang on, Claire Bear.”

I slammed the phone shut and sat back down on the coffee table, twisting my wedding ring as I waited to hear her car pull up the drive.

Five

My foot refused to stop twitching as I fumed, recalling her beautiful face and her flawless hand wrapped around my Charlie's arm. I wished I had called her a whore and said every nasty insult I had ever heard on Jerry Springer. She deserved it. Sam's bumper knocked the trash can off the curb as she peeled into the driveway. Her door slammed and her steps came pounding up the porch. She tossed her purse on the side table as she ran in the house.

"Oh my God Claire, come—what are you doing?" she said, seeing me silently mumble insults to no one. "Oh never mind." She waved a hand in the air. "Alright, tell me the whole story." She sat beside me on the coffee table.

"I just can't believe it, Sam. I really can't. I can't believe it was Monica," I said, shaking my head and raising a hand in the air.

"I know, right? I mean that's cold. Your friend's husband," she said, glaring at the imagery flowing through her mind.

"I knew he said he met someone, but it just didn't seem real, you know. Until I saw them together," I said as I took in a huge breath. "The way she touched his arm, called him honey..."

Sam nudged me with her shoulder and rubbed my knee.

"It just made it so—so real," I said, cocking my head and looking Sam in the eyes.

“God, Claire, I can’t even imagine how pissed you are. I mean, I’m ready to kill the son of a bitch myself, and he’s not even my husband.”

My shoulders slumped under the weight of betrayal, and the anger dissipated as the hurt settled in. Charlie belonged to someone else now. He didn’t feel anything for me.

“Oh, and you look great too, by the way,” she said off-hand. “I can’t believe he didn’t drop to his knees when he saw you, but this?” Sam said as she stood and walked to the liquor cabinet. “This is just freaking absurd, you know, like the crap you see on TV.” She grabbed two glasses and a bottle of tequila and started walking to the kitchen.

“I don’t know, Sam. I haven’t seen or talked to him in seven days. Seven days! But it’s...still, it just didn’t seem real, or maybe I didn’t want it to be real. I don’t know.”

“It has to be like a defense mechanism or something,” Sam said with her back turned to me and looking through cabinets. “So by the time it really hits a person, they’re already kind of used to the other person being gone, you know? Maybe?” she said with a shrug. She walked back to the living room with a bowl of lemon wedges, shot glasses, and a salt shaker.

“I just, I just don’t know what to do now, Sam. He’s gone and, and...and I love him. I want him back. Is that dumb?” I asked no one. “But he seems tainted now or something. I don’t...I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, first things first,” she said, handing me a filled shot glass and a lemon wedge. “First, we get you good and drunk.”

She had an infectious smile. I couldn’t help laughing as I licked the skin between my thumb and index finger. “Yeah, and then what?” I said, holding my hand up.

“Hell if I know. I’m only good for the first part,” she laughed and shook salt on my hand. “Ready?” she said, holding her shot glass in the air.

I nodded, and we both licked salt and drank our shots. “Oh my, that’s horrible,” I said, cringing as I sucked the slice of lemon. “Oh that’s terrible. I can’t do that again.” I kept trying to lick the taste off my lips. “Oh that’s awful. Here, give me another one,” I said and raised my glass for her to refill it.

“Is Mark working tonight?” Sam asked, sprinkling her hand with more salt. “We should call Holly. He can watch the kids. You know, have a little ‘screw men’ drink fest,” she said as she laughed.

I laughed with her, clinked my glass against hers, and swallowed another shot of tequila.

I sat on the floor, legs spread in front of me as I leaned back on the bookcase. “You know what we need? We need chocolate.” I pointed a finger at no one. “Chocolate makes everything better.”

“I don’t think any of us are in the conditionalizing to drive,” Holly said with squinty, bloodshot eyes. “Wait, conditionalizing? That’s not right, is it?” she said to no one. “Condit—condition—” Holly smacked her numb lips together.

“You think Mark will get mad if we call him for some chocolate?” Sam said and smacked Holly on the leg.

“I think it’s a little late maybe,” Holly eased her head toward the clock, opening her eyes wide to focus. “What does that say?” She squinted at the numbers. “Why do you have letters on your clock? I think it’s broken,” she said, waving a hand at it.

“Aw, but now I want chocolate,” Sam pouted, tugging on a loose thread on her tube-top.

“We should have him get marshmallows too,” Holly said, leaning over and taking the bottle from my hands.

“Ooo, smores!” Sam started to giggle. “You’re so smart, Holl,” she said, head wobbling as she tapped Holly on the cheek.

“I really thought we were good together. Didn’t you guys think we were good together?” I raised my heavy eyes to theirs. My sisters’ giggles faded to quiet pity, their soft eyes looking as hurt as mine. “You know, I just, I really don’t know what I’m going to do,” I said, reality slithering into my momentary smiles from a drunken stupor.

Sam shook her head, took a drink from the bottle, and tried to get up. She stumbled and then crawled across the floor on all fours. “I don’t know, Claire Bear,” she said as she slunk beside me.

Holly slid off Charlie’s recliner, plopped down at my other side, and leaned against my shoulder. “Gotta start a new life, honey. Something bigger—”

“And better!” Sam blurted out, raising the bottle in the air.

“You know, it sucks, just plain sucks what he’s done to you,” Holly said as she reached around me and took the bottle from Sam. “But everything happens for a reason, right? Isn’t that what people say?”

“Damn straight,” Sam slurred. “Something better is out there just waiting for you,” she said, patting my knee.

I laughed and threw my arms over their shoulders. “You know, this tequila thing is probably a terrible idea, but this...” I said, squeezing my arms tighter around them. “I think this is exactly what I needed.”

“Wanna go slash his tires?” Sam said, leaning forward to look at Holly and me with a big grin. “I’m not joking. Come on, let’s go do it!” Holly and I looked at each other, then back to Sam’s giddy, vengeful smile, and started laughing.

“I can’t remember where I left my limo. Maybe next time,” Holly laughed.

I woke up the next morning lying upside down on the sofa, my head dangling off a cushion and legs slung over the back of it. My eyes didn’t want to open, but I had to flip upright before the gurgling bubbles in my stomach traveled up my throat. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes as I surveyed the living room. Lemon wedges, sucked dry of all liquid, were everywhere. One even managed to get wrapped up in the pull cord on a lamp. Sam was face down on the loveseat, snoring and wearing a grass hula skirt on her head. Holly was on the floor beside her, hunched over and sleeping with her head on the coffee table.

I rubbed my forehead, ran my tongue along the roof of my mouth, and cringed at the fuzzy, gross coating on my teeth. I dragged myself off the couch and headed upstairs for a shower. Thank God I was never prone to hangovers. A long, cold shower sparked my body back to life again. I got dressed and tiptoed downstairs, desperate for some coffee. I scooted past my unconscious sisters and into the kitchen, holding a mug under the coffee pot to fill it up before I slid the pot on the burner.

At the picnic table in the backyard, I blew on the steaming cup and listened to the world churning around me. Trolley cars were already running, cars impatiently driving behind them, and neighbors

clamored and busied themselves with summer yard work. I could hear the neighbors behind me chatting through the fence, something about their other neighbor not mowing his lawn enough and weeds spilling over onto their yards. I glanced beneath my feet, wincing at an unruly dandelion.

The water trickled down the stream of the Koi pond, and his face poured into my mind again. My Charlie. I ran a fingertip over my wedding ring as I cupped the mug in my hands. I closed my eyes, and Monica fluttered into sight, her slender hand so comfortably wrapping itself around Charlie's arm the way I always did. I remembered how different his voice sounded, and I took a deep breath trying to accept that he wasn't my Charlie anymore. He was hers.

"What are you doing?" Holly said from behind me, her mascara and eyeliner smudged around her puffy, hung-over eyes. She squinted and clutched a cup of coffee for dear life.

"I don't know. Sitting; thinking," I said and patted the empty spot beside me.

"I don't think I've drank that much since my bachelorette party," she said, straining to keep her eyes open as she took a sip.

"It's been a while, that's for sure..."

"So, you're all glazed over looking," she said, turning to me as she brought a leg up on the picnic table bench. "What's going on? What's churning inside that little head of yours?"

"I just – I just can't figure out how this happened, you know? I keep trying to figure out where it started to go wrong, where I went wrong."

"Sometimes things just fall apart. If we could figure out why that easily, you really think anyone would get divorced?"

"There has to be something I missed, something I should have paid more attention to." I shifted as I watched my neighbor in her yard, wrapped in her housecoat examining her tomato garden. "Is it me—"

"Don't even think about putting that kind of guilt on yourself, Claire."

"It's totally possible. I mean, I think about me, how I am, and then I think about Monica."

Holly sat up and almost interrupted me but didn't for once. I set my mug on the table, turning it with my hands. "She has this charisma, you know. This spark, this magnetism. She's like a living,

breathing Diane Lane movie, you know?” I said, turning back to Holly.

Holly ran her fingers through her hair, placed an elbow on the table, and rested her chin on her palm. “Claire, don’t do this to yourself—”

“There’s something about her so full, people are just drawn to her, you know? It’s no wonder Charlie was too.”

“Claire,” Holly took a breath, set her coffee down, and faced me square on. “You can’t compare yourself to her. You can’t. You’ll spend the rest of your life in misery.”

“But she has that, that thing that draws you in and makes you love her no matter how flawed she is. And I look at me. What do I have?” I said as I turned back toward Mrs. Harold’s yard. She had a basket slung over her arm now and was bent over plucking fleshy red vegetables. “I feel so inadequate, like every time I watch a chic flick, you know. I always wanted so badly to be like that, have that charismatic personality that just makes people feel alive, but I just fall flat—”

“Claire, you’ve got to stop this,” Holly said, pulling on my arm to force my attention at her. “You are anything but inadequate.”

“But I am, aren’t I? People aren’t drawn to me. If anything I seem to repel them. I’m like *that* friend, you know, the one you bring around to make yourself look better.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re my best friend—”

“And that, that’s exactly it! What kind of person only has friends who are family members? I’ve got you guys, and that’s it! I’m like that flat, lifeless character, frumpy and forgettable. Monica, she’s like Diane Lane, and I’m like, like Joan Cusack or something.”

“Claire, listen to me,” Holly said with sharp, insistent eyes. “No one, and I mean no one, is really like that. Even Diane Lane isn’t like Diane Lane movies. You’ll always fall flat if you try to live up to Hollywood expectations.”

“But isn’t that what men want? I mean, obviously they do. He left me for it.” I ran my fingers across my forehead, endlessly comparing myself to something I could never be.

“Look, she may have a ton of friends and always walk around with this great ‘I’m so happy’ smile on, but so what? You don’t have to have lots of friends or people huddling around like love struck puppies to have worth.”

Worth. That was it. I didn't feel worthy of love, like I offered nothing. I failed Charlie somehow, fell short of this great woman he thought I would be. Instead, I grew into this mediocre, crafty, Sunday paper reading housewife.

"There are things about you others would kill to have."

"Yeah, I highly doubt that," I said as I raised a brow.

"This isn't some pep talk crap, Claire. It's true. You've got this...this amazing, gentle love," Holly said, reaching for my hands and turning me toward her. "One smile makes even the shittiest day better. You've got this peaceful calm about you; no matter how chaotic the world is, being around you seems to slow it down, forces you to take a breath."

"I could never be half the woman you think I am."

"Why do you think you're such a great big sister to Sam. She's like this gossiping, walking panic attack in the making," Holly said. "Being around you soothes people, it makes life seem easier. Like we..." Holly tipped her head up, thinking. "It makes us feel like we can handle it, we can take it."

"I wish I could believe you, I really do. But if I was like that—or more like her, vivacious, funnier...then he wouldn't have left."

"And maybe then he would have thought you too much woman and left anyway?"

"But that's obviously what he wants—"

"Charlie's not the right man for you."

"If I could only go back, if I would have tried harder—"

"You are a great woman, and if Charlie's too stupid to see that, then he's not the right man for you, Claire."

"But I never tried, you know, never asked him if he *really* was happy—"

"And he could have told you, talked to you like husbands are supposed to."

I looked back at Mrs. Harold walking toward her house with a basket filled with delicious mounds of green and red.

"No amount of changing yourself will fix what doesn't go together, Claire, and for whatever reason, you guys just don't go together."

"I just can't figure out how I'm supposed to go on. I don't have a job; my husband doesn't love me anymore. How the hell do you move past that?"

“You move forward because you have to. Life doesn’t stand still. It makes you move on until you *want* to move on, you know? It’ll run you over if you don’t move.”

I sighed and turned back to Holly with a faint, forced grin. “Suppose I should start looking for a job, huh?”

“Might be a good idea if you want to keep your house,” Holly said with a soft laugh, leaning forward to sip her coffee.

Keep my house...If he lets me. I stopped twirling my wedding ring, pulled it off my finger, and set it on the table in front of me.

Holly's eyes drifted to it and then up at me. Our eyes met, equally watery, and she held my hand in hers and nodded at me.

I took a breath and tried to blink back my tears, but I couldn't. I raised my lips to a smile and fanned a hand at my eyes. “Well, there’s that at least,” I said as I nodded and looked down at my beautiful ring alone on the table. “What do I do with it?”

“Give it to Monica. Maybe it’s cursed,” Holly said as she laughed.

After my sisters managed to stagger out of my house, I spent the morning cleaning up the wreckage from our evening long drinking binge. As I dipped a rag into a bucket, I panicked at my naked finger, my heart dropping to my stomach in fear that I lost my wedding ring. In a stuttered breath, I realized I had taken it off. I no longer had a reason to wear the stunning white gold band on my finger. I ran a fingertip over the bright tan line where the ring should be, my lip quivering as I dropped the rag on the floor and forgot about cleaning.

My heavy feet dragged me up the stairs, but only a few feet into the bedroom I stopped cold. Monica loved the balcony, *our* balcony. I wondered how much of my house she had touched. Did she admire the dress form in the corner I loved so much? Did she run her home wrecker hand along my cute dressers? How many times has she been in my bed with my husband? I looked at my bed and pictured them rolling around inside it. I felt a tsunami of sickness, covered my mouth, and ran to the bathroom.

After rinsing with mouthwash, I went into the office and curled into a ball on the futon. “He can have the damn house,” I said to myself, pulling the sheet up over me, trying to hide from the world.

They had ruined my beautiful home, made it painful and dirty. I couldn't love it anymore knowing she loved it, knowing she had been with him in it.

I wanted to cry. Not because he slept with her, but because they had stolen my comfort, stolen my place of solace. Not a single corner felt safe to me now. No crevice felt untouched or still mine. She had taken my husband and now the safety of my home. *I guess I should be grateful there's nothing left to take*, I thought, scrunching my legs up to my chest. I rubbed my empty finger. I felt naked without my ring.

Six

I haven't seen Charlie since the day he came to the house with Monica, but he did call me a few days ago. He wanted to fill a few more boxes. I'm too weak to face him on any superficial, casual level. I can't put myself through that again.

It feels odd to me, being afraid to see someone I spent so many years with. I couldn't deny him the right to his belongings, but I couldn't bear to see him, and I couldn't bear not seeing him. Sam suggested someone be at the house when he came by, to supervise things; it disgusted me that her idea soothed me. She, of course, elected herself. And Daddy as an intimidation factor. Daddy never liked Charlie either, I learned.

I sat at Starbucks, flipping through a magazine, killing time and waiting for Sam to let me know when Charlie left. She was supposed to call me, so I was surprised to see her walking to my table.

Sam had a great walk, the kind I spent hours practicing as a teenager but never fully achieved. She oozed sexiness, the unignorable strut of a woman who knew the power she held in her sexuality; you could see it with every subtle sway of her hips. Men turned to watch her walk by, her curly dark-brown hair bouncing as she stormed past them.

"Oh my God, Claire, it was great!" she said, dropping her purse on the table as she sat in the chair opposite mine. Her cheeks were

bright red and her dimples were in full bloom. I knew something had her laughing.

“Sam, what did you do?” I said, leaning forward in my chair and imagining her trying to set Charlie’s car on fire.

“It wasn’t me! Why does everyone always think it’s me?” she said, crossing her arms in a halfhearted pout. A strand of purple streaked bangs fell and dangled on her eyelashes as she plopped back in the chair.

“What happened?” I said, tucking my hands underneath my thighs.

“Oh, you should have seen it,” she laughed. “God, it was priceless!”

“Sam, would you just—”

“I swear I’ve never seen Daddy act like that. I almost peed myself trying not to laugh!”

“Daddy? What the hell—”

“I know, right? That man is normally a wallflower. But today, oh no, not even close,” she said, her eyes growing wider and more excited as she leaned forward. “So I’m there, thinking *I’m* going to be the smartass, right? Give Charlie lots of shit, you know. I’ve been practicing in my head all the crap I want to say to him.”

Part of me found it amusing knowing she wouldn’t let Charlie just pack his things and leave without giving him a hard time.

“So I’m like all geared up, right? So excited to just bug the hell out of him. But Daddy, he’s like following Charlie around and ruining it for me,” Sam said, leaning back and chuckling. She relived the moment in her stare, soaking up every bit of sweet revenge.

“Charlie’s trying to box up some clothes and stuff, so Daddy, in his wallflower way is standing next to Charlie, kind of looking over his shoulder a little, you know.”

Sam’s wound up excitement was infectious, her bright eyes so giddy that I found myself getting sucked into her enthusiasm. I leaned over the table, grinning as I waited.

“Charlie’s packing up some t-shirts and boxers and stuff, so Daddy, oh so casually, steps forward. Now here I’m about to rip Daddy a new one, thinking he’s going to help the guy fold or something,” Sam said.

You would think Sam was an Italian the way she talked, hands and arms filled with more emotion than her words as they flew around while she spoke. She waved an arm as she said, “But he

picks up a pair of Charlie's boxers and starts, like, examining it, and Charlie's just kind of gawking at him." She started rifling through her purse. "And now I was too. It was weird, you know? So," she pulled out a compact mirror. "Daddy looks at the tag, and you know Daddy, he is always so polite it's disgusting."

I waited a moment, heart pounding as Sam fiddled with her hair in front of the tiny mirror, puckering her lips and smoothing out her eyeliner with a fingertip.

"So," she said, lowering the mirror. "Daddy says to Charlie 'Wow, a medium, aye? These look pretty small. Must not be much to put in there, you know, in the manly department, huh? Probably why you guys didn't have kids. Equipment's too small to work?' I about died!" Sam said with a raspy cackle.

"Oh my God, he didn't!" I said, laughing so hard people turned toward us. I couldn't picture my calm, quiet daddy challenging the size of a man's 'equipment'

"And so then," Sam said, trying to control her laughter. "So then, Charlie is just kind of standing there, like a deer in headlights, right? He looks over to me! Like I'm supposed to help him!"

"I can't believe Daddy did that!" I said, still laughing as I imagined Charlie, blindsided by my well-mannered dad.

"Just wait. He kept going!" Sam said, waving a hand at me to stop laughing. "So Charlie tries to start folding again. He *refuses* to look up and has his eyes locked on this box. Then Daddy kind of slaps him on the back, you know, and he says 'Eh, don't worry about it, Charlie. Your lady out there has got some nice birthing hips, but she looks a little too ragged to pop out some kids. You know, been around the block a few too many times, eh?' That's when I almost peed myself," Sam said, laughing so hard she snorted.

"Damn it! I knew I should have stayed at the house when he was there," I said as I smacked the table while laughing. "God, that would have been great. I can't even imagine Daddy saying those things!"

"Oh, Claire Bear, it was priceless. Of all times for you to not be there," Sam said through a chuckle.

"I bet Charlie was mortified," I said as I laughed. I almost felt bad for laughing about Charlie's embarrassment. The wife in me wanted to call and apologize, to see if he was all right.

"I hope it doesn't screw up things for that meeting thing today though. Might have pissed Charlie off pretty good, you know?" Sam

said, her eyes lifting to mine as she opened her purse again. “I couldn’t really tell. I was laughing too damn hard to pay attention.” She pulled out a tube of lip gloss, puckering her lips in the mirror as she slid the wand across her lips. “What time’s the meeting anyway?”

“Three o’clock. He’s got some time to cool off if he’s mad,” I said.

“Or let it fester. Get it brewing before he shows,” she said, blotting her lips together. She closed the compact and tucked it back inside her purse.

“No, I don’t think...Really, you think he would do that?” I don’t think I have known Charlie to ever let anything fester. “Well, I guess there’s a lot of things about him I didn’t expect...” I said, scooting the file from my lawyer over and resting my elbows on the table.

Sam laid a hand on my forearm. “There’s not much else he can do, I guess, right? I mean, really, he’s done enough, don’t you think?”

“How do I know? I don’t know the man anymore,” I said, leaning back in the chair again and turning away. I watched a mother struggling to fold up a stroller and jam it in the trunk of her car, stopping to scream at her two boys running circles around her. She snapped her fingers and pointed to the ground beside her.

“Charlie won’t be vengeful or anything today, you think?” I said, turning back to Sam.

Sam shrugged. “Probably not. He’s still just a putz.”

A strange heaviness strangled the air in the conference room as I sat with my lawyer, waiting for Charlie so we could hash out the nitty-gritty of our divorce. We were supposed to determine how the property was divided; that’s what Mr. Haskell told me anyway. Hell, I didn’t even know what I wanted. I spent two days just staring at the paperwork Mr. Haskell had given me. I never thought I would find myself in the position of having to split everything up. Charlie and I were supposed to last forever.

I kept tapping a pen on the table as we waited, fixing already straight stacks of paper in front of me and readjusting their spot on the table.

Mr. Haskell, or Ed as he told me to call him, placed a hand over the shaking pen. "It's going to be just fine. This is all strictly a formality," he said with his reassuring smile.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my anxious heart and nodded.

"You're sure you've considered everything, all of the items you guys have? I've seen a lot of arguments over the dumbest of possessions," he said, looking down as he straightened his red, striped tie.

"Yes, I think so. It's hard, trying to catalog a marriage."

"It should go smoothly as long as you remembered all the important items like mementos and heirlooms," he said, tucking his tie back into his suit jacket and glancing at me expectantly.

"I believe so," I managed. The air was stale and thick, and I felt like I was about to have an asthma or panic attack. I almost asked Ed for a paper bag to breathe in.

The conference room door opened, and Ed stood as Charlie and his lawyer walked in. Ed extended his hand to them. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. Please," he said, gesturing to the empty chairs across from us. "Can I get you some water? Or coffee, perhaps?"

"We're fine, thank you," Charlie's lawyer said. He looked like a prick of a man, skinny with a ferret-like face, not even bothering to look in my direction. Ed was ruthless, according to Sam, but Charlie's lawyer - looking at him I felt like I should be apologizing even though I didn't do anything wrong.

Charlie looked toward me with his puppy dog, apologetic eyes, and my heart melted. He looked great. His flawless skin had a bronzed hue from lounging in the sun on Saturdays like he always does. He wore his Chicago Cubs t-shirt, the edges of the sleeves slightly tattered from being worn too many years. I loved the way it hugged his chest, contouring the curves of his muscles. I tried, I tried damn hard to be mad at him. But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't hate my Charlie.

"Now, if we could just get right to the business at hand," Charlie's lawyer said.

He still hadn't introduced himself to me, like I was the invisible enemy. I felt my chest tighten up. Staring at his lawyer, so thin and stern looking, not an ounce of warmth in his tone, I wanted to hide behind Ed.

“As we know, Mr. Nobine has requested full ownership of the house,” Charlie’s lawyer said.

“Against my advisement, Mrs. Nobine has agreed. Mr. Nobine is to pay her half its market worth. We’ve had it appraised by three realtors unconnected to any party here,” Ed said, his tone shifting to something stronger than he had ever used with me as he handed them the appraisals.

Charlie and his lawyer looked it over, whispering to each other and nodded. “Seems fair. We agree to that amount,” he said, flipping through a file. “Now, we also request the majority of the furniture and contents of the house itself.”

“Hold on here,” Ed said, sitting straight.

“Mrs. Nobine will not be in need of that much being a single woman,” his lawyer said with a snide glance in my direction.

I started to shrink down in my seat. How long could he talk as if I wasn’t there?

“And with Charlie living with Ms. Bower, they’ll need much more than she, starting a family and such.”

“Starting a family?” I muttered. My heartbroken stare locked on Charlie’s eyes. “Charlie?” I said, my eyes watering as I waited for a reply. Charlie’s head slumped, looking up at me with regret.

Charlie’s lawyer continued without acknowledging me. “Given the situation, I think it’s quite standard—”

“No, no, that’s not fair,” I said, startled at my attempted defense. “I worked on most of that stuff myself. I bought it with *my* money and spent hours fixing it up or making it by hand! He can’t have all of it. Absolutely not,” I said, shaking my head and turning toward Ed in panic.

“She’s right. If Mr. Nobine is getting the property, the car, and most of the joint assets already, it’s preposterous that he get the majority of the contents as well,” Ed said to them as he lay a hand on mine.

Reassurance went coursing from my hand through my body as he patted my hand. I could see now, the building of his ruthlessness Sam talked about. I was glad.

“My client was the bread winner—”

“My client also worked. She wasn’t a housewife. She invested just as much of her income into their life,” Ed said, crossing his arms on his round stomach.

Charlie and his lawyer hunched close, whispering again. The lawyer was insistently shaking his head no as Charlie tried to be convincing.

“We’ll agree to her having the first pick of necessary furniture only, to get her started, but only what is *necessary*. But Ms. Bower is insistent upon the master bedroom being unchanged.”

“How on earth could she have a say so in this? She’s a mistress, for God’s sake,” Ed said as he shot upright.

“Well, she really likes the room as-is, thinks it’s pretty and charming,” Charlie said softly, avoiding looking at me.

“Pardon me, but that’s bullshit. Cheaters don’t have a damn choice in it, not in my book,” Ed said, leaning back and crossing his arms again.

I sat a little taller hearing Ed’s forceful tone, saying what I didn’t quite have the courage to voice myself. I nodded my head in silence, and then I leaned over to Ed and whispered in his ear.

Ed glowered at me for a moment, not wanting to cave in this matter. But I couldn’t sleep in that bed. I haven’t since the day I found out Charlie and she already had.

“Mrs. Nobine has *generously* agreed to that, but she requests the dress form and the turquoise dresser.”

“And does she have any other list of demands,” Charlie’s lawyer said with a glare, throwing his pen on the table and crossing his arms.

“My client has demanded nothing up to this point, only what is fair and owed to her. I’ll be damned if I let him and his mistress walk away with everything,” Ed said, an evil, mocking smirk stretching across his wide face as he motioned in Charlie’s direction.

I wanted to stand up and cheer Ed on and then crawl under the table and hide. I just wanted this to be over with, but I didn’t want to be left with nothing either. I really had no idea what I wanted, except getting Charlie back. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to let him walk away with everything if that wasn’t going to happen.

“In addition to what we’ve already discussed, my client has requested a few things, and I don’t see any reason why your party should not agree,” Ed continued.

“What, exactly, is it Mrs. Nobine is requesting then?” Charlie’s lawyer said as he rolled his eyes and started picking at his fingernails.

“My client has compiled a list—”

“A list! What the hell are you—” Charlie said, squeezing the armrests as he sat straight up.

I was completely thrown off by his tone and the strange shift in his gentle face from the soft, apologetic Charlie to this greedy, cheating, angry man across from me. *Did he really expect me to cover away, letting him and Monica drift into the sunset?*

“Yes, a list, Mr. Nobine. Same as Mr. Conner has given to me on your behalf,” Ed said with a raised eyebrow.

Charlie snapped his head around to his lawyer. Mr. Conner nodded, and Charlie slouched in his chair like a pouting brat.

“Mrs. Nobine has been more than generous in what she’s willing to part with—”

“More than generous!” Charlie snapped. “Well, if that isn’t the biggest hunk of—”

“Considering what your client has put her through, I would think he would be a bit more obliging,” Ed said to Charlie’s lawyer. Ed’s pudgy face morphed to a fleshy red, taut and angry. He stood and drove his hand deep into his pocket.

“My client has done nothing erroneous except fall in love,” Mr. Conner said, sliding his chair away from the table. “It’s not his fault he married the wrong woman.”

My eyelids pinched shut. Charlie thought of me as the wrong woman? A waste? My heart crumbled so quickly my chest hurt. I couldn’t seem to get any air into my lungs no matter how deeply I inhaled. My chair became quicksand, pulling me down into the darkness of being a waste.

“What could he possibly want with teapots?” Ed’s screaming drifted into my ears like ringing static. I wanted to blend into the wall, to be transparent, weightless, the definition of a wallflower. *How was it he is the one who cheated and walked away, and my lawyer is having to do the defending? How did my life turn out like this?* Instinct kicked in, detaching myself from this landmark event in my life. My mind floated into an abyss of nothingness, watching the argument unfold in front of me as if staring at a silent movie.

I never expected the meeting to take the turn it did. I didn’t know what expectations, if any, I should carry into the meeting, seeing that the situation was a nightmare come to life. I assumed it would be a cut-and-dry deal. I wasn’t asking for much. I thought Charlie would bow out gracefully, and I would walk away with

meager belongings and try to figure out what the hell happened to my life. After three hours of the lawyers hollering at each other, hurling insults, and Mr. Conner bashing my integrity, it seemed we finally had an agreement.

The final papers were sent to be drawn up and in four weeks, I would be Ms. McGibbins. The maiden name worn with pride for twenty-two years now sounded shameful, like I needed to whisper it, or by using it again, the world would know I screwed up my marriage beyond repair.

I had only three weeks to move out of the home I thought I would never want to leave. I was tempted to throw the keys at Charlie and just be done with it. Be done with him. Forget my clothes, and the items inside I once cherished; it wasn't home anymore. As beautiful as the house was, with its wraparound porch, French doors and walk-out balcony, it was ugly to me now. I spent so much time wondering what rooms Monica had been in, how many of our things she had touched or used. All the cleaning in the world didn't seem to remove the ghost of her presence. Everything felt chilled and violated. *Let her have it*, I thought as I drove home, *it reeks of her now anyway*.

Seven

The sounds that hit me as I opened the door to Mom and Dad's came at me like a wave of loving, chaotic racket. Holly and Mark hollered at the kids to stop running around the table and sit down, while Sam yakked over them telling Daddy a joke from across the table. Mom shouted louder than the pounding chatter, insisting everyone "Sit down and eat before the roast gets cold." The aroma of Mom's signature roast beef, glazed onions, and creamy mashed potatoes danced around my senses as I inhaled. It brought me back to being a girl, when the scent of her love-filled food could soothe any pains of life. Despite the stream of loud voices, clanking silverware, and the rumble of laughter, the rush of clatter enveloped me like a warm embrace.

I walked to the dining room, almost getting knocked over by my nephew, Seth, as I stepped into the doorway.

"Whoa!" I said, smiling as he chased Anna with a forkful of sauerkraut in his hand.

"Eat it! Eat it!" he laughed, not even noticing me as he ran.

"Seth, I said sit down!" Holly said through clenched teeth, glaring and pointing to his empty chair at the kids table.

"Claire, honey!" Mom said as she spotted me lurking in the archway, standing and scooting around everyone to greet me. "Hi, baby. I wasn't sure if you would make it today," she said, pulling me

into her arms. “After that terrible meeting you had the other day, I thought—”

“It’s Sunday brunch. Who misses Sunday brunch?” I said with a smile. I wrapped an arm around her as I walked to my usual chair.

“So what day are you moving again, Claire Bear? Do I need to take time off work?” Sam said, stuffing a chunk of roll in her mouth.

“I’m almost finished packing, but the plan is to move this Friday,” I said, reaching around Holly to grab the gravy boat.

“Now where are you moving to again?” Mom said, dumping potatoes onto Daddy’s plate and wiping her hands on her apron.

“Greenwich. Not too far from here,” Sam said.

“Oh that’s right. A little house, not an apartment, right? I hate the thought of you in some tiny, grungy apartment.”

“You sure you can afford that, Claire?” Daddy said, looking up at me as he hovered over his plate, sliding a forkful of beef into his mouth.

“Of course she can, Daddy,” Holly said.

“It’s a real nice place. You coming to see it on moving day?” Mark asked.

“Being unemployed, I’m not so sure you should be buying a new house, Claire,” Daddy said.

“I’m not unemployed, Daddy, and Charlie bought me out of my share of the house, remember? So I’ve got some cushion to keep me afloat if I need it,” I said, cutting my roast and dipping a piece into the silky gravy.

“But you aren’t working. How are you going to pay bills with no job?” he said, wiping his mouth as he leaned back.

“She’s not unemployed, Daddy. She’s a *consultant* now,” Sam said.

“Yes, remember, dear? Some of those companies from the advertising place left when they found out she wasn’t working there. Now they go to her directly. That’s right, right, Claire?” Mom said to me.

“I work for them on an as-needed basis, a consultant of sorts, yeah.”

“As needed? Sounds like unemployed to me,” Daddy said.

Mom swatted his hand, glared at him, and dumped more potatoes on his plate as her way to shush him.

“Self-employed, Daddy, not unemployed,” Holly said, snapping her fingers and pointing in warning to the kids about to launch rolls at each other.

“Well, I just don’t want you getting behind in bills is all. I want you to be set with money. I worry is all,” Daddy said, his voice cracking as he said *worry*.

Mom rubbed his hand as they shared one of their sweet, loving stares we sometimes saw between them. Daddy stood and excused himself. “Not enough butter set out,” he said, disappearing into the kitchen.

“He worries, you know, about all you kids,” Mom said, watching Daddy over her shoulder before she turned back to us.

“Yeah, we know, Ma,” Holly said and rubbed Mom’s back.

“So, tell me about this new place, Claire,” Mom said, leaning forward to scoop more beef from the platter.

“It’s really cute, Mom. You should see it,” Sam said, glancing at me and smiling.

“Great little neighborhood too. Lots of parks and playgrounds so the kids won’t get bored when she babysits, right, Claire?” Mark said with a grin and nudged my arm with his elbow. “Eh, eh?”

“Does it have a nice yard? It’s a good time to plant bulbs for fall plants, you know,” Mom said.

“Great yard, Mom. You and Daddy should stop by on Friday,” I said, still unable to comprehend that I was moving in less than a week and starting a new life I never wanted.

“The kitchen is super cute too. Small, but sweet like, you know,” Holly said.

“Yeah, and it’s got this like, well, you remember Mrs. Sanford’s old place?” Sam said to Mom. “Well, in the kitchen, next to this pantry looking thing—”

They continued chatting about the new house, and I smiled and nodded as I ate, pretending to listen as their voices swirled around me like a supportive tornado. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the empty chair in the corner, Charlie’s chair. Mom had moved it away from the table to against the wall after she heard the news about his cheating. I suppose it was her mild-mannered way of showing her angst at Charlie’s behavior. It still felt empty without him beside me, arguing about CDs versus stocks with Daddy, and talking with Holly and Mark about a savings bond for the kids. My

eyes started watering; I glanced up at Sam, already watching me. She attempted to smile, to comfort me from across the table.

“Yeah, Mom. Claire is going to do just great,” Sam said to Mom with her eyes still locked with mine, as if she knew that was exactly what I needed.

I nodded and tried not to cry, tried to believe they were right, and I really would be okay. Nothing about this unwanted adventure seemed okay.

“Oh, of course she will, honey,” Mom said to Sam while turning to face me, smiling as she dabbed a napkin to her lips. “You know, I was talking to one of the ladies in my quilting group. Her daughter went through a divorce too, and she’s managing just fine,” Mom said, nodding as she finished talking.

“Lots of people get divorced, Mom. It’s not the fifties anymore,” Sam said and chuckled.

“Well, of course it’s not, dear. I know that,” Mom snickered at Sam. “But this woman, she’s about Claire’s age, and she’s doing great. I guess she doesn’t date much though, but she’s not as pretty as my Claire. But she has one of those...” Mom glanced at the kids, cupped her hands over Anna’s ears, and leaned forward as she whispered, “one of those *mechanical* boyfriends. You know, the things with the batteries. You turn it on, and it—”

Sam choked as she spat her mouthful of water onto the bowl of green beans. I almost gagged on my potatoes, and Mark was already bright red, snorting and biting his lip in near hysterics. Holly slapped him on the arm as she fought back her own giggles. He bit his lip harder and ducked his flushed face down.

“Oh, Mom. Mom, you just didn’t—” Holly said, trying not to laugh.

I covered my mouth and talked through my fingers. “Please, Mom, don’t tell me you’re going to sit here and talk about my sex life at the table.”

“What?” Mom said, truly puzzled by our reaction. “All I’m saying is I know what divorced women can go through these days, and if my friend’s daughter is doing fine, I know my Claire Bear will be just great,” she said, reaching over the table to rub my hand.

I was beyond embarrassed, but I couldn’t fault Mom for not knowing how to relate to divorce and casual sex. Hell, I didn’t know how to relate to it, and I was living it.

I patted her hand and tried to smile. “I know. Thanks Mom.”

“You know, Claire, if you do have one of those mechanical boyfriends, I would appreciate it if you hide it in a box before we help you move,” Sam said and started chuckling at me.

“Dammit Sam.” I laughed and flicked a bite of carrot at her face.

“Girls, now you stop it,” Mom said, shooing her hand at us.

“I leave you kids for five minutes, and look at you,” Daddy said, rejoining us at the table without the extra butter he claimed we needed earlier.

Sam and I had forks heaped with mashed potatoes, cocked back, aimed, and ready to fire.

“Come on now. You’ll get the little ones riled up,” Daddy said with a glare of fatherly warning.

Sometimes I hated the unspoken lifelong commitment to attend Sunday brunch with the family, but today I welcomed the sliver of normalcy. Since my life fell apart, I craved it and clung to any hint of it I could find. Sunday brunch had become my savior, a promise I had somewhere to go where I was accepted as-is, if only one day a week. I could be plain old, regular, Joan Cusak-ish Claire, and that was okay. That was loved.

The day that I both dreaded and welcomed arrived, moving day. And of course, even the weather taunted me as the weatherman reported we were set to hit record highs for the entire weekend. Fabulous. “The entire tri-county area might suffer through rolling blackouts from the amount of air conditioners running,” he ranted on as I drank iced tea. Just past sunrise, the temperature soared to an insufferable 96 degrees. Women throughout the neighborhood didn’t bother with the usual stylish attire accustomed to the area and wore bikini tops and cut-offs.

I opted for a bikini top too and even considered ditching that and moving in the buff. I slid my Michigan baseball cap back on as I took refuge under the elm tree. We must have taken at least eight breaks already, and it was barely lunchtime. Everyone was polite, smiling as they worked and reassuring me they didn’t mind the heat.

“I must be getting fat. I sweat a lot lately,” Mark said, smiling in response to my guilt-ridden grimace as he peeled his sweat soaked t-shirt off.

“No, it’s miserably hot. I’m so sorry,” I said, handing him a glass of ice water.

“It’s fine, Claire,” Holly reassured me. “He’s just getting fat,” she said with a teasing grin as she pinched a barely visible roll at his waist.

I apologized again, but I had no choice but to press on with the move. I had to be out of the house in less than twenty-four hours, or I would be trespassing. My life with Charlie would officially be over in a few hours, making me an intruder on the property I helped buy.

The judge awarded Charlie most of the furniture, but I was permitted to keep most of the ‘stuff’ as Charlie called it. All the trinkets and treasures I found at estate sales and antique malls. Charlie cared so little about them, he didn’t even bother to fake a demand for them in his tangent during our meeting weeks ago. I was allowed first choice of the furniture, as Mr. Conner said I would, and I based my picks by what I thought Monica might not have touched. I couldn’t stand the thought of bringing anything into my new home she might have tainted. With her sleazy touch always on my mind, I mostly found myself in the attic digging through boxes left forgotten for years.

On the day we divvied up our belongings, our lawyers followed us around with packages of stickers. I was red, and Charlie was blue. Whoever was awarded an item put their colored sticker on it, and the lawyers initialed it. I don’t know how I still held love for a man who no longer trusted me with a stack of stickers without his lawyer present. Even so, I did; I would take him back that day if he asked me.

“You want these in the truck or the car?” Sam asked me, holding a box marked kitchen.

“Um, the car. My teapots are in there, so be careful,” I said. I took a step back and surveyed the mostly empty dining room. With my delicate China plates off the walls and in popcorn filled boxes, the cherry wood trim showed its faded age with perfect vacant circles around the room. I let out a big breath, set my hands on my hips and took in the rest of the room. A hand slid onto my shoulder. I turned, saw Holly beside me and tried to return her weak smile.

“It’s going to be fine, Claire. We’ll get you settled in the new place just fine—”

“It looks so naked in here,” I said, putting a hand to my cheek at the barren room.

“Good. Means you got all the good stuff then,” Holly said, playfully squeezing my shoulder.

“We still need to get her laid though,” Sam said, walking toward us and putting a hand on my other shoulder.

“I don’t think she’s worried about that yet, Sam,” Holly said.

“Well, she should be. Don’t want her relying on a mechanical boyfriend or anything,” Sam teased.

I rolled my eyes. “One step at a time,” I said as I tried to laugh.

“It’s all in the truck. Is there anything else? Only have a little room left in there,” Mark said, leaning in the archway.

“No, I think that does it,” I said through a breath.

As I followed Mark through the dining room, I ran my hand along the smooth, oval dining room table. I took my last look at Charlie’s recliner as we moved through the living room. My eyes watered; I could still see him in his paint stained sweat pants, nibbling his bottom lip as he tried to finish the crossword puzzle in the paper. Our engraved silver wedding frame sat in the usual spot on the big oak mantel above the fireplace, the stained glass windows beside it casting a flickering rainbow on his handsome, young image.

I picked up the dress form and my purse and turned to face Mark. “I think that’s everything,” I barely managed.

Mark tugged on my finger and bent to catch my wandering gaze. “We’ll be outside. Take your time.” He wrapped his long arm around my shoulder, giving me a quick squeeze before he went outside.

Sam rubbed my back, slid the dress form from my hands, and headed for the door with Holly in tow. My feet dragged in a slow motion circle in the foyer as I took in the grandeur of the high ceiling, the curvy, cherry banister on the stairs and the ornate checkered tiles underneath my feet. I pulled the house keys from my pocket and ran my thumb over the worn-out silver key. I tried to ignore the burning emptiness. I set the keys on the small table by the door where we always dropped the mail, pausing in the doorway and taking one last look at the beauty of my former life.

“Goodbye Charlie,” I whispered as I shut the door for the last time.

It was after ten o'clock by the time we finished unloading the truck and had the bigger pieces of furniture somewhat situated in the new house. Despite the reasons I needed to buy it, I really did like the small, cottage-looking ranch house close to my parents' place. I kept the antique floral sofas from the downstairs sitting room, the wood rocking chair from the dining room, and bought a set of end tables at a local auction for my new living room.

Holly made Mark rearrange the living room at least six times before we decided to set the smaller sofa kitty-corner by the front window, so I could put the long sofa table behind it. With a few exhausted goodbyes, I watched the vehicles pull out of the driveway, turned around, and took in the mess of my new life. I dragged the rocker to the smaller window next to the fire place, sat down, propped my feet on a box, and ate a piece of cold pizza.

"Welcome home, Claire," I said to myself and raised my soda in the air to toast with no one.

The small windows let the natural light pour in during the daytime, giving the rooms the quaint, homey feel I once had at my old house. When I did my first walk-through with a realtor, I knew I might be able to call this place home. Someday. I was lucky to find a short sale home in this market, and to find one I liked, well, someone must be smiling upon me from above.

My favorite part is the French doors in the kitchen leading out to the backyard filled with so many different flowers I don't know the names of. I tried to imagine sitting in the tiny kitchen, drinking morning coffee as the sun glided over the rainbow of petals. The image feels foreign to me, like I am somehow stuck in some other woman's life.

I finished my pizza and soda, put a Harry Connick Jr. CD in the stereo Mark set up for me and walked into the kitchen. I already missed listening to Jazz bands from the bar by the house.

I heaved a box onto the white tiled counter, ran a knife along the tape, and started digging out my teapots from underneath the balled up newspapers and Styrofoam popcorn. They would look great on top of the whitewashed cabinets here, far better than they looked in the old house. I took a big breath and started unpacking the box. It was time to get settled.

Eight

Late August is my favorite time of the year, warm enough the days still cling to the easygoing air of summer, yet cool enough that people don't hide in their air conditioned homes and forget the beauty of the outside world. The break from the heat offered me the opportunity to scope out my new neighbors and sense what kind of personality my neighborhood held. At times, the change was too much, and I would sit on my small front porch, staring at faces of strangers passing by, too afraid to go inside the cheerless place I now called home.

I told Holly I was homeless. My home had been taken over by another woman, seeping poison of adultery into the beauty and safety it used to bring me, and this new residence I feared would never have the warmth I longed for.

"It just needs window coverings and stuff, you know? Make it yours and all that," she told me. I wondered if I could wallpaper my life; cover up the old with something new, fresh and invigorating, all in one weekend project. I wished change was that superficial.

"This place sucks," I said on the phone.

"That place is great. I'd kill for your closet space," Sam said.

"I'm going to get sucked into a lifetime of depression in here. It's old and ugly. I hate it. You think I can put it back on the market?"

Sam sighed. “You just hate it because it’s *yours*, not yours and Charlie’s.”

“No—” I hated being wrong. “I can’t take this. I’m going to go crazy like this. I bet Charlie hasn’t even thought about me...”

“Claire Bear—”

“I know, I know. Don’t say it.” I stood up, walked to the window, and started picking at chipping paint on the wall. “I really think I hate it here.”

“You like that place and the view in the mornings, remember? You’re just feeling depressed and bitchy. You’re not going to make a habit of this are you? It’s kind of a bummer.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the amber glow draping over my café table in the kitchen. “Yeah, I guess it’s nice in the mornings.”

“See? You like it there.”

“Then why do I feel like I hate it? I look around, and it’s like, ugh.” I curled my lip at the tidy living room. “It makes me pissed off being here.”

“It’s because you didn’t want it. You want what you can’t have anymore.”

“I hate when you’re right. You know that, right?” I said, laughing as I rubbed my temple. “Go change into something sloppy and comfortable. We’re going out.”

“You’re not going to make me try that horseback riding crap again, are you? They’re so smelly, and mine kept pooping everywhere” Sam groaned.

“No,” I chuckled, grabbing my purse and keys off the counter. “We’re going to paint. I have to change something here, or I’m going to lose it and burn the damn house down. Put on some grungy clothes. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

I do remember a time in my life when I practically salivated at the notion of not needing Charlie’s approval when it came to decorating. But marriages growing as they do, I learned to accommodate for his desires, blending his tastes with mine, and doing my best to perfect the art of compromise. Yet peering at the long wall of paint swatches with Sam in the hardware store, not needing his opinion came as just another reminder of my unwanted singlehood status. A table for one, one movie ticket, one car garage, one set of keys hanging by the door. I no longer needed Charlie’s input. I would never again hear that strange breathy grunt when he didn’t like an idea.

Fumbling with the five samples in my hand, the stark realization hit me that, at some point in my marriage, I had become incapable of considering myself or my own opinion.

“What about this? It matches that comforter you bought, doesn’t it?” Sam said, dangling a butter cream swatch in the air. “It’s kinda pretty, don’t you think? Almost iridescent, kind of.”

I bit down on my quivering lip. “I, I don’t know,” I said, a single tear trickling through a crack in my shabby wall of courage.

“Well, what colors are in it? I thought it was a bunch of purples, in the flowers and stuff.”

“It is,” I said, turning back to the huge wall of rainbow choices.

“What about like a gray or something? That might look nice,” she said, pointing to a silver gray. “No, that’s too dark. I like the purples better. What do you think?” she said and slipped the card back into its slot.

“Charlie doesn’t like purple,” I mumbled. I thumbed through the pile of cards in my hand, only able to define Charlie’s preferred color palette. “Do I like purple?” I said, looking back at Sam.

“Don’t all girls like purple?”

Somehow in wanting to please him, I lost my voice, lost my flare and independence. “I don’t even know if I like purple!” I cried, clasp my hand over my mouth as cardstock swatches slipped from my fingers.

Sam instinctively looked behind her to see who might have heard me. All the sets of staring eyes affirmed her fear; everyone had. “Shh. Calm down, Claire Bear.”

“What about this one? Do I like this one?” I said, my hysteric eyes welling up as I held up a swatch of royal blues. “I don’t know!” I laughed and wiped my nose on my sleeve. “What kind of thirty-three year old doesn’t even know what colors she likes?”

“Claire, please,” Sam said through her teeth, glancing back at the onlookers. “Sorry!”

“Charlie would like this one,” I said, grabbing a handful of greens.

“Stop it,” Sam whispered, trying to shove the cards back in the slot and push me toward an area of seclusion.

“And this too,” I cried, reaching around her and yanking out a stack of browns. “He likes tans too. He says it reminds him of nature, and nature is calming,” I said, laughing as tears streamed down my face.

“Would you stop it, please?” Sam said, trying to pry the stack from my hands.

“Don’t you find this calming? It’s like being outside!” The woman beside me jumped as I whipped around and held the overflowing pile of swatches inches from her face.

“Stop it!” Sam shouted and tried to push me away again.

“You, you look like a strong woman,” I hollered over Sam’s shoulder to a woman by the specialty paints. “I bet you know if you like this color,” I cried, dangling a swatch over Sam’s shoulder as she continued to shove me.

“She’s just going through—I’m sorry,” Sam said with a mortified smile. “Go Claire,” she said, her eyes burning with embarrassment.

“And you,” I said, disregarding my humiliated sister and pointing to a couple trying not to laugh at me. “You two stay happy, or this is what happens to you!” I said before caving to Sam’s shoulder pressed into my chest. I turned around and walked to the empty end of the aisle.

“What the hell is your problem? Jesus, Claire,” Sam said, glancing behind her to the stunned crowd still gawking at us.

“All I know is what he likes,” I said, wiping my nose as I raised my watery eyes to hers.

“Yeah, I think I got that part. I think the whole damn store got that part.”

“He would like this one here, see?” I said, squinting to read the name through my tears. “Iceland blue. He would like Iceland blue, because it’s not too dark but not a baby blue.”

“Jesus, get a hold of yourself, Claire,” Sam said, ripping the paint swatch from my hand and throwing it on the floor.

“He was everything to me. Don’t you get it?” I said, flipping through the remaining swatches in my other hand. “I can tell you every single color he would like and why. All of them,” I said and held the stack up to her face. “I don’t even know what colors *I* like. I have no idea who I am without him. Can’t you see that?” I shouted. I collapsed onto a pallet of tarps and started crying into my hands.

“Oh Claire Bear,” Sam said, crouching to her knees and rubbing my heaving shoulder.

“I totally lost myself in him.” I wiped my eyes, turned away, and shook my head. “I, I have no idea who I am,” I said, raising my eyes to Sam. “Isn’t that pathetic?”

“We’ll make it easy okay?”

“Ha, right,” I said as I laughed. “Easy. Look at me.” I looked down at the paint samples scattered on my lap and the floor around me. My sleeve was covered in wet eyeliner and snot. “I’m a mess. I can’t do this,” I breathed and wiped my eyes again.

“Yes, you can. Watch this.” Sam picked up the pile of swatches I had dropped on the ground and held one up in front of me. “Now look,” she said. “It’s yes or no only.”

I raised my bloodshot eyes to the card.

“Is this pretty?” she said, pointing to the first color on the swatch.

I shook my head, not even thinking as I reached and blew my nose on the tarp sample dangling from the shelf beside me.

“Good. We don’t like that one,” Sam said, then slid her finger to the next color. “Is this pretty?”

I sniffled and cleared my throat. “It matches my new comforter,” I said, wiping the mascara from under my eyes. “The little swirly part of it, remember?” I said, taking a breath as I sat up straighter.

“I think it would look great, don’t you?” Sam said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“I, I guess so,” I said, taking the swatch from her hand. “Lilac,” I said, reading the name to myself. “Lilacs are pretty.”

Sam stood and held a hand out for me. “See? You’ve picked out a color for your bedroom all by yourself. A color *Claire* likes.”

I tried to chuckle, my blushed cheeks attempting to smile. “Okay,” I said and took a deep breath. “The living room too. I need a color for there?” My statement sounded like a question from a petrified child as I looked at her with bewilderment. It now escaped me what I hated about my house and what needed to be changed. Maybe I did like it the way it is, only I didn’t know it?

“Well, it’s kinda small in there. You don’t want to go too dark, or it’ll look even smaller, I think,” Sam said, wrapping her arm around mine as we bravely walked back to the rows of paint swatches.

I tried to ignore the people watching me. *They must think I am a complete lunatic who’s just had a nervous breakdown in the paint department.*

“Um, you know what looks nice?” My hesitant voice cracked as I spoke. “When one wall is different, an accent wall. Is that what they call it?” I said, a shaking breath escaping me as I attempted to muster confidence.

“That would look nice. Good idea! See, we got this,” Sam said, winking at me as she bumped me with her hip.

I nodded. “Alright, I, I can do this.”

As I sifted through soft hues of peaches and yellows, I imagined the manager printing my picture from security cameras onto a flyer, warning employees about letting me on the premises again. But I managed to triumph over the small hurdle of my first big decisions as a single woman, slowly weeding through colors, forgetting entirely what my Charlie might have to say about them. I reminded myself Charlie had no say-so. This was not Charlie’s house.

My meltdowns ate up most of the afternoon. Not a single paint brush touched a wall that day, but with the tower of paint cans on my coffee table, I dared to feel proud about the small achievement. Sam dutifully came over every day that week and helped me rid my house of the old lady wallpaper and outdated colors. I don’t think I would have survived taping off the windows without using her love of change as a crutch to cling to.

I’m not quite sure why, perhaps it was lingering remnants from my hardware store breakdown or maybe it was the fragment of sanity left in my subconscious urging me toward the excitement of a fresh start, but I chose a pastel yellow for the tiny kitchen. Normally when I saw yellow, I only thought of baby nurseries or marshmallow peeps, but against the white cabinets and the dotting of color from my teapots, I couldn’t help feeling happy in the quaint space.

I folded up the last tarp, tucked it into the hall closet, and went to refill my coffee in the kitchen. I decided to drink my coffee on the back porch, to take in the tranquility of life before the world started to stir. I took a purposeful sip while listening to the rustling leaves and the slow chirping from the sparrows chattering on the waving branches above the azaleas. I could lose hours sitting there, watching the sun drape itself over the garden-like yard.

I curled up on the blue rocking chair, hung a leg over the armrest, and blew on the steaming coffee cup. The moment of not thinking, just breathing, vanished as I tugged on my waistband to free the inch-thick roll oozing out of my shorts. I poked the squishy, extra belly insulation, watching it engulf my fingertip. Even if I didn't have Charlie to look good for anymore, I needed to ditch my new boyfriends, Ben & Jerry, and start caring again.

I eyed the mound of take-out containers in the trashcan by the shed as I bent to slip my sandals on, the roll getting pinched between my legs and waistband. "That's it," I said, kicking the trashcan as I walked by it, intent on shopping for real food that came from a place that didn't have a drive-thru window.

A nice stir-fry with fresh vegetables for dinner is a good start. Maybe I could swing by Sam's and see if she would keep me company for dinner, I thought, as I scanned my barren kitchen cabinets, my grocery list growing to two pages long.

I thought eating alone would be the easy part of being divorced. It's just eating. People eat alone or not. It's just a meal, something we do to replenish our body. Yet my routine the past few months had become sitting in silence, poking my microwave dinners with a fork, thinking only of where my marriage went wrong and why Charlie didn't allow me the chance to fix it before he deserted me.

I sucked in my gut, looking at my reflection of how my body used to look, and then let out a breath as my belly popped out.

"Real food. I can't do this to myself anymore," I said, grabbing my purse.

I was hunched over the grocery cart at Gordon's Market, eating a few green grapes as I wandered through the fresh spices section trying to find the basil.

"Did I miss it?" I whispered to myself, looking behind me as I walked. The halting bang of metal on metal made my stomach slam into the cart's handle.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, turning and hoping I hadn't crashed into some frail old woman and broken her arm. That would suit my luck these days.

"It's quite all right—"

“Oh—God...” I said, suddenly weak and without air to breathe as panic squeezed my heart. *Stay cool. Look casual*, I thought, brushing my bangs to the side in an easy motion.

“Claire, hi. You, uh,” Charlie mumbled and rubbed the back of his neck. “You look really good.”

Of course I would run into him when I looked like I had just rummaged through a thrift store bargain bin. The cuff of my Army green shorts were ripped and hanging on my dimpled thighs, the straps on my tank top fuzzy from too many washings, and my halfhearted ponytail dangled underneath a white bandana. Why don't I ever run into someone when I look good? That's just cruel.

“Uh, thank you?” I said as I sucked in my stomach a little tighter.

“So, uh, are you, do you live around here now?” he said, bending over as he rested his elbows on the grocery cart and wearing his easy smile I tried so hard to forget.

I felt myself starting to flush. I pretended to straighten items in my grocery cart that toppled over to give myself a second to breathe. He looked good; his biceps looked more defined, filling the sleeves in his t-shirt. Rugged and sexy, I almost reached out to remember the feel of his stubbly cheeks.

“Sort of. I'm in Greenwich now, but Gordon's has—”

“The best produce, right?” Charlie said with a smile. He kept sliding a hand in his pocket, only to pull it back out, rub the back of his neck, and chuckle at nothing.

“Yeah,” I said and tried to laugh. I realized then, as hurt as I still was and the nights I wasted crying about being a failure, I hadn't really thought about Charlie in weeks. I didn't know whether to feel happy or sad about forgetting him.

“Good. I'm glad you're in a decent part of town. I was worried—” he tugged on the brim of his baseball cap.

Worried? Maybe he does still think about me? “Um, Charlie, I was thinking, about us,” I said, clearing my throat and trying to focus on the thoughts whirling in my head. “You know, we never, well we didn't—”

“Claire, listen,” he said, glancing to his right again with an uneasy look. He leaned closer to me, still looking over his shoulder. “I've wanted to tell you—” he said as he craned his neck around the corner of the aisle.

“Is everything all right?” I asked, stretching to see what he was staring at.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Just, uh—”

“Honey, I found it,” Monica said, waddling around the corner of the aisle. She looked gorgeous; her olive skin had a golden, glowing sheen. She held a bag of freshly baked bread against her rounded, plump, baby-filled belly as she walked toward Charlie.

There was that feeling again, that sucker punch to the gut when you have just gotten your footing. How stupid of me to think we would have this grand reconciliation in the middle of a grocery store, when he was only trying to hide me from his pregnant girlfriend.

“Oh, Claire, hello,” she said, stepping closer to Charlie and wrapping a hand around his arm like a cat claiming her territory. The diamond on her ring twinkled as she rubbed her stomach and cocked her head wearing a victorious smirk. My throat swelled up as I stared at the stunning ring.

“Well, I should be—” I said, nodding to nowhere behind me, hoping I didn’t stink of defeat.

“Oh...yeah,” Charlie said. His smile sagged, and he rubbed the back of his neck again. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“We should be getting on, honey. We need to get ready for the shower,” she said, smiling as she leaned closer and hugged her arm tighter around his.

He readjusted his baseball cap and said, “It’s nice seeing you again, Claire. You look really good.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled through an awkward chuckle, smiling as I nodded goodbye. I whipped my cart around and tried not to run.

“Claire!” he said, hesitantly raising his arm.

I spun around, hoping my skin wasn’t showing the flush I felt on my hot cheeks. “Yeah?”

Monica cleared her throat and tapped the face of her watch in front of him

“Well, I uh...I guess I’ll see you around?” he said, his eyes locked on mine.

They weren’t my Charlie’s eyes anymore; I couldn’t see what he was trying to tell me without saying anything.

My look shifted around for a second, trying to make sense of him. “Yeah, maybe. Goodbye, Charlie,” I said. “Monica...” nodded as I begged my feet to not break into a sprint.

“Take care. Claire,” he said, raising his hand in a half wave.

I walked a few aisles over, sure I was out of sight before I stopped and pressed a hand to my chest. My heart pounded beneath my fingertips. I scrambled to find the phone in my purse and sent Sam a text as I practically jogged to the checkout line. *At least I'm getting a workout in.* I kept glancing over my shoulder as I waited, praying the cashier would finish my order fast enough so I wouldn't get stuck with Charlie and Monica behind me in line. I considered ditching my cart and running to the car.

"So was he like happy and crap to see you? I bet that bitch hated seeing you," Sam said, pouring wine as I sat at her kitchen table.

"I honestly have no idea," I said, taking a glass.

"Of all the things to happen right?"

"It was so weird," I said with a shiver. "My stupid heart still fluttered, still melted at his dumb smile. But the only thing I wanted to do was to run away. Isn't that weird?"

"It's good, I guess," Sam said, kicking her heels off and propping her feet onto an empty chair. "You know, sort of means you're healing pretty good, right?"

I shrugged and took a sip of wine. "Maybe. I don't know if you call this healing or denial."

"Probably both."

"It's like he was going to tell me something, but I don't—"

"Yeah, he was gonna say he got his bitch knocked up."

I rolled my eyes. "Probably." I sipped my wine and set the glass down. "It didn't feel like I was talking to my Charlie, I couldn't figure out if he was glad to see me."

"You have to stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?"

"Stop calling him *my* Charlie like that. It's not right."

"I—I didn't realize I—" I said, hanging my head and nibbling my bottom lip.

"He's not your Charlie anymore, Claire Bear," she said, leaning forward and nudging my finger. "And you're not his Claire. You're your own Claire now. You have to let go, you know," she said, sitting back and propping up her feet again. "Don't let him have that kind of power over you."

“I know. I, I don’t want to hold onto him anymore I don’t think. I didn’t realize until I saw him, but—” I looked in her eyes. “I mean, I’m doing pretty good though, right? I’m doing all right on my own. Only a few meltdowns.”

“I still haven’t been back to that store!” she said as she laughed.

I started to forgive myself as she smiled. I laughed with her and took my first real breath in months. “Neither have I.”

“God, what a crazy woman.” She winked as she laughed at me.

“Listen, I have to get home before the milk gets warm. You want to come over and have some dinner? I’m thinking stir-fry.” I said as I finished my wine and slid my purse over my shoulder.

“As long as you don’t put any funny vegetables in there that I can’t pronounce. You know, don’t make it *too* healthy,” she said, standing and putting our glasses in the sink. “Oh, and you have to dye my hair after.”

“Again? Didn’t you just change it last month?” I said, flicking off her kitchen light.

“I like change. What can I say?” She grabbed her purse on our way to the door. “I want to go like super deep red, like what’s-her-face from *My So-Called Life*. You remember that show?”

“Sam, really? Aren’t we getting kind of old for that? Is this like a pre-midlife crisis or something?”

“I know, crazy, right? I love it,” she said with wide, mocking eyes. “So are you going to that old lady meet-n-greet thing this week Mom was talking about?” Sam asked as she fastened her seatbelt.

“That thing at the Senior Center?”

“Yeah, ceramic show or some junk right?”

“I promised Holl I’d come watch Seth’s baseball game. They made it to the playoffs, did you know?”

“God, I hate you. She suckered me into it,” Sam said, scrunching low as she crossed her arms.

Sam came over before the game, insisting I primp myself like a Barbie doll and wasting two hours of preparation to look as if I had just stepped out of the house on a whim, gorgeous and casual.

“You never know who will be there, you know,” she said, thumbing through my dismal wardrobe. “I mean, there could be

some hot divorced guys there. Their weekend with the kids kind of thing.”

I neglected to mention that I had no idea how to prowl anymore. God only knows what kind of tips she might give me if I slipped about my nonexistent game.

All I wanted was to talk to Holly, my sweet, sensible sister, about what Charlie might have been trying to say to me the other day at the store. Maybe he did miss me, maybe he did regret his decision. But as I drove to the baseball field, running over ways to bring up the subject without seeming a desperate, wounded woman, the idea of having Charlie back didn't have the glimmer I thought it would. *Did I really want him back anymore?*

I thought Sam asinine for even mentioning using Seth's game as a chance for an impromptu singles mingle, but as I sat with Holly, I scanned the faces around me on the bleachers. Even though Charlie was engaged with a baby on the way, I felt guilty for looking.

“Come on, Seth. You can do it, baby!” Holly screamed toward the field and then halfway turned her head toward me. “So, Mom told me you haven't been out at all, you know, like a date?”

I sighed and leaned back, resting my elbows on the row behind me. “Why does everyone keep asking me that? Why is everyone in such a rush about this but me?”

“Because it'd be good for you, that's why. That's what people do when they're single,” she said. “That's it. Run, baby!” she yelled as she stood, clapping as Seth rounded first base.

I stood and cheered, smiling as little Seth stomped onto second base and waved to us as he brushed off his pants. “I wasn't exactly good at dating to begin with. You remember my date with that Alec guy my junior year?”

“God, I forgot about that!” She laughed and raised a hand to her mouth. “What a disaster. I can't believe you told him he'd be cute without the unibrow.”

“It's mortifying the shit that came out of my mouth.”

“You did have an awful lot of first dates,” Holly said with a grin.

“See? My point exactly. I suck at dating. I always say something stupid and get flustered. I don't get why you guys suddenly think it's a good idea.”

“Bad at it or not, you can't keep going on like this,” Holly said as we sat back down.

“That’s why Charlie and I were so good together. We both sucked at dating, but we were good together.”

Holly glared at me, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay, I *thought* we were good together. I don’t see how people think dating will fix things for me.”

“It’s not about fixing really. But you got this like big depressing doom and gloom cloud hanging over you all the time. It’s terrible seeing you.”

“Gee, Holl, I love you too.”

“Shut up. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a wave of my hand. I leaned back again and blew my bangs out of my face. *Am I really that depressing and lonely?* “You don’t think— am I going to become like the crazy cat lady? Talking to people who aren’t there with ninety-five cats running around my house?” I said, gaping as I turned to face her.

“Well—” Holly shrugged.

“But, dating, really?” I said with a contorted face.

“Yes, *dating*,” she said, opening her eyes as she stressed the word.

“I’m so bad at it. My laugh turns into this horrible cackle, I giggle like an idiot, and I can’t even tell if a guy is flirting with me,” I said, grimacing at my lackluster player skills. “And don’t you think it’s too early for all that? I mean, it’s only been a couple of months really.”

“Hell no, it’s not too early. Aside from today, when’s the last time you didn’t wear your sweats? You know, like how you used to dress?” she said as she tugged on my spaghetti strap sundress.

I grimaced; I couldn’t even remember if I ever unpacked my skirts. “Wow, this is kind of bad,” I said, slinking lower. I hated the idea of becoming the frumpy divorced lady, the type I used to pity as I moved about through my happy married days. “Right, dating. I should date,” I said, nodding with wide, apprehensive eyes.

“Things have changed a lot since you dated. It’s not as complicated anymore,” she said, stuffing a piece of gum into her mouth.

“Says the married woman.” I stuck my tongue out at her. “And unless it’s changed meaning it’s now acceptable to be a dating moron, then I’m still in trouble.”

“There’s lots of good websites now for that sort of thing—”

“Websites? You think I’m that much of a lost cause?”

“Oh, shut up. That’s how people do it now,” she laughed. “Sam loves it—”

“Of course she does. All she has to do is block an email address after she’s slept with a guy.”

“No, well maybe, but that’s not the point. It gives you a chance to sort of check a guy out before you waste your best lip gloss or sit in some stupid bar praying anyone talks to you. You can look for the kind of guy you really want without all that crap.”

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for in a guy. I haven’t had to think about that since I met Charlie,” I said, staring at my feet. Maybe she would understand it more if she knew I still reached to put my wedding ring on after I showered.

“You can’t stay cooped up in your house all the time. It’s not healthy,” she said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out some money. “You have to get out and live a little.”

“I do live,” I said, glaring at her with a smile as I crossed my arms on my chest.

“Come on, lets get a hotdog,” she said, pulling my arm as she stood.

We weaved our way around parents as we climbed down the bleachers and walked toward the concession stand.

“Listen, working on furniture like you do is great and all that, but it’s not really living. It’s a hobby,” Holly said, wrapping her arm around mine as we walked around coolers and lawn chairs. “You have to go out and see people, other than our weird family and the checkout lady at the grocery store.”

Kids bounced in line in front of us, tugging on their parents’ sleeves and begging for ice cream and cotton candy. We heard cheering behind us. We turned to see if it was Seth running for home plate.

“It will be good for you, Claire, and maybe even a little fun,” Holly said, craning her neck above the crowd behind us.

“Fun? You think this will be fun?” I glared. “And I do see people. I have clients.” I knew how pathetic my defense sounded.

“Clients are not people. Clients are clients.”

“All right, I get it,” I said. “I’m stuck in the past, I get it.”

“I poke fun, but I know it’s scary. I couldn’t imagine dating again.”

“It’s beyond scary. I’m probably going to throw up on the poor guy,” I said, digging money out of my pocket. “Two dogs and Cokes, please,” I said to the cashier.

“Just think of it as a chance to do all the stuff you always wanted to do.”

“Knock stuff off my bucket list, huh?” I grinned.

“Something like that, yeah.”

I drummed my fingers on my chin. “What I want to do. I don’t even know what that means.” I turned to face Holly. “You did hear about my experience picking out paint, right?”

Holly cringed and nodded. “Not your best day. I’ll give you that.”

I let out a deep breath as I pulled out a stack of napkins from the dispenser. “Well, I guess it can’t hurt anything, right? Maybe it could be fun?” I said with a shrug and an abysmal attempt at optimism. I was nothing like Sam. Even when we were kids and I should have been teaching her about flirting, she taught me. I had no idea how to woo a man, obviously, because my husband left me for another woman. That’s about as anti-woo as a woman can get.

“That’s the spirit!” Holly laughed as she smacked my back.

I rolled my eyes as I wobbled on my feet. “What do I have to do for these website things to find Mr. Right?”

“You set up a profile and stuff. It’s easy, I guess. Even my librarian does it. I’ll call Sam. She knows all the good ones.”

“Great. Advertise myself. I should take out a billboard too.”

“Oh, stop it,” Holly said, swatting my arm.

“Look, desperate dating dunce over here!” I said, waving my arms in the air.

“Shut it,” Holly laughed and pulled my arms down. “It will be fun, you’ll see.”

“Uh huh, fun...” I said, glaring at her as we stepped over to the pick-up window.

Nine

I busied myself in the kitchen, scrubbing already clean counters and making margaritas before my sisters arrived to throw me into the pits of online dating. I thought about Mom's pep talk earlier in the afternoon as I folded the dish towel. *Maybe it won't be too bad*, I thought. *Not as glorious as mom thinks though*. She dove headfirst into her best motherly talk, giving the whole mom-like spiel about how any man would be lucky to have me and how there would be more men contacting me than I knew what to do with. I chuckled to myself. *Maybe it will be like the commercials, all ooey gooey and romantic?* I laughed out loud as I reached for the margarita glasses. "Don't count on it," I said to myself.

"Hey, Claire Bear!" Sam hollered as she walked in the living room.

"I'm in the kitchen."

"God, with the day I've had, I really need one of those," Sam said, nodding at the mixed margaritas as she plopped into a chair at the table.

"That bad, huh? What happened?" I asked, dipping the rim of a glass in salt.

"I hope you didn't go anywhere looking like that," Sam said, tugging on my baggy t-shirt.

I looked down at my paper-thin Tom Petty t-shirt. "What? This won't win me Mr. Right? Aw, darn," I said, smiling as I posed

for her. “You really think I’m that stupid?” I added, filling her glass and handing it to her. “So, what happened?”

“I was supposed to have a lunch date with this amazing guy. He’s so sexy. Dark hair, dark eyes, an Italian guy,” she said, unbuttoning her collar and sipping her drink. “Or maybe Jewish?” She wrinkled her nose as she tapped a finger to her chin. “Greek? I don’t know, but he has amazing jet black hair.”

“You even know his name?” I teased, smacking her with my wound up dish towel.

“I know. I’m terrible,” she laughed. “Anyway, I didn’t go because I got stuck going to lunch with my boss and this sleazeball client of his. I mean, you know I love attention from men,” she said, as she slouched. “But *that* man, ugh,” she said with a shiver. “I feel like I need a shower. He must have mentally undressed me in record time. The perv!”

“Where is everyone?” Holly said from the living room.

“We’re coming,” I said as Sam and I gathered the glasses and pitcher in our hands. I leaned in and hugged Holly with my free arm.

“So, let’s get you set up!” she said, winking at me as she sat on the sofa and turned on my laptop.

“I’m still not sure about this, guys,” I said, putting a hand on my cheek and letting out a sigh. “I mean, do you really think I’m ready?”

“I do it all the time. Its no big deal, really,” Sam said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’m on at least four sites right now, maybe five?” Sam nudged Holly with her hip to scoot over.

“But you love dating and casual sex. You practically buy condoms in bulk,” I said and sat between them.

“And you’re kind of a prude. What’s your point?” Sam said, licking salt off her glass as she eyed me.

“I am not!” I laughed.

“Oh, God, you two,” Holly laughed. “It’s like being with my kids. Now shush. Here we go.” Holly nodded to the laptop and slid it over to Sam.

We leaned in and watched Sam’s fingers dance across the keyboard, bringing up websites and clicking through sign-up forms faster than I could read what was on the page.

“So, here,” Sam said, pointing at the screen. “Pick up to five of your favorite activities.”

I scanned the list as I reached for a glass. “Um, I guess crafts, reading, movies. What was that other menu? Scroll up again.”

“God, boring!” Sam said. “Liven it up a little. Put like skydiving and crap like that,” she said, already clicking on activities you couldn’t pay me to try.

“Wait, stop! Skydiving? Are you out of your mind? Uncheck that!” I said, turning to her.

“I think the point is to meet someone she wouldn’t hate dating. She’s bad enough at it as it is,” Holly said to Sam.

“Holly, you’re supposed to back me up—”

“I am!”

“Look, if I’m going through this nonsense because *you* think I’m ready, then it’s going to be on *my* terms. Got it? To find someone who likes *me*. Not some skydiving nymphomaniac that I’ll never be,” I said while giving them my best glare. “Got it?” I said again, this time flicking Sam’s ear.

“Ow! All right, all right. Jeez, you guys really are no fun,” Sam said, rubbing her red earlobe.

One pitcher of margaritas into this online dating adventure, and things started to fall into place. We clicked from page to page, picking my likes and dislikes, favorite movies, books, and quotes. I began to think maybe this dating business might not be so bad after all. And like a smack to the face the momentary fun vanished as Sam clicked to the next page. We had reached it; the dreaded empty box where I describe myself with real words and no checkboxes. We sat in silence, staring at the blinking cursor on the screen. We finished our drinks and refilled them again while the blank box continued to mock me.

“There really isn’t multiple choice for this part?” I said, desperately hitting the back button.

“Oh come on. Claire’s a great girl. It’s not that hard,” Holly said, sliding the laptop off Sam’s lap and onto hers. “This is easy.”

Easy, I thought, watching the little box remain empty.

“She’s badass in that dork kind of way. Can we put that in?” Sam said.

“I don’t know. Can we?” Holly said. They looked at me in unison.

“Um, well, I—”

Sam looked at Holly, Holly looked at Sam, and I turned and looked at them both.

“Am I really that terrible we can’t think of anything appealing to say?” I said, slouching on the sofa and crossing my arms. “Not even a single paragraph? It’s no wonder Charlie left me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sam said and nodded at the keyboard for Holly to start typing. “Sweet, girl next door type. I like antiques and spending time outdoors. I enjoy being with my family, silly comedies, quiet Sundays, and warm arms to cuddle in,” she said with a firm nod.

“Really?” I said, curling my lip at the small generic paragraph. “That sounds horrible. I wouldn’t even want to date me. Am I really that transparent?”

“Hey, you guys don’t like my ideas, so…” Sam said, raising her hands like a submitting criminal.

“It’s great. Don’t worry,” Holly said. “Now,” she gave a reassuring wink and clicked to continue. “What are you looking for in a partner?”

“Um, well—” Dates with Charlie poured into memory. I loved his simple nature, his weird hatred of spontaneity, and the tiny gestures of romance. I opened my mouth to speak, but as visions of our relationship clawed at my heart, it hit me. Turning to those traits simply out of familiarity would only be seeking out a carbon copy version of Charlie. I didn’t want a replacement. I wanted something genuine, a relationship I wouldn’t get lost in. But the realization brought me no closer to answering the question. What do I want? “Someone who won’t cheat and leave after six years of marriage?” I said with a shrug.

“Aw, Claire Bear,” Sam said, wrapping an arm around my back. “Forget that bastard. We’re done with him.”

“Absolutely. He was never good enough for you anyway. I’m glad he left,” Holly said.

I tried to use their encouragement to smother the pitiful panic inside my head. I cleared my throat and shivered the memories off me. “Well, how about this…”

All that was left was to upload a photo, and my fancy new profile was complete. I picked a photograph from a vacation in Vegas. I was sitting by a fountain, talking with an older woman while I rested my feet from walking down the strip all day. She was telling

me how she went to Vegas every year to see Wayne Newton with her girlfriends. She was in the middle of a story about how one of the women faked a heart attack as a diversion so a friend could snip a lock of Wayne's hair without security noticing. I laughed so hard thinking of these tiny, frail women causing such a scene for a few pieces of hair I almost fell in the fountain. The woman in the photo was giggling from her toes like a child; she was the Claire I wanted to be again. Alive, colorful, and smiling. Free.

We uploaded the photo, and a big 'Congratulations' box appeared on the screen. *Congratulations, Claire. Your marriage failed*, I thought.

Sam closed the big box. "Here's the fun part," she said, almost salivating as the page filled with my potential matches. Sam, being true to her carefree, casual sex nature, made her top picks based on how attractive the men were. The details of his personality were of no importance to her. Dates were just a precursor to sex.

Holly, being the sensible older sister, focused more on finding a good match for me and paid more attention to their characteristics. I, on the other hand, had no idea what I wanted in a man, and seeing how Brad Pitt was still married, I was out of ideas.

"I like Robert Downing Jr. He was really good in Ironman. Can we find someone that looks like that?" I asked.

"What about this one?" Holly said, pointing to a tanned brunette with a neatly trimmed goatee. "He's cute, right?" she said, looking at Sam for approval. "And he has a lot of similar likes and stuff as you," she said, turning to me.

"He's pretty good, I guess. Nice eyes," Sam said. "Here, wink at him." Sam grabbed the laptop from Holly and clicked a winking smiley face.

"Wait! What did you just do?" I said, snatching the computer from Sam.

"I winked."

"What the hell is a wink?"

Sam laughed as if I were a moron. "It's like real winking, Claire. Calm down," she said patting my knee. "Just getting their attention without having to actually say anything yet. That's all."

"It's probably the best way for you to go at first," Holly said, in agreement with Sam.

“He’ll check out your profile when he logs on. If he likes it, he’ll send you a message,” Sam said, reaching around me for the pitcher of margaritas.

“It saves you torturing yourself with an opening letter,” Holly said, holding up her glass for Sam to fill it. “You don’t quite seem ready for that,” she said, eyeing my stare of panic.

“Or some stupid rejection reply,” Sam added as she raised her glass to her lips.

“I don’t know how the hell you guys got me to agree to this,” I said, filling my own glass and taking three huge gulps.

Sam laughed. “You’ve dated before. This just skips those awkward intros you’re so bad at. Or you know, getting all dolled up to meet some putz at a bar.”

“Uh oh!” Holly said as she shot forward toward the laptop. “He winked back already!” she said, extending her arm and giving Sam a high-five.

“Score!” Sam said. “Just wait. He’ll send you a message.”

“Really? He winked already?” I said, leaning forward to look at my Overview page. “Well...maybe I’m not half bad after all, huh?” I said with a confident nod.

With the first few winks under my belt, I welcomed the hint of confidence churning in me. I even took the laptop from Sam and set it on my lap as we went through and winked at a few more men.

After Holly and Sam helped me sort through my potential matches on a few more websites, we said our goodbyes, and I started to clean up. There was something about drinking with my sisters that gave us all the munchies. It’s lucky for our hips we didn’t do it that often. We managed to devour the Nutter Butters and an entire box of Ho Hos in the few hours they were here. I closed the laptop, tucked it into the bag, picked up the last wrapper from the floor, and headed to the kitchen. “What a night,” I whispered to myself.

I rinsed the glasses and the pitcher, leaned against the sink, and rested my palms on the counter. The laptop sat on the sofa. I bit my bottom lip while staring at it and drummed my fingers on the counter. I chuckled at myself. “It would be stupid to check it already,” I said, waving a shooing hand at my living room and turning back around. I didn’t want to succumb to desperation and spend the night continually hitting refresh in hopes that someone, anyone, would send me a message. It surprised me, this weird rumble of

excitement and fear about whether or not a message waited for me. I thought of the movie *You've Got Mail* and now understood completely what Meg Ryan meant when she said, 'You've got mail. Those are powerful words.'

I looked around, checking to ensure my empty house wasn't hiding anyone who would see me turning on the laptop. I settled on the sofa, took another look around, and then started at the first website I registered on. I logged in, nibbling my lip as my heart thudded twenty beats faster. The page seemed to take forever to load. Impatient, I hit 'refresh' twice.

"Two messages!" I said, raising my fists in victory.

I slid the laptop onto my lap as I leaned back, propped my feet on the coffee table, and clicked on the inbox.

I wedged my cell phone between my cheek and shoulder, trying to balance the Styrofoam cup of coffee in my elbow as I rummaged through my purse. "We ended up sending a few messages to each other," I said to Sam on the phone with my purse strap between my teeth, finally fishing out the keys to my car.

"Is he cute? He's the one that looked like Tom Cruise, right? You think you like him?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, cringing as I climbed in my car. "He's cute. Not really my type, I think. But I don't know if I have a type."

"Well, there's something about him, or you wouldn't be talking to the guy, you know."

She sounded winded. "Are you busy? You want me to let you go?"

"I'm just trying to get out of the damn warehouse. These guys are such pervs. He sounds like a nice guy, huh? Kind of like the guy in Accounting I slept with once."

"Is there anyone at work you haven't slept with?" I laughed.

"I know, right? Maybe that's why the women here hate me? Anyway, this guy, nice?"

"Nice enough, I guess. He's an English teacher I think, so he must like kids at least."

"That's cool. A guy who would want kids!" she said, talking at a normal volume and calmer than a moment ago.

“Even though I told Charlie it was okay that we never tried, I really want to have a baby, you know. Maybe it’s that biological clock thing—”

“God, I hope mine never does that!”

“I think it’s kind of like—”

“Have you guys set up a date or anything yet?”

“Actually, yeah,” I said, unsure if it was excitement or sheer terror twisting my stomach. I had a hard time convincing myself being single again was somehow a good thing. It still felt like big, fat failure to me.

“And you just now called me! Claire, shame on you! When are you meeting him?”

“Friday. We’re going to have dinner at that new seafood place I was telling you about.”

“That’s great! Holl and I will come help you get ready.”

“Thank God! I was going to ask anyway,” I said and let out a breath of relief. “I have no idea what I’m supposed wear, or do even.”

“Of course you do. You’re beautiful and always have been. Just be yourself.”

“Thanks, Sam,” I said, grateful for the self-esteem boost but no less terrified.

“Listen, you want to grab lunch? I really need to get out of here today,” she said.

“Sorry. On my way to meet with a potential client, and after that I’m heading over to a temp agency.”

“Oh so you are going to get an assistant then?”

“I’m going to look into it. I’m getting swamped with work.”

“I’ll just come over later if that’s cool?”

“You know where the keys are,” I said with a smile, hanging up and trying to focus on the meeting ahead.

Ten

I sat waiting for my personal dating task force to come save me from my utter confusion and horror. I fidgeted with magazines on the coffee table, my legs crossed, and my foot shaking so fast and hard I imagined it soaring across the room. Then I would be forced to go on this damn date footless. My sisters lived about twenty minutes from me, but I swear I had been waiting over an hour.

Sam threw the front door open, posing as she announced, “Have no fear, Claire Bear. We’re here!”

“Jesus, what took you guys so long?” I said as I bolted up from the footstool.

“You’re a nervous wreck. Look at you,” Holly said, setting down a duffle bag and pulling me into her arms. She would kill me if I ever told her how much she reminded me of Mom when she hugged like that.

“We had to go back to Holly’s. *Someone* just *had* to get a certain perfume,” Sam said, turning to mock Holly as she put a hand on her hip.

“What? It’ll be perfect for tonight,” Holly said and stuck her tongue out at Sam.

“I do not have the sanity to deal with bickering right now. Let’s focus on the spastic sister for a second,” I said as I nibbled off my last long nail.

“Don’t worry, Claire Bear. It’s just dinner. What’s in a dinner right?” Sam said, not looking at me as she thumbed through the pile of clothes draped over her arm. “I’ve brought the sexy stuff, and Holl brought the smell good stuff.” Sam stuck her tongue out at Holly.

Holly dismissed Sam with a roll of her eyes. “Okay, girl, project perfection is a go!” Holly threw the duffle bag back over her shoulder.

“Project perfection?” I said. Both Sam and I turned to Holly with raised brows.

“Sorry. Too much time with people who eat with bibs on, I think,” Holly said, cringing at herself.

“I blame Mark,” Sam said. “He’s sucked the coolness right out of her.”

“Fine, I’ll just take the bag of—”

“No, no! Let’s not get crazy. Call it whatever you want. Please don’t leave me,” I said, grabbing the strap as she halfheartedly turned to leave.

“Oh, all right. Come on. Let’s get you ready,” Holly said and wrapped an arm around my shoulder as we turned toward the hallway.

After an hour of rummaging through Sam’s filled duffle bag and raiding my closet, my bedroom resembled the aftermath of a wild beast let loose in my room for days.

Sam insisted I wear her dark wash skinny jeans. “They’re all the rage right now. I can’t believe you didn’t know that.”

“Aren’t these, like, the same thing as tapered jeans that Holly wore in the eighties?” I said, dangling a pant leg as I inspected the stretchy jean-like material.

“Shut up. Eighties,” Sam muttered, rolling her eyes. “They make your ass look fantastic, so you’re wearing them, and that’s that.”

“But I’m going to be sitting on my ass, you know...dinner. You sit while eating dinner,” I said, still skeptically glaring at the reflection of my hips in the mirror.

“But you have to stand up and walk at some point, don’t you,” Sam said, slapping my right butt cheek with her brush.

“Uh, Holl, little help here?” I begged, turning to face her as I pouted.

“I hate to admit it, but she’s kind of right,” Holly said, wincing in defeat.

“Yes! Score one for Sam,” Sam said, licking her fingertip as she marked the air with her points.

I hated to admit it, but my peach crinkled cami did look great with the weird stretchy jeans. It’s the perfect top, the kind you can wear for almost any occasion, so I wore the hell out of it. I paired it with a semi-casual, three-quarter length sleeve cardigan. Effortlessly casual, that’s what Sam called it, although her idea of effortless had taken us two hours to achieve.

I stood in front of the full length mirror, twisting and turning as I analyzed my reflection.

“You look great, Claire. Don’t worry,” Holly said, sitting on my bed holding a small pile of discarded clothes on her lap.

“Yeah, fabulous. This guy would be a moron to not see that,” Sam said.

“You sure?” I asked, but for once I couldn’t find much to criticize about my appearance. I was surprised to see a confident me in the mirror. *I really do look nice*, I thought, straightening the cami over the jeans.

“Absolutely,” Holly said. “Come here. We need to fix part of your hair,” she said, standing to plug the curling iron back in.

“Normally on a date, that’s when you have the shittiest hair day or your favorite shirt has a stain on it,” Sam said, picking off chipped nail polish. “But you look amazing. Someone’s going to fall in love with you tonight.”

“Don’t go overboard, Sam,” I said through a laugh.

“Hold still,” Holly said, turning my head straight again as she rolled a section of hair into the curling iron.

“So are you meeting him there, or is he picking you up here?” Sam asked.

“I’m meeting him there. I don’t want some potential freak from the internet knowing where I live.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Holly said, running her fingers through the freshly curled hair. “Close your eyes and don’t move,” she said, spraying the hairspray like I was about to walk through a wind tunnel.

They gave me another once over, a spray of Holly's perfume, and I was ready. Ready to leave at least, but still nowhere near ready for dating.

"Just be yourself and relax," Holly said, handing me a pink leather clutch bag.

"You look great. Have fun okay?" Sam said with a hesitant smile.

My heart felt out of rhythm, thudding and stopping as I tried to convince myself I was embarking on an exciting adventure and about to have fun with a strange man. I didn't remember first dates being this nerve wracking. How did I ever enjoy this ungodly anxiety? It pushed me to the verge of nausea. *Oh, crap, I can't do this*, I thought as I pulled into the parking lot. I almost turned the car right around to leave but forced myself to pull into an empty parking spot. I turned the car off, flipped the visor down, and looked in the mirror. Nothing changed in the ten minute drive. I had no excuse to call the date off; the lack of wardrobe malfunctions left me no choice but to go in the restaurant and find my date.

I rubbed my clammy hands on my jeans as I walked through the door, hoping they might stay dry long enough to shake my date's hand. The combination of oriental music and a room full of chatter pounded in my ears as I entered the lobby and drowned out the relentless thumping of my heart in my ears. I pumped my hands, trying to appear calm and casual as I scanned the crowd for my date. The panicked thudding of my heart caused all cells in my brain to cease sparking, and I suddenly couldn't remember what he looked like or what the hell his name was. *Was his name Mark or Matt? Maybe it was Ronald? Did he say he'd be in blue or green? Maybe it was blue and green?* I kept looking for someone that looked like Charlie, but I knew that wasn't right. I took a deep breath, stretched to the tips of my toes, and looked around again. I saw a man smile, motion with a half wave, and start to walk toward me.

He didn't look right. Although I really couldn't remember anything about him at all, I was certain this could not be the right man. The man I talked to was younger than this, I thought mid-thirties. Yet the man approaching me would have passed his thirties years ago.

“Claire?” he said, smiling and extending his hand to me.

“You must be Ryan,” I said, returning the smile and reaching my clammy hand out.

“Ryan? My name is Clark,” he said, his brows contorting to embarrassment on my behalf.

My heart stopped in my throat, and I stood silent and gaping. “I...oh, I—” I tried to breathe, tried to force my misery to an apologetic smile.

“I’m just kidding. It’s Ryan,” he said, his freckled cheeks rising to a rosy smile as he patted my shoulder.

I let out a huge breath as I swatted his arm. “That’s not funny!” I said, glaring with a smile.

“Sure it is. You’re laughing, aren’t you?” he smiled and extended his hand to me again. “Shall we have a do-over then?” he laughed.

“No, I think we’re good there,” I said, smiling as I looked away to catch my breath.

“You look—”

A roar of laughter from a group beside us overpowered his voice.

“What?” I shouted, turning my ear toward him.

“I said you look amazing,” he said into my ear and kissed me on the cheek.

I flinched and caught myself before I jerked my cheek away. The heat of his lips against my skin surged guilt through my body, turning my skin cold and pale. I found myself leaning away from him, staring and incapable of a smile or grimace as he looked back at my stunned face.

He rubbed his palms together and stared toward his feet for a moment. “I made us a reservation. I can go tell the hostess we’re ready. Unless you wanted to get a drink at the bar first?” he said, trying to talk over the noise surrounding us.

“That’s all right. I’d like to go sit,” I said, hoping my legs wouldn’t collapse as I followed behind him.

Ryan stretched his hand out behind him for me to hold as we weaved our way through the crowd. I lightly touched my fingers to his. He already shattered my threshold for acceptable physical contact with the kiss on the cheek; I couldn’t bear holding his hand too. I hoped the slight touch of my fingertips would suffice. I guess he thought not and closed his hand tight around mine. I felt trashy

with his hand wrapped around mine. I hung my head, avoiding eye contact with anyone. I had to remind myself that I was divorced, single, and allowed to do whatever I pleased with any man I pleased. But the words I muttered to my conscience made me feel no more comfortable being there.

As custom, we slid our shoes off at the entry to our private screened-in table. He held out a hand for me as I sat and attempted to find a comfortable position on the tiny pillow. *Well, at least he has manners*, I thought, seeing him wait until I was situated before he sat across from me.

“That’s a great picture of you on the website, but wow, doesn’t do you justice now that I get to see you,” he said with a charming smile.

He still didn’t look right to me, like it was a prank, and I was on a date with the wrong man. I waited for a TV host to jump out with cameras and announce what practical joke show I was on. Maybe I was desperate for some reason not to like him. Like if I detested other men enough, if I could find nothing about them pleasing to the eye or soul, perhaps then Charlie would come back to me. *Man, I’m an idiot*. I almost rolled my eyes at my absurd thoughts.

I fidgeted with the chopsticks beside my place setting, searching the vast, whistling emptiness floating inside my head for something to say.

“I’m sorry, but you’re stunning,” he said, his round cheeks rising to a big smile. “I really just can’t stop looking at you.”

I blushed at his awed stare. “Your picture is a little different too, now that I see you in the light,” I said, hoping it didn’t sound like an insult. I flashed a quick smile to be sure.

He unfolded his napkin and set it on his lap. “It’s probably a good eight years old by now, but it makes me look good, back when the guns were a bit bigger,” he said, laughing as he squeezed his floppy bicep into a small muscle. “I haven’t gotten around to changing it, you know, hoping to get back that way and all.”

“Oh, okay,” I said through a nervous chuckle. “Well mine is a few years old too,” I said, hoping to ease his embarrassment.

“See you’re cheating too, trying to take a few year off the clock huh?” he laughed as he reached across the table and pinched my cheek.

I grinned through a disgusted cringe, leaning back as he squished my skin between his fingertips.

“You shouldn’t worry about that, Claire. You look great for a woman your age.”

My age? What, like I’m old? I then decided why he was single. He had no idea what a man is or is not supposed to say to a woman.

“So, tell me about yourself, Claire. You’re a consultant?” he said, sipping the red colored drink he must have ordered while waiting for me.

I didn’t understand how he could be that comfortable on a first date, leaning back on his palms the way he was, calm and assertive. I was a mess, sweating so profusely I was afraid I might start to stink and be stuck suffering through dinner with a horrendous stench dripping under my arms.

“It’s a recent change for me,” I said and looked up at him. His eyes fascinated me, a rich, cherry-ish hazel color, bright and open. Older than I thought he was or not he was an attractive man at least. I must have been smiling, because he smiled at me, the sweet got caught in someone’s admiring stare kind of smile. My heart fluttered. I let out a small breath and looked down to adjust my napkin, trying not to get flushed.

“A consultant for what, exactly? I think it’s great when someone has the guts to become self-employed. Kind of sticking it to *the man* and doing their own thing, you know?”

I must have left out the part that I was fired before becoming self-employed. “An advertising consultant. You know, print ads, commercials, website ad design, and things like that. Nothing grand, really.”

“Impressive!” he said, offering a tender smile through his age worn cheeks.

Maybe this won’t be so bad after all, I thought as my heart slowed.

“So, you’re a teacher? What grade and subject?” I asked, scooting closer to the table and forcing myself to break down this barrier I tried to have between us.

“I’m a sixth grade English teacher, at Philmont.”

“Oh, that’s a fun age, huh? You can really start to see growing personalities then, and who they might be when they’re old like us,” I said with a smile.

“Those kids are hellions. I have half a mind to tell the parents what little jerks they’re raising,” he said, rolling his eyes and raising the glass to his lips.

“Oh, it can’t be that bad!” I said, relaxing into a teasing grin. *Did I flirt? Is this flirting?* “You don’t think that, or you wouldn’t have become a teacher.”

“Parent-teacher conferences are the worst. I have to sit and smile and tell them how bright their little Johnny is.” He grunted as he rolled his eyes. The corner of his mouth started to twitch with disgust.

My shoulders began to tense up. “Oh, stop it,” I said through a hesitant laugh and patted his hand. “They’re just kids. We were all like that once.”

“No, these kids aren’t like we were. Texting in class, the internet,” he let out a full, deep groan and took another sip. “I don’t know where to start with what’s wrong with them. Little monsters, that’s what they are.”

“Oh, come on now. Then why did you become a teacher?” I smiled, trying to convince myself this was mere social chitchat and not the beginning of a terrible first date.

“Summer vacation, that’s what sealed the deal for me,” he said with a roaring laugh. “I get at least eight weeks to recoup from dealing with them and do whatever the hell I want.”

Tough it out. Don’t be so judgmental, Claire. You would love summers off too. “That would be nice,” I said with a fake smile.

“Some days I just want to walk out or whack ’em with a ruler like the good old days, you know,” he said, waving his hand with an invisible ruler.

I flinched when his palm slammed down on the table.

“Right on the back of the neck you know, just once,” he said.

“Not really a fan of kids, huh?” I asked, my eyes wide as I watched him above the rim of my glass and gulped down my Tequila sunrise.

“Some kids are okay. The quiet ones,” he said, laughing so hard he snorted and covered his mouth. His eyes squinted to wrinkled slits on his bronzed face as he chuckled, calming with a few breaths as he composed himself and sat a little straighter.

I cleared my throat, desperate for escape or a change in conversation. “So...” I reached for my glass, raising it to my lips before I realized I had already finished it. “Well, uh, so have you been on the website long?”

“Oh, I’m on a lot of them, probably a few years now. How about you? Hey, did you see that commercial for the new one that’s out? I’m already on there too.”

“I’m only a few. I signed up, oh, I think a week before you messaged me.”

“A week, that’s it? I’m an old pro at this now!”

“Oh, I bet you are!” I said and slapped his shoulder hard. I enjoyed mocking him; I think hoping to jolt him into chivalry.

“Yup, had me a lot of first dates. Not sure why, really. Probably just haven’t met the right lady yet. Well, until now anyway,” he said, reaching around the centerpiece and cupping my hand inside his.

The wave of disgust his touch sent coursing through my body made me jerk my hand back so quick I knocked over his glass. “Don’t get ahead of yourself Clark. I mean Ryan,” I said, blotting the wet spot with my napkin.

“You know, you’re really something, Claire.” He chuckled, put his elbow on the table, and cupped his chin in his palm. “I mean it. I could easily fall in love with a woman like you.”

The outright audacity of his words stunned me. I sat breathless, staring into his hazel eyes desperate to see the twinkle of humor.

“Just, just cool your jets there,” I said, raising my hands to halt his compliments.

“But look at you. Don’t you feel the connection?” he said, gently twirling a fingertip on the top of my hand.

I snickered and yanked my hand away, rubbing off his unwarranted gesture as the waiter walked up and said, “Ready to order?”

The menu hadn’t left my lap since we were seated, and I was about to ask for a few more minutes.

“Yes, the lady will have the Sashimi dinner,” Ryan said. “She’ll also have...”

I almost fell off my little pillow. I cleared my throat and leaned over the table to catch the waiter’s attention. “Well, actually, I haven’t yet looked at the menu.”

“I’ll give you a few more minutes,” the waiter said with a nod and started to step back.

“No, that’s all right, we’re ready. Did you get the Sashimi?” Ryan said, nodding to the waiter’s notepad.

“But I haven’t decided yet—”

“You’ll want this,” Ryan said to me.

The waiter stepped forward again, raised his pen back to his notepad, and looked at Ryan.

“She’ll also have the Junmai Daiginjo—”

“I’d like to look at the menu myself,” I said again, looking at Ryan then back up to the waiter.

The waiter lowered his pen, somewhat agitated, and started to step back again.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ryan said as he chuckled and took the menu from my hands. “Trust me, you’ll love it,” he said, turning back to the waiter and motioning for him to step forward.

It became apparent he had somehow misunderstood our current relationship. Meaning that we didn’t have one, but he thought himself in the position of knowing everything about me.

I tried to be gracious, giving him the benefit of the doubt for being too well mannered, or perhaps he just didn’t know any better. But my teeth clenched together, my nervousness shifting to frustration as I scrunched the napkin in my hands under the table.

Ryan poured us Saki and held his cup in the air for a toast. I raised my cup without returning the smile.

“Well, Claire, here’s to the start of something new.” He smiled and raised his cup a little higher. “To new beginnings!” he said, clinking his cup against mine.

That’s all it took. Three little words, and I was ready to hurl my body through the paper screen and run to the nearest exit. Upon hearing the same toast Charlie gave the night he walked out on me, I decided there couldn’t be a single thing about Ryan that would ever create a *Ryan and I*. I slid my hand under the table and into my purse, cupped my cell phone in my palm, and readied it to excuse myself. Sam was my emergency call. With one quick call or text, she would then call me with an ‘emergency’ I just *had* to tend to, giving me the reason to bow out of my date early.

Ryan finished his Saki and looked up at me. His eyes were stunning when he looked at me like that, like he was trying to soak up the beauty of me. I can’t remember the last time a man admired me so deeply, and so far it was the only saving grace he had.

“I’m sorry for staring,” he said with a bashful grin, lowering his head. “You’re just so, just so beautiful I can’t help it.”

My cheeks felt hot, and I knew I was blushing. Doesn't he know he can't say things like that when I'm ready to leave? "Thank you."

"To be honest, I never thought you would reply. I'm horrible at first messages, and well," he chuckled and rubbed his palms on his jeans. "I thought you were a little out of my league."

I never considered myself out of anyone's league. "Oh no, I don't think that highly of myself, believe me," I said through a nervous chuckle.

"Well, you should, Claire. Just look at you! God, you're gorgeous. The things I could do to you," he said, then licked his lips as he eyed me.

Thank God the waiter came in with our food, distracting my not-so-secret admirer.

Whatever it was he ordered for me was a platter of some sort with an array of pink and red hunks of raw meat topped with sparse, green leafy things. The funky food in the center of my plate had tentacles. I wasn't sure how I felt about eating something with tentacles. I poked it with my chopstick.

"It's dead, trust me," Ryan laughed.

"What is it?" I asked, scooting the squishy thing around on my plate.

"It's Ika. Otherwise known as squid. You'll love it."

There he goes again, knowing what I love. "Squid?" I prodded it again. "Have you tried it before?"

"Of course, I've tried them all. Just be sure to not chew it too much. The little suction cups can get stuck on your cheek," he said. He reached over the table, picked up a tentacle and swallowed it whole.

My face scrunched, shriveling up like a dried out prune as I watched him suck down the squid. "Stuck on my cheek?" I said, almost throwing up on his behalf while he licked his fingertips.

"You'll love it. Just try it," he said, holding up a piece for me.

"No, thank you. I don't want to," I said as I leaned away from the slimy thing in front of my face.

"Yes, eat it," he said with a smile.

"I'll just try one of the other—"

"Eat it," he said again, scooting the hunk of squishiness closer to my mouth.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head.

“Open!” he said, pressing the wet thing on my lips.

Before I knew what happened, he force fed me this gooey, rubbery thing that refused to slide down my throat. I coughed and gagged, then cupped my napkin over my mouth and spit the wad of nastiness out.

“Aw, Claire, those are delicious,” he said, frowning at my balled up napkin.

“That’s disgusting.” I tried to scrape the aftertaste off my tongue by sliding it across my teeth. “And I don’t particularly like being force fed strange food,” I said, wiping my mouth.

“Well, you should have said something when I was ordering then. You could have ordered something else,” he said with a sour look, scooping up the remaining squid from my plate and setting it on his.

“Should have said something?” *Did he forget his constant interruption of my protest?* “I tried to tell you that I—”

“You have to at least eat that,” he said, pointing to something wrapped in dark colored leaves and stuffed with rice.

“What is it?” I asked, sniffing it as I hovered over the plate.

“Just try it,” he said, nudging my chopsticks to my mouth. “You’re not really adventurous are you?”

My hand dropped to the table. I glowered at him and raised my eyebrows.

“What? I’m just saying,” he said, returning the glare as he finished the squid. “You should be more adventurous, Claire. Life’s too short to be so prudish. It’s not very becoming for such a beautiful woman.”

“Prudish?” I said, ready to gag him with the pile of tentacles. “I do like to try new things, or I wouldn’t be on this date with you, Ryan, would I? And to clarify, I tried to tell you I wanted to order, but you just kept talking over me!” I said, waiting for some type of apology as I crossed my arms on my chest.

“You shouldn’t be so timid in asking then. Jeez, for a woman who runs her own business, I would have expected someone a little more outspoken.”

“All right, Ryan,” I said, calmly placing my hands in my lap. “You want outspoken? I’ll give you outspoken.” I tossed my napkin on the table. “I don’t think this is going to work, and I’m going home,” I said, sliding my purse up my shoulder as I stood. “How’s that for outspoken?”

“We’ve just gotten off on the wrong foot is all. Let’s not be overdramatic here.”

“Overdramatic? You just tried to jam food down my throat that I didn’t want, all while just staring at my breasts!”

Ryan shrugged. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have worn a V-neck?”

“Look, I don’t think we’ll ever be on the right foot, and I’m leaving.”

“Just stay. You’ll see how good I can be for you.” He laid on me what I’m sure he thought was the sweetest smile.

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows as I glared down at him.

“But come on,” he begged, topping it with more superficial sweetness.

“See, I wasn’t too keen on this dating crap to begin with, but I thought, well, what the hell, why not try it,” I said, digging through my purse. I looked down at him, keys dangling from my fingers. “See, Ryan, women don’t want to know you’ve fallen in love with them on the first date. Women like to order their own food. Women don’t want to hear how much you hate kids. And smacking them with a ruler, I mean, come on, really?” I cocked a hip and put my hand on my waist. “You want to know why you have so many first dates? It’s because of this,” I said, waving my hand at our situation. “All of this, that’s why. You need to, like...Hell, I don’t know what you need to do.”

He uncrossed his legs and leaned back on his palms, looking at me like a child listening to their parents drown in a long-winded speech.

“While you have some great traits I’m sure, and some women might love your...” I tapped a fingertip on my chin, trying to think of the right word. “love your *intricacies*, but I am not a fan. It’s best if we just never speak again and pretend this never happened.”

“See, assertive like that. Love it, Claire!” he said, smiling as he looked up at me.

I shook my head. “Nope, sorry, Ryan, it’s not working for me,” I said with a polite nod, turned, and started to walk away.

“God, you’re sexy when you’re mad,” he said, leaning forward and rubbing his hand on my calf.

I jerked my leg back. “Goodbye Ryan.”

“So, can I call you later then, babe?”

I rolled my eyes. “Please don’t.”

I slipped my shoes back on and clutched my purse under my arm. Where was the polite guy I sat down with? I didn't even think about whether what I said was rude or not or if leaving in the middle of a date somehow made me a snob. My chest heaved with anger. I pushed through the people still waiting to be seated, not even muttering an apology as I stormed to my car.

I was pulling up into Sam's driveway when my cell phone started ringing in my purse. I dug through, pulled it out, and saw the display said Ryan.

Eleven

“I do feel a little bad. I’ve never walked out on a date before,” I said, rocking on Sam’s glider on the back porch.

“Sounds like the guy was a jerk, and he needed to hear it,” she said, handing me a Tupperware dish with leftovers.

“I don’t think he was a jerk. Maybe a little misguided,” I said, shoveling a heaping fork into my mouth. “Thanks. I’m starving.”

“Misguided is not opening the door for you or complimenting your ass instead of your hair,” Sam said, picking at the food as I ate.

“I still think he’s probably a nice guy. Way, way down. He just needs a certain kind of woman to tolerate him. And I am *not* that woman.”

“You didn’t even get a good dinner out of it either. That’s the only bonus to a bad date.”

“Oh my God, the squid was so gross!” I shivered.

“I know, right! It could have been worse though,” Sam said, licking Alfredo sauce off her finger.

“I guess not as bad as your husband walking out on you. So maybe this dating thing isn’t too bad in comparison.”

“Did you call Holly yet?”

“I came right over here without even thinking. I should though, after I eat. I need to wash down the flavor of that...whatever the hell it was I tried to eat.”

Sam had an amazing view from her townhouse. It sat perched on a hill, overlooking the twinkling lights of Georgia nightlife. I leaned back between mouthfuls, stopping for a breath and took it all in.

“Well,” Sam said, swatting my knee and leaning back with me to look down on the city. “Dating sucks, plain and simple,” she said.

“Thanks for the encouragement!” I said, laughing as I covered my mouthful of food.

“It does. I’m sorry, but it does,” she said as she chuckled. “But you just have to find the fun in it. And when you do end up finding the right guy, it makes it all worth it right?”

“That’s what I thought. Guess I was wrong though huh?” I said, showing her my left hand void of a wedding ring.

“Just look at Holly and Mark. It’s almost sickening sweet seeing them together.”

I shrugged as my head slowly bobbed in agreement. “They are perfect for each other, aren’t they?”

“So maybe you have to go through some shit to get there, but you will. You’ll find that Mr. Right,” she said, nudging me with her shoulder.

“And what about you? What do we do about your dating life?” I asked.

“Not a damn thing!” she laughed. “I love my life. I’ve got freedom. I occasionally have to suffer through some bad dates, but I get to meet a lot of interesting people and have that great one night stand sex!” Sam winked at me as she chuckled. “Maybe someday I’ll meet a guy I think is worth changing it for, but not today anyway,” she said, leaning over and picking through the tub of Alfredo with me.

“Well, date number one was a big fat fail. How long can I put off date number two?” I said.

“You’ll find your groove, Claire Bear. You’ll find the fun in it.”

The fun in it? I spent almost two hours getting dolled up for about thirty minutes with a strange man choking down slimy, tentacle covered food, only to walk out and find myself back at my sister’s house devouring her leftovers that I sent her home with. Where was the fun in that? Sam was an expert at dating and loved every minute of it. Whereas I liked being married, simplistic Sunday routines and curling up every night with the same man wrapping his arms around

me. I didn't want variety. I wanted romance, true love. I wanted the sappy, gooey filled stuff I watched in movies.

"Do you think I'll ever find it?" I asked, resting my head on the back of the swing as we rocked.

"Find what?"

"True love. That stuff we dreamed about as little girls."

"Holly found, it right? Look at Mom and Daddy. They try not to show it, but you can see how much they love each other."

"I hope it's out there for me too..."

"Just think, that guy could be out there right now, wondering the same thing about you. How's that for sappy?"

I loved Sam's eternal optimism. I suppose that's why I found myself driving to her house after I left the restaurant. For the moment, I would try and believe her. I tried to imagine what he might look like, this mystery man, sitting there waiting for me. I laughed out loud at myself.

"What?" Sam said.

I shook my head, smiling. "Nothing."

"Kids, stay away from the garden," Mom hollered from the picnic table. "So, honey, the girls told me you met a man. How was the date?" she said, sitting down with a glass of iced tea.

"It wasn't so great, Mom."

"Aw that's too bad, honey. What happened?"

"The guy was a jerk, Mom," Sam said, leaning over Holly for a piece of watermelon.

"He wasn't a jerk really—"

"Sure he was," Holly said.

"Bossy, yes, but I wouldn't classify him as a jerk," I said, taking watermelon from Sam's plate.

"Charlie, now that's a jerk," Mark said, standing behind Holly as he rubbed her shoulders.

The afternoon wind carried our words away. We fell silent, like mourning the loss of a life I was afraid I would never have again. They knew how much I loved Charlie, and they seemed certain I would rise above, come out stronger and happier than I was before. I wish I held that kind of hope for myself.

“So did you meet him on a computer? Is that right?” Mom said, breaking the painful silence.

“On one of the websites the girls put me on.”

“I still don’t understand that. What happened to going out and talking to people face to face?” she said, standing up and talking over her shoulder as she walked toward Daddy who was manning the grill.

“It’s what everyone does now, Ma. It’s easier, you know,” Sam said.

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t seem right to me, sitting on your couch meeting people through a screen.” She scrunched her brows as she shook her head. “What happened to the rush of catching your first glimpse of someone—”

“Like you and Daddy?” Holly said.

“Exactly, sweetheart. I was there with a girlfriend. She didn’t want to go alone to the dance. Her date stood her up, you see,” Mom said, turning to look at Daddy. “And there he was, the most handsome man I had ever seen.”

“Are you telling that tired story again Evelyn?” Daddy said, stacking hamburger patties onto a plate.

“So shy, shuffling his foot around, all by his lonesome,” Mom said.

“I just felt weird. A girl gawking at me like that from across the room,” Daddy said, winking at her as he set the plate on the table.

“Aw. You love her, Daddy. Don’t tease,” Sam said, smiling as she reached for a bun.

“Of course I do. I’ve built a fine life with her. Got you three kids and grandbabies. Don’t get much better.” He smiled, stealing a glance at Mom from the corner of his eye. “I’m glad she was gawking at me all weird like that.”

“See? That’s the kind of thing I want,” I said, waving my hand at my parents. “Where’s that kind of romance?”

“All in due time, honey,” Mom said, patting my hand as she sat.

“Come on, kids. Time to eat!” Holly yelled.

As the kids came charging toward the table, laughing as they raced each other, I sat back and observed the odd little bunch I called my family. Mark kissed Holly’s temple as he sat down, and her face flushed as she closed her eyes taking in the tender love in the touch of his lips. She wrapped an arm around Anna, kissing her little forehead, and helped her assemble a cheeseburger. Mark picked up Seth and put him on his lap, making Seth giggle. “You look like a

tasty burger!” he said, gnawing and nibbling as he pretended to eat Seth’s arm.

Daddy kissed the top of her weathered hand as he reached around her for the mustard. Mom rubbed his back as she lay her head on his broad shoulder, still reliving their meeting, the single spark igniting a love to carry them through the next forty-two years of their lives.

My silent admiration drifted to Sam, resting her elbow on the table with her head in her palm and taking in the same thing my eyes envied. She reached across the table and cupped her hand over mine, nodding, agreeing that she too hoped to one day find herself wrapped up in a love like Holly or our parents had found. My eyes started watering as I returned the nod. I smiled and blinked the tears back. I had spent too much time crying over love.

“So how many more games do you have left this season, Seth?” I asked, grabbing the ketchup and squirting it on my bun.

Ryan called me no less than seven times a day, each time with a more sincere apology and new approach to beg for a second date. Either I finally started to believe him or I had some subconscious awakening that I was exactly what I told people I wasn’t; I was lonely.

Loneliness is a terrifying emotion. It can make you make brash decisions, like calling back a man from one of the worst first dates you ever had. And that says a lot, coming from a woman like me, the queen of first dates.

My breath shook, my fingers threatening to tremble, and I paced along the back patio listening to his phone ring.

“Hello?” he said,

“Hi, um, Ryan. It’s me—”

“Claire! I almost gave up on you!” Ryan said in a breath.

I chuckled, my snortly chuckle that rears its ugly head whenever I’m nervous. “Yeah, well, I’ve just, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking—”

“I’ve been crying about you for weeks. God, I miss what we had, don’t you?”

I choked, trying to swallow. “What we had?” I said, realizing what I had gotten myself into. “Ryan, we never *had* anything.”

“I really screwed it up with you, I know, but if you give me another chance...I really miss you, Claire.”

What was I doing? Ryan was no more right for me than Charlie was. “I’m sorry. I think this was a mistake.”

“No, no, just—just gimme another chance, Claire. I can be the man you want. Listen, I’m sorry for my behavior at dinner, and all the calls. I just, when I met you, I had to, I had to keep seeing you, you know?”

“I’m sorry, Ryan. This was a mistake,” I said, clicking my cell phone shut. Did I really expect to find the man of my dreams in Ryan? The man I caught peering at me behind a tampon display at the grocery store last week. *What was I thinking, calling him again.*

In that moment of idiocy, I decided I had better do something quick, or I might end up seeing Ryan again in pure desperation.

“What the hell? It can’t hurt, right?” I said to myself, flipping open my laptop and clicking the link for LostLovers.com on my desktop. The big, swoopy writing struck me every time I logged on. Too many loops in their cutesy title made it read Lost Losers, making this single woman feel even more desperate and alone than she already was.

I didn’t know how to react when the mailbox icon flashed a measly four messages. Over a month since I last logged on, before my date from hell with Ryan, and only four of the three thousand members saw me fit for a message. Was there something wrong with my profile? Maybe a terrible computer glitch had garbled my description or replaced my photo with one of Rodney Dangerfield? Yes, that had to be it. A glitch ruining my profile. I clicked my profile, ready to be horrified with the glitch that terrorized my profile.

I scanned the content, scrolling down until the end. All was in place, exactly how I entered it the night Holly and Sam signed me up.

I grimaced while reading my random, paragraph long description again. “Maybe it could use a little sprucing up,” I said to myself. “Just a quick tweak.”

A quick tweak turned into a three hour project. I sorted through photographs of myself and edited them in Photoshop, cropping my head shot into other photos, making me appear grander and sexier than I might ever be. I browsed through other women’s profiles, my fierce competition, copying and paraphrasing the ones I thought the most appealing.

I winced as I read my new, vamped up profile, held together by virtual duct tape and carbon paper from other people's profiles. It was a bit of a stretch maybe, but apparently, this was a cut-throat thing, this dating business. A little stretching of the truth wouldn't kill anyone. I was still me after all, just exaggerated a bit. *Yes, just improved is all*, I thought with a firm nod and clicked to save the changes.

Content with my new online look, I read through my whopping four messages. I immediately discarded two, the first man looking like Charlie's twin and the other being old enough to be my dad's golf partner. I scanned the two messages left. One still lived with his mother. "Um, no," I said as I deleted it.

"Well, what the hell, why not?" I said to myself and then ran a search for my *new* matches.

"Softball coach. Holly would like that," I said as I read his letter out loud. "Quiet Sundays, road trips through the country, vacations at the beach...Well," I said, picking up my glass of sun tea. "Sounds kind of promising. I guess I'll try," I said to myself, bravely hitting the 'reply' button.

Downtown a few days later, ordering new business cards and a logo creation, I called Sam to join me for lunch. Lunch, it turns out, was ice cream cones from the vender two blocks from her work. We strolled to a park a few blocks away, meandering through the tree-shaded paths until we found a bench not being held captive by bees swarming around the remnants of messy eaters.

"I feel a bit bad about it," I said, licking a trail of melting ice cream from my cone.

"Don't feel bad. I looked at your profile, and it's not that bad," she said, pointing to another drip on my cone.

"It's like false advertising, isn't it? I said I like dogs. What the hell do I know about dogs?"

"I said I love mountain climbing and scuba diving," she said, glancing up at me with wide eyes.

"You're afraid of heights!"

"I know, right? God help me should some guy actually want to go do that shit!" she said, twisting her cone as she licked.

“Why do you do that? I feel terrible about it. The whole point of this is to meet someone you’re compatible with.”

“Compatible is boring. I want fun, adventure,” she said with a shrug. “So did you get more messages from it?”

I cringed. “Twenty-two, and that was just the first day,” I said, covering my eyes as I winced.

“Damn, girl!”

“No, it’s terrible!” I said, shaking my head at my vain desire for more responses. “All these poor guys sent a letter to a woman I’m not. That’s a horrible thing to do.”

“Everyone lies, Claire Bear.” She pointed to a park bench. “Let’s go over there. These heels are killing me.”

Sam kicked her shoes off after we sat, licking her ice cream as she rubbed the bottom of her foot. I glanced at the faces around me, all preoccupied with their own thoughts, their own worries devouring their lunch break, when my drifting stare stopped at a homely man at the fountain. He sat slouching in a frumpy suit, eating a sandwich with a newspaper beside him. His posture seemed ragged and tired, the puffy skin around his eyes dark and heavy. I wondered why he looked so sad.

“Did you reply to any of them yet?” Sam said, leaning back on the bench and biting into her cone.

“I did to one, just something short. I really didn’t know what to say. I was afraid my boringness might scare him off. You know, the *real* me,” I rolled my eyes. “I’m so stupid. How can I put a profile like that on there and then go on a date as just plain old me,” I said, tugging on my sweater as I slumped in self-loathing.

Sam finished eating her cone, licked her fingers and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Well,” she said, covering her mouth with a hand as she talked with a mouthful. “You can either just be you and see what happens or be the girl in the profile and see what it’s like to live like someone else.”

“I couldn’t do that,” I said, turning to glare at Sam.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not her. I’m me, and I could never be her. I’m just lonely, you know? I just—what a mess. Why did I do something so stupid?” I said, tossing my cone into the overflowing trash can beside me.

“Because you want attention and you want love. All women want attention, Claire. Charlie neglected you for a long time,” she

said, sitting up and turning toward me. “Way before you guys got divorced. He’d work late, business trips, and sit in the yard all weekend alone like the antisocial putz that he is.”

The night Charlie left me emptiness spread like a mass inside me, but it never occurred to me that maybe the mass was building before he walked away. I spent so many years blindly justifying his meetings and his time in the yard as a needed retreat from a stressful week. Years were wasted trying to make *him* feel better. I never stopped to see if I felt appreciated. My eyes lifted to the lonely man at the fountain. He had finished his sandwich and sat straight with a coy glance around him to see if anyone was watching him. Would that be me in a few years? Sitting alone, lost, and afraid of the world?

“So what are you going to do?” Sam said, nudging my leg with her knee.

“I want the right kind of attention,” I said, watching the sad man walk away. “I want to find someone that likes me, someone who worries if I’m happy too,” I said, turning my watery eyes to hers.

“Oh, Claire Bear,” Sam said and wrapping an arm around me. “Then change your profile back and go out with this guy. Be just you, who’s a fabulous woman, by the way,” she said with a smile, squeezing her arm a little tighter around me. “And just see what happens. I mean, it can’t get worse than that Ryan what’s his nuts, right?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I’ll have to do. It’s not like I’ll meet the right guy this way, right?”

“Exactly. So don’t worry about it.” Sam slipped her heels back on and tossed her napkins in the trash as she stood. “Walk me back to work? There’s this stupid team meeting bullshit I have to go to.”

“I can do that. A sort of repayment for letting me bitch through your lunch break,” I said with a grin.

“Everyone has to bitch sometimes!” She wrapped an arm around mine, and we started walking back to her building.

“Thanks, Sam,” I said as I gave her a hug and promised to call her later.

Back at my quaint, seafoam green living room, I plopped down on the rocking chair with my purse and boxes of stationary and business cards still bundled in my arms. I didn’t blink and didn’t move, frozen by the realization of what I had lost to spare Charlie’s

feelings. Countless weekends I spent cooped up in a quiet house, afraid to make a sound, not wanting to disturb Charlie while he unwound from a long week. How many times did I rationalize his ignoring me? How many things about myself did I change to please him?

My gaze lifted and slowly took in my surroundings, scrutinizing my new house with fresh, angry eyes.

“I won’t let him control me anymore,” I said through clenched teeth, tossing my bags on the floor. I spun around, unsure what item to take my pent up neglect out on first. As I turned again, trying to focus my rage on a single target, I stubbed my toe on the sofa. I stopped and glared hard at the permanent dip in the cushion from where Charlie always sat. My target was in sight.

“Stupid couch,” I groaned, storming forward and propping the front door open. I pulled on the armrest and started scooting the sofa toward the door. I climbed over it, using all my weight to heave it through the slim doorway.

“Sit there with your stupid crossword puzzles,” I snapped as I grunted to pull it off the porch. Then I bent and pressed my shoulder into it to push it out to the curb. “Tell me to be quiet because you need to relax,” I said to the sofa, kicking it before I turned back to the house. A wave of perseverance surged through my veins, flushing my skin tomato red as I stormed into my house. Now sweating, I threw my sweater onto the floor as I scanned the contents of my house for the next victim of closure.

“I’m done with you, Charlie,” I said, charging to the kitchen and pulling the trash can into the living room. “Done,” I groaned to myself, staring at the curio cabinet in the corner of the living room. I eyed the trinkets and treasures. The shelves were filled with tiny, fragile memories. I yanked the door open, cracking the glass as it banged against the wall. I picked up the teacup and saucer he bought me on his trip to California. I turned the small cup in my palm, examining the hand painted flowers and ivy border, admiring the time it must have taken to create such a miniature masterpiece. I remembered how special I felt when Charlie gave it to me, that he took the time to think of me while away. I slammed the cup and saucer into the trash.

“No more. I won’t let you change me anymore!” I screamed, gliding my arm across the shelf, scooping up all the treasured china and letting it fall into the trash.

I threw out the books he gave me when he forgot my birthday, the oil painting we bought in North Carolina, and the teapots he surprised me with on anniversaries. I stormed through every room and ripped pictures off walls and t-shirts from vacations out of drawers, throwing away every piece of him still left in my house. I tied up the six stuffed trash bags, dragged them out to the curb, and tossed them beside the mound of furniture at the edge of my lawn.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, got a glass of water and sat on the rocking chair, panting and chugging the water as I surveyed my empty house. I finished the water, calming my breathing as I stood to take care of the one treasure that remained. I grabbed the stuffed bear Charlie won me on our first date from my bedroom closet, walked back to the curb, and chucked it on the heaping pile of my former life. I took a step back, dripping with sweat in the cool afternoon air, and admired the pile, letting pride and strength flow through me.

I crossed my arms on my chest, nodding to myself. “Goodbye, Charlie,” I said, turning and going back into the house without looking back.

Twelve

“Jesus, you did clean house, didn’t you?” Sam said, frozen in the doorway as she pulled the sunglasses down the bridge of her nose and took in the empty space.

Holly came up the porch and walked into a paralyzed Sam standing in the doorway. “Whoa...”

I cocked my shoulders back and stood tall as I glanced around me. “I’m done with all that crap. Done with Charlie. This is *my* life now, right? Why keep him in it?” I said, nodding my head at my barren home.

“Well...” Holly said, scratching her forehead. “That’s great. That’s really great and all, but...So, uh, now what?”

“The woman said she wanted to go shopping. That’s why we’re here,” Sam said, smiling now. She winked at me. “So, let’s go shopping. Duh.”

“By the looks of it, I hope you’ve got a lot of money,” Holly said through a laugh.

“I just need to grab a couple things. I’d offer you a place to sit, but, well,” I said, motioning to the square pattern on the carpet where the sofa once sat.

“So what did you do with all that stuff?” Sam called out from the living room.

“I threw it all at the curb. Neighbors must have thought I was nuts or got evicted or something,” I hollered from the bedroom, pulling a sweatshirt over my head and grabbing my purse.

“You should have dropped the stuff on Charlie’s lawn. How great would that be?” Holly said and started laughing.

“He’s not worth wasting the gas to drive there and drop it off,” I said as I came back in the living room. “Thanks, guys. Really, I mean it.”

“Nothing to it. We love shopping,” Holly said.

“Especially with someone else’s money!” Sam giggled.

As we climbed into Holly’s SUV, armed with a wad of cash I haven’t seen since the day I bought my first car, I welcomed the hint of exhilaration beginning to stir inside me.

“It all looks great in here. I can’t wait for you to come over and see it,” I said to Sam on the phone as I slipped on an earring. I spun around, sat down on my new sofa, and bent to put my sneakers on. “I was a little worried about the color, but it matches well,” I said, rubbing my hand against the smooth, chocolate-colored microfiber cushion. The most expensive new addition during my spending spree with my sisters was the plush sectional in my living room. I don’t know who I thought would be stretching out on this giant piece of furniture with me though. *Maybe I should get a cat?*

“See? I told you it would look good,” Sam said.

“I wish you could come over, but I have to leave in a little bit.”

“You sure you don’t want help picking out an outfit?”

I took a breath, bracing myself for another date. “I think I got it. He said to dress casual. I can do casual. You think earrings are too much?” I said, tugging on my simple, silver dangle earrings.

“If he said dress casual, no earrings. I’d probably do a ponytail too. He sounds kind of sporty, you know?”

“Damn, I just spent like an hour curling my hair,” I said, scowling at my cute curls in the mirror. “I have to leave in a minute so I’ll call you after.”

“Good luck, Claire Bear!”

Mike, a softball coach from the next town, replied almost instantly after I responded to his first message. I imagined him looming over his computer, tortured by eager impatience as he prayed for my reply. But a twisted, more realistic vision painted itself over my imaginary dream man. A gruesome, desperate, hunchback of a man forever clicking ‘refresh’ and praying that anyone would reply to him. Kind of how I felt every time I logged on.

Mike told me to meet him at Kensington Park, which terrified me, conjuring up visions of some serial killer stuffing me into his van. I was relieved to see a filled parking lot and people walking the tree lined paths. I pulled my hair up into a ponytail, took a deep breath, and walked toward the visitor's center.

The quaint shop had only a few people in it; mothers with kids in strollers and two men, one being the man behind the big U-shaped counter with rows of brochures behind him. My look moved to the tall man by a rack of postcards. He wore black jogging pants and a white t-shirt that hugged his biceps and chest, exposing the well-defined shoulder muscles beneath his shirt. As he stepped around to a display of overpriced souvenir books, I caught a glimpse of his face, exactly like his photo on the website. *What a relief*, I thought, eyeing the slender, tanned face now looking toward me. Two huge dimples appeared on his smooth-shaven cheeks.

A shiver crept up my neck. I grinned and moved my arm in a slow motion half-wave as he walked toward me.

Piercing blue eyes glimmered beneath the shadow of his baseball cap. “Claire? I’m Mike,” he said, his smile growing wider as he extended his hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mike,” I said, returning the smile and blushing before I shifted my gaze to the floor.

“God, you look great,” he said, holding my hands up as he admired me.

“Thank you. So do you,” I said, turning away before I rolled my eyes. *So do you?*

He chuckled and held open the door for me. “Well, we should get going if we’re going to make our reservation.”

“By the way, where are we going? Since I’m here it doesn’t have to be a surprise anymore,” I said, smiling as I glanced at him from the corner of my eye.

“I guess I can tell you,” he said as he placed his hand on the small of my back.

I forgot how warm a man's hand could feel so gently pressing there. I took a shaky breath.

“Well, since we both seem to be pretty adventurous people, I thought we'd try cliff jumping!” he said, his enthusiastic eyes locked on mine.

My profile, the vamped up version, said something about sports and adventure. Something tomboyish that couldn't be further from my true personality unless it said I was cult leader at a nudist colony. And there I stood, covered head to toe in athletic apparel, oozing a false aroma of sporty. I thought my nose might start to grow from the lies I spewed online.

“Um, what is cliff jumping, exactly?” I asked, trying to gulp down the lump in my throat. I hoped it was a name having nothing to do with the actual activity.

“You know Harrington's Bluff? Well, they strap parachutes on you, and you jump off. They say with a bit of good wind you can ride for forty-five minutes at least,” he said, a fire of thrill burning in his eyes.

“Forty-five minutes, huh?” I said, lifting my head to glare at the fierce breeze mocking my lying self.

“I know. With this wind, it should be awesome!” he said, nodding to Mother Nature in appreciation.

“Listen, couldn't we start small, like rock climbing or something?” I said, then turned back and pointed toward the parking lot. “There's this gym a few miles away. I hear they have a great rock climbing wall. You know, indoors, with harnesses and a padded floor.”

Mike erupted into laughter and smacked my backside. “That's a good one,” he said, chuckling as he wiped a tear under his eye. “A gym...” he checked his watch, pressing firmer on my back as we walked. “Come on. We're going to be late.”

The bluff would inspire awe in the coldest of hearts. The jagged edges of the mountains were softened by the peppering of trees, and a rainbow of oranges, yellows, and crimson leaves blanketed the skyline. The wind made the air about fifteen degrees cooler at this height. My cheeks flushed a fearful red as the fierce wind whipped

against my face, and I peered over the edge as a jump assistant tugged on my backpack.

“I know! It’s awesome, isn’t it!” Mike said, watching my eyes widen taking in the horizon.

“You know, I really think it’s best if we do this another day. Don’t you think it’s too windy?” I yelled over a gust of wind.

“It’s ideal conditions. I’d be jumping if I weren’t working,” the assistant hollered over me. He tugged on my shoulder straps and smacked my back. “You’re good to go!”

“What?” I yelled, my petrified knees locking in place.

“Come on, let’s do this!” Mike screamed, stepping closer to the edge of the bluff. “Woooo!” he hollered into the wind. He clapped his hands, and his cheeks rose to a smile of sheer delight.

I inched backward, shaking my head.

Mike looked over his shoulder at me. “Come on, let’s go!” he said, grinning as he turned, ran full speed, and leaped off the edge of the bluff. “Woooo!” his voice echoed through the roar of wind.

The jump assistant nudged my backpack. “You better go before the wind shifts,” he hollered in my ear.

“Wind shifts?” I said, spinning to face him. I envisioned an unruly gust whipping my parachute toward power lines. I shook my head again. “I can’t do this,” I yelled.

“It’s fine. Just jump,” the man said.

I spun back around, and my shaky, clumsy feet took a step forward. I craned my neck and looked down the edge of the bluff at the sharp, jagged rock line below me. I stepped backward. “I can’t do this,” I yelled, continuing to step away from the edge. I was desperate to yank the thirty pound sack from my back.

The man sighed, rolled his eyes and started unstrapping the harnesses.

An hour and a half later, I sat on top of a picnic table, sipping bottled water and waiting for Mike at the landing field. I heard his “Wooooo!” and watched the red and yellow parachute lowering to the ground. His long legs touched the ground as he landed, slowing them from a jog to a sudden stop.

His face was beet red, battered by the wind. He walked toward the group of workers helping people out of their jumpsuits. “That was amazing!” he cheered, clapping to himself. His wandering stare caught a glimpse of me. “Where were you?” he hollered.

I took a deep breath as I slid off the table and walked toward him.

“Did you go a different direction? I didn’t see you. That was amazing, wasn’t it?” he said, halfway folding his jumpsuit and handing it to an employee. “What a rush!” he said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “What did you think?”

“I, uh, well, I didn’t go,” I said, my embarrassed stare shifting to the ground as I handed him a water.

“What? Why not? Was something wrong with your chute?”

“No, uh,” I tried to smile as I raised my eyes to his. I hated myself for lying about who I was. “I couldn’t do it.”

He stopped walking, stunned and perplexed. “I thought you would like it?”

“I know. I know you did,” I said, and biting my lip. “See, the thing is Mike, well—see I don’t really like this kind of stuff,” I said, blurting it out before I chickened out and trapped myself in this charade.

His brows scrunched as he stared at me. “But, I thought—”

“I know you did. My profile...”

“I, I don’t get it,” he said, turning around to sit on the picnic table beside me.

“I know, see—” *The whole truth, and nothing but the truth.* “See, I thought that I wasn’t interesting enough, that I was boring. That I, like, had to say these things to get men to like me,” I said, my tortured smile contorting to a grimace as I tried to look up at him.

“You lied? And tricked me?”

“No, I mean—” I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Yes. Yes I lied.”

“You shouldn’t do that to people, Claire. It’s not right,” he said, his scowl locked on my mortified eyes as he stood.

“I know, I’m sorry. Look—” I said, facing him square as I attempted to smile. “Can we maybe go grab some lunch and see what we really have in common?” I hoped my smile didn’t look as tortured as it felt.

“You shouldn’t do that, lie like that,” he said, lowering his head as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “Some people take this seriously and want to find a partner. True love, you know—”

What have I done? Have I shattered someone? I’m a terrible person. “I do take it seriously, Mike. I thought—”

“Clearly you don’t, Claire, or you wouldn’t be...” He waved a hand at my outfit. “Pretending.” He cleared his throat, pulled his baseball cap out of his back pocket, and slipped it on his head. “I think we should say goodbye now,” he said, walking away before I could say anything in response.

I hung my head, cupping it in my hands as I attempted to convince myself I wasn’t a horrendous person. If it meant I would spend my life alone, I had to be honest in who I was, whoever that was. And she hated cliff jumping.

I heard Sam’s car pull up the driveway as I slipped a baseball cap on.

“You ready to go?” she said, strolling in the front door.

“Yeah, I just have to grab my keys. I’m not bothering to take my purse to the game,” I said, rifling through my purse and stuffing my keys and cell phone into my pockets as I turned to face her. “You’re not really wearing that to a little league game, are you?”

“What?” she said, looking down as she pulled up her lime green tube top. “There might be single dads there. Why should the little kids get all the attention?”

“Are those, my God, are you wearing booty shorts?” I said, spinning her around and tugging on her cutoff shorts.

“Stop it. They’re cute,” Sam said, swatting at my hand.

“I can see your ass cheeks!”

“You’re just jealous,” Sam said, readjusting her top again.

“Well, maybe a little, but you can’t wear that. You’re going to spill out everywhere!” I said, watching her fuss with her shirt. “Come on, let’s get you something else,” I said, tugging on her arm as I tried to pull her to my bedroom.

“We’re already late. Let’s go,” Sam resisted, already halfway out the door.

I rolled my eyes as I watched her bouncy, carefree step carry her to the car and she honked the horn.

“I don’t see her. Where is she?” I said, craning my neck over the crowd at the baseball field.

“Who thought so many people went to these things?” Sam said, scanning the faces for Holly. “Oh, over there, by the coach,” she said, pointing and pulling on my arm as she lead us through the mass of parents.

“Oh, no...” I whispered to Sam.

“What?”

I leaned in toward her. “That’s Mike,” I said, already mortified as my heart rate became thirty beats faster.

“Cliff jumper Mike?” Sam said, her wide eyes locking on the tall, slender man next to Holly.

“Oh my God, what are the odds?” I said, covering my forehead with a hand, too embarrassed to look up at him.

“Oh, hey, guys!” Holly said, “I was just talking to the coach about Seth’s shoulder,” she said, scooting to the side to make room for us in their conversation. “Mike, these are my sisters. This is Sam,” she said as she glared at Sam’s outfit.

“What’s up?” Sam nodded to Mike.

“And this is—”

“Claire,” Mike interrupted, his grin vanishing as his face grew cold.

“Uh, hi, Mike,” I said, trying to smile but too ashamed to raise my eyes from the ground.

“Oh, you know Claire?” Holly said, puzzled by the awkward exchange between us.

“I guess you could say that,” Mike said, readjusting his baseball cap and looking at his watch. “I should be going. And give the boys a talk,” he said, nodding to Holly as he walked toward to the team.

“What was all that about?” Holly said, spinning to face me.

“That’s Mike. You know, *Mike* Mike, from my date Mike,” I said, raising my eyes to hers.

“You dated *that* Mike!” she said, covering her mouth with a hand as she spun around to look at him.

“I didn’t know it was Seth’s coach,” I said, cringing in apology.

“Man, that’s awkward huh?” Sam said, already bored and eyeing men around her. “Anyone else here single?”

“Sam!” Holly snapped.

“What?” Sam said, returning Holly’s glare.

I lost all focus on Seth, on the most important game of his young softball career, and spent the time staring at Mike across the field.

“You think he hates me?” I said to no one, watching him give a pep talk to the pitcher.

“I don’t think I’ve ever really seen him act that way,” Holly said.

“Oh, who cares? I mean, you didn’t really like the guy, right? It’s not like you guys were in a *relationship* or anything,” Sam said, picking at her chipped nail polish.

“Sam,” I said, gaping at her complete disconnection to the idea of embarrassment or regret.

“Well, I mean, come on, really. You guys have nothing in common,” she said, raising a brow in her attempted defense.

“Thank God the season is almost over. Give him time to forget me before next year,” I said.

Holly leaned back on her elbows. “He’s really a nice guy. I’m sure he’ll get over it,” she said, nudging my leg as she grinned at me. “I hate to agree with her, but Sam’s right. You guys weren’t in a relationship or anything. It was a first date.”

“He’s pretty cute, really,” Sam said, licking her lips as she sat up to get a closer look. “You think he’d like me? Maybe I should go chat with him?” she said, trying to perk up her breasts.

“Please don’t,” Holly said as she laughed. “You’re both officially never allowed to date someone I know, ever again,” she teased.

“I think I should just give up dating altogether!” I said, laughing at myself.

“Oh, no, you can’t get out of it that easily,” Holly teased.

“We could go on a double date. How fun would that be!” Sam said, suddenly interested in our conversation as she shot forward to face me.

“I think my clubbing days are over,” I said as I laughed. “Besides, I’d probably just mess up your mojo.”

“Stop it,” Holly said and swatted my knee. “You just had a bad couple of dates.”

“Yeah, you’re not allowed to quit yet,” Sam said.

“He keeps looking at me,” I said, nodding toward Mike.

“I noticed that too,” Holly said.

“You think he hates me?”

“Probably,” Sam said, biting a fingernail.

Holly smacked Sam's arm. "He doesn't hate you."

"Want me to distract him? I could go have a wardrobe malfunction," Sam said as she winked.

"That's the last thing I need," Holly said, as she turned toward me. "You have another date soon don't you?"

"Don't remind me," I said, rubbing my temples.

"Who's this one?" Sam asked.

"Darrel, works for some brokerage firm or something, I think it was."

"Sounds boring," Sam said, then held out her hand to Holly. "I want some junk food," she said, eyeing her empty palm as she waited for Holly to hand her money.

"Good for you. Go get some," Holly said to Sam.

Sam rolled her eyes and leaned back again. "So, this new one, is he from your fake profile?"

"After Mike I switched it back. I had to. So he's from the new me. Or would it be old me?"

"You nervous?" Holly asked.

"Actually, I don't think so," I said, surprised by my answer. "I mean at this rate, what else could go wrong, right?"

Thirteen

“Just remember to text me his license plate number,” Sam said, hugging me as she held open the front door. “So if something happens, I have something to give the police.”

“Dang, Sam, way to freak me out,” I teased, squeezing her tighter.

“There’s a lot of psychos out there. You never know,” she said and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. “You look gorgeous. You really do.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said, fluffing out my red dress. “I just hope it’s not too much.”

“Okay, I’m going to go. Call me later and let me know how it went?” Sam said, smiling as she walked to her car.

I waved, watched her car pull away, and commenced pacing. Nervousness had kicked in, again. But I was sure, at least this time, that no one I knew had ever met this man. Should it go terribly wrong and I ruin his life, it would never trickle down to any of my circles.

I decided to distract myself with an unnecessary makeup touchup. I leaned toward the mirror in the entryway to reapply my lipstick when a stream of headlights poured through my curtains. I heard a car door shut and then a gentle rapping on my door.

I pumped my hands into fists, squeezing the jitters out of them. “You got this,” I whispered to myself as I reached for the knob.

“Darrel, hi. Please come in,” I said, smiling as I gestured to my living room.

“Claire, it’s nice to meet you. You look amazing,” he said and leaned in for a casual, half-hug.

“Thank you. I just need to grab my purse. Is this too much for where we’re going?”

“Even if it were, I would find another place to go. You look too wonderful,” he said.

I loved Italian food but could never eat it without thinking of the night Charlie left me. I had sworn off manicotti for good.

The stars had shown in my favor at least, and Darrel had not chosen the same restaurant. Campanello’s was a beautiful. The dim lighting cast a romantic glow on the burgundy tablecloths. It was a restaurant designed for couples, with a sea of bistro tables creating a soothing, intimate setting. A little too intimate for my taste, leaving no room for my hands on the table where I wouldn’t bump against Darrel’s.

A harpist sat in the corner, plucking nylon strings and filling the room with delicate, sweet songs I didn’t recognize. I wondered if they were from the old country.

I spun the stem of the wine glass between my fingers. “So, have you been single long?” I asked.

The lighting suited him well, and his olive skin glowed flawless as he smiled at me. His mousy brown hair held a golden tint in the candlelight, sparkling as the flame flickered.

“Only a few months,” he said, taking a deep breath as he gulped down his wine.

It’s funny, sitting here with someone more nervous than I. “Is it as bad as you remember? Dating, that is?” I asked, trying to laugh.

“It’s been a little trying at times,” he said, setting his empty glass on the table.

“I was horrified at first. Well, I guess maybe I still am,” I said, chuckling as I wrung my hands together. “But this is nice, isn’t it?” I wasn’t sure if I was trying to encourage Darrel or me, but it didn’t seem to help either of us.

“I keep going on these dates you know, but none of them seem comparable to her,” he said, his eyes lowering.

I could see the wetness building up around his hazel eyes.

With our hands already touching on the tiny table, I patted the top of his hand. “Oh, it’s all right. That’s what I thought too at first, but it’ll get better,” I said. Did I really just give this poor man the same speech everyone had given me? Had I bought into their pep talks to the point where I would force them on another poor human being? I wanted to give myself a time out.

“My first date, when I got there I almost felt like I was cheating. Isn’t that silly?” I tried to laugh at myself, but Darrel went pale. “But my husband, he was the cheater, apparently!” His face started turning a strange, blue-green. I knew I was bad at small talk, but I didn’t think myself bad enough to make someone nauseous. “So, Darrel—”

I thought for a moment Darrel was choking, gasping as he raised a hand to his mouth.

“Are you okay?” I said, crouching to see his face. In the stream of the candle’s light, I saw the twinkle of tears rolling down his rose colored cheek. “Oh, are you crying?” I said, reaching into my purse for a tissue.

“Thank you. I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his eyes with my hankie.

“It’s okay. It’ll be all right, you’ll see,” I said, patting his hand again.

“Gosh, you’re wonderful, Claire,” he said, raising his watery, bloodshot eyes to mine. “Some guy is going to be really lucky to—”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Don’t worry.” I smiled as he sat up and composed himself. Well, stopped crying at least.

“What, what were you saying?” he said as he finished wiping his eyes.

“Oh, I was just going to ask you what you like to do on weekends.”

Darrel, thank God, seemed to pull himself together a little. He took a sip of water, smiled, and said, “Lately, I’ve been trying hiking. Have you ever hiked before?”

“Not in a few years, but there used to be a path. Gosh, where was it...” I tapped a finger to my chin. “Out on I-90, I think it was, by Balton City, maybe?”

Poor Darrel broke into sobs again, and his big, burly chest was heaving as he wailed. Other couples turned toward the commotion at our table.

“Oh, what is it? I’m sorry,” I whispered as I patted his shoulder. “Shh. It’ll be fine, Darrel,” I said again, patting his arm and looking around in horror.

“She...” Darrel sniffed and took a breath. “She was from Balton City,” he cried, blowing his nose like a trombone into his napkin.

“Oh...oh. Oh, dear,” I muttered, scrambling for more tissues from my purse. “Here,” I said, handing him the rest of the packet.

Darrel blew his nose three more times as he bawled. I sat back, watching the pile of used tissues grow into a small mound on our tiny table. “Um, Darrel...” I bent forward. “Should we go?”

“No,” he groaned. “I’ll be fine. It just...” He sat up, tipped his head back, and tried to blink away the remaining tears. “It just kind of comes and goes, you know, the emotions.” He tried to smile and took one long, deep breath.

I waited for a moment, eyeing him and waiting to be sure the tears had stopped. I put a hand up. “We good now?”

He nodded. “So, umm,” he cleared his throat and finished the bit of water in his glass. “What about you? What do you do on the weekends?”

I took a breath, trying to shake off the last few odd, uncomfortable minutes with him. I wanted to stay positive, to find the fun in this dating crap like Sam told me to. I smiled, flicked my hair back off my shoulder, and said, “Well, I’m usually with my—”

“You know,” he interrupted, “in this lighting, you really look like her,” he said, looking up at me before he began crying hard.

“Thank you—”

“Why did she leave me?” he bawled, throwing his hands up before he buried his head in his arms on the table.

“Is everything all right, signora?” our waiter asked, glaring at the sobbing mess across the table from me.

“Yes, he’s just having a moment, that’s all,” I said, patting Darrel’s back as he bawled.

“Darrel, calm down. Everything’s going to be fine,” I said, trying my best at a reassuring tone.

He took a stuttered breath, sat up and attempted to stop his crying as he nodded at me.

“See, that’s better,” I said, painting a smile on my face. “Everything will be fine. Let’s just try and enjoy dinner, okay?”

I just wanted to escape. I wanted to apologize to my sisters for putting them through moments like this, falling apart so terribly in the most public of places.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm just having a hard time moving on," he said, trying to smile as he wiped his eyes.

"We'll just have dinner all right? Nothing more, right?" I said, eyeing the exit sign lit up behind his head. "No moving on; no pressure. Just two friends having dinner. Right?" My feet itched to run. But how could I desert the poor guy like that? Clearly someone had messed this guy up more than even I was messed up.

"You really are a great girl. Thank you, Claire," he said, gesturing to the empty tissue package.

"Nothing to it," I said.

"You're so sweet. Just like my Jessica..." he said, his eyes growing wide as he bit his lip and fought the tears starting to stream down his face again.

I sighed, leaned back in my chair, and threw my hands up in the air. What have I done to anger the dating Gods so badly? It must have been a grave insult or slander of their name to stick me with this heaving puddle of a man.

"Darrel, it's fine. Please stop crying," I whispered.

"She had dark hair, just like yours," he said, glancing at me. Then he buried his face in his hands again. "Oh, Jessica! Why, Jessica, why?" he cried into his palms.

"I think we should go now," I whispered to Darrel, standing and wrapping my shawl around my shoulders. I dug a twenty dollar bill out of my purse and tossed it on the table. *A lot of money to pay to go home hungry*, I thought as I wrapped my arms around Darrel's heaving shoulders and guided him to a standing position.

"Give me your key's. I'll drive us back," I said to him.

"She was so sweet, like you," he cried as he dug through his pocket.

"All right, lover-boy, let's go," I said, taking the keys from his hand and walking us to the exit. *It would be nice, at some point, to actually make it through dinner on a date*, I thought, eyeing the filled plates as we left.

“There are four messages from him,” Margie, my new assistant, said to me as I walked in. She held up a hand full of pink message slips.

I rolled my eyes. “Just set them on my desk.”

“It was fine the first couple of times, but on the last call, I kind of snapped at him and he started crying,” she said, slipping a notepad into the crook of her arm as she stood.

“Yeah, Darrel kind of does that a lot,” I said as I sat at my desk. “I think the guy means well. He’s actually kind of sweet when you can talk to him between bouts of crying.” I chuckled a little. “But he’s more of a mess than I am.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said, sitting across from me. She set the pad on her lap and clicked her pen open, ready to take notes.

“I wish he would stop calling. Isn’t that horrible?” I said, resting my elbows on my desk and rubbing my temples. “Okay,” I said, sitting up and shaking it off. “We need to whip up three proposals,” I said, flipping through a file. Margie’s quick hand swooped letters onto her notepad as I spoke. “They all want completely different campaigns, so we have to start from scratch,” I said.

I sat at my desk, hours after Margie had left for the day, still working on a PowerPoint presentation for the upcoming proposal meetings. I scrunched my shoulder blades together, groaning as I stretched my arms and leaned back. I interlaced my fingers behind my neck, contemplating a dinner of some sort when I heard someone knock on my door.

Couldn’t be the girls, I thought as I stood. *Sam’s on a date, and Holly’s at a Girl Scouts meeting.* I peeked through the front curtains, and a wave of tension and impatience surged through my muscles from the man standing on my porch.

I opened the door, resting a hand on my cocked hip. “Darrel, what are you doing here at this hour?”

“I’m sorry Claire, but I left messages for you and haven’t heard back so I thought—”

“You really shouldn’t just stop by a woman’s house like this. It’s creepy you know,” I said, stepping back and giving myself space to

dive for any type of weapon for defense. But I couldn't picture Darrel as the harmful, slasher-type stalker; unless he killed his victims by drowning them in his tears, that is.

"I know. I'm sorry, but I just—" he ran his fingers through his hair and leaned against the porch railing. "I saw that your light was still on, and Margie left a while ago—"

"See, now *that's* creepy. Were you watching my house?" I said, stepping back.

Darrel slouched like a heartbroken child. "Well, a little, I guess. I'm sorry." He raised his pouty eyes to mine.

"You can't do that, Darrel. That's scary!"

"I'm sorry." He shuffled a foot and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I just needed someone to talk to." His head slumped lower.

I crossed my arms on my chest, letting a scornful glare rest on his pitiful eyes. I sighed. "What happened?"

"I went on another date last night, but she had blond hair and, well really nothing like you or Jessica..."

I closed my cardigan tighter around me and stepped out onto the porch. I knew now, at the mere mention of this woman's name, it would be seconds before the poor sap fell apart.

"I, well, I lost composure for a moment, and she called me a spineless baby."

I saw the glimmer of wetness in his eyes, and I crumpled inside by the bawling I knew would come.

"Darrel, you know you just have to toughen up a little bit, that's all," I said, resting a soothing hand on his shoulder.

"So I really am a baby? It's no wonder Jess left me," he said, hanging his head and starting to cry.

"Some women like a manly man, you know. That's all."

"It's no wonder she left me for that damn lumberjack looking guy," he said through a groan, shaking his fist in the air.

"There are plenty of women who like the more...sensitive types like you," I said, nodding with a soft smile.

"Really?" he said, his hopeful eyes rising to mine.

"Sure," I said, smiling wider. "I don't know any, but I'm sure they're out there." I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and turned him toward my door. "Let's go inside and have a drink. Get you some tissues."

Reinventing Claire

“Thanks, Claire. You’re really the best,” he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Fourteen

I met Sam at our usual coffee shop. I expected it to be noisy and crowded like it usually was on Saturdays and was surprised to see a mostly empty shop. For once, we had our pick of tables.

Sam dumped four sugar packets into her coffee, broke a piece of my cookie off, and stuffed it into her mouth. “So this is what you’re having for breakfast these days?” she said, licking chocolate off her lips.

“It works for me lately,” I said, shrugging as I took a bite. “You’re one to talk,” I added, nodding to the mound of sugar packet wrappers next to her cup.

“So anyway,” she said, twirling the plastic stir stick in her coffee. “The guy was a total snooze fest during dinner. Well, sort of. I guess he was *maybe* okay. But God, the sex was to die for!”

“I just don’t get how you go on these amazing dates, and I get stuck with like, the dating rejects.”

Sam shrugged as she sipped her coffee. “Maybe because I’m just looking for one thing out of it?”

“I’m not going to resort to becoming a slut,” I said, leaning back as I watched a couple across from us. Their wrinkled, weathered hands were interlaced on the table. His face buried behind the morning paper while she flipped through a magazine. *They had*

probably been together longer than they were ever single, I thought, admiring their comfortable silence.

“No one says you have to be a slut, but *just* sex works for me, that’s all I’m sayin,” Sam said, pulling me back into our conversation. “Relationships are complicated and messy. Screw that,” she said, cringing as she leaned back. “Hey, you are going to dinner tomorrow at Mom and Dad’s, right?”

“Where else would I be?”

“She asked me to bring the sauerkraut, but—” She looked at me with her stare of pity.

“Fine, I’ll bring it,” I said, smiling as I rolled my eyes.

“Thanks. I get so lost in grocery stores.”

“It amazes me sometimes how you even manage to function,” I teased her as I raised my cup to my lips.

“Yeah, yeah,” she glared with a grin.

A man paid for his coffee and started to pass by us. His brown eyes caught my glance as he walked by, holding their stare for just a moment too long. Our eyes locked, both flickering the same curiosity before he turned his gaze back to the floor as he rushed by. He stopped at the door, turned back around, and approached our table.

“I’m sorry, Claire, is it?” he said, hesitant with a smile.

“Yes, I’m sorry I—” I sat up, turning to face him.

“Mac. Mac Goodman,” he said, extending his hand to me.

“Mac! Oh, hello!” I said, smiling as I closed my hand tight around his. I remembered him now, from the Christmas parties and team days at Charlie’s work. Mac was one of the few people at Charlie’s work who was laid back and approachable, often making him and his wife the couple I clung to at those dreaded outings.

He stood for a moment, his eyes warmer than I remembered and locked on mine as we stared in silence. His jaw was covered in dark morning stubble, his light brown hair was ruffled and mussed, and he had a slight gleam in his eyes as he looked down at me. I didn’t remember him being this attractive.

Sam cleared her throat, snapping me out of the weird trance.

“I’m sorry. Mac, this is my sister, Sam. I don’t believe you guys have met before,” I said, motioning to my sister.

“Sam, pleasure to meet you,” he said, smiling as he shook her hand and turned back to face me. “Wow, you really look great, Claire,” he said, loosely tucking a hand into his pocket.

Sam cleared her throat again as she slid her chair back and stood. “Well, hey, listen, it was great meeting you, but I have to get going.”

I knew she didn’t have anywhere to go; we always met for coffee on Saturdays.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry to have interrupted like that,” Mac said, stepping back.

“No, no it’s fine. I was just saying goodbye to Claire anyway,” she said, motioning to her empty chair. “Please, go ahead. I have this—this thing to go to,” she said, winking at me as she stepped around him.

I wasn’t sure if I should be grateful or angry with her for deserting me with a man I really didn’t know that well.

“Call me later?” she said, her wide grin hinting mischievousness.

“It was nice meeting you,” Mac hollered toward her as she left, pausing for a moment before he sat in Sam’s seat.

The familiarity of his smile sent a soothing reassurance through me as we sat for a moment, letting the strange air around us settle.

“So, Mac, how have you been?” I said, finding myself still smiling. “It’s been forever since I’ve seen you.”

“Good, good,” he said, setting his bag on the table and pulling out a poppy seed muffin. “You want some?” he said, holding it up.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, and nudged my plate with the cookie on it. “Breakfast of champions right here,” I said and chuckled.

I caught myself getting lost in his eyes, losing myself in this whirlwind of familiarity, excitement, and guilt. A flicker of remorse surged through me. *How could I allow little flutters like this for a married man?* I wondered, for a moment, if maybe Monica wasn’t the tramp I thought she was.

“How’s your wife? Tracey, right?” I said, taking a bite of my cookie.

“We’re divorced,” he said, breaking his muffin in half and putting half on my plate.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. I didn’t know,” I said, averting my gaze to the table. Of course I would bring up the most delicate subject. It seems I have a knack for saying the worst thing possible to everyone.

“You should really try it. They’re amazing. Have you tried one before?” he said, nodding to the piece of muffin he put on my plate as he took a bite of his.

I shook my head, broke off a piece, and ate it. It was still warm, fresh from the oven and filled with the comforts of home baked goodies as a child.

“It was over a year ago. Hard at first, but things are better now,” he said, and popping to top off his cup and pouring in a creamer.

“Charlie must have rubbed off on you, huh?” I teased with a smile. “Spread the divorce bug around the office.”

“I think it was Tracey that rubbed off on him. She left me for someone else,” he said, shrugging as he grinned.

Again, open mouth, insert foot. God, Claire. “I’m sorry. I guess I have all the wrong things to say today!” I bit my lip through a smile. “Once the coffee kicks in, I swear I’m smarter,” I laughed before taking another sip.

“I’m over it really, I guess. It’s a big adjustment, but I’m doing all right with it, I think.” He ran a hand through his hair as he leaned back, and I found myself tracing the lines of his bicep muscles with my eyes.

God, I must look terrible! What am I doing? I shot my stare down to my fingers drumming on the table.

“I’ve been dating here and there. Nothing serious though. No one I would let Nathan meet anyway.”

A flash of jealousy ripped through me, thinking of him on a date. *What’s wrong with me,* I cursed myself, wanting to slap myself upside the head.

“What about you? You seeing anyone?” His eyes flickered hesitancy. I knew the look. It’s the same one my eyes held the day I ran into Charlie at the grocery store holding silly hope that there wasn’t someone in his life.

“I’ve been on a few really, really bad dates,” I said, cringing as I laughed. “I’m not sure if I really have no idea how to pick a man or if I have some weird force field that like, pulls losers in my direction.”

“You too, huh?” he laughed and leaned back, his eyes locking on mine, almost taking me in.

Sitting there, makeup-less, wearing a grungy old sweatshirt and my favorite pair of lazy-day jeans, I wished I had at least taken a shower. I slid my hands into the sweatshirts front pocket, hoping I didn’t appear as unkempt as I felt.

“That can’t be it. It’s impossible,” he said, crossing his arms on his chest. “Look at you. Any man would be lucky to have you,” he said.

I waved my hand in front of his face. “You must need glasses. How many fingers am I holding up?” I laughed.

“I’m serious,” he said, chuckling as he lowered my hand to the table.

My heart stuttered in a way I forgot it could when his hand rested on mine for a second, sending a wave of warmth and hopefulness for something I wasn’t sure was even there or just in my imagination.

“You sound like my mother,” I teased. “She’s absolutely certain that I’m perfect,” I said, grinning with a firm nod.

He rested his chin in his palm. “I can believe that.”

I felt out of breath. I blushed and turned to look at something, anything.

“So how is Nathan these days? Does he live with you or Tracey?” I said, sliding my hand out from underneath his before it started to tremble.

“Oh, he’s great. So tall now. You probably haven’t seen him in a couple years now, right?” he said, his face shrouded with a proud, fatherly grin.

“I think he was in kindergarten last time I saw him?”

“Has it really been that long? Man,” he scrunched his brows together in disbelief. “Well,” he said, leaning back again and picking up his coffee. “He’s at the age now of still kind of thinking I’m cool but on the brink of thinking I’m super lame,” he laughed.

His laughter stirred up a comfort I hadn’t known before.

“Be glad you didn’t have a girl, or you would have been totally lame years ago,” I said and chuckled.

We sat there long enough to see the breakfast and lunch rush pass through the coffee shop. I thought, or hoped, we would still be there for the after-dinner rush too. I couldn’t remember if I always felt this comfortable with Mac, if we always talked so openly like this. Or if we perhaps moved to another level from this unexpected encounter, a level of camaraderie. Like a group of divorced brothers banding together to share their tales of dating woes. My stomach

coiled, thinking that after this brief yet amazing encounter, we would vanish from each other's lives like we had before.

I slipped past the momentary awkwardness hours ago and comfortably reached across the table to pick at the remnants of his croissant sandwich.

"I mean, he's a really nice guy, I think, but man, he's always crying!" I laughed, rehashing my latest visit with Darrel.

Mac laughed. I loved the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled.

"See, I had the opposite," he said, settling down a bit. "A buddy set me up with this woman who, apparently, hated men." He chuckled, then scrunching his face up tight and crossing his arms. "She sat, the whole dinner, like this." He closed his arms tighter.

I giggled from my toes, watching his goofy impression of a pissed off woman.

"I just spent the whole time trying to figure out why she went on the damn date since she clearly hates men!"

"Maybe she doesn't hate all men, just your charismatic personality," I teased, grinning as I patted his cheek.

"At least I don't make people cry," he said, grinning as he raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, low blow!" I laughed, pausing to sip my Pepsi. "Really, I'm considering giving up dating altogether. God, what a hassle it all is. And for what?"

"Are you going to be one of those bitter divorced ladies?" he chuckled.

"Maybe."

"Nah, bitter doesn't suit you." He leaned back and let his eyes slowly take me in. "You're too nice for that."

"Apparently, Charlie didn't think so," I said, instantly regretting ruining the moment by the mention of his name. *Ab, what the hell*, I thought. "How is Charlie anyway?" I asked, uncertain as to why I cared.

"We don't talk much anymore, really," he said, picking up the last bite of his kosher pickle. "We played golf a few months back, right before the weather started to cool down."

"They had the baby, right? Probably six months old or so now?" I asked. I pictured Charlie curled up on his leather recliner, and this tiny, angelic infant resting in his daddy's arms.

“Something like that, yeah. I don’t think he’s too happy though,” he said, grinning at me, expecting me to relish in Charlie’s misery.

“No?” I said, somewhat intrigued.

“I guess Monica started being a real bitch after he slipped the ring on her finger, really tightened the leash around Charlie, you know? That’s why we stopped talking. She never lets him go anywhere.”

It surprised me that I felt bad for Charlie. And that not a passing thought of hope coursed through me for some type of reconciliation between us. I just pitied him. “That’s too bad,” I said, leaning back and running my fingers through my hair.

Mac checked his watch. The weight of disappointment sank into my belly. I didn’t want him to leave, for the conversation to end, for my life to go on hoping for a chance encounter with him again.

He nibbled his lip staring at his watch, let out a sigh, and scooted his chair back.

“You have to go?” I said, smiling and trying to hide the hint of defeat in my tone.

“Yeah...” he said, still staring at the time. “Nathan is coming over for a movie later, so I should—”

“Of course!” I said, glancing at the time. “I should get going too, really,” I said, although I had nothing to do. “Guess I just lost track of time.”

He sighed, smiling at me with his tender gaze locked on me. “You maybe want to bump into me again tomorrow?” he said.

My lungs filled with air again, a heaviness I didn’t know was there lifting itself from my chest. “Sure. Where at and what time?” I wanted to wince, thinking I sounded a bit too eager, too available. I sucked at playing hard to get.

“I promised myself I’d de-bachelor pad my place, like, months ago. I’ve got a cardboard box as a coffee table,” he laughed. “I have to get housey type stuff. You know how to do that?” he grinned.

“I am *great* at housey stuff,” I said, relieved this wouldn’t be just one of those moments in life you wished you could have again.

“Great! Write down your address, and I’ll come pick you up around one. Is that cool?” he said, handing me a napkin and a pen.

“One is perfect,” I said, scribbling down my address.

Fifteen

“You look really confused,” I laughed, holding up a set of blue dish towels in my right hand and a set of striped tan towels in my left.

Mac scratched his head. “I think I am. I usually just get whatever’s on sale,” he said. He scratched his head again, staring at them. “You sure it all has to match?”

I laughed, and for the first time, I heard my real laugh with a man, not the tortured, ‘Dear God get me out of here’ laugh.

“I don’t know. What do you think?” he said, slipping the towels out of my hand and examining them as he ran his thumb across them.

“Well, you want me to get all girly on you?”

“I guess. I clearly don’t know what the hell I’m doing,” he chuckled.

“Here’s what I think. You already got blue pillows for your couch,” I said, gesturing to his partially filled cart. “*And* you picked out blue towels for your bathroom. So if you get blue for the kitchen too, you’re just going to have a house filled with blue.”

“Like the Smurfs, right?” he said, chuckling as he put the blue towels back on the shelf. “Well, tan it is then,” he said, tossing them in the cart. “You are pretty good at this housey type stuff,” he teased, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and squeezing.

“Everybody has to be good at something, right?”

“I’m sure you’re good at a lot more than just this,” he smiled. He rested his elbow on the cart, put his chin in his palm, and held the simple, sweet gaze on me.

I didn’t want to blush. I playfully pushed him out of the way as I chuckled and started pushing the cart forward. I hoped I hadn’t misread him and was actually in the dreaded friend zone guys so often spoke of. Did I want to be more than friends with Mac? Did I really want to be more than friends with anyone? For a second the floor started to tilt on me. Woozy, I clenched my hands around the cart’s handle for stability, almost tripping as a storm of questions encircled my moment of peace with Mac. *He probably doesn’t even think of me like that. Why am I even bothering myself with such stupid questions?* I thought, trying to shake off the maddening rush of uncertainty.

“Well, I really appreciate you helping a guy out like this,” Mac said, loading items onto the conveyor belt at the checkout line. “It’s really nice of you to waste a Sunday on a hopeless bachelor like me,” he said through a laugh.

“It’s nothing, really. It was either go out with you or watch movies on Lifetime. So you sort of win by default,” I said as I patted his hand. Mac closed his fingers around mine. Everything moved in slow motion. His gaze slowly lifted from our clasped hands to my eyes as he squeezed tighter, smiling at me with the gentle brush of his thumb against the top of my hand.

I wanted to return the gesture, to caress his hand the way I hoped he was mine. But I was terrified the silly girl in me was mistaking a superficial friendly action as some outpouring of romantic affection.

“Well, I hope Nathan likes the changes,” I said, clearing my throat as I pulled my hand from his, fearful I was misinterpreting his motives.

He paused for a moment, his hand still resting where mine was. “He mentioned something last weekend about it looking weird. That’s kind of what spurred me to finally do something. I figure if a ten year old boy says something about the place needing something, it must be really bad!” he laughed, stepping behind the cart to wait for our turn.

His arm brushed against mine, and I thought for sure he heard the shaky exhale escape me before I could restrain it. My heart thudded in my ears, my breath became harder to catch, and I felt on the verge of panting standing so close to him with the warmth of his

arm against mine. I wondered if he was trapped in the same silly, emotional state as me.

He slouched on the cart's handle and cocked his hip so that his leg crossed over the front of mine. The weight of his body was now leaning on me. I knew our stance would look like that of a couple.

He cleared his throat as he turned his head to face me. His lips were so close to mine the heat of his breath warmed my face. His eyes raised to mine, his plump lips bending to a sweet smile.

My cheeks rose to a smile without restraint.

He leaned a little harder, exaggerating our stance. "I like this," he said, his voice soft and sure. "You and me."

The words 'you and me' forced a deep inhale. Was there a *you and me*? Had we upgraded our relationship status to something more than mere acquaintances? Hope terrified me. Hope that we had become *something*. Or would become something.

"No?" he said to my silence, leaning away from me a little.

The gap between our bodies jolted my mind from my questioning trance. Urging it to, for once, not over think things, to just go with the moment. Whatever the moment really was.

"Yes, it is," I said, smiling. I bent and rested my elbows on the handle beside him.

"Yeah, it is..." he said, grinning as he scooted closer, again protecting my arm with the warmth of his as we inched the cart up to the cashier.

Mom leaned over the stove, closing her eyes as she waved her hand over the pot and wafted the aroma of the stew toward her face. Her cream, tulip patterned apron wrapped tightly around her waist. She stood the same way I had seen her for years, finding peace in providing something delicious for her family.

"Smells great, Mom," I said, stepping beside her and kissing her cheek.

"Oh, hi, honey. I didn't hear you come in," she said, cocking her cheek to meet me halfway. "Course with all that racket out there, I wouldn't hear an ambulance parked in my living room," she said to the chaos in the other room.

"Why isn't the game on? Who changed the channel?" Daddy hollered in the living room.

Seth and Anna zipped past us, charging toward the stairs and giggling. Dad's remote was clenched inside Anna's tiny palm.

"Now stop it, you two," Mom giggled, swatting Seth's behind with her dishtowel. "You go on and give that back to Papa. You know how he likes his Sunday football."

"Naw, they're getting slaughtered anyway," Daddy said as he came in the kitchen. "Here, let me get that," he said, taking the heavy pot from Mom's hands. "Come on, you," he winked at me as he nodded toward the dining room.

"You're late," Holly said, glancing at me as she helped Anna sit at the table.

"I was out. Errands, sort of," I said, refusing to let my eyes meet hers. She would see through my casual charade like sheer organza.

"Claire met a man yesterday, Mom," Sam said, staring at me from the corner of her eye.

"Sam!" I snapped through my teeth.

Sam chuckled and slid a napkin over her lap.

"Oh, did you now, baby? What's his name?" Mom said, smiling as she poured a ladle full of stew into Daddy's bowl.

"His name is Mac, and it's not like that, Mom. He was an old co-worker of Charlie's, that's all."

"Didn't look like that to me," Sam said, almost giggling at me from the other side of the table.

"Yeah, and you spent how long with him yesterday? Like *all* day?" Holly said, raising an eyebrow at me.

"She told you, didn't she?" I said, rolling my eyes as I sighed.

"Of course I did, duh," Sam laughed.

"Sounds pretty cute," Holly said, grinning.

"There's no secrets in this family, you know that," Mom chimed in, waving a hand at Mark to sit down.

"Well, yeah, but does everyone have to broadcast *everything*?" I said, shaking my head. "It was just a cup of coffee."

"She saw him today too," Mark said, biting his lip to hide a smile.

"You're not on my side either!" I teased, swatting his arm.

"I think she's quite smitten with him, Daddy," Mom said, grinning as she nudged Daddy's arm.

"Huh? Yes, quite," Daddy said, only partially listening as he craned his neck to see the TV in the living room.

“You guys are blowing this way out of proportion. He’s just an acquaintance. Charlie’s friend, for Pete’s sake.”

“I call bullshit,” Mark said, reaching around me for the basket of biscuits. “You guys went shopping today, right?”

“How did you know that?” I snapped, and then I instantly turned to scowl at Sam. Sam shrugged. “Just towels and stuff, not a wedding ring or anything,” I said, exaggerating a glare at Sam.

“Guys don’t care about that crap. That’s why we let the women do it. We don’t care about towels.”

“No, he said he—”

“Doesn’t matter what he said,” Mark said, breaking the biscuit and dipping it into his stew. “He just used it as an excuse to see you.”

“It’s true,” Sam said through a mouthful of food, covering her mouth with a hand. “Guys don’t care about crap like that. He just wanted to see you,” she repeated.

I sighed, crossing my arms as I leaned back. “Doesn’t anyone in here have something going on in *their* life? Why’s it always got to be about me?” I said, smiling as I threw my hands up.

“Sure we do. You’re just more interesting than how much I saved on groceries this week,” Holly said, grinning at me.

“You know, honey. I think the kids are right,” Mom said, holding up her index finger as she spoke. “Most men would prefer to do other things than shopping for things for the home. In my experience anyway, that’s what the women do.”

“So I saw him, like, twice. It’s no big deal,” I said, sliding the spoon into my mouth.

“Yeah, but you spent, like, all day with him yesterday,” Sam said.

“And half the day today,” Holly added.

“Sounds like a little something something to me,” Mark said, nodding with the girls.

“It’s not an anything!”

“Pfft, whatever,” Sam said, raising her palm to my face.

“I don’t even know if I want it to be a *something something*,” I snapped.

“Of course you do, honey,” Mom said, patting my hand. “Don’t you?”

“I—I don’t know, Ma,” I shrugged as I sat back. “I really don’t know.”

“You scared?” Mark said, softening his tone.

“I guess a little maybe.”

“Just one date at a time,” Sam said with a wink.

“We haven’t even had a *date* date yet!” I said through a laugh.

“I bet you,” Mark said, tapping a finger to his lip as he thought. “I bet you a Saturday night that by the end of the week he asks you out.”

“A Saturday night?” I laughed, uncrossing my arms as I leaned forward to stare at him.

“If I win, you watch the kids for us on a Saturday night. If you win, and he doesn’t ask you, we take you to your favorite place to do that girly, moepy stuff you guys do.”

“Girly, moepy stuff?” Sam said, cocking her head toward Mark.

“All right, you’ve got a deal,” I said, laughing as I shook Marks hand to seal our bet.

“By the end of the week, you just watch,” he said, a cocky grin stretching wide across his smooth cheeks.

“Uh huh, sure,” I said, smiling as I rolled my eyes and turned my attention back to the steaming bowl in front of me.

“So when will you be talking to him again, honey?” Mom asked.

I cleared my throat, hunching over my bowl as I lowered my voice to a mumble. “He said he’d call tonight.”

“Oh yeah, it’s on like Donkey Kong!” Sam cheered, reaching across the table to high five Mark.

Thankfully, the conversation moved from my nonexistent love life onto lighter, less intimidating areas. After dinner Daddy and Mark meandered to the garage, tinkering with the lawnmower. Daddy said something about the throttle not seeming right. Sam excused herself to a meeting as she called it. Code word for a date. Holly and I moved to the porch swing out back watching the kids poke over-ripened tomatoes with a stick in Mom’s garden.

“So really, all teasing aside, what do you think of this guy?” she asked, slowly rocking us with her toes.

I shrugged, uncrossed my legs and pushing us back again. “He seems nice. He always was though. I never knew him as well as Charlie does, but he and his wife always made those work functions fun, you know.”

“His wife!” Holly said, choking on her coffee.

“He’s divorced. Don’t worry,” I said with a chuckle.

“You think there’s something between you two? You guys sure did spend a lot of time together for not knowing each other that well.”

“I don’t know, Holl. I can’t tell if he likes me like *that*, or if in some desperate need, I’m totally misreading the guy, and he sees me as just a friend, you know,” I said, using my toes to inch us back and swing higher. “Shoot, I don’t really even know if I want something like that between us. I’m just getting used to being single and dating, you know. Like, I just now am hitting my stride—”

“And to jump right in to another relationship,” Holly said, cocking the left side of her mouth up.

“Exactly. I mean, am I really ready for all that? Do I really want the hassle of a *real* relationship?”

“On the other hand,” she said, easing her back against the old wood swing. “You’ve been divorced for over a year now. Maybe it’s time? Step it up a notch, you know?”

“Has it really been that long?” I said, pressing a hand to my lips. That dinner, the night Charlie took me out to forget my crappy day, still stung so fierce like it happened last week. Yet, even trying, I cannot remember the last time I *really* thought about him. When did I stop wondering what happened between us? When did I move on? Why did my heart still feel stuck?

“Well, all I’m sayin’ is if this guy seems nice, I’d just go with it, you know,” Holly said, leaning against the swing’s chain, raising her legs, and putting her feet atop my thighs.

I dug my toes into the ground, pushed us back, and let momentum take hold of the swing. “I feel really comfortable with him. It’s kind of weird,” I said, reaching over and taking a sip of Holly’s coffee. “Like I’m hanging out with you and Sam or something, but it’s a man.”

“He’s not gay, is he?” Holly laughed.

“No!” I chuckled, shaking my head. “He’s just like, I don’t know, it’s comfortable.”

“Like, could be a great relationship comfortable or good friend comfortable?”

I shrugged. “That’s the problem. I guess I don’t know how to tell the difference.”

“Well, worst case scenario, you end up with a really good friend out of the deal, right?” she said, her eyes bright with optimism as she shrugged.

“Right, and who couldn’t use another friend, right?” I said, nodding with her. “I think Mark would really like him though,” I said, watching my brother-in-law hunch over the old lawn mower beside my dad. “They’ve got the same kind of sense of humor, I think.”

“Better keep him away from Mark then. He’d probably steal Mac away, enticing him with beer and Buffalo wings,” Holly laughed, smiling as she admired her love across the yard.

“Did I tell you he has a son?” I said, snapping my head toward Holly. “He showed me a picture, cutest little boy. Nathan.”

“You okay with being a step-mom?”

My head jolted back as my eyes widened. In my crazy, random thoughts about Mac, me, us, I never slipped his son into this imaginary picture to see if I still fit. The addition of a son would dramatically change this daydream I let roam through my thoughts.

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” I said, shooting a worried gaze in her direction.

“You should, because if it goes that far,” Holly raised her brows. “You don’t want to string the guy along, you know. If being a step-mom isn’t something you want, you gotta set it straight right away that you guys are just friends.”

“Draw the line. Make it crystal clear I don’t have feelings for him,” I said, nodding at her.

“Right, cause then you’re messing with a kid’s head too, you know—”

“I couldn’t do that. He’s a good kid. Well, I guess. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Are you nervous about talking to him tonight now?”

I crinkled my nose up, cocked my head, and looked toward her. “You know, I think I’m kind of excited.”

Sixteen

Mac and I talked until two in the morning like a couple of teenagers. Well, more *mature* teenagers, like on *Dawsons Creek* or *90210*. And a little closer to the gray hair stage than a prom date. With that slight difference in age, I was paying for the late night chat. I somehow turned off my alarm clock, woke to the sound of Margie pounding on the front door, and was desperate to not fall asleep on my desk.

Already behind schedule, I started the workday still in my pajamas. After lunch, I finally dressed, and since I was wired from two pots of coffee, I thought I just might make it through the day.

I reached for my phone to make a call, but it rang just before I picked it up.

“McGibbins Advertising, this is Claire.”

“Do you have a grill?”

“Umm, excuse me?” I said, sure it was a crank call.

“Do you have a grill?”

I fumbled for the caller ID. “Who is—”

“It’s Mac.”

“You need to say that!” I laughed, relaxing and leaning back in my chair. “Why do you want to know if I have a grill?”

“See I bought these steaks, really nice cuts of New York strips. I was going to come over tonight and cook them up, but I don’t want to try and lug over my grill if you have one.”

“So you’re just inviting yourself over to my place now is that it?” I teased, feeling a flush creep up my neck as I twirled a piece of hair around my finger.

“Yeah, I’m cool like that,” he laughed. “So do you have one, a grill?”

“Just a charcoal one,” I said, my heart thumping hard in my chest.

“Charcoal’s better than gas anyway. So I’ll bring the steaks. You make something to go with it?”

Sam told me to play it cool. ‘Guys like to be like hunters. They want to pursue you,’ she had said. I tried to take a quiet breath. “Who’s to say I don’t already have plans?” *My word, I’m really flirting, aren’t I?* I wanted to pat myself on the back. *Look at me, being flirtatious. I’m so badass right now.*

Silence filled the line; I tipped the phone back to see if we were disconnected.

“Oh...” he said, his voice drifting off. “I’m sorry. I guess I should have—”

“I don’t. Have plans, that is,” I said, my voice soft and light. “But you can’t just assume an extremely awesome woman such as myself would forever remain plan-less. For all you know, I’m a high commodity.”

“Of course, you’re right. I must bow to your awesomeness, oh great one of many plans,” he said while laughing.

“That’s better,” I said, blushing as I imagined his bright grin. “Your greatness will expect you at, say, six-thirty?”

“Make it six? I had a light lunch, and I’m starving.”

“Six it is,” I said still smiling, the warm flush now making my face hot and red.

I hung up the phone, tapping a finger to my lip as I grinned and glanced at the clock. *He’ll be here in three hours*, I thought. I picked the phone up again and started dialing.

“Hey, Claire Bear,” Sam said as she answered.

“He’s bringing steaks over for dinner,” I blurted, now panicked, thinking this might be a *date* date. Or, God, what if it wasn’t, and I was misreading him again?

“You’re kidding me!” Sam said in her high-pitched squeak.

“I don’t think it’s like a *date* date. At least I don’t think so, maybe it is—”

“When’s he going to be there?”

“Six, but I need you to come help me pick out something to wear. I can’t do sexy casual.”

“This is so exciting!” Sam squeaked again, and I could hear her clapping.

“No, don’t do that!” I said, trying to catch my breath. “You’ll get me all worked up. I’m already messed up, and I don’t want to get all giddy just to be let down,” I said, surprised by the truth I blurted.

“Oh, stop it. You gotta be more positive, Claire! Really, don’t be such a Debbie Downer.”

“Just come help me pick something out. Please?”

“You know it. I’ll be there!”

I gnawed off all my fingernails waiting for Sam to arrive later that day. I don’t think I was as nervous on my wedding day as I was now. I rolled my eyes. *I’m so ridiculous.* I pulled the cork from a wine bottle, grabbed the first glass I saw, and filled it to the rim. I took a big swig, letting the gentle flavor trickle down my throat as I leaned against the counter and let out a deep breath.

“Sorry I’m late. I couldn’t find this one top I wanted to bring,” Sam hollered from the front door.

“I’m a nervous wreck. This is so stupid,” I said as I hugged her.

“You like him that much, huh?” she said, setting a bag on the kitchen table and starting to sift through an array of blouses.

“I feel like I’m going to choke on my heart it’s beating so damn fast,” I said, clutching a hand against my heaving chest. “Is this a heart attack? Am I having a heart attack?”

“It’s called a crush,” she giggled.

“Oh, God...” I rolled my eyes.

“Here, finish this,” she said, handing me the coffee mug of wine I set down. “Just chug it. No bitch-sipping.”

I nodded, obediently gulping every drop in the cup.

“Better?” she said as I set the mug on the counter.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so, but now I might be drunk when he gets here.”

“Sometimes that’s good too,” she laughed and winked.

I pulled Sam into my bedroom, and we started rummaging through our clothes for the perfect sexy casual outfit. I now envied Sam for how quickly she pulled together a trendy look from my modest clothing.

“When did my ass start sagging like this?” I said, looking over my shoulder at my butt, which was much wider than I remember it being this morning.

“Your ass is fine,” Sam said, swatting my arm and handing me a teal colored cami.

“Look at it. It’s like gravity is clutching the cheeks and dragging it into a big-ass abyss or something,” I said, spinning around to examine it in the full length mirror we propped against my bed.

“Your ass is fine. Shut up and put that on,” she said, nodding at the shirt in my hand.

I slid the cami on, took one look, and pulled it off. “Grab my lilac one in the closet,” I said to her, motioning to the other side of my room. “No, to the left, by that red wrap thing.”

“This one?” she said, holding up my chiffon, spaghetti strap blouse.

“Yeah,” I said, wiggling my fingers for her to hand it to me. I slid the shirt on and turned toward the mirror.

“Very cute.” Sam nodded and crossed her arms on her chest while scrutinizing my outfit. “You’ll be cold though. Here, try this with it.” She thumbed through a pile on the bed and tossed me an off-white cardigan. She gasped as I slid it over my shoulders. “Perfect.”

All I needed was someone to play music while I waited for Mac to come over, and I could have killed time with a game of musical chairs. I moved from the kitchen table to the sofa, then to the rocking chair and back to the kitchen. My hope for feeling, or at least appearing, casual in any manner evaded me. I plopped down on the kitchen chair. Sweat started beading up on my forehead, and my palms were clammy. I was damn near starting to pant.

“Maybe I should be doing something?” I said to myself. I pulled up my sleeves and started washing the few dishes piled in the sink. I took more time than needed, exaggerating every swipe of the sponge on the plates and cups and hoping to not finish the five minute task too soon. On my last dish, thinking I might have to start washing them again to kill more time, I heard a knock on the door.

I grabbed the dishtowel and wiped my bubbly hands as I opened the door. “Hey, I was just doing some dishes,” I said, hoping it sounded casual as I moved to the side of the door for him. “Come on in.”

“Nice place,” he said as he glanced around the living room.

“Thank you. I’m still sort of getting used to it,” I said, scrunching my nose at the house I hoped to call home someday.

“It feels warm, homey,” he said.

“To you, maybe. Just feels like a house to me,” I said, surprised at my honesty. “It does have some nice qualities to it though,” I said, admiring the antique mantel.

“Great yard. Nathan would love it,” he said, craning his neck to see out the back window.

I saw his eyes widen. I thought it cute the way he spun around to hide his embarrassment

“Here, let me take those, so you can get the grill going,” I said, smiling as I slid the white paper package of steaks from his hands. “You want something to drink?”

“What do ya got?” he said, now smiling and following me into the kitchen.

“Eh, just poke around in there until you see something you like,” I smiled and motioned to the fridge.

Mac opened the fridge, bent over, and started scooting contents around. “Yogurt, lettuce, tuna fish. This is definitely a woman’s fridge,” he said to me from over his shoulder.

“Not entirely,” I said and nodded. “Look behind the orange juice.”

“Ah, there’s the good stuff,” he said as he grabbed a Samuel Adams from the six pack.

I handed him a bottle opener. “You can’t have a good steak without a good beer,” I said, hoping the smile I flashed was cute and not some contorted creeping looking, serial killer grin. “That’s almost a sin.”

“You’re not half bad,” he said, leaning against the fridge as he took a sip.

Even a dating moron like me could recognize the flirtatiousness of his grin, and I managed a playful grin in return. I leaned against the counter across from him. I tried to hide a smile, seeing that he put quite a bit of effort into his appearance today, hoping to impress *me*. His skin was a new-razor kind of silky smooth, and he had the gleam of hair gel in his slightly spiked hair.

A reddish hue crept up his neck and over his cheeks as I looked him over. He ducked his head a little, raising his eyes to meet mine, and his cheeks flushed brighter.

“So, are you going to make a poor girl starve?” I said, handing him the steaks I put on a plate.

“Yes, Ma’am!” he said, winking at me as he saluted.

As he stepped out of the kitchen, I braced myself on the counter and let out a breath. *How did Sam do this so effortlessly?* Flirting was hard, stressful work. I cracked open a beer, drinking it so quick some dribbled down my chin and neck.

“Music. I should have some music on,” I whispered to myself and started scanning my CD collection. “Do I play romantic? Maybe that’s too forward,” I said to myself and tossed a CD to the side. “Something upbeat?” I said, flipping through case after case. “Oh, screw it,” I said, turning on the radio to a classic rock station.

Led Zeppelin poured out of the speakers behind me as I came to the patio with my almost empty beer in hand. I leaned against the doorway. “This okay with you?” I said, nodding to the music behind me.

“Great song,” he whispered, bobbing his head to the beat.

“Sam always teases me whenever I put this station on. She says I’m too young to be listening to *old* music,” I laughed, stepping out of the doorway and onto the patio. I paused in the middle of the patio, not knowing where I should stand. Should I be beside him or maybe on the other side of the grill? *Or should I stand over there, not so close to him?* I took a hesitant step, stopped, and then turned and settled on sitting at the small table next to the grill.

“No way. They don’t make music like this anymore. Now it’s all this whiny, nasally stuff that all sounds the same,” he said, shaking his head in shame at the popular music of today. “They’re all just trying to be badasses. But Zeppelin, Morrison, Hendrix – now *they* were badasses.”

“See, you get it!” I said as I laughed. “I’ll take something that’s on an album, not a CD, any day.”

Then it came. The thing I never managed well at any point in my dating history; the awkward silence. When someone clears their throat, both staring at nothing as your mind is frantic for words, any words, to spur the conversation back to life. This is where I always blow it, where I say the most asinine statement ever to slip past my lips, and I never hear from the man again. I bit my lip, holding back any lame comments about the weather.

Mac sat in the chair across from me, watching the amber embers flicker and glow in the grill. He set his arm on the table,

drumming his fingers on the beer bottle. I cleared my throat, my stare shifting around before it settled at the iron umbrella base. My foot started shaking. Then my heart kicked into overdrive, seeing that our knees were nearly touching under the table.

“Do you, uh, do you have a spatula or tongs? I’ll need to flip those soon,” he said, his voice as shaky as my limbs felt.

“Sure, yeah. Hang on,” I said. Weak in the knees, I tried to stand with grace and allure, but I banged my knee on the table when uncrossing my legs, shaking the table and almost knocking his beer over. “Sorry,” I muttered, trying not to trip as I escaped to the kitchen.

I bent over, resting my elbows on the counter and cupping my face in my hands. “God, settle down,” I mumbled into my palms.

I stood, took two big breaths, and pulled a spatula from the drawer.

“Here you go,” I said as I handed it to him a minute later.

“Thanks,” he said, standing. He moved to the grill and flipped the steaks with precision.

I bit my lip and moved closer, hoping he couldn’t hear my stuttered breathing as I scooted beside him.

Mac took a big gulp of beer. Then I felt his hand slide around my back and rest on my shoulder.

“They should be ready in a minute or two,” he said, his voice soft and apprehensive.

Maybe he was as nervous as I was? Here I was so afraid *I* was misinterpreting his intentions. Maybe he was afraid he was misinterpreting mine?

I cupped my hand over his on my shoulder. “They smell great,” I said, letting myself look up at him.

As our eyes locked relief flashed through his gaze. His shoulders relaxed, and his face brightened as his mouth rose to a small smile.

“Well I don’t want to brag, but I’m pretty damn good at grilling.”

“We’ll see about that,” I teased, pulling his arm tighter around me.

Mac helped clear the table after dinner. We stood side by side as I washed and he dried the dishes, our shoulders touching as they did the day at the store. As he reached to grab a plate from me, his

hand slid over mine. I froze, my arm suspended in the air, not letting go of the plate. And he didn't let go of my hand.

"Umm, I was thinking Claire," he said, now rubbing the plate with a towel. He lowered his head, as if he was afraid to look at me. "What do you say to dinner, Wednesday night?"

"You fancy some hotdogs?" I laughed and tried to tease, but my shaky voice sounded more like a squirrel with strep throat.

"No, I, uh," he set the plate on the rack and turned to face me. "I was thinking it would be nice at a restaurant. You know, go out..." His look shot to the floor. "Like a real date..."

I could almost hear Mark laughing in victory. Mac asked me out, for an official date. "Oh," I muttered.

"I mean, if you want to, that is," he said, eyes wide and worried. "I just thought it would be nice to—"

"Go out," I said.

"Yeah, a restaurant, dinner—"

"Table, chairs—" I smiled. "A *date* date." I grinned as he doodled swirls on the counter with a nervous hand. "I'd love to," I said, cocking my head a little so he would see my smile.

Mac stood taller, his poor face a bashful shade of crimson as he smiled at me. "Okay," he chuckled and ran a hand down my arm. "I'd like that."

Mac paused in the doorway of the front door as he left and spun around to face me. "I, uh, I had a really great time tonight, Claire. This was nice."

I loved how timid his smile was, so childlike with honesty. I hoped he wasn't a masterful player and I the lucky sap of the week.

"I did too," I said, tucking my hands in my back pockets and shifting my stare to the ground.

He slid his hand around my waist to the small of my back, and I thought I was going to collapse. My legs started shaking so hard I knew he must have noticed. He leaned in, and as he pressed his soft lips against my cheek, I closed my eyes. I had forgotten how amazing the rush of simple kiss on the cheek could make the world stop.

I cupped my hand over his chest. His heartbeat pounded underneath my fingertips. I cocked my head, closed my eyes, laid my head on his chest, and let my breath go.

Reinventing Claire

We stood for a moment with him nuzzling his cheek against me, and then he stepped back and caressed my cheek.

“You look really pretty today. I’m sorry I forgot to tell you,” he said, his voice almost a whisper.

“Call me tomorrow?” I said.

“Of course.”

Seventeen

“Oh. My. God! That sounds so cute!” Sam said.

I finished a late meeting on her side of town and met her for dinner after work.

“I can’t believe he actually asked me out,” I said, reaching across the table and scooped a bite of her Asian chicken onto my fork.

“You can’t be that surprised. Sounds like the guy is nuts over you.”

“I don’t know about all that, but I guess he’s actually interested huh?”

“You’re so cute,” she said, smiling at me.

“What?”

“Look at you,” she giggled, motioning at me with a quick swirl of pointed finger. “You get all flushed and stuff talking about him. It’s cute.”

“Oh, stop it,” I said, smacking her finger away from me.

“I think it’s great!” she said, nudging my shoulder with her fist. “Going on a real date with a nice guy. My lil peanut is growing up on me,” she said in a mocking tone, wiping an imaginary tear from her eye.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, glaring as I grinned.

“This guy just might be, dare I say it, *the* one,” she said with an exaggerated wink.

I rolled my eyes, set my fork down and started nibbling on my thumb nail. “Seriously. I really do like him, Sam,” I said, my voice soft and serious.

“I know,” she said. She took a sip of wine and grabbed the roll from my plate. “I haven’t seen you like this in a while, since—”

“Charlie, I know,” I said, heavy now with remembrance of the relationship I thought would last forever.

“But kind of different though,” Sam said, crossing her arms as she examined me. “Like, I don’t know, it’s different somehow. I can’t really figure it out, but it’s kind of cool.”

“You don’t need to fill my head with fluff. I’m well aware this could all end the same way,” I said, not even sure what *this* was between Mac and I.

“It’s not fluff. It really is different.”

I shrugged, leaned back and tossed my napkin on the table. I knew there was a difference between my relationships with Mac and Charlie, although I couldn’t pinpoint what it was. The only thing certain was that thinking of Charlie made me so depressed I could eat a large pizza by myself trying to forget him, and thinking of Mac made me hopeful.

“I like him Sam,” I said, raising my eyes to hers. “A lot.”

“I know,” she said, sensing my fear and rubbing my hand.

“Do you think I’m too broken to be with him?” I said, hoping it wasn’t true. Being with Mac stirred up desires I thought were lost forever, a desire to love, to be loved. My family preached this day would come, when I would *want* to take the risk of opening my heart and letting someone in. And it terrified me that they might be right. What if I let Mac in, and he found me too messed up to be with? What if there is something about me that would forever repel a man?

“I didn’t think you were broken to begin with,” she said, lowering her head to catch my wandering stare. “I think it was Charlie that was broken.”

In trying to decide what to wear on my date with Mac, I stood there looking at the plethora of clothes dangling from the closet rod. Everything reminded me of Charlie. The simple black dress, every woman’s staple, I wore to the annual banquet at Charlie’s work. My red chiffon dress with the plunging neckline, I wore on our

anniversary. My silk dress with the pastel flower print, I wore to his family reunion. Silly as I thought I was being, I didn't want to take memories of Charlie with me on my date with Mac tonight, so I did some emergency shopping.

I laid out my new dress on the bed. A simple teal dress with a swoop neckline. Then I lined up an array of shoes beside it. I cocked my hip to the side, rested a hand on my waist, and nibbled on my lip as I pondered my options.

Mac was tall enough that I could wear my favorite pair of black heels, something I couldn't do with Charlie.

"They'll be perfect," I said to myself, scooping up the other four pairs into my arms and dumping them in the closet.

Like a child, I twirled in my dress in front of the mirror, loving the way the fabric moved like gentle waves. I stopped in mid-spin when I heard Mac knock on the front door.

I pumped my hand into fists before I turned the knob, not sure what I was bracing myself for, but I couldn't breathe.

"Hi Mac, come on in. I just need to grab a shawl real quick," I said as I opened the door and turned toward the hall closet. I draped the shawl over my forearm and faced Mac. "I'm ready."

He still stood in the doorway, motionless. I panicked seeing his blank stare. I thought maybe I had forgotten to cut the tags off my dress and still had them dangling by my armpit, or I rubbed my eye and smeared mascara all over my face.

I smoothed out the sides of my dress. "Is, is something wrong?" I said, looking down at my dress for whatever had him so speechless. I looked up at his unchanging gaze. "Mac?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry..."

"Is something wrong?" I asked again, twisting to examine the side and back of my dress for whatever it was that made me look terrible.

"You look, you look absolutely stunning." He stepped forward, cupping my hands inside his and holding my arms up. "Just gorgeous."

I smiled, turning my head away as my face turned a brilliant shade of rose. "Thank you."

"I'm not sure we should go," he said, raising my arm to twirl me around. "Some other guy might try to steal you from me, and I'm no

good at bar fights,” he said, raising his cheeks to the familiar grin I was coming to love.

“Oh, shut up. Don’t tease,” I said, smacking his chest. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Just let me get a picture of you first,” he said, smiling as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. I managed my best sultry, Marilyn Monroe pose. He laughed and snapped a photo. “All right, come on, calendar girl,” he said, laughing as he escorted me through the door.

I scooted onto the black leather chair Mac held out for me, trying to breathe, and trying to mimic the calm assurance Sam oozed without even thinking.

“You look really nice, Claire. Really nice,” he said, ducking his head with a bashful smile.

“Thank you. You mentioned that earlier,” I said with a grin.

“Sorry, I guess I’m a little nervous.”

“It’s okay. I am too,” I said, smiling as I took a deep breath and locked my eyes with his. “I’m not really good on dates. I’m sure at any moment now I’ll say the dumbest thing ever, and you’ll be planning your escape.”

“Naw, I think the guys you’ve been out with didn’t appreciate your...quirkiness,” he said with a smile.

“Quirkiness? Are you trying to imply that I’m not cool?” I teased with a glare.

“Oh, God no!” he chuckled, raising his hands in defeat. “So, how many of these terrible dates have you been on?” he asked, raising his glass of wine for a toast.

“Five very unsuccessful dates,” I laughed as I raised my glass. “I never even made it to the eating part on any of them. Well, except one,” I said, shivering at the memory of squid in my mouth.

“Well, here’s to at least making it to dessert then,” he laughed as we clinked our glasses together.

“I was on this date, probably two months ago by now,” he said, relaxing into an easy slouch. “She really wasn’t my type. Not that I really know what my type is,” he said, scrunching his brows as he scratched his head. “Anyway, a buddy set me up with her.”

“A set up, again?” I laughed.

“I don’t have much luck asking women out on my own,” he said through a chuckle.

“Should I be scared?” I teased.

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“So this woman...” I said, steering the conversation back on track.

“Right. A blond lady, real high maintenance.”

“High maintenance?” I said, leaning forward and putting my elbow on the table.

“You know the type, all hairspray and makeup, freaks out if a hair is out of place.”

I nodded, thinking how those types always got the guy.

“So I’m all shaky, haven’t dated in forever. What the hell do I know about dating anymore? I’m trying to tell a joke, mess it up, and then I spilled some beer on her.”

I cringed, imagining this beautiful blonde debutant-looking woman, flawless and perfect, a walking angel, screaming and hollering at Mac about ruining her dress.

“She slapped me, hard, and left. Never heard from her again. Go figure,” he said, trying to laugh, but his voice cracked with nervousness.

“I guess we’re equally crappy at being single then,” I said, slipping into a state of comfort. My heart slowed, and my chest rose and fell at an easy pace. “I promise I’ll wait until after dinner to slap you and storm out,” I said, winking at him as I flipped open the menu.

“Scout’s honor?” he asked, holding up the Boy Scout hand symbol.

“Sure, Scout’s honor,” I laughed, holding up the Star Trek symbol.

My plate was heaped with delicious, colorful vegetables and noodles. The bell peppers were the perfect shades of red and green, and the fettuccini noodles were cooked to a perfect al dente. I bent over my plate, closing my eyes as I let the aroma fill my senses.

“So, what happened with you and Charlie anyway,” he said, cutting into his veal.

“I don’t know, really,” I said, shrugging as I slid twirled my fork into the noodles.

“I’m sorry. Is it—”

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry,” I said. “I don’t mind talking about my divorce.”

“It’s just, you guys seemed happy. I never would have guessed you to join the ranks of the divorced.”

“Me either,” I said, cocking my lips to the side. “Charlie and I, well—” My stare roamed as I thought. “He never really told me he wasn’t happy. I didn’t know. I thought we were happy, and then he up and tells me he wants a divorce.”

“Didn’t give you much of a chance to try to patch things up?” Mac said, his full attention on me as he handed me a roll. “Did you guys try counseling?”

“I didn’t even know we were broken,” I said, sliding my butter knife through the roll and opening a pad of butter. “Okay, here’s my story, and then you tell me yours,” I said, smiling as I readjusted myself in the chair. “So, I loved my job, but I hated my boss. Or she hated me, one of the two. It was a terrible tango we did.” I paused as the waiter refilled our glasses. “She fires me, for no reason other than she doesn’t like me, and Charlie being the great husband he was,” I said with a sarcastic grin. “He takes me out to dinner to relax. Then, to top off my day, ready for it?”

Mac nodded, stuffing more noodles into his mouth.

“He tells me he’s been cheating and wants a divorce so *they* can get married.”

“Oh, ouch!” Mac said.

“*Then*,” I said as I chuckled, stopping to take a sip of water. “He leaves me in the restaurant. No car, no house keys, no money with me. I’m totally stranded, totally freaking out. Ugh, what a mess.”

“Oh, damn, that’s cold,” Mac laughed.

“Well, there’s my sob story. Now it’s your turn,” I said, smiling and started eating again.

“Well, I didn’t get fired,” he said and smiled. “But we had been fighting a lot lately. I was being an ass; she was being a bitch.” He bobbed his head side to side as he spoke. “I thought I’d try to be sweet. I bought her a big bouquet of lilies; they’re her favorite.”

I set my fork down, no longer interested in my delicious meal.

“I take a half-day and come home, thinking I’ll surprise her, you know. She’ll love the flowers, and we’d have a great day together and want to patch things up. I’ve got this big ass bouquet in one arm and

a bottle of her favorite champagne in the other. I'm looking around the house for her, but I can't find her. I get to the bedroom, and the door's closed, which is weird."

My heartbeat started to race. I felt it coming, the heartbreak.

"I open the door. I've got this big gumpy grin on, and there she is, straddling my best friend."

"Yeah, you win," I said, holding my glass up.

Mac laughed and clinked his glass against mine. "Yeah, I totally got you beat."

"How did you get past that?" I asked. I didn't remember having reached to touch him, but I was stroking the top of his hand.

Mac shrugged. "I don't know. Time, I guess." He flipped his hand over, watching our hands laced together. "How did you get past it?"

It was my turn to shrug. "Time, I guess."

I watched as he traced a fingertip over the lines in my hand, like a feather gliding across my skin.

"Would you..." he took a breath, his shoulders tightening as he sat straight. "Would you take him back? If he asked, I mean?" he said, the words barely making it out of his mouth.

The fragileness of his gaze struck me, and without thinking, I cupped both of my hands around his on the table. His body seemed soothed by the simple gesture, melting away the tension gripping his neck and shoulders.

"No," I said, bending my cheeks to a smile.

Mac nodded, letting himself grin. "Good," he said, squeezing his fingers tight around mine. "I just wanted to make sure."

I had never seen so many delectable temptations on a dessert tray before. Delicate white plates were filled with cream filled tarts, pastries heaped with fruits, fresh chocolate cakes four layers high, and cookies that would make Mrs. Fields hang her head in shame. Being the adventurous woman I am, I asked for a hot fudge sundae. No whip cream.

"I think Sam's already planning our wedding," I laughed, licking hot fudge off my lips.

"Well, don't be surprised when you meet my mom if she gives you her wedding dress," he said, returning the laughter.

When I meet his mom, I thought. His simple statement propelled me into the realization that I was in a relationship. We were an item now, a real couple, together. Sweat started to bead up on my forehead.

I must have said something stupid or had sheer panic in my stare because he tapped my hand with his index finger.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” I said, trying to smile and stop myself from unnecessarily freaking out. “I just, the meeting your mom thing, I think I —”

“Too much too soon, huh?” he said, his soft brown eyes shifting toward the floor. “I guess I set myself up for that one,” he said, letting out an edgy chuckle.

“No, I, uh—” I cleared my throat and rubbed the back of my neck. “It’s good, I think. I think it just startled me for some reason. I don’t know why, really.”

“I didn’t mean that you’d be meeting her tomorrow or anything,” he blurted, almost begging.

“Oh, of course,” I tried to laugh.

“But that’d be good, someday?” His uneasy stare lowered to meet my gaze.

I bobbed my head. “Yeah...”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said, getting lost in his gaze.

“Say, you want to swing by my place after this?”

“Umm...I—” I mumbled, sitting straight in my chair. I couldn’t remember the last time I had sex. *I wonder if it’s possible to actually have cobwebs down there?*

“No, no—” he said, raising his hands in halt. “Not like that. I meant to see the stuff from the store,” he said, his eyes wide with embarrassment. “Not like, to, you know...”

“Oh,” I said through a breath. “Yes, that’d be nice.”

Eighteen

“I just kind of tossed the pillows on there. That’s why they’re called throw pillows right? You just throw them on?” he said, pointing to the tan sofa with three navy blue pillows thrown on the cushions.

“Sort of,” I laughed, bending over to reposition them in a neat row. “Kind of more like that usually,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “It looks nice though. Valiant effort.”

“And, uh, well, the towels and stuff are in here,” he said, leading me down the small nook carved out as a hallway. “When I got them in there, I realized it looked kind of dumb having so much blue, so I took them back and got some gray ones.”

“That does look a lot better. Not so Smurfy,” I said, poking my head into the small doorway.

“I guess your housey knowledge is rubbing off on me,” he said with a smile.

“Maybe a little, but don’t quit your day job,” I chuckled.

“That’s Nathan’s room,” he said, motioning to the small second bedroom. I leaned in the doorway, almost scared to be so intimately up-close to his son's belongings.

“It’s kind of a disaster, sorry. I didn’t really plan on having company,” he said, bending over to pick up a pile of matchbox cars and set them in the toy box.

“It’s nice. He likes it here then, in the apartment?” I said, picking up a Transformer and handing it to him.

“I think so. He seems happy like he was before the divorce at least.”

“You must be doing a good job then,” I said, smiling as I turned and traced a finger around a football wall decal.

“And that, that’s my room over there,” he said, motioning to the doorway across the hall but not moving toward it. Mac glanced at the floor. I thought it cute how he didn’t want to be presumptuous.

“Yeah?” I smiled from over my shoulder as I walked into his room and flipped on the light switch.

As I expected, it was a bachelor’s room. A full size bed with a sage green comforter, and two hand-me-down dressers filled with pictures of his son atop them. Two tan pillows, the ones we bought together, were placed on the made bed.

His chest brushed against my back as he came up behind me. My breath stuttered. I felt my skin growing hot, and I braced an arm on the doorway.

“It’s quaint. I like the pictures,” I said, turning to face him. I expected him to take a step back as I did, but he didn’t. We stood chest to chest in the small doorway, his heaving against mine, and my hot breath was against his neck.

He reached up, cupping his hand around the back of my neck as he bent and closed his eyes.

I let the warmth of his hand and the tenderness of his hold coax my eyes shut as I tipped my head up, letting his soft, gentle lips touch mine.

He slid his other arm around my waist, pulling me into his arms, and our tongues twirled around each other’s as we stumbled to grab hold of the other. I can’t remember the last time a man kissed me like that. I mean *really* kissed me. The kind of kiss that makes your knees weak and wobbly like a newborn foe. The kind that makes you feel like you’ll never catch your breath; the kind of kiss that makes you never want to release your lips from his.

Before I knew it, he had spun me around and put my back against the hallway wall. One arm was still wrapped around my waist as he raised the other and leaned it on the wall.

“Oh my God, Claire,” he whispered, breaking for air as I pressed my lips on his neck.

“Do you...” he moaned, gently sliding a hand into my hair. “Should we...” he said, trying to motion to the bedroom without letting go of me.

I put my hand behind his neck, drawing him closer as we kissed, and pulled him toward the bed.

With a touch as light as air, he draped my hair over my shoulder, kissing the back of my neck as he unzipped my dress. He ran his hands down my body as he slid the dress down.

I turned, locking my eyes with his as I pulled the shirt over his head, and then I floated my fingertip down the length of his abs.

Mac picked me up and laid me on the bed, pressing himself into me as we kissed.

“Do you, um, do you have one?” he whispered.

“A what?” I mumbled, barely capable of speaking.

“Protection?”

My heart sank. Protection? The simplest of duties a single woman can do. Protection? I never imagined I would be in this position again. Of course I didn’t have protection.

“You don’t?” I said.

“No, I, uh—” he said through a pant. “Well, I haven’t yet, you know...” he said, his gaze soft and fractured.

“Neither have I,” I said.

Mac glanced at the alarm clock on the dresser. “Store will be closed by now. I’m sorry,” he said through a breath, laying his head on my chest.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply to draw in his scent. I tipped my head back on the pillow and ran my fingers through his hair. “This is nice too,” I said, turning my head to catch his look. “Isn’t it?”

He closed his arms tighter around my body, sighing as he relaxed on me. “This is perfect,” he whispered, closing his eyes as I caressed his cheek.

Sam would die, I think, hearing I *almost* had sex with a man. She wouldn’t understand just the closeness of holding a man, the rapture of lying so intimately with a man. *Almost* having sex was torture to her.

Mac sighed as we closed our eyes and lay our heads on his pillow. He pulled the comforter over us, tucking me in as he lay back down.

“This is nice, you and me,” he whispered.

Nineteen

“I think that’s your phone,” Mac whispered, his gentle hand trying to nudge me awake.

“Huh?” I said, rubbing the morning crust from my eyes.

“Your phone,” he said again.

I heard my cell phone buzzing in the other room, and as the sound stirred me awake, I remembered I was in Mac’s bed.

He kissed my forehead. “Should you get it?”

I rolled over, nuzzling my back into his chest and now terrified to look at him. I am not one of those women who wake up beautiful. I knew underneath my eyes were inch long smears of rubbed eyeliner and mascara. My hair would be a poufy wad of tangles and hairspray filled snarls.

“It’s probably just Sam, but I should get it, or she’ll worry” I said, trying not to appear as if I was sprinting away from him as I slid out of bed. I fumbled through my purse for my phone in the living room and grabbed the small brush and compact mirror.

“Where the hell have you been? I damn near called the cops!” Sam hollered before I could even say hello.

“Calm down, Sam,” I said, trying to run the brush through my tangles.

“What the hell, Claire? You didn’t call, didn’t text, didn’t stop by. I thought this guy was off in some warehouse mutilating you!”

"I'm fine, Sam. I'm sorry I worried you," I said, cupping the phone on my shoulder. I opened the compact and started wiping the black streaks from under my eyes. "I'm here, with him," I whispered.

"What?" she screamed. "Did you have sex?"

"I'll tell you later," I said, glancing over my shoulder when I heard Mac stirring in the bed.

"What? You can't say something like that and then make me wait!" she snapped.

"I'll call you in a little while, I promise," I said, slipping the brush and compact back into my purse. I cupped a hand over my mouth, breathed into my palm and inhaled. I cringed. *Where's my mints?*

"Forget that. I'm taking a half-day. I'll be over in a little while."

"All right, bye," I said, turning to see Mac walking into the living room. "Sam. She was worried because I didn't call."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, pulling me into his arms.

I moaned, wrapped my arms around his waist, and lay my head on his shoulder.

He nuzzled his head against my crazy morning hair. As I closed my eyes, just letting myself feel the tenderness of his toned arms wrapped around me, I forgot how terrible I looked.

He wrapped a sheet around my body, rubbing my arms to spur the rush of blood through my chilled arms. "You want some coffee?"

"I should probably get going. Sam's on her way to my place," I said, smiling as he looked down at me. "I have a family of incredibly nosy over worriers," I laughed.

"I'll take you home, I suppose. If I have to," he said, smiling as he pulled me back into his arms. "Will I see you again, Claire?"

The gravity of his tone startled me. I scrunched my brows and tipped my head up to look at him.

"You know, I just...I'd like to see you again."

"Of course you will. Why wouldn't you?" I said, trying to convince him as I glided my hand down his arm. I never thought I would find myself in a situation of being the strong one.

"I thought, with last night and everything, maybe the disappointment..." He sighed, unable to finish his thought.

"Last night was wonderful," I said, stretching on my toes and kissing his chin.

“So you stayed all night?” Sam said, in her overzealous squeal. “But without sex? That’s kind of weird.”

“You know, it’s like…” I said as she refilled our coffee and set the pot back on the burner. “I mean, it was really, really hot, and I was totally disappointed for a minute—”

“God, I totally would have ditched him. What kind of single guy doesn’t have a rubber? I mean, really?” she said, rolling her eyes as she blew on her coffee.

“See? You don’t get it. Sometimes just holding each other can be more passionate than sex,” I said.

“Man, if that’s the kind of warped, demented thinking you get from being married, I don’t want any part of it!” she said, raising her hands to fend off the deterioration of her sex life. “That shit sounds totally lame.”

“You don’t get it. Holly would get it.”

“Holly doesn’t have hot sex anymore,” Sam said, raising an eyebrow in retort.

“Holly has more than hot sex,” I said.

“Well, hot sex or not, you like this guy?”

“Yeah, I really do, Sam. I think you’d like him too,” I said, grinning as I slouched in the chair with glimmers of Mac’s smile bursting through the morning fog in my mind.

“So you guys are like a couple now, huh?”

“We are?” I said, my eyes widening.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? That messy love crap?”

“I—well, yeah, I guess I did. I mean, I do. I do want that—” I raised my panicked stare to hers, my heart rising to my throat faster than I could choke it down. “I do want that, don’t I?”

Sam shrugged. “Claire Bear, he’s got a kid. You can’t string him along with that kind of baggage if you don’t *really* like him.”

I nodded but locked my huge eyes on the scratch in the center of the table. “Yeah, I do. I want that messy love stuff.” I lay my forehead in the palm of my hand. “I do?” I mumbled to myself.

Sam drummed her fingers on the table. “Forget all that drama. Let’s get to the good stuff. This gorgeous hunk of manliness, is he a good kisser?”

I laughed, knowing my cheeks blushed as I glanced at her. “You know the movie kiss, like *that* kiss at the end of the movie when they finally get together?”

“Oh, you had the movie kiss!” Sam said, cupping her hand over her mouth.

“The movie kiss,” I said, grinning as I nodded.

“God, I hate you!”

I’m not sure how, but somehow Mac was joining me for Sunday dinner with the family. In some hyper-caffeinated state, I either asked him or mentioned something, and he agreed to it. But at the end of it all, there we were. Driving to my parents’ house when I had no prep time to forewarn him about the chaotic whackos that are my family members; no time to give my family a list of demands of acceptable conversation and beg them to please refrain from all embarrassing stories or asinine questions.

“First is Sam. Don’t listen to just about anything she says.” I tapped a finger on my lip as I spoke.

“She didn’t seem that bad,” Mac laughed.

“And Daddy. It’ll probably feel like an inquisition, but he doesn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s going to be fine, Claire—”

“But then there’s Holl. You can listen to her. Well, most of the time,” I said, cringing as I bit my lip. “Better yet, don’t listen to her—”

“Claire, it’s going to be fine. This isn’t my first time meeting a family, you know.” Mac shook his head at me as he smiled.

“You know, it’s probably best if you don’t listen to any of them. Earplugs. We should stop and get you a set of earplugs,” I said, turning to face him.

“Would you stop? It’s going to be fine,” he said and chuckled. “Just calm down.”

I locked my eyes with his, nodding as his tranquil stare lulled me out of an all-out panic attack. “All right, I’ll try to stop worrying,” I said, still nodding as I turned to look out my window. “There. The one with the blue car in the driveway,” I said, pointing to Holly’s car. As we stepped out of the car and started up the walkway, the tiny flutter of nervousness transformed to a raging river of *oh shit* terror.

My hands went numb and clammy, my throat dry and scratchy, and my tongue coated itself in that slimy, swollen feeling just before you get sick. I turned to glance back at Mac, now looking a bit squeamish himself, and tried to bend my tension strained lips to a smile.

“Claire, baby, hi,” Mom said as she opened the door and pulled me into a hug. “You must be Mac. Hello, dear,” she said, extending her hand while still hugging me.

“Mrs. McGibbins, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, sounding so cool I almost got mad at him. How dare he seem so confident when I was about to keel over in anxiety.

“Honey, Claire’s here,” Mom hollered toward the dining room. Then she turned back to Mac, her sweet smile disguising a stealthy inspection of the man standing next to me. My boyfriend. *My boyfriend?* If mom wrapped her arm around me any tighter, I knew I would lose my breakfast all over the forest green area rug.

“Well, bring him in here already. I’m hungry,” Daddy yelled.

As I took a deep breath, Mac slipped his slender fingers around mine. I strolled to my usual seat, now accompanied by an ugly folding chair Daddy must have dug out of the basement. I glanced by the china hutch as I slid into my seat. Charlie’s chair was still scooted into the corner. I almost thanked Mom for not making Mac sit in Charlie’s chair.

“Hey,” Sam said, half waving as we sat down.

My stomach rolled in repulsion at the aroma of lasagna wafting around me. I took a sip of water and wondered when I turned into a thirteen-year-old again, terrified about bringing a boyfriend home to my family.

“Hi, Sam. It’s good to see you again. How are you?” Mac said, a twinge of relief in his eye at the sight of a familiar face.

“Eh.” Sam shrugged.

“Hi, I’m Holly, and this is my husband, Mark,” Holl said, reaching around Mark and me to shake Mac’s hand.

“You a football man?” Mark said, not looking up at Mac.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m working on my picks for fantasy football. I’m stuck on wide receivers,” Mark said, glancing up from his iPhone.

“Put that thing away. It’s time to eat,” Daddy said, waving a hand at Mark. “So, you’re Mac.” Daddy crossed his arm on his chest.

I heard Mac take in a deep, anxious breath as our focus moved to the prominent, burly man at the head of the table. Daddy wore a tight t-shirt today, no doubt to emphasize his large muscles uncommon for a man his age. I figured he hoped to squeeze out every drop of intimidation he could.

“Mr. McGibbins, sir,” Mac said, rising as he reached to shake Daddy’s hand.

Daddy nodded, not returning the handshake and slid the pan of lasagna toward him instead, making every attempt to flaunt the huge carving knife as he slid it through the pan.

Mac sat back down, his head lowered and eyes dripping defeat. I patted him on the knee.

“So, Mom, how’s the canning going?” I asked, hoping Mom’s gardening hobby would shift the attention away from Mac, if only for the briefest of moments.

“I ruined the last batch,” she said, rolling her eyes as she cut the garlic bread. “I was talking to Florence on the phone. She’s got this terrible bunion on her foot and her doctor won’t do anything about it. I always told her not to go with an HMO though. PPO insurance is so much better. But she never listens.” Mom wiped her hands on her apron. “Well, anyway, I let the tomatoes boil too long and had to throw them all out.” She snickered at herself.

“You guys met through Charlie, right?” Holly asked, leaning around Mark.

I hoped to avoid that, knowing Daddy would find it reason enough to hate Mac just for being associated with the man who broke my heart.

“We used to work together a few years back,” Mac said, pouring himself a large glass of iced tea.

“You still work with him?” Daddy said, ripping into a piece of garlic bread like a crazed caveman.

“He switched companies, shortly after Claire and Charlie split up.” I wondered how Holly knew that but was grateful for the defense.

Daddy grunted, eyeing Mac for a moment as he gnawed on the bread. “You workin’ now? Steady employment?”

I guessed that meant the pleasantries were over, and the inquisition had started. “He works for a larger firm now, Daddy,” I said, hoping to ease the stern glare on his worn face with my sweet, daughterly smile.

“Don’t want no bum seeing my girl,” he said, squinting an eye at Mac.

“There’s rumors I might get promoted to a junior exec starting the next fiscal year,” Mac said, his tone strong, and his freshly shaven cheeks rising to a grin. I felt his right leg shaking underneath the tablecloth.

“Daddy,” I said, widening my eyes to a forceful plea.

“Yes, um, shall we toast?” Mom said, the gracious, welcoming sensitivity I hoped would rub off on Daddy.

“Pass the carrots,” Sam said. She picked a few out of the bowl and popped them into her mouth, and then she started to scoop some onto her plate. “So what’s the deal with you two? Are you an official couple now or what?”

Mac choked on his tea. I reached around, smacking his back as I glared at Sam. “I, uh, well, we haven’t really—” I turned back to Mac, his blood shot eyes locked on mine.

“I think so, yes,” he said, glancing at Sam then back at me. “Right?”

I reached for my water and gulped it all down, a thousand terrified thoughts banging in my head as all heads turned toward me waiting for a simple answer. I smiled, bent my head, and wiped my lips with a napkin. Then I glanced up at the staring faces again.

“Right?” Mac repeated, bending his head to catch my stare.

“Um, yes, I suppose we are,” I said, my voice soft and not at all self-assured.

“Oh, well, isn’t that lovely,” Mom said, grinning as she turned her attention to Daddy. “That’s lovely, dear, isn’t it?”

Mac kept his eyes on mine as the momentary distraction of filling plates kept the conversation on hold. Forks and knives clinked all around us with scooping and plopping of food onto plates.

I’m not sure why the question terrified me. Not sure if I was afraid of commitment or afraid of love or afraid of, hell, everything.

“Right?” Mac whispered.

I raised my eyes to his. All awareness of my family was forgotten. His soft eyes had a fresh, new worry. Me. In the hope and fear swirling in his stare, I knew he was more afraid of trusting this messy love stuff than even I was.

I slid my hand over his, wrapping my fingers around his stiff, tension-ridden grip. I caressed my thumb across his tight skin.

“Yeah,” I whispered, letting the worry melt away from my bones.

“You sure?” he said.

I grinned. “Yeah.”

“So, you have a son, right, Mac?” Mom said.

“Yes, Nathan. He’s a couple years older than Seth here,” Mac said, nodding toward Seth as he perked up at the mention of his name.

“Oh, well, that sounds nice. A little boy for Seth to play with,” Mom said, cupping her hands on her lap. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it, honey. Another boy to play with here?” she said to Seth.

Seth shrugged, turning his attention back to the mound of pasta on his plate.

“Just like his Daddy. Only cares about food,” Holly said as she smiled at us.

“Well, I can’t wait to meet him,” Mom said, reaffirming her welcome to Mac through a smile and nod.

“If they’re at that point yet, Ma. Don’t rush it,” Mark said, half glancing at Mac in some sort of manly safeguard.

“Yeah, that’s like a whole other level of dating, Ma. When you bring on the baggage—” Sam said.

“Sam!” I snapped.

“Kids aren’t baggage,” Holly said, the firmness of her tone fed by pride of being a parent.

“You know what I mean,” Sam said, arching her brows as she picked at her food in search of some sort of defense. “That’s just like another stage of dating, Mom. That’s all I was saying.”

“We’re throwing a party for the kids on Seth’s team in a few weeks. You could bring Nathan,” Holly said, turning toward us. “You know, if you guys wanted to, I mean,” she added.

“I’m sure he’d love that,” Mac said, smiling in thanks to Holly.

“You want to go?” he asked me, his voice low and hushed, hoping to slip the question past nosy ears.

Did I want to go? Was I ready to meet his son? Was I ready to take *that* step? I wasn’t even sure of the one I just took, clumsily agreeing that Mac was my boyfriend. I tried my damndest to muster some type of response. Yet, there I sat, with Mac’s eyes locked on mine and me without a word to utter. I attempted to smile, probably contorting my face into a weird cringe.

Reinventing Claire

The question tore through me, over and over. Was I ready to meet his son? Truth was, I couldn't tell you if I was ready for any of this.

Twenty

“I thought he handled Daddy’s questions about his income pretty well, don’t you?” Sam said, propping her feet up on the porch railing as we took in yesterday’s disaster of a dinner.

“Yeah, I was pretty proud of him for that, the way he danced around it without really dancing,” I said, slipping off my heels and crossing my feet beside hers.

“You had that weird freaked out look though,” she said.

“I did not! What weird freaked out look?” I laughed as I turned toward her.

“The one you get when you look like you’re about to hurl or break into hysterics,” she said and started to laugh. “Like in the hardware store, when we bought paint. Remember that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, scowling at her before I turned back to watch the evening hubbub on my street.

“Oh, shut up. Yes you do,” she said as she slapped my knee.

“Shh, watch,” I said, pointing to the neighbor across the street hoping to distract Sam. “He’s going to watch her drag all the trash bags to the curb and then holler that she needs to use a trash can instead of the flimsy bags that always break. He does this every week.”

Sam eyed the elderly man in his driveway, arms on his hips and shaking his head at the woman dragging bags to the curb. “You can’t avoid the conversation, Claire,” she said.

“I’m not avoiding anything. Wait, here it comes.”

We saw the old man pull his dark brown trousers up in a huff, take a few brave stomps toward his neighbor, and wave a finger at her chaotic pile of trash.

“See, told you. Every week,” I said as I shook my head at the odd little man I had never spoken to.

“Stop avoiding the conversation,” she said again.

“I’m not avoiding anything. I was just nervous about bringing Mac to meet everyone is all.”

“Nervous? You looked like, if given the chance, you would have jumped across the table and sprinted for the car.” Sam slouched as she sipped her iced coffee.

“I was just nervous. That’s normal. Not like you would know though. You never keep a guy around long enough for that,” I said, raising an eyebrow with my not-so-clever retort.

Sam rolled her eyes. “You just looked freaked, not nervous. Like, holy shit freaked.”

“Well, of course I’m freaked!” I said through an anxious chuckle. “I spent how many years of my life thinking I would never have to do this again because I was married? Now in the past year and a half, I lost my husband, my job, my house, started dating before I wanted to, and now have a boyfriend I’m not sure I want! Wouldn’t you be freaked out?”

Sam shrugged as she nodded. “It’s been a big year. I’ll give you that. I just want you to be happy, you know. Are you, happy?”

I took in a deep breath. Was I happy? Mac’s smile melts me and turns me into a schoolgirl, all swoony and giddy. And I loved how I could be my usual, unkempt, messy self on Sunday mornings with him without even thinking about how bad I really looked. There was something about him, about us. I couldn’t deny it.

“I think so. I feel good around him, if that’s what you mean.”

“He is damn sexy,” Sam said, looking at me from the corner of her eye.

“Hands off!” I smiled and smacked her hand. “You know we still haven’t even...well, you know,” I said, leaning toward her in secrecy.

“Still!” she shouted. “Good God, girl! What the hell? Did you take some twisted vow of celibacy or some shit?”

“The one night we couldn’t, and then the next time it was, I don’t know, we were both kind of awkward or something. *Then* he

had Nathan with him and, I don't know, it just hasn't worked out." I shrugged.

Sam slowly shook her head, pitying my nonexistent sex life.

I pulled my hair up into a ponytail as I exhaled. "We're going out to dinner tomorrow night though, so I was thinking maybe we could—well, you know—afterward."

"You sound like someone just ran over your dog with a car," Sam said, turning to see my pale, freaked out face gazing at nothing in particular.

"I feel like it's all happening so fast, which is stupid," I said and rolled my eyes. "Charlie and I have been done for over a year now. I know it's not fast. I just, it *feels* fast."

"You should do something special to help make you excited about it. Kind of pump you up for it, you know? Watch a porn or something before he comes over."

My head snapped toward her, eyes shocked and mouth hanging open.

"So that's not your thing, I guess?" Sam chuckled.

"Well, I did buy something nice for it."

Sam's eyebrows rose in curiosity.

"I bought this black lace bra with matching panties," I said, my smile somewhat embarrassed. "I thought, well, if I wear my black heels with it...I always wanted to try that, you know, with the stockings on too while we—" I felt my cheeks burning talking about it. If I couldn't even verbalize it with Sam of all people, how the hell did I think I could really pull it off with Mac? Was I capable of being that vulnerable with him?

"That's good. You'll feel super sexy," Sam said, patting my knee. I must have looked mortified. "I bet he'll be speechless no matter what. Don't sweat it."

"You know, I don't remember if I ever made Charlie speechless," I said to no one. "I mean, on our wedding day when I walked down the aisle, of course, but—well, not like that, when we...I don't think I ever made him gape."

Sam pursed her lips, raising her eyes to mine.

"Isn't that sad that I never realized that while we were married?" I played intimate moments with Charlie through my mind, finally seeing his empty gaze. "I guess we never really were as happy as I saw us as in my mind, huh?" I said, now talking to her.

"I don't think so, Claire bear," she said softly.

“I never made him speechless...”

It seemed ridiculous to me to be *this* nervous, more nervous than the night I lost my virginity. I was seventeen, in the backseat of Jimmy Holesome’s ‘88 Camaro. Holesome; I always found his name ironic, since he was the least wholesome person I ever dated. I remember hoping to be the best virgin ever. After all, I did read Cosmo. By the end of our three week relationship, I learned that I was nothing like Cosmo.

I tried to smother my worry with preparation. Every woman has a certain routine she goes through when readying herself for *the big night*. My first time with Charlie was awkward, not very romantic, and more comedic than anything. I had no routine to fall back on and decided to soak in a hot bath for an hour to start the getting ready process. I used a new can of shaving cream promising “The smoothest legs you’ve ever had” and a brand-new razor. It proved to be a mistake as I stared at the mild gash by my kneecap. I soaked, breathed, and tried to coax myself into feeling sexy, womanly, and desirable. I clasped my new black lace bra and then slid up my thigh-high stockings, my hands shaking a little as I slid them up my leg.

I’m not sure how long I stood in front of the mirror, or why I was. As if I stood there long enough, I would admire my body more or become more in touch with my inner sex goddess that surely must be buried in there somewhere. It was unbelievable to me that I had been topless and almost had sex with Mac already. All I could think about, staring at my clad body in the reflection, was how terrifying sex was.

I zipped up my black a-line dress, dug through my jewelry box, and pulled out the white gold rope necklace and hoop earrings. I fumbled with the clasp. *God, my palms are sweaty*, I thought as the clasp shot out of my fingers for the third time. *I hope he doesn’t want to hold hands*. I smoothed out the skirt with my clammy hands.

I tamed a wild curl by my temple as Mac knocked on the front door. I took a few steps back, inspecting myself again before nodding with apprehensive approval and turned to go answer the door. I glanced at the alarm clock on the way out. 7:45 on the dot.

My slimy hand slipped on the handle when I tried to open it. “Hi, Mac.” My voice shaking as I motioned for him to come in.

Before I could grab my purse, he put a hand at my waist and pulled me close. “You’re stunning,” he whispered into my ear, letting the words linger before he placed a sweet, gentle kiss on my cheek.

My face started to get hot, and his nervous smile made my cheeks even redder. “Thank you,” I mumbled, catching my breath and turning to grab my clutch off the coffee table. “So, where are we going tonight?”

Mac stood silent with a gentle smile warming his face. He locked his eyes with mine as he slid both hands slowly down my bare arms. The light touch sent a shiver through me, covering my body with goose bumps. He raised a hand and cupped it on my cheek. Then he pecked a tender kiss on my lips.

He cleared his throat. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

His boyish grin was calming to me. I slid my arm around his and smiled. “I think I can handle that kind of hello.”

“When Nathan and I went out for ice cream last weekend we passed this place, Shields. Have you been there before?”

“No, but Sam has. She said it’s wonderful, but don’t eat the salmon,” I said and chuckled. My heartbeat soared as we pulled into the parking lot. Every passing minute reminded me of my matching bra and panties hiding underneath my dress and my foolish former hopes for the end of the evening. I thought for sure I must have been mad thinking I could do this. Maybe I should take a vow of celibacy?

Always the gentleman, Mac held out a chair for me before sitting at our table and motioning to the waiter to take my drink order first. As the waiter stepped away to fill our order, I glanced around to take in the setting, hoping the atmosphere would calm my nerves.

Elegant was what Sam should have said. The dining area had plush u-shaped booths in sleek, dark-chocolate leather. White frosted fixtures hung above every table. I turned toward the piano player in the corner, his long fingers dancing across the keys playing a song I didn’t know as a few couples twirled around the small dance floor.

“It’s a lovely place,” I said, facing Mac again.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” he said, fiddling with the giant gold napkin ring, twisting and turning the napkin trying to figure out how to retrieve his silverware from the swan-shaped napkin.

I laughed, reached across the table, and slid it from his hands. I gently guided the ring off and handed it back to him.

“Thanks. I’m all thumbs,” he said, his voice hinting a tremble.

We sat quiet for a moment while we scanned the menus. *Was this awkward silence? Is the gap in conversation a sign we’re not good together?* I took two long drinks of my wine. I tried to shove doubt out of my mind by pouring my focus into the menu.

“What’s Shepherd’s pie?” Mac said.

“I think it’s like an English stew or something. Beef and potatoes and stuff in it?”

“Stew in pie form?” He looked up at me, his smile brighter and calmer now, yet looking every bit as nervous as I felt.

“Something like that.”

“I like beef. I’ll give it a whirl,” he said, chuckling as he set his menu on the table. “What about you? Anything look good?”

“Well, I’m really tempted to get the Co—”

“Cobb salad?”

I rested my hands on my hips, playfully raising my eyebrows. “What makes you think I was going to say that?”

“You always get a Cobb salad on the weekend,” he stated rather matter-of-factly.

“Must be because I eat like crap during the week,” I said and laughed. I wanted to thank him for noticing little habits like that.

“Wouldn’t know it by looking at you.” He winked at me.

“This place is really nice. Thank you for taking me here,” I said, turning to watch an older couple on the dance floor. They were cheek to cheek, hands clasped together, and only seeing each other.

“Tracey always wanted me to go dancing with her,” he said, nodding to the couple as we watched them spinning hand-in-hand.

I turned back toward Mac.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t talk about her on a date, I guess,” he said, lowering his head and rubbing the back of his neck.

“Charlie said it was a waste of time. I’m not very good at slow dancing,” I said with a shrug.

Mac took in a breath, nodding to himself before he set his napkin on the table with authority. “Come on,” he said, standing and holding out a hand to me.

I shook my head. "Really, I'm not very good."

"Let's be bad at it together," he said, reaching his open hand closer. "You'll step on my feet, I'll step on yours, and everyone else will have a good laugh watching us. What do you say?"

His eyes never looked purer to me, so open and trusting. I knew then no man's gaze could ever look as powerful to me as the one Mac held that instant. I cupped my hand inside his, slid my chair out and followed him to the dance floor.

"I remember this song. Secret Love by Doris Day. Mom used to sing it when she folded Daddy's laundry," I said. Mac wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me close his body. I reminded myself to breathe, to take in the warmth of his hold and let myself be open.

"Ouch," he whispered, stumbling from my stepping on his foot.

"Sorry." I cringed and tried to step away. "See, I'm terrible. Let's just go sit," I said, pulling back a little to break free from his grasp.

Mac pulled me in closer, locking his eyes with mine and smiling as he pressed a foot down onto my toes.

"Ouch!" I said, smiling as I shook the pain from my toes.

"Now we're even." He ran his thumb along the length of my cheek, letting himself be absorbed into the moment. "Dance with me, Claire..."

I wrapped my arms back around his shoulders, and with each clumsy step, I let go of my worry about people watching us or if I stepped on his foot again. Which I did. Three times, actually. I closed my eyes and rested my head on his shoulder, taking in the soothing rhythm of his steady heartbeat.

A few minutes later, our waiter tapped Mac on the shoulder. "Sorry, sir, but your dinner has been served," he said, nodding as he stepped away.

How long had we danced? I thought, now realizing I lost track of the music. Was it two songs? Maybe three?

Mac led me back to our table, and we both sat in awe at the beautiful dinners before us.

"I never thought pie could look so pretty," he said.

I chuckled seeing him curiously poking his dinner with a fork.

"It's so pretty. I'm almost don't want to eat it," he said, laughing as he raised his head and looked at me.

"Pretty or not, I'm starving," I said, already sliding a bit of chicken into my mouth. "Mmm," I said, licking my lips. "You gotta

try this,” I said, covering my mouth with a hand. I cut off another piece and slid my fork into his mouth.

“Mmm. Oh, yeah!” he said, nodding as he chewed. “Let’s trade.” He grinned as he reached across the table to grab my plate.

I smacked his hand and laughed. “No way, buddy. This is all mine.”

Mac raised his hands in defeat, laughing as he again tried to figure out how to eat his dinner. “Do I use a fork or spoon?”

I shrugged. “Just shove your face in it and start chewing.”

In hearing his laugh, I remembered how he always made me laugh so easily, even when Charlie and I were married. Mac always made me laugh.

Twenty-one

After dinner, we took a walk down by the pier a few blocks from the restaurant. Mac stood behind me, wrapping both arms around me as we gazed in silence at the clear evening sky and rippling water. A stiff wind came, creeping up my dress and sending a chill through me.

“It’s getting cold,” Mac said, rubbing my arms for warmth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think to bring a jacket.”

“It’s all right.” I turned to face him and tucked my hands between our chests as I lay my head on his shoulder.

He closed his arms tighter around me and let his breath go. *It’s now or never*, I thought, letting myself cave to the idea of love.

“Let’s go have some coffee and warm up a little?” I asked, tipping my head up to him.

“There’s a shop a little ways from here. Should be open still.”

“No, let’s have some at my house,” I said, grateful and terrified that I managed to get the words out. “It’s more comfortable.”

He paused for a moment, asking me if I was sure without saying a word to me. I nodded.

“Sounds good,” he said, slipping his hand around mine as we started walking back to his car.

I stood in the kitchen with my arms out beside me, palms flat on the counter, eyes wide, and my lungs refusing to fill themselves with air.

Well, there he is, in the living room. Waiting for you. Because I had to invite him back, "for coffee." Now what? I thought, scorning myself as my bravery slipped away.

"No, no," I whispered to myself. "You like him. Don't be like that," I said, hoping a pep talk would work.

"Is everything all right?" he asked from the living room.

"Yeah, just be a minute." I took two deep breaths, closed my eyes, and remembered the awed gaze when he picked me up earlier tonight.

"I thought you wanted coffee?" he said, perplexed that I came back empty handed when I said I was going to make a fresh pot.

"Oh, I, uh," I muttered, glancing at my empty hands. I urged myself to be fearless, to simply trust. I walked to the couch, stopped in front of him, and tried to smile as I took his hands inside mine and guided him to a standing position.

My heart hammered to a furious beat. I raised our clasped hands and caressed his skin before I tipped my head up, hesitating before I kissed him. Mac melted at the touch of my lips against his and pulled me into him. I placed one of his hands on my waist, leaving the other hand to rest on my backside.

Passion started to consume me, and I panicked. Tension coursed through my muscles until they were taut with nervousness.

Mac stepped back and raised my chin so that I looked up at him. "Are you all right?"

I tried to smile. "I'm not very good at this either, I guess—seduction," I said with a weak grin.

He took my hands inside his, raised them to his lips and kissed each finger. "You don't need to do that. Not for me. You're gorgeous in every way already."

"But I want to," I said, starting to cry as I looked up at him. "I want to be sexy to you. I—" I tried to smile away the tears, rolling my eyes at how pathetic I must seem to him. I wouldn't blame him for walking out on me now. Who wants to be with a woman terrified of having sex?

Mac wiped the tears tracing a line down my cheeks, and then he bent and kissed the trail. “You’re always sexy to me, even when you weren’t supposed to be. Even when you were my friend’s wife...”

I looked up at his earnest gaze, slid my hand behind his neck, and drew him into a kiss. I took his hand in mine, turned, and led him to my bedroom.

I wasn’t sure what to do then. Even being this jittery, crying mess of a woman, he found me sexy and wanted to be with me. He found me desirable. I wasn’t sure if I should undress him or let him undress me. I completely deserted the idea of keeping my stockings and heels on now. How stupid of me to think I could do that. I only hoped for the cover of darkness to hide all my flaws underneath the comforter.

Mac sat on the edge of my bed, moving his hands down the sides of my body. I think I was petrified. Despite the microscopic section of my brain with common sense telling me just to kiss the man. I stood motionless. Tears rolled down my cheeks again.

“Oh, baby,” he whispered, wiping my cheeks. He picked me up and sat me on his lap. He wrapped my arms loosely around his neck. “We don’t have to do this,” he whispered.

I nuzzled my head in the crook of his neck, inhaling his faint, natural scent. He held me in his arms, swaying our bodies from side to side while I whimpered into his collar. Would Charlie have done this for me? Would he have noticed my crying at all? *No*, I thought, almost full of rage. *He would have just sat on his damn deck, trying to read his paper saying how his weekends were to relax and not to deal with my blubbering.*

And then there was Mac; this sexy, gentle man holding and comforting me when he thought he was going to have sex. As Mac stroked my hair, I knew Charlie could never compare to the man caressing me now.

I slid his arms off of me, scooted out of his lap, and stood before him. I wiped the remnants of tears from my cheeks and stepped out of arm’s reach. I pulled the zipper down on the back of my dress and let it fall to the floor. I stood before him in my lace bra and panties, black stockings, and heels.

Mac watched me for a moment, his eyes widening as they slowly scanned my body from head to toe.

I stepped toward him, placing his hands on my hips, and ran my fingers through his hair. I prayed we would make it into the bed

before my momentary boldness escaped me and I dove into my closet to hide.

His hands traced my curves. Every few seconds he glanced up at me to ensure I was fine with his continued touches. He slowly peppered my stomach and chest with gentle kisses and then reached behind me to unclasp my bra.

I stopped his hand. “No,” I said as he stepped back. “I want to keep it on, to be sexy for you.”

“You don’t need to do anything for me,” he said, reaching again and unhooking my bra.

He continued to undress me, the heels and stockings now piled on the floor beside my bra and panties. I felt naked, *really* naked.

Mac picked me up and lowered me onto the bed. Both of us giving into the pleasure and slowly letting the exploration of each other’s body soothe our fears so we could fully give ourselves to the other. He moved and caressed me in ways I never knew before. He looked at and touched me as if he had never seen anyone so beautiful.

Tears filled my eyes as he lay above me. Because everything about Mac felt so damn good, so much more than I could ever have dreamed of. And it scared the hell out of me.

As we finished, exhausted and panting, I sniffled and wiped my eye.

Instantly, he rolled toward me. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he said, sure he had done something horrible to me.

I smiled, locking my eyes with his and put a hand on his cheek. “No, I’m fine. I’m perfect...” I curled myself up inside his arms. If this is what love could have in store, I might enjoy this ride.

I tried to open my eyes as the morning sun poured in through the curtains, thinking for a moment I dreamt it all. But as the mattress bounced from Mac rolling over, the reality of last night hit me. I had actually done it. We made love. I scooted backward, pressing my body against his. Still half asleep, he groaned and threw an arm around me, pulling me closer to him. His arms felt so good.

I rolled over, gazing at him as he slept. I traced my finger along the tiny lines beside his mouth, down his strong jaw line and down

his neck. He twitched and mumbled. I pecked a kiss on his forehead and slid out of the bed.

After brewing a pot of coffee, I slipped my robe on and went onto the back patio, eager to let the crimson horizon hush my roaring thoughts. *Did Charlie ever love me like that, the way Mac did last night?* I couldn't remember now. I didn't know which bothered me more, that Charlie might never have seen me as beautiful or that I couldn't remember such a thing about a person I spent ten years with. Is this what it felt like to let go?

I heard rustling coming from the house. I stood and headed to the bedroom. Mac lay on his back, stretching his arms above his head.

I leaned against the doorframe, smiling as I said, "Morning. Want some?" I waved the cup of coffee in the air.

Mac groaned as he stretched, and then held out his arms for me to come to him.

I set the mug on the dresser and slid into bed beside him.

"I was worried for a minute, when I woke up, and you weren't here," he said, closing his eyes as he lay his head on my stomach.

"I woke up early. I didn't want to disturb you, so I sat outside for a while and had some coffee."

"Claire, I wanted to tell you something."

I didn't like the grim tone of his voice. I swallowed a lump in my throat, my heart skipping a beat. *Here it comes, I thought, the big letdown.* "You're a nice girl, but..."

"Yeah?" I somehow managed.

"Well, I, this is hard for me—"

Oh, no, wait for it...

"I, well, I haven't done that with anyone, since Tracey, that is." He averted his eyes, his face tightened and strained, embarrassed about something.

"And?" I said, still waiting for the letdown. Now more than ever, I regretted letting myself cry so childishly last night. Maybe I scared him off, thinking I had more baggage than he was willing to deal with. "Did I do something wrong?" I blurted out on the heels of my worry.

"No, God, no," he said, facing me as he cupped my cheek in his palm. "It's just, man, why is this so hard? I'm sorry," he said, straining to laugh. "It sounds stupid. I can't believe I'm telling you," he rolled his eyes at himself. "I told myself after the divorce that I

wouldn't do this again with just *anybody*. My friends, they told me to, well, just bang anyone. Get back in the saddle again, you know?" He cringed a little.

I reached up and laid my hand on his chest.

"Well, anyway, I kind of promised myself I wouldn't just have random sex and that it would be with someone special, someone I wanted to be with, you know, long term..." He almost winced as he blurted the last two words out, *long term*. His scrunched face grew full on frightened waiting for my reply.

Long term...The words seemed to just hover in the air above us. Was he talking marriage? Life long commitment? "All right?" I muttered.

His breathing quickened, and he tried to smile and force a casual motion with his hand. "Well, you know, I just wanted you to know."

I felt him closing up, something inside him hurling bricks to rebuild a barricade between us. I scooted closer, fighting his instinctive resistance by laying my head on his chest. His muscles wanted to give into relaxation. I twisted my finger around the small patch of hair on his chest.

"You're special to me," he said, running his hand across my hair. "You're my Claire..."

I tipped my head up and kissed his chin, and then I nuzzled my body against his again. *He called me his Claire*, I thought, letting the idea of such a fondness sink in. Something about his jumbled, half-thought-out speech and clumsy declaration soothed me instead of making me panic like I had thought it would. I traced tiny shapes on his chest, listening to the soft thudding of his heart and feeling the gentle rhythm of his breathing. I was his Claire...

Twenty-two

“Oh my God, that is just the sweetest thing ever!” Holly squealed as I gushed my mortifying experience trying to seduce Mac.

“She cried. That’s not sweet. That’s weird,” Sam said to our sappy sister. “Who wants to have sex with someone who’s crying?”

Holly slapped Sam’s arm. “Shut up. It’s so romantic. You don’t even know what romance is.”

“Whatever.” Sam rolled her eyes. “So it’s official then, huh? You guys hit the hay, solidifying your couple status?”

“You make it sound like some sort of contract or something,” I said, chuckling as I eyed Sam.

Sam shrugged. “I’m not into commitment.”

“Yeah, we kind of figured that out,” Holl said. “Well, I happen to think it’s sweet,” she said, sticking her tongue out at Sam.

“Hey, listen, I have to get going,” I said, glancing at my watch. “I have a meeting in an hour, but I told Mac I would swing by his office to drop him off some lunch first.”

“Aw how cute. Couple errands!” Sam teased, and then she leaned and wrapped her arms around me. “You know I’m kidding,” she said, squeezing me tighter. “I think it’s great how happy you seem.”

“I have to go too. PTA meeting in twenty minutes,” Holl said as she stood from the park bench.

We said our goodbyes, and I slipped my heels into my shoulder bag and put on my sneakers so I could make better time to Mac's work.

I never expected an accounting firm to have such a gigantic skyscraper as their headquarters. I tipped my head back so far to look up the building I got dizzy.

"Hi, I'm here to see Mac Goodman, please," I said to the receptionist.

"Fourteenth floor. The elevators are just around the corner there," she said with a smile, pointing across the lobby.

I wiggled my way into the cramped elevator and pushed 14. As the doors opened, there came a wave of ringing telephones, a sea of dark suited men in cubicles, and secretaries rushing about with stacks of files clutched in their arms.

I meandered through the maze of cubicles and then stopped a passing man. "Excuse me, could you tell me where Mac's office is?"

"Sure, third office on the left down the hall."

There was a gold name placard on the wall beside the door. I rapped on the door and smiled as I poked my head in. He had another man seated across from him. They both glanced at me, and Mac's eyes lit up with a brilliant sheen.

I smiled and jiggled the paper bag with his lunch inside it.

Mac rose and came around the desk, kissed me on the forehead and put an arm around my waist. "Paul, this is my girlfriend, Claire."

Paul's eyes flickered surprise at *girlfriend*. "Pleasure to meet you Claire," he said, extending his hand.

"Likewise, Paul," I said, returning the handshake.

"I was wondering what had him so chipper lately," Paul chuckled. "Now I see why," he laughed again and winked at me.

"Goodbye, Paul," Mac said, laughing as he lightly pushed Paul out of the office and closed the door.

"I'm sorry I can't stay with you. The meeting is still a good six blocks from here," I said, leaning on the edge of his desk.

"I'm just happy to see you," he said, setting the bag on his desk and wrapping both arms around me. "Listen, are you still sure about this weekend?" he asked, leaning back from me a little to study me for worry.

“Yes, I’m excited to meet Nathan,” I said with a smile. “A little nervous, sure. I don’t want him thinking I’m trying to replace Tracey or anything.”

“Don’t worry about that. He knows better than that. Shoot, *he’s* been bugging me for months to get a girlfriend. He’ll love you!”

I took a deep breath with wide eyes. “I hope so...”

“As long as you don’t feel pressured to do this,” he said, resting his hands on my shoulders. “I don’t want you to feel pushed. Truthfully, I’m probably just as nervous as you are.”

I smiled. Was it odd that I found his anxiousness about meeting his son comforting? “I just hope he doesn’t hate me,” I said with a wince.

“Not possible. You’re amazing,” he said.

“You’re so cute when you’re full of crap,” I said, smiling as I squished his cheeks together. “I have to run. Be there at four tomorrow, right?”

“Anywhere around then, yeah,” he said, bending to kiss me before I left.

Ready for it or not, I guess our relationship was at the next level. I hoped Nathan wouldn’t hate me.

“He’s just a ten-year-old. It will be fine.” Distraction suited my nerves well throughout the morning, but as I drove to Mac’s apartment to meet his son, nothing could quiet the worry rolling around in my brain. “You love kids; kids love you. Everything will be just fine.” I resorted to self pep talks for the remainder of the drive. And it wasn’t going well.

I couldn’t hear the sound of my knock on his door over the drumming of my heart. It never occurred to me before that meeting a ten-year-old child could be unimaginably intimidating.

“There’s my Claire!” Mac said, his skin flushing as he smiled.

There it was again, *my Claire*. I was beginning to love the feel of those two words together. “I hope I’m not too early,” I said, hugging him with one arm.

“No, timing is perfect,” he said, bending a little and locking his eyes on mine. His stare questioned if I was all right and ready for this, really ready to meet his son. I nodded but wasn’t confident in my reply.

“Hey, Nathan, come here a sec. I want you to meet Claire,” he hollered down the small hallway.

Mac took the filled paper grocery bag from my arms and set it on the coffee table. As I took in a deep breath, bracing myself for this all-important introduction, Mac slipped his hand around mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. But his hand was more sweaty than mine. I realized then how selfish I had been, not thinking what a huge step this must be for him – letting a woman meet his son. I looked up at him, stretched on my toes and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Just then a tall, lanky, brown haired boy trotted out of his bedroom. He was a pint-sized Mac.

“Nate, this is my girlfriend I was telling you about, Claire.”

“Hi, Nathan, it’s nice to meet you,” I said, extending my hand to him. I wasn’t supposed to hug him, was I?

Nathan wrapped his slender fingers around mine and gave my hand a quick shake. “Hi.” He stood for a moment, eyes shifting back and forth as we all felt the overwhelming silence. Finally, it was Nathan who broke the awkwardness in the air. “You know how to fix stuff?” he asked me.

“What? Fix what?” I said, almost nervous.

“Do you know how to fix shirts and stuff?”

“Um, sometimes...” I said, not entirely sure where this conversation was going.

“A button came off my shirt. Mom will be really mad if I bring it home broken, but Dad says he doesn’t know how to fix it.”

Mac shrugged. “I don’t do the sewing thing.”

“Can you fix it for me? Mom likes me to wear dressy shirts to church.”

A button. He wanted me to fix something for him, saving him from his mother’s wrath. That had to be a good sign, right? Some sort of bonding experience, or potential for one... I hoped so.

“Why don’t you bring it out, and I’ll take a look,” I said with a smile.

Mac rubbed my back, smiling as he nodded with reassuring approval. As his hand brushed across me, I told myself to stop worrying so damn much.

A moment later, Nathan came strolling back into the living room with a navy blue, button-down dress shirt dangling from his

hand and dragging across the carpet. He handed it to me expectantly. Time to work some magic, I supposed.

“Do you still have the button?” I said as I sat on the sofa with the shirt in my hands.

Nathan ran back into his room, flying back into the living room seconds later. “Here,” he said, plopping onto the sofa beside me.

“Do you have a needle and thread?” I asked Mac as I looked up at him.

“Shoot. No, I don’t,” he said as he cringed.

“Aw man! Dad!” Nathan said, smacking his palm onto his forehead.

“Oh, well, I can’t really fix it without that,” I said. “I can run back to my house and get some?”

“No!” Mac said, startling Nathan and me. “I mean, no,” he softened his tone. “This is good,” he half-whispered to me, motioning with a nod to the building connection between his son and me. “Listen, I’ll run up to the store real quick and get it. They have those little packet things at Walgreens, right?”

“They should.”

“I’ll drive up there and get it. Sound good?”

I took a deep breath. I hadn’t even met his son five minutes ago, and now we were to be left alone for at least ten minutes? Had he gone insane?

“Well, maybe we can all go together after dinner,” he said, reading the hesitancy on my face.

I tried to trust myself, that I was more than capable of sitting with a child for ten minutes. If I could handle Holly’s kids for an entire weekend, what was ten minutes?

“No, that’s fine. Go up there and get it. We’ll stay here. We’ll be fine, right, Nathan?” I said, turning toward Nathan as I smiled.

“Yeah, it’s cool, Dad. I can’t go to church in a t-shirt tomorrow. Mom will be mad.”

“All right, I’ll just be a few minutes,” Mac said, rushing to grab his keys. He stopped halfway through the door to smile at me once more, showing a bit of his own worry in his taut grin.

With Mac gone, the air felt heavier. I took in a deep breath to ease the weight on my lungs. “So, Nathan, what subject do you hate the most in school?”

He jolted a bit and looked at me. “Don’t you mean what I *like* the most?”

“I always hated when people asked me that,” I said as I winked at him. “I always thought the only thing *to* like was recess and lunch.”

“I hate history. It’s boring and stupid,” he said, leaning back on the sofa with a pouted lip.

“I hated history too!” I said with a bright smile.

“No way! It’s so stupid, isn’t it?” he said excitedly turning to face me.

“But I learned something really cool. You want to hear it?”

“Sure!”

About twenty minutes later, Mac came back with a filled bag, stopping cold when he came in.

Nathan and I were sitting on the sofa with our feet propped on the coffee table and baseball cards strewn about around us.

“Dad, Dad!” Nathan said, jumping up from the couch and launching a stack of cards on the floor as he started bouncing around in front of Mac. “She likes Spongebob. Did you know she likes Spongebob?”

“Well, no, I—”

“And she knows about baseball stuff too. Did you know she has a kid who plays baseball?”

“She does?” His shocked stare shot toward me.

“My nephew—” I tried to say.

“And she hated history too!” Nathan said, still hopping as he spoke. “But then she didn’t hate it. Because she told me about those guys who invented flying,” he said. He stretched his arms out beside him and started twirling around like an airplane. “Did you know they used to make bikes, you know, like I have?” he said, stopping his flight. “She said there is all sorts of cool stuff like that in history when you get past the boring stuff!”

“Whoa, whoa,” Mac said, raising his hands to halt Nathan’s enthusiasm. “Slow down, bud!”

“She said maybe we can go get ice cream after dinner, and she can tell me more about those bike airplane guys. Can we go, Dad? Can we?”

I smiled and shrugged.

“And here I was worried you guys wouldn’t get along,” he said, grinning at me as I stood.

“I’m gonna get the chips!” Nathan hollered, bolting into the kitchen.

“I never pegged you for a history buff.” Mac said as he leaned to kiss me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“Naw, I hate history. History sucks,” I said as I laughed.

Twenty-three

“Did I tell you how amazing you are?” Mac said, tightening his arm around my shoulder as I nuzzled up against him on the sofa.

“Yes, but I never get tired of hearing it,” I said as I tipped my head up toward him.

“Well, you are.” He kissed my temple and lifted my hand, turning and twisting it as he caressed it. “I can’t believe how quickly Nate took to you last weekend. You’re an amazing woman, my Claire.”

I closed my eyes as he pressed his lips on my forehead. I was beginning to love the time I spent with him. It didn’t matter to me what we did, where we were, or how I looked; I just wanted to be with him. It terrified me, but I knew I loved him. I don’t know how love crept up on me. Sneaky bastard. But what bothered me more was that I couldn’t say it. As if admitting it would somehow doom our relationship to end in some cliché way; he would desert me, find someone else, or just get tired of me like Charlie did. It’s ludicrous really, to think that verbalizing three little words could destroy something that may be meant to be.

“Mom is making cupcakes this weekend. Do you and Nathan want to stop by for a bit?” I said as I stood. I had slipped into his sage green button-down shirt after we made love. I stretched as I waited for his reply, the baggy shirt rising up my legs.

Mac put his hands on my hips, pulling me closer to him. “God, you’re beautiful.” He gently slid his hands up and down my thighs.

“Mac, I want to tell you something,” I said, moving his arms and climbing onto his lap.

“Fire away,” he said, wrapping an arm around my waist.

“I’m really scared to, which I know is kind of stupid.” I ran my fingers through his tousled brown hair. “I guess, well, I guess part of me is afraid it, we, could end up like me and Charlie did if I say it.”

“I’m listening,” he said, sitting a little straighter and turning his focus away from the smoothness of my collar bone and up to my eyes.

“I know it couldn’t make us end up like that, but I don’t want you to think I’m still hung up on Charlie,” I said, putting my palm on his cheek as I locked my eyes with his. “It’s just, I don’t want *us* to be like that.”

Mac cleared his throat. The color started fading from his face, losing the luster it held only moments ago. I didn’t want to scare him, but I was scared.

“Mac...” I took in a deep breath and planted a slow, purposeful kiss on his lips. “I love you.”

His eyes brightened, his face filling with color as he pulled me into his arms and squeezed me so tight I could hardly breathe. “God, Claire, I’ve been wanting to say it, but I don’t know. I guess I was maybe scared too.” He started placing dozens of kisses around my face. “I’m so scared to try this again, *really* try, and I was worried I’d scare you off.”

I smiled, running both hands through his hair as he bantered on.

“Claire, I love you. I *really* love you. I don’t think I ever felt this way about Tracey like I do you, my Claire.” He put a hand on the back of my neck, gently pulling me forward and into a long, tender kiss.

“I love you, Mac,” I whispered between kisses.

“I love you too,” he said, smiling as he lifted me into the air and carried me toward the bedroom.

“So I have kinda big news,” I said to my sisters, licking cookie dough off my fingertip.

“Oh, yeah?” Holly said, spooning a ball of dough onto a cookie sheet.

“Bet I can guess it.” Sam winked at me, half-heartedly stirring the dough in the bowl.

“This morning, when Mac was over—”

“You know, that’s like four weekends in a row he’s stayed over,” Holly said.

“I know! I was totally going to drop by, but I didn’t want to walk in on them, you know, in the middle of—” Sam cringed. “That would be too weird.”

“Hey, you want to hear my news or not?” I teased.

“I think she’s telling us to shut up,” Holly said as she slid the cookie sheet into the oven and winked at Sam.

“All right, we’re zipping it,” Sam said.

“I know you guys think I’m overdue or something to have a man. But all this feels fast to me.” I tousled Seth’s hair as he ran through the kitchen, scooping up a fresh cookie off the counter as he raced by. “But I love my time with Mac, and I miss him when he’s not there. So the other night, I decided I had to tell him...”

Holly and Sam looked at each other, grinning as they slid into the seats across from me. “Tell him what, exactly?” Sam asked with a playful grin.

“I told him I love him.” I smiled as I bit my lip, cringing and exhilarated all at once. I couldn’t believe the freedom from admitting it. That me, Claire, could love again. And someone loved me back.

“Oh, that’s great, Claire Bear!” Sam said, jumping up and wrapping both arms around me.

“I knew there was something special between you two. I could just tell! I knew it, didn’t I?” Holly said, tapping Sam on the arm.

“Yup, she called it weeks ago,” Sam said, helping herself to a cookie.

“So, did he say it back?” Holl asked.

I felt my cheeks get hot, instinctively bending to a smile.

“Aw, he did!” Sam said, nudging me with her shoulder.

“Yeah, he did,” I managed.

Mac loves me. Mac loves *me*. In the muddled mess of trying to forget Charlie, trying to figure out the chaos of me and all that damn dating nonsense. I never thought I would really love again. Or that I even wanted to. You can’t get hurt if you don’t love someone.

I thought Charlie and I were the ideal, that we complimented the other and had found a cohesiveness so many other couples never found – but when he left me, I guess I thought if he couldn't love me anymore, then maybe no one could. But, Mac loves me, and I love him.

I pulled myself from my wandering thoughts and realized I sat at the kitchen table alone. My sisters were working on the next batch of cookies.

“How many batches of these damn things do you need? Jesus,” Sam whined, plopping a huge spoonful of dough onto the cookie sheet.

“There's 34 kids in Seth's class. I figured two cookies per kid, plus the teachers,” Holly said, breaking up Sam's wad of cookie dough into smaller pieces.

“God, we're going to be here forever. And I just did my nails last night,” she said, grimacing at her dough caked finger nail.

“It's just dough. Comes off with water, you big baby.”

“God, I hope so,” Sam said, staring at her nails.

“So is Mac coming on Sunday?” Holl asked, flopping dough off her spoon.

“Yeah, he's bringing Nathan too.”

“Oh, look at you! Aren't you just the sweetest thing?” Mom said, beaming as she looked down at Nathan.

“She's not really creepy, I promise,” I whispered into his ear just before Mom pulled him into a death-grip hug.

“Hi, Mac, honey, how are you?” she said, leaning over Nathan and kissed Mac on the cheek.

“I'm good, Mrs. McGibbins. How are you?” he smiled as he wrapped an arm around her for a light hug.

“Oh, stop that. Call me Mom,” she said, swatting his shoulder and winking at him. “Well, come on in. Everyone's out back.”

“Hey, guys,” I said as we walked out to the back yard, my hand swooping in a small wave.

Nathan spotted Seth by the back fence, squatting under a tree and poking some poor insect with a stick. He craned his neck a little, watching with intrigue. “Dad, who's –”

“That’s my nephew, Seth, I was telling you about.” I crouched down and wrapped my arm around his skinny shoulder as we watched Seth across the yard. “I bet he brought his PS3, and I know he got a new game for it the other day. I bet if you asked he’d show you.”

“Can I?” he said, looking up at Mac.

“Keeps you out of my hair.” Mac smiled and winked, and Nathan jogged across the yard. Moments later, they both came running toward us for the door.

“Getting my PS3, Mom!” Seth yelled as both boys ran inside the house.

“Hey, Mac. How goes it, man?” Mark said as he shook Mac’s hand.

“Doing good. How are you? How’s work?”

“Eh, they got me working all kinds of overtime but can’t complain too much. It’s money, right?”

“You still on that coding project?”

“Yeah, they want to roll the software out in three months. But it takes longer than that just to test it all!” Mark laughed.

I could have been invisible. I could have slipped away and neither man notice my disappearance. I couldn’t recall Mark and Charlie ever talking so casually. I smiled listening to them drone on and on.

“I’m going to go see what my sisters are up to,” I interrupted, pecking a quick kiss on Mac’s cheek, and scooted between them toward my sisters. I looked back over my shoulder. Mac let out a throaty chuckle at something Mark said. Mac fit nicely in my family.

“So, I thought I saw a little boy here, for a second or two,” Holly said, smiling as she scanned the yard.

“They’re inside playing on Seth’s PS3.” I chuckled as I eased my way between my sisters on the picnic table.

“As long as they’re not loud,” Sam said, glancing up at me through her black sunglasses.

“Ms. Sunshine there had a little too much party and not enough sleep,” Holly said, laughing as Sam groaned and plopped her head into her arms on the table.

“Shh,” Sam said, waving a hand at us as she buried her head deeper into her arms.

“Come on in, everybody. Dinner’s on!” Mom hollered from the kitchen window.

Mac sat beside me, the long dining table now at full capacity with the addition of Mac and Nathan. Nathan sat beside Seth, both whispering and giggling. They looked at Holly to ensure she wasn't listening and started giggling harder.

Sam managed to take her sunglasses off for dinner, and as I was about to make fun of her, I noticed a void behind her. Charlie's chair, the one Mom scooted into the corner, was gone.

"Hey, Mac, you hear anything about those parts for my lawn mower?" Daddy hollered over everyone as he heaped a mouthful of shredded pork.

"Yeah, they shipped the other day. Might get here tomorrow or Tuesday," Mac said. He started running his fingers over my leg as he talked mowers with Daddy. I wondered, as he caressed me, had he always been so easy to love? How could his wife have ever let him go? His stubbly cheeks rose to a grin as he talked. I couldn't imagine having a reason to let him go.

He caught me staring at him and turned to me, perplexed about my apparent goofy gaze. "What?" he said with a grin.

I smiled, cupped my hand on his cheek, and rubbed my thumb along his jaw. "Nothing. I was just ogling you."

"So, Mac, honey, will you and Nathan be at Seth's birthday party?" Mom asked.

We pried ourselves away from our gaze.

"Of course they will, Ma," Sam said, pouring herself another cup of coffee.

"Well, you're officially not being asked to come anymore. They're assuming you are. I guess that means they like you," I whispered to him as I chuckled.

"Good, I like that." Mac's cheeks flushed as he looked at me.

"Me too," I said, interlocking my fingers with his underneath the table.

Twenty-four

“Where are we going?” I asked as I clasped my diamond earrings on.

“Someplace special,” Mac said, standing behind me and bending to kiss the back of my neck.

“Oh, sounds intriguing,” I said, smiling as I turned around and slid my arms over his shoulders.

“Beautiful, as always,” he said before he kissed me. “Come on, we’ll be late,” he said, wrapping his hand around mine and turning for the door.

The grand dining room was a beautiful vision, surely plucked from the imagination of a 5-star designer. The tables were topped with simple red tablecloths, looking so smooth they might slide off the tables they covered. Beneath my feet, the carpet looked like a sunset drizzled onto the floor, a stunning piece with crimsons, burnt orange, yellows, and purples swirled together. The sheer decadence of the room was almost intimidating.

“Are you sure I look all right?” I whispered as we were ushered to our table. Glancing at the silky and shimmery dresses adorning the gorgeous women we passed, my own attire felt low-class and unfitting for the company surrounding us.

“You’re stunning,” Mac said, kissing my cheek as he held out my chair for me.

A silver bucket of ice with chilled champagne already sat atop our table. Mac popped the cork off and poured us both a glass. I smiled as we held our glasses up to toast.

“To four perfect months,” he said, kissing my fingers before he drank.

Had it been that long already? How did he know our anniversary, and I didn’t? Wasn’t anniversaries something women ingrained in their minds? What was wrong with me that I didn’t even know we had one?

“To four months,” I repeated, clinking my glass with his.

“You know, there’s something I’ve been thinking about,” Mac said, setting his glass down and cupping my hands inside his. He rubbed his thumbs against my palms, staring hard at our hands bound together. “I don’t want to seem off-putting or forceful about it. It scares me like hell, truthfully,” he said, straining to smile as he looked up at me.

My stomach knotted together, twisting and cramping with each breath as I waited. *Was he about to propose?* Panic overcame me; I finished my champagne trying to figure out how a woman says no to a proposal. But, did I want to say no?

“I never thought I would be in a relationship again, or even want one,” he said, taking a deep breath and rubbing my hand again. “With everything that happened with Tracey, I just, well, I gave up, really.”

I could hardly hear him over the pounding of my erratic heartbeat.

“But you’ve shown me what love can really be like, Claire, and our four months together has been—”

“Claire?”

As I thought my heart could take no more strain, it dropped to my stomach upon hearing that voice again.

“Charlie?” I said, looking up at the familiar man standing beside our table. The room started to swirl around me. My head became fuzzy as little dots filled my vision. To my right stood the man I thought was the love of my life. Yet, sitting in front of me was the man who might actually *be* the love of my life.

“Wow, Claire, you look amazing,” Charlie said, blushing as he smiled.

Why did he always have to look so damn cute when he did that?

“Mac, hi,” Charlie said, somewhat stunned as he reached to shake Mac’s hand.

“Charlie. How are you?”

Charlie ignored the question and stood in silence, his perfect puppy-dog eyes taking in every bit of me. It felt thrilling and terrifying. I looked over at Mac. He sat stiff, his rigid frame tightening with each breath, and his eyes refusing to blink as they filled with rage.

I cleared my throat, mustering any ounce of courage lingering inside me. “Charlie, so...” I said, civil yet eyeing him with skepticism.

“Oh,” he chuckled, pulling his stare up from my curves and locking his eyes on mine. “I’m here with a client,” he said, nodding behind him. “But when I saw you across the room, gosh, you look gorgeous—”

“It’s not proper etiquette to keep clients waiting. You know that,” Mac said. His tone was stern and hard, and he exaggerated the motion of reaching to hold my hand. He sat stiff, claiming me with our clasped hands.

Seeing the disappointment in Charlie’s eyes, part of me felt dirty, and I almost let go of Mac’s hand. Charlie’s wedding band glistened as he rubbed his chin. *How dare me for feeling dirty by something so true as my relationship with Mac.*

“Yes, shouldn’t you be going?” I said, giving Mac’s hand a quick squeeze of assurance. Although I wasn’t sure he would believe it if I wasn’t even quite sure.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Charlie said in his wounded tone.

I couldn’t stand it, being stuck between them. I wanted to bolt for the door, alone and without the drama of their pissing contest.

“Well, it’s really good seeing you, Claire,” Charlie said, quickly tracing a finger down my exposed shoulder.

I shivered at his touch. Mac almost jumped out of his chair.

“Are you still living at the same place?” Charlie asked before he turned to walk away.

“Yes,” I muttered, breathless and about to pass out.

“Good. Maybe I’ll see you around again.” Charlie winked at me as he turned his back to us and walked to his table.

“What the hell does that mean, see you around?” Mac snapped, glowering at Charlie’s figure moving through the restaurant. “He

lives on the other side of town. See you around..." he mumbled, glaring above the rim of the glass as he finished the champagne in two gulps.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said, trying to sound light and unconcerned. But my head turned, following Charlie as he left us. Charlie busted me and smiled directly at me as he chatted with the man at his table.

My stare darted down, shameful, and locked on the tablecloth.

"Well, there goes everything," Mac said, throwing a hand up as he chucked his napkin on the table.

"No, no, it's fine. Forget him," I said, not believing one bit of my loving tone. "What were you about to say before he—" I couldn't even talk about him without looking in his direction. It was something instinctive, something that grew from years of marriage. You scanned a room to find the one you loved. I craned my neck to spot him.

Mac leaned back, crossing his arms on his chest as he watched me. I felt his hurt stare on me, but for some reason, I didn't care. He let out a long breath, waiting for me to turn back to him, to be *with* him.

When I wasn't able to see Charlie anymore, I turned back to face Mac. My heart sank with betrayal seeing the hurt in his eyes. Searching for Charlie amidst the crowd, I knew, was no different to Mac than if I strutted over and sat on Charlie's lap.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what I was doing," I said, trying to smile, but reeked of tortured shame.

"You still love him?" Mac said, throwing it out before us.

Mac's eyes were bloodshot, watery, and on the brink of a murderous rage or heartbreak. I heard this strange John Wayne-type voice in my head. *You're either with him or with me, sweetheart. Can't have 'em both*, the little voice said as I stared at Mac. Was that it; was Mac going to make me choose? Was there even a choice to be made? I gave him the only response that made sense.

"No, of course not!" I reached for his hand. "I love you. You know that."

He bore into me, searching for the feelings I didn't think would still be there. Until I saw Charlie again. "Say it again," Mac said, sounding more like a beg than a command.

"I love you. I'm *with* you," I said, smiling as I squeezed his hand.

Mac watched me for a moment longer, and then he either believed me or hoped to believe me. He sat forward, put his napkin back on his lap, and poured us more champagne, forcing a smile as he did so.

“Now, what were you saying?” I said, smiling as I sipped. My eyes drifted to the corner, looking once more for Charlie. *Was I really with Mac now? God, was I ever?* If not for fear of causing a horrible scene in such a refined establishment, would I have escaped with Charlie given the chance?

“What do you think?” Mac asked. He tipped his head to catch my gaze. “Claire? What do you think?”

I shrugged in slow motion. *I hadn't realized he even spoke.* “I'm sorry, what?”

“You didn't hear a word I just asked you, did you?” he said, slouching in the chair.

“I'm sorry. I guess I drifted off.” I didn't mean to hurt him. Maybe I was more like Charlie than I thought I was. “What did you say? I'm listening now.” I smiled and tried to sound encouraging.

“Never mind. I guess I got my answer.”

No matter how sweet or attentive I sounded throughout the rest of the evening, Mac distanced himself from me and cut me off from the gentle touches, goofy smiles, and sarcastic jokes we loved to share. And I couldn't blame him. Instead of thwarting Charlie's subtle advances or shooing him from our table like I should have. I followed him with my eyes. I didn't want to imagine what damage my actions could have done to Mac.

I cleared my throat as we pulled in my driveway.

Mac put the car in park, left his hands clenching the steering wheel, and stared beyond my house.

“Aren't you going to come in?” I said, twisting in my seat to face him.

He ran his hands across the top of the steering wheel as he sighed. “I think I'm just going to stay home tonight. Early meeting tomorrow...”

“Oh,” I managed. I let out a shameful sigh. “Are you sure? I'd really like you to stay.”

“Would you?” he said, his tone stabbing me.

“Of course I would. Why would you say that?”

“I saw that look, Claire...” He took a deep breath, pumping his fists resting on the steering wheel.

“What *look*?” I said, attempting to sound offended. I crossed my arms on my chest for extra measure.

“That, when you looked at *him*.” He turned toward me, hopeless and broken.

“There wasn’t any look, Mac.” I lowered my head, hoping he would look me in the eyes.

“Are you sure?” He raised his head a little.

“Of course I am.” I put his hand inside mine.

“How sure?” he said, relaxing into a slight smile.

“Hmm, let me think,” I said as I playfully eyed him and tapped a finger on my chin. “I’m prettty sure.” I smiled, slipping back into the comfort I loved between us.

“Pretty sure, that’s it?” he grinned and threw his hands up. “Well, that’s it. If you’re only *pretty sure*, then get out of my car!” he said as he laughed.

I chuckled, scooted closer toward him, and ran a fingertip down the length of his arm. “Are you ready to come in now?”

His muscles tightened underneath my fingers. “Please. It’s our anniversary.” I tried for a playful pout, but he didn’t look at me.

“I have a meeting,” he said dryly, staring straight ahead again.

I bit my lip, let out a breath, and grabbed my purse off the floor mat. “I see.” I reached for the door handle and turned to look at him again, unsure if I should kiss him goodbye. “Well, goodnight, I guess,” I said, hesitating before I pecked a quick kiss on his cheek. “I love you?” I said, hoping he would respond. The few seconds he waited to reply felt like hours.

“Love you too.”

I stood on the front porch and watched Mac’s car pull away, my heart sinking into my stomach hoping that I would see him turn around and come back. I wanted to call him, beg him to come back and stay with me like he belonged, but I wasn’t sure if I had the right to do that. Not if I was letting Charlie flutter through my thoughts. I flipped open my cell.

“Hey, Claire Bear, how was the date?”

“Can you come over?”

Instantly sensing my stress, Sam said, “What’s the matter?”

“I need you to come over. I don’t know what happened.” I kicked my heels off and sat on the coffee table, running the evening through my mind again.

“Did you guys have a fight or something?”

“No, worse, I think.” I think I would have felt better if he screamed at me, called me a cheating whore, something.

“Oh, God, you guys didn’t break up, did you?”

“No, not yet,” I said, hoping it wouldn’t come to that.

“What do you mean, not yet? What happened?”

“Can you just please come over?” I said, no longer able to hold back the tears I didn’t know were struggling to come out.

“On my way,” Sam said and clicked her phone shut.

Sam arrived in record time. I wanted to tease her about getting a speeding ticket, but I really didn’t care. I was just grateful I didn’t have to wait long.

“What?” Sam said, somewhat winded as she charged into the living room. “What happened?”

I rubbed my hands on my forehead. “God, where do I start?” I mumbled through my palms.

“That bad?” Sam was worried, and so was I.

“Well, it started off great. He took me to this amazing restaurant. I mean, just gorgeous.” I pulled my knees up to my chest, tucking my legs under my dress. “He wanted to take me somewhere special because it’s our anniversary today—”

“It is? Why didn’t you mention that before?” she asked as she sat beside me, tucking her legs up on the cushion.

I threw my hands up. “I didn’t know! How terrible does that make me?”

Sam scrunched her nose.

“Never mind. Don’t answer that.” I pinched between my eyes. “So, we’re having a really nice time. I mean, just...just perfect.” I took in a deep breath, the weight of his name already dragging my heart down to my toes. “Mac was about to tell me something, or ask me something, maybe?” I scratched my head, trying to remember it all. Why did it seem so blurry now? “I think it was important to him, by the tone of his voice, you know?”

“What was it? Do you know?” she said, leaning forward, hands clenched at her chest.

“Just as he’s about to tell me, or ask me, then...” I let out a heavy breath. “Then Charlie shows up, and he’s standing at our table and starts talking to us...”

“Oh my God,” Sam muttered. She put a hand over her mouth, shaking her head. “I don’t think I want to hear this.”

“I don’t think I want to say it,” I said.

“Hang on,” Sam said and walked into the kitchen. I heard clanking and cabinets slamming. She came back into the living room with a bottle of wine in her hand, sat down, and took a few gulps from the bottle. “I’m ready,” she said.

“The timing couldn’t have been worse,” I said.

“Like there’s a good time to run into that bastard,” Sam interrupted.

I shook my head at myself. “I wish I could explain it. It’s like, like the way he looked at me, spoke to me... I can’t remember the last time he paid me that much attention.”

Sam nodded, eyes wide, and took another gulp from the bottle.

“But there he is, and, ugh, Sam, he looked so good,” I said through a breath.

Sam’s eyes drooped with disappointment. “Oh, no, Claire Bear...”

I rolled my eyes. “I, I don’t even know why, but I couldn’t take my eyes off him.”

Sam covered her mouth. “Oh, please don’t tell me...”

I held my hands up and shrugged.

“Jesus, Claire. Please, *please* tell me that’s it,” Sam begged. “Please tell me you told him to get bent, piss off, something!”

I pressed my lips together and shook my head.

Sam closed her eyes, bracing herself for the moment I admit that I seriously screwed everything up.

“Charlie just kept looking at me the whole time he’s talking, like, like he’s enamored with me or something.” I leaned forward, took the bottle from Sam’s hand, took a big swig, and handed it back to her. “And poor Mac, he’s just pissed,” I said, remembering his hands clenched into fists on the table.

“Well, no shit! It’s your anniversary, and his woman is drooling over some other dude. I’d be pissed too.”

“That doesn’t help, Sam,” I pleaded.

Sam shrugged. “I’m sorry, but come on!”

I knew she was right. “I wanted so badly to say something to just make Charlie go away, but at the same time, I didn’t want him to leave.”

“Jesus, Claire...”

“I know,” I said, running my hands through my hair. “Finally, Charlie leaves with this client he’s with, and it’s just me and Mac again.”

“Did he start screaming at you? I sure as hell would have.”

“I almost wished he did,” I said, raising my eyes to hers. “I tried to convince him I was paying attention to him, that I didn’t care about Charlie—”

“But you do,” Sam interrupted with a glare.

“Well, I screwed it up. Bad. By the time we’re heading home, he’s hardly even talking to me.”

“Can you blame him? I mean, God, Claire, what were you thinking?”

“I don’t know!”

We sighed in unison. Sam took another swig from the bottle, and I tried to rub the tension from my shoulders.

“When we pulled up in the drive, I finally started to convince him I didn’t care about Charlie. Well, I thought I did.”

“Uh-oh,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” I said through an exhale. “Then he refuses to come in the house. Giving me some lame excuse he has a meeting tomorrow or something.”

“Oh, shit...”

“I know. He’s spent, like, how many nights here?”

“Enough to make me stop coming by so much,” Sam added.

“Exactly. And now suddenly he doesn’t want to stay the night?”

We sat quiet for a minute, weighing the consequences of my moronic ogling of my ex-husband and completely ignoring the man who loves me.

“I think I really screwed things up, Sam,” I said, biting my lip as I glanced at her.

“Hell yeah, you did. I mean, I don’t do relationships, but if my man was sitting there, on our *anniversary*,” she said, widening her eyes as she scorned me, “totally infatuated with his ex...” Sam shook her head at me. “No way in *hell* would I even let him blurt out an excuse. We’d be done. That’s total bullshit, Claire.”

“That’s not helping, Sam. You’re supposed to help me figure out how to fix it.”

Sam leaned back and crossed her arms. “I don’t know what to tell you then, because that’s how I see it.”

I nibbled my bottom lip. I tried to imagine how I would feel if the situation was reversed, and it was Tracey who stood by our table. My heart sank into my belly. It would crush me. Yet as I thought of the admiration in Charlie’s stare, my damn heart still fluttered.

I moaned as I rubbed my temples. “Why did he have to be there?”

Sam raised her eyebrows. “Why did you have to give him a reaction?”

I looked up at her. She raised her brows higher as I sat without a defense.

“You totally crushed Mac tonight. You realize that, right?”

I didn’t want to admit it, so I nodded. I cleared my throat, afraid to say it. “You think I lost him?”

“Well, lucky for you, he’s nicer than me. But, truthfully?”

I nodded.

“I’d dump your ass if I was him. And, I don’t know...” Sam let out a breath. “He just might anyway, because what you did was—I wouldn’t stand for it, in love or not.”

Twenty-five

For the second week in a row, Mac wouldn't stay the night, and it killed me. My pleading had no effect on him. In the chill between us, I fell asleep on the opposite side of the sofa while he was here last night. I woke up in the same spot I had fallen asleep in, alone. The TV shut off, and a blanket thrown over me.

I stretched, pulled the pillow Mac used against my chest, and inhaled his lingering scent.

"Mac..." I whispered, running my hand over the pillow. I rolled over and blindly reached for the remote on the coffee table, slid my hand around the top, and got a paper cut on my fingertip.

"Huh?" I said, sitting up and unfolding a note. Scribbled in Mac's messy, child-like writing, I read, 'I love you, my Claire. Always.'

My eyes watered as I read the note repeatedly, knowing he still loved me. It was so lonely without him. I almost drove to his apartment but sought counsel from my sisters first.

Sam told me just to let Mac work out whatever it was going on inside his guy brain, and he would see that I was waiting for him when he came out of it. A guy funk, that's what she called it. I hoped she was right. I couldn't stand the idea of losing him. I decided to shake him from my thoughts, shower and head out to run a few silly, nonsense errands. That turned out to be a terrible idea.

“Crap,” I said to myself as I dug through my pockets. I had left my debit card in my other pair of jeans. The woman behind me in line made no attempt to hide her annoyance at my holding everyone up.

“If you can’t pay, then get out of line,” she snapped as I fumbled through my purse. “Some people are in a hurry.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t have enough cash,” I said, cringing as I looked up at the cashier.

She rolled her eyes and pointed behind her. “Put your cart over there if you’ll be right back, and we’ll hold it for you.”

“Oh, thank you!” I said, nodding as I jammed my wallet back in my purse and jogged to the exit.

I got in my car and turned the key. Nothing. “Damn it,” I said, plopping my head on the steering wheel. I turned the key again, but the engine didn’t turn over, only a slight “tick, tick, tick” sound. “Shit.” I fumbled for the lever to the hood. It took me a minute to figure out which way to slide the lever thing, but I opened the hood and looked at the engine as if I had any clue what I was staring at.

I was waiting for one of the parts to talk to me telepathically, I suppose, or to spot an exposed wire, a hunk of something missing, a little gremlin eating my radiator maybe. Hell, I don’t know what I was waiting for.

“Need some help?” I heard Charlie say.

I turned around, grateful and afraid to see him standing there smiling at me. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Go ahead and turn the key again,” he said.

I dutifully followed his instructions, met again with the faint ticking sound.

“Sounds like a dead battery. Let me get some cables. I’ll park next to you and give you a jump.”

“Okay,” I said as I got back out of my car. “Thanks, Charlie,” I said, half smiling as he walked toward his car.

Charlie angled his car toward mine and hooked up wires while his engine ran. He stood next to me, leaning over the engine and messing with some kind of wire. God, he smelled good. I hated that about him. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath.

“Give it a try again,” he said.

I turned the key again. Nothing.

“Well,” he said, unhooking everything and wiping his dirty palms on his jeans. “Looks like you probably need a new battery.”

“Great. Just what I need,” I said, cursing my car for making Charlie be my savior. It couldn’t die in my driveway or at my sisters house. No, it had to die right as Charlie was nearby.

“I’ll give you a lift to the auto store. We can pick one up and I can put it in for you,” he said, smiling that boyish grin that made me melt.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll just call Mac,” I said, digging in my purse for my phone.

“Nonsense. Don’t worry about it.” He closed my car hood and put a hand under my elbow. “Come on, it won’t take but thirty minutes.” His slender fingers wrapped around my arm, guiding me toward his car. I wanted to resist him but found myself sitting next to him in his car.

“Thanks,” I said, glancing at him and trying to smile. I was afraid to look in his eyes, afraid I might see the same stupid sparkle that made me turn to goo ages ago.

“Good thing I just happened to be in your neighborhood, huh?” he said, chuckling as he laid a hand on my forearm. “It’s good to see you, Claire.”

I looked down at his hand on my arm, knowing I should remove it, jerk my arm back, smack him – something. But I fastened my seatbelt, bracing myself for the next thirty minutes I would spend with him.

“Sorry, I thought for sure it was just the battery,” Charlie said as we climbed back into his car.

I watched my car being lowered from the tow truck as we pulled away from the mechanic. “Really, you don’t need to drive me. I can call Mac to pick me up.”

“I’m sure he’s busy, and I don’t have any plans for today.” He looked toward me for a moment, holding a tender stare.

“What about Monica and the baby?” I said, I think wanting to startle him. “Aren’t they expecting you home by now?”

“Yeah, well, we’re kind of fighting right now,” he said, easing into his perfect puppy-dog pout.

“Oh, sorry to hear that,” I said, turning to the window. I ached to be on the outside, walking away from Charlie and his intoxicating scent. Despite the crisp air, I rolled down the window to flush his aroma from my senses.

“It’s all right. It’s just since...” he stammered, running his fingers through his hair. “Well, since that night.”

He was baiting me; I knew it. “What night?” I said, glancing at him.

“Since I saw you, at the restaurant.”

“Oh.” I tried to sound disinterested and shrugged. But I was interested, and he could see right through my feeble charade.

“I, well—well, it was really, really nice seeing you again.” He put a hand over mine.

I jerked my hand back, looking at it as I rubbed off his touch, as if he had infected me with relationship-killing Charlie goo.

“I guess she was jealous, because she saw a change in my behavior toward her because of that night.”

“Monica, jealous? Now there’s an absurd statement,” I said, snickering at the air.

“Yeah, she doesn’t have a whole lot of room to be judgmental, does she?” Charlie laughed, and it was too enticing to resist. I laughed with him. “But seeing you, losing you really, has changed me, Claire,” he said, softening his tone, slowly reaching again for my hand.

For a second, his touch was soothing, something comforting and familiar. As my heart beat a little faster, I thought how much smoother Charlie’s hand was than Mac’s. I jerked my hand away again and tucked it underneath my thigh.

“Turn left at the light,” I said, glaring at him and hiding my other hand – just in case.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. Your being with Mac and all. Which, by the way, threw me for a bit of a loop!”

“What? You mean you, the man who slept with and married my friend, *you* find it hard to believe I would date your friend? Or ex-friend, I should say.” I let my tone thrash like an unruly whip against his wittiness.

“All right, all right. I guess I deserved that jab.”

“You deserve a hell of a lot more than just the one,” I snapped, annoyed that my tone lacked the sharpness of my last statement.

“I guess you’re right. I wasn’t good to you, Claire. I know that. You deserved a lot better than I gave you. And I’m sorry about that, Claire. I really am.”

I rolled my eyes, hoping I oozed bitchiness from every pore on my face and trying to summon my inner Sam. But it felt nice, hearing him apologize. I took a breath, knowing he was playing me for the fool again. He was charming me with his grin and hoping to melt me into the submissive Claire he was used to.

“Turn right up there. It’s the fourth house,” I said, not looking at him.

“I have changed, Claire. I have.” He parked in front of my house, shut the car off, and turned toward me. “It’s nice,” he said, smiling as he nodded to my house.

“No thanks to you,” I said, glaring over my shoulder.

He had an exaggerated gulp and bit his lip. “Claire?”

I sighed, impatient and dying to get out of his car. “What?” It was obvious to even me that I shouldn’t give him the privilege of explaining himself. He had his chance to do that, and he left me without a word.

“I would like the chance to show you—”

“Show me what, Charlie?” I groaned as I stopped, halfway off my seat and out of the car.

“That I’ve changed. I know I don’t deserve it—”

“Damn right, you don’t. You had your chance. You had years worth of chances, Charlie. Years!”

“I know. I’m sorry, Claire!” he said, his chocolate eyes melting into mine as he reached across the seat for my hand. “Please, please just let me show you. I’m different now, I promise. Let me show you I can be the man you deserve now.”

I shook his hand off mine, glaring at him as I stood on the curb. “No, you don’t deserve it.” I slammed the car door shut and started walking up to the porch.

“Please, Claire. I’m sorry!” he hollered through the open window.

I waved my hand in the air behind me, not turning to look at him. “Thanks for the ride.” I slammed my front door and leaned my back against it, my heart pounding in my chest. My hands shook and my legs were tingly and unsteady. I slid onto the sofa’s armrest and picked up my phone.

“Yeah?” Sam said.

“I need another emergency meeting.”

“God. Oh, did you guys—”

“No, we’re still together. It’s Charlie.”

The silence was thick and hard to breathe through.

“Oh, God,” Sam whispered.

I knew all the fears whipping through her mind, because they charged through mine too.

“I think he wants to get back together...”

Twenty-six

“What the hell was he doing down here anyway?” Sam said, snapping a pencil in half. Rage engulfed her eyes. She hated Charlie. “Dumb bastard is probably stalking you or something,” she said, peeking through my front curtains.

“I doubt that, Sam. Chill out. It’s just a coincidence, I’m sure.”

“Coincidence, my ass,” she said, shaking the broken pencil between her fingers. “Son of a bitch is trying to ruin it for you. Break you guys up. I know it.”

“Why would he say those things to me? Why now?” I wished I didn’t care why he said anything. Only a perpetual doormat would consider his reasoning.

“He saw you happy.” Sam pointed at me with the broken pencil. “He saw you happy, and now he wants that. He wants it back. Because he’s miserable with that slut-monger wife of his.”

“So, you don’t think he’s changed?” I said, turning to face her as she paced.

“Hell no, he’s just in fight or flight mode. Dumb worthless prick.”

“Fight or flight?” I said, standing up and now pacing on the other side of the living room.

“Yeah, like, when he’s not happy, it’s like he’s in fight or flight mode, you know. Fight to get happy or flight. You know, take off

like he did to you.” She paused, knowing his leaving me still stung. “So he’s miserable and feels cornered. It’s fight or flight time.”

“So, I’m his flight?”

“Exactly. Like Monica was the first time.” She took a hateful breath as she shook her head.

I plopped onto the armrest, focusing on nothing. “Could it work though, this time?”

Sam stopped dead. “You can’t be serious?” She paced again, faster and harder. “What about your happiness? He’s just using you. What about Mac? For Christ’s sake, the man is head over heels for you!” She threw her arms up.

I nodded, slowly trying to digest the demise of my relationship with Charlie and the natural ease with Mac. “He does love me, doesn’t he?”

“Well, duh,” she said, resting her hands on her hips. “I mean, would you really want to put yourself through all that shit again? Would you really want to lose Mac for the prick that ditched you? Really, Claire bear?”

I could smell Charlie as if he still sat next to me, still feel the tingle on my arm from the warmth of his touch. I closed my eyes, letting myself see the way his cheeks wrinkled when he smiled at me, see the hope lingering in his stare. I rubbed my bare finger that once held my wedding band. Then I remembered the day he stood on my porch, Monica wrapping her arm around his bicep, and Charlie telling me they wanted my home.

“You can’t put yourself through that again,” Sam said, sensing I pondered the idea of it. Charlie and me. “You would be, like, the biggest dumbass if you did.”

“I love Mac,” I said, opening my eyes and locking them with hers. “I do. I love him.”

“Then don’t lose that. Don’t let that go. Especially not because of some idiot like Charlie.”

I nodded, empowered, flushing any hint of doubt out of me. “Right. I mean, he’s the jerk who cheated on me. Like I wasn’t good enough or something,” I snapped. “And now he thinks he has a chance with me or something. Pfft!” I snickered at the thought. “You know what?” I bolted up, zipped by Sam, and grabbed my purse. “Can you give me a ride?”

“Where?” she asked, her brows scrunched with confusion.

“I have to go see him.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to wait?” Sam hollered through the car window.

“I’ll catch a cab back,” I said, running for the entrance. I stopped and spun back around. “Thanks, Sam, for setting me straight,” I said and smiled.

Sam waved a hand, “Nothing to it. You know I love bossing you around.” She winked at me as she grinned and then drove out of the parking lot.

I hoped he was there. I didn’t want to waste time calling to find out or to get stuck in a conversation about how I spent my morning trapped in Charlie’s car. I just had to go see him.

I sprinted through the office, not caring how many people stared at me or thought I was a whack job. As I whipped the door open, I prayed to God he was in there alone.

He jumped in his seat. “Claire? What the—”

I shut the door behind me, walked to his desk and stood in front of him as he turned his chair to face me. I slipped his hands into mine, smiling as I guided him to a standing position. The sincerity flickering in his eyes was enough to make me pool up at his feet. I stretched to my toes, pressing my lips against his harder than I ever had.

I broke from his grasp, grinning, and rubbed his chin with my thumb.

“Man, what was that for?” he said, staggered and bewildered.

“I love you, Mac. Only you. I don’t want some stupid Charlie crap that doesn’t exist to come between us.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “There is no Charlie. I don’t care about him. I don’t want to be with him. I don’t love him.” I kissed his fingers interlaced with mine. “I love you. And I just wanted to come here and show you.” I smiled, feeling him relax into me, the tension melting from his body as he pulled me a little closer.

“It’s you and me,” I said.

“My Claire,” he whispered, and then he bent his head and kissed the top of my hand.

I breathed for the first time in days and put my head on his shoulder, letting my love for him consume my doubt. I didn’t want Charlie. The love I hoped for, deserved, I knew was with Mac and

Mac alone. My sisters were right. Charlie and I just weren't good together. And Charlie's failing marriage wouldn't change that.

I tipped my head up. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

Mac kissed the tip of my nose. "No place I would rather be."

"Hey, babe?" Mac called from the living room.

I poked my head out from the hallway as he dropped his weekend duffle bag on the floor. "I'm in the spare room."

"I'm going to grab a beer. You want something?"

"Water, please!" I hollered.

Mac stood in the doorway, sipping a beer and holding out a bottle of water for me. I wiped sweat from my brow and gulped the water down.

"What are you doing in here? I thought it was movie night?" he said, surveying the mass of clutter and boxes in the second bedroom.

"Well, since I'm renting an office now for work, I wanted to redo the room here."

Mac pushed a box with his foot and peeked inside it. "What do you have planned?"

"First, I have to figure out where to put all this junk." I kicked a box, walked up to him, and wrapped my arms around his chiseled waist. "But, I have something very special planned for in here." I said as I looked up at him.

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned at me, set his beer down on a stack of books, and draped his arms on my shoulders. "And what might that be?" He kissed the tip of my nose.

"It's a surprise," I said as I closed my eyes, my skin flushing as he peppered me with tiny kisses.

"A surprise, huh? Well, aren't you just full of mystery?" He smacked my backside as I walked away.

"Hey!" I said, grinning as I rubbed my tingly cheek.

"Am I going to like it? Not that it's my house or anything."

"Well, I hope so, or I'm wasting a perfectly good weekend if you don't!"

He flipped a few more boxes open, taking a glimpse at their contents, and pulled out my high school year book.

"Oh, no you don't!" I said, jogging over and yanked it from his hands.

“Aw, come on. It can’t be that bad. You should have seen me in high school. Big gumpy guy, bad teeth,” he said, pulling his teeth over his bottom lip like a beaver.

“Come on, you’re taking me out.” I tossed the yearbook back into the box.

“I am? Where am I taking you?” he said, letting me pull him toward the front door.

“Home Depot. How’s that for romantic?” I winked at him.

I nibbled on my nail. I never knew there were so many options for closet hooks. White, brushed metal, bronzed, aged bronze; I just wanted hooks.

“You’re not going to give me any hints about what we’re getting all this stuff for, are you?” Mac said, leaning against the cart and spinning a package of painter’s tape around his index finger.

“Nope.” I kissed him on the cheek and continued to ponder the plethora of hooks.

“Well, look at that. We meet again.”

We turned around, Mac tensing as Charlie ran a hand through his hair.

“Charlie, hello, again,” Mac said through a sigh.

I went to stand beside Mac, wrapping my hand around his arm and pulling myself close to him. I thought if I held Mac tight enough, it would dissuade any hint of stupidity from weaseling back into my brain.

Charlie held a chilling stare of challenge as he eyed my hand around Mac’s arm. He raised his eyes to mine, sparkling with interest, and smiled before he turned his attention back to Mac.

“Never knew you to be the handyman Mac,” Charlie said, chuckling with sarcasm.

Mac bit his bottom lip, slowly nodding as Charlie laughed. “Well, Claire’s doing the shopping today—”

“Of course she is. She’s always working on something, isn’t she?” Charlie focused his stare on me. I knew in the insistence of his gaze that I was his next conquest, and he wouldn’t stop until he claimed me as his again. Especially now that I was with Mac. “But I’m sure you already knew that, didn’t you, Mac?”

“We should get going,” I said, tugging on Mac’s t-shirt sleeve.

“You remember that time you tried to refinish a dresser for our bedroom?” Charlie said, his nostalgic laugh warming his face. “God, you were so covered in paint! In your hair, on your nose. Your chest...” he said, lowering his voice. A seductive grin rose as he was mentally undressing me.

I tightened my hold on Mac’s arm. Mac stood taller, taking a step forward. “All right, Charlie, I don’t know what you think is going to happen here—”

“She’s great, isn’t she?” he said to Mac while staring at me.

“Yes, she is.” Mac’s tone was flat and his stance strong as he gently scooted me behind him.

Charlie frowned at my cowering behind Mac. “Worth fighting for, wouldn’t you say?” Charlie said, now looking over to Mac.

“We need to get going,” Mac said, his chest heaving with anger. He took my hand into his as we turned to leave.

“Hey, Claire,” Charlie said.

We both turned to look back.

“I’ve got a small apartment not too far from here now, in case you wanted to know,” he said, letting a spiteful stare rest on Mac.

“Color me elated,” I said, hoping the snicker would fend him off.

Charlie took a step forward and ran a finger down my arm. “I’ll see you around then. I’ll show you, Claire. This time.” He smiled, letting his hand linger on my skin too long for my comfort.

Mac grabbed Charlie’s wrist, threw his hand off me, and took a forceful step toward him. They stood nose to nose. Mac’s head was tipped down, pouring hate into Charlie’s soft chocolate eyes.

Charlie chuckled, took a step back, and smiled at me around Mac’s shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

I felt Mac readying to step forward. I held his arm tighter and pulled back. “Come on, let’s go.”

Mac took a hesitant step backward, holding his glare on Charlie as we started walking away. I looked over my shoulder at Charlie, who was some feet back now. He slid his hands into his pockets, smiling as he watched me. He nodded, his smile broadening as he winked, and then he turned and walked away.

Twenty-seven

I craned my neck above the crowd, trying to spot his face among the other antsy, fidgeting kids on the overflowing stage.

“Oh, there he is!” I said, tugging on Mac’s sleeve. “Third from the left, towards the middle there, see?” I said as I pointed.

“Yeah, I see him!”

Nathan stood on his toes, scanning the crowd. I stood up, waving as I smiled, and hoped he could see me amid the other waving arms of proud parents. Excitement rushed through me as Nathan spotted me, his little smile growing wider as his lanky arm waved in the air.

“I never thought a kid’s concert could be so exciting!” I said, grinning at Mac as I settled back in my seat just as their teacher clapped for the children’s attention.

The crowd eased into silence as cameras flashed throughout the room. I turned mine on, adjusted the settings, and tried to zoom in on Nathan.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” I said, tipping the screen to show Mac.

“He really likes you, you know?” Mac whispered as the children started to sing.

“I like him too,” I said, my face growing hot being caught in Mac’s gaze.

“I kind of like you too,” he whispered.

His goofy grin made me giggle. I rolled my eyes and swatted his arm.

The children, albeit all off key, performed the various Christmas songs beautifully. I tapped my foot as they sang, lip-syncing along with them. Mac chuckled at my enthusiasm throughout the entire performance. After the Christmas concert, the three of us went out for ice cream as I promised Nathan we would.

“You’ve got a big goober hanging off your chin,” I laughed as I pointed at Mac, his strong jaw covered in melted caramel.

“Mmm, yummy,” he said, wiping it off and licking his finger.

“Use a napkin,” I teased.

Mac playfully rolled his eyes and went to ask the vendor for more napkins.

“I like you, Claire,” Nathan said between licks. “You’re kind of goofy.”

“I like you too, Nathan,” I said, twisting my cone to catch drips.

“You’re the first girl Dad has let me meet, you know?” he said, tipping his cone to take a bite.

“Well, I guess that’s a good thing, huh?” I said, pointing to a missed drizzle of chocolate soft serve on his cone.

He dragged his tongue across the cone in a huge lick. “You guys gonna get married?” he asked as Mac sat back down.

I choked on my mouthful of ice cream, almost spitting bits of minty chips on Nathan.

Mac’s eyes doubled in size.

Nathan stopped eating and looked up at us, waiting for a reply.

“Um,” Mac cleared his throat and adjusted his positioning on the bench. “Well, maybe someday.” He reached and took my hand in his.

For the first time, marriage didn’t sound revolting. I never daydreamed about us getting married before but had settled into the idea that my life would, no matter what, be spent with Mac.

“Cool,” Nathan said, turning his attention back to his ice cream.

“Well, little man, we should get going,” Mac said as he checked his watch. “You sure you don’t want me to wait until Sam gets here? I don’t want you sitting here all alone.”

“She’s just fashionably late. Don’t worry about me.”

“Call me when you get home?” Mac said, bending to kiss me before he left.

“See ya later, Claire!” Nathan said, waving as they walked down the street.

I watched their figures fade as they strolled farther down the street and found myself swinging my legs under the park bench as Nathan had only moments ago. I turned my cone as I finished eating the last few bites and let my mind wander, foolish enough to imagine how Mac might propose someday.

“Nice night, isn’t it?”

I took a breath hearing him and turned just as Charlie helped himself to the seat beside me.

“What are you doing here, Charlie?” I said, raising a brow in annoyance.

“I live a few blocks from here. Just went out for a walk. I can only watch so much TV, I guess.” He leaned back on the bench, stretched his legs, and crossed them.

“How lovely,” I said, looking away and crossing my arms. Where the hell was Sam?

“Lot of free time these days, with the divorce and all,” Charlie said, his voice trailing, sounding small and wounded.

“Divorce?” I wiped my mouth with a napkin as I turned to him, hating myself for indulging him with conversation.

“It’s for the best, I guess.” He rubbed his palms on his jeans, letting out a soft chuckle at nothing. “Look, Claire, I—”

“Charlie, please, don’t,” I said, my eyes begging him to not put us through this – put *me* through this. “Just save your breath.”

“I feel like I’m an addict or something. Coming clean, you know.”

“I remember the last time you came clean to me, and here we are because of it.” I let out a breath, leaned back, and let myself relax into the moment a little. I knew I was flirting with danger by letting my guard down enough to get comfortable with Charlie.

“I spend a lot of time saying sorry these days, to Monica, friends I deserted...to you...” He twisted on the bench, facing me square and reaching for my hands but stopped himself. “I am sorry, Claire. There’s so many things I wish I could go back and change. Maybe things wouldn’t be like this—”

“But they *are* like this, Charlie. We’re not together anymore, because of you. And I’m happy now. I wish you could just be happy for me and leave it at—”

“I can’t, Claire.” He rubbed his temples and roughly ran a hand through his hair. “Maybe it makes me selfish or something, but I can’t be happy seeing you with another guy!”

“You are selfish. That’s why you left me, and that’s why you want me back now. You’re a selfish man.”

He pulled on a patch of his hair, groaning as he buried his forehead in his palms. “But I know I could be good to you now. I could. I could be the guy I should have been—”

I shook my head. “No, Charlie. You should have been that guy when you had me.”

“I, I could go with you to the flea markets like you like. We could take walks on Saturdays—”

“No, Charlie—”

“And go to Sunday dinner.” He chuckled to himself, and then he looked up and smiled. “You know, it’s stupid, but I miss those damn dinners. Arguing with your dad; fighting with Mark about money. I really miss all that.”

“They don’t miss you,” I laughed.

“But do you? Do you miss me?” He looked down at my balled up fists, careful as he slipped his hands around them and rubbed them to relaxation.

I looked down at our intertwined hands, at how comfortable it used to feel and how secure I felt with his hands around mine.

“I don’t know, Charlie. How can I answer that—”

“You didn’t say no!”

“That’s not what I mean, Charlie,” I snapped, shaking my hands free from his.

“You didn’t say no. That means I have a chance, God bless it.” He raised my hands to his lips for a quick kiss. “Somewhere in there, I’ve got a chance to get you back!”

“No, Charlie, that’s not what I meant. Stop it, please!” I covered my head with my hands.

“Please, Claire. I can be a good man to you, be a good husband again.” He crouched to his knee, taking my hand inside his as he begged. “I know you still love me. I can see it. You try to hide it, but I can see it in there. We’re meant to be together. I know you love me.”

“It’s not like that. Don’t put words into my mouth.” I covered my watery eyes with a hand. *Damn you, Sam, for being late again.*

“Then look me in the eyes and tell me. Tell me you don’t still love me,” he challenged me, grinning as he begged, and waited with my sweaty hands inside his.

I took a few shaky breaths. It should be easy, saying I didn’t love him. I was over him, right? I had my own home, a thriving business, a man who loved me to the core – even all the stuff that drove me nuts about myself, he thought was cute. How could I still hold some sliver of love for this man before me, this man who thought nothing of my love?

It was those damn chocolate, pleading eyes. A tear rolled down my cheek. I shook my head but couldn’t manage to mutter a word.

“You can’t do it, can you?” he whispered.

I bit my quivering lip, more tears tracing trails down my face.

“I love you, Claire. I always have and always will.”

I shook my head again. I had to resist him.

“And you love me too, don’t you?” he whispered, bending his head to catch my tear filled stare.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sam yelled at the sight of me sobbing and Charlie on his knees before me. “Get your damn hands off her, you son of a bitch!” she screamed, prying his hands off mine and shoving him with her foot. She bent and wiped the tears off one of my cheeks. “What did you do to her?” She seeped hate into his eyes, but he never looked up at her. He sat back on the concrete where he fell from her push, watching me intently with a hint of a smile on his lips.

I stood with Sam’s help, trying to not sob. I braced myself on her and tried to walk away.

“You still do, Claire, and I’ll be waiting for you until you want to say it,” Charlie said, brushing his hands off on his jeans as he stood.

I looked back at him over my shoulder but couldn’t say a word.

“You shut the hell up! You hear me? Not another damn word to her, or, so help me God, I will end you!” Sam screamed, breaking away from me to pound a fist into his shoulder.

Charlie flinched and rubbed his shoulder as he backed away, still grinning at me.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sam said to me, out of ear shot from Charlie.

I took one last glance over my shoulder, in time to see Charlie mouth “I love you.”

Twenty-eight

Sam said I was an idiot. I would be lying if I disagreed with her. Charlie's cheating and divorcing me for a woman I thought was my friend was bad. No matter which way you tilted the picture it was ugly. Even leaving out his apparent troubled marriage, considering letting him in my life in any fashion was idiotic, by all definitions.

After Sam declared my idiocy, I consulted Holly for advice. She was the one I deemed my sensible sister. She too said I was an idiot.

I was about to enter unnatural territory. Not that seeking advice from Mom was something I hadn't done before, feared, or loathed, but with such phenomenal sisters... Sorry, Mom, but you come in last place for love advice.

"Oh, hi, baby!" Mom smiled as she greeted me, surprised by my random visit.

"Hey, Mom. What are you up to today?"

"Oh, honey, what's the matter?" she said, seeing right through my forced casual tone and spotting the "please, Mom, help me!" tone I tried to hide.

"You have time for some coffee?"

"Sure do. Nothing I have to do today can't wait until tomorrow." She wrapped a warm arm around my shoulder and guided me to the kitchen.

Sitting at the round, wooden table in the tiny kitchen brought the sense of comfort no other kitchen could hold. Sure, with its 1970

décor and lack of modern niceties like a dishwasher it was left something less than desirable, but the tiny, outdated kitchen would always whisper home.

I turned the coffee mug between my palms, watching the black, liquid heaven spin around inside the tan porcelain. Mom sat quiet, letting me ponder and gather my thoughts, always the patient mother she was.

“I ran into Charlie,” I managed.

“Again?” she said with her mug to her lips.

“The other night when I was waiting for Sam in the park, he was going for a walk.” I raised my eyes to hers, surprised at the calmness of her emerald stare. “I think he wants me back, Mom, to get back together.”

“Hmm,” she said, lowering her cup to the table. She rubbed her hand, staring at the scrunched, aged skin. “Well,” she sighed and looked back up at me. “There’s a lot I could say about it, honey, so where are you at with it?”

Thank God she didn’t flat out say I was an idiot.

“I don’t know. I guess that’s kind of why I’m here,” I said through a shaky chuckle.

Mom refilled my coffee and adjusted her apron as she sat back down at the table. “Honey, I could sit here and tell you he’s not worth a lick of your time, which...” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I don’t think he is.” She sat straight again. “Or, I could be the supportive mother and be happy for whichever man you choose.”

“I’m an idiot for even thinking there’s a choice to be made.” I looked up at her, hoping for disagreement. She slowly nodded. I rolled my eyes at myself and turned my attention back to my coffee.

“See the thing is, dear, no one, not me, not Daddy, not your sisters, no one can tell you which is the right choice for you.”

I bit my lip. I loved how, no matter how unhelpful her advice was, it could never sound so full of love from anyone as it did rolling off my mother’s lips. I laid my hand atop hers on the table, bending my lips to a pathetic grin, and squeezed her hand in thanks.

“Because it’s *my* life, *my* choice. I get it.”

“Now that’s not to say we can’t all have opinions about it.” She began to laugh. “And we’re all happy to give them! But we can’t decide what’s right for your life anymore than you can decide what’s right for mine, or Sam’s, or anyone’s.”

“Sam said I was an idiot.”

“Well, she’s my blunt one,” Mom laughed.

“Holly did too.”

“She’s my smart one.” Mom winked at me, and I swatted her hand.

“Ugh, I see how it is!” I said as I laughed. It felt good being here, being able to breathe and think. I took a deep breath and settled back into my thoughts.

“You think he could ever change?” I said, raising my eyes to hers.

Mom shrugged. “Only if he wants to. So, I guess the question is, do you think *he* wants to change?”

Charlie had never been known to change. For most of our relationship, he feared it. He seemed to thrive on routine, schedules, and monotony. Except, of course, for the secret affair and sudden urge for martial freedom from me. I wondered if he was the same way with Monica.

I shrugged. “Better question is, do I want to lose Mac to find out? Because I can’t keep them both.”

Mom nodded as she sipped her coffee.

“I am an idiot for considering this, aren’t I?”

Mom sensed my need for the question to be rhetorical, and she crossed her arms lightly on her chest and leaned back a little.

“Nothing would be different, would it?” I said to no one.

Mom let out a breath, reached across the table, and rubbed the top of my hand.

“I don’t think so, baby, but it’s up to you to decide if you want to try anyway.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

I didn’t tell Mac about my latest encounter with Charlie, yet as I sat and listened to the rings leading me into voicemail again, guilt overwhelmed me. As if Mac was a clairvoyant and would somehow know that I had seen Charlie, and was contemplating giving him another chance. Or that I questioned who I *really* loved. Thank God I had an afternoon presentation to distract me.

Hours after my flopped presentation, Mac finally returned my calls and asked to meet me for dinner. He was short. Almost curt.

The hours dragged on, and I wasn't sure if I should be grateful for that or not.

I tried to sound light, relaxed, and normal. "You were busy today, huh?" I said as I stabbed a forkful of salad. "I was too, that presentation I was telling you about. I think I killed my chances with them," I said, hoping my tone didn't sound as bogus as I thought it did.

Mac twirled a spoon in his soup.

I cleared my throat. "I guess I wasn't as prepared as I should have been. I don't think I've said 'umm' that many times in a speech since my freshman year in debate class!"

"I had a weird lunch meeting today," he said, finally raising his gaze from the soup.

"Yeah?" I said, smiling as I heaped another bite into my mouth.

"I had to take the rest of the day off, to kind of sort through it all."

A heaviness draped over him, pulling down his toned shoulders and making him sink into the seat. I set my fork down, giving him my full attention.

"I had lunch with Charlie today," he said.

I swallowed hard. My ponytail suddenly felt too tight, pulling on my scalp as a throbbing headache squeezed my head. "What did he want?" I didn't really want to know.

Mac leaned back as he let out a breath and ran his fingers through his brown, textured hair. "He wants you."

I didn't think I could handle the answer, but I had to ask. "What do you mean?"

Mac rolled his head from side to side, trying to ease the tension out of his neck before he spoke. "He told me, basically, that he knows you guys belong together."

I rolled my eyes. I'm not sure why.

"He asked me to be the bigger man and step aside."

"He what?"

"And said that you still love him."

I wasn't sure how to react. Appalled, surprised, guilty? I took in a deep breath, now nauseated, and pushed my salad away from me. Mac locked his wounded eyes on mine. I braced myself for what I knew he was about to ask me.

"Do you still love him?"

There it was, like a dagger to my heart, the question I had no idea how to answer. If there was an answer?

“Do you still love Tracey?”

Mac shrugged and raised a corner of his lip. “I don’t know. I guess, sort of. Not *in love* with her.”

“Do you think I hold that against you?” I didn’t even know what I was saying, where I was going with it, or where it might lead us. The only thing I knew to do at that moment was just let the words go as they came to me. Whatever they may be.

“No, I guess not,” he said.

“Well, see, why can’t it be the same for me?” Was I really getting defensive? Justifying myself? My unbridled thoughts disgusted me.

“But it’s not like Tracey is begging me to come back to her. She’s not meeting you for lunch asking you to leave me alone so we can be together again.”

I bit my lip and nodded. The waiter returned with our entrees, salmon for me and a bourbon burger for Mac. I wasn’t sure if it was the smell of the salmon or because my relationship with Mac was on the line, but my stomach rolled so hard and fast I held a hand against it.

“Look.” Mac took my hand in his as he leaned over his plate. “If you still love him like that, I don’t care. I don’t care if you always love him a little like that. You were married and spent a lot of years with him. I won’t, and never would, hold that against you.”

My eyes watered as he spoke, the waves in my belly growing fierce and the burning in my heart forcing me to crumble.

“But, babe, I don’t want to lose you. We’re good together, don’t you think? I thought what we have going is good.” He pressed his lips together, his eyes growing wetter than mine. “Is this what you want, you and me? Or do you want Charlie?”

The question hung in the air like an invisible barrier between us. I loved Mac. I loved Charlie. The problem was, clearly, who was I in love with?

“We can’t leave this hanging between us.”

My welled up eyes let loose a stream of tears, and I rubbed my thumbs over his hands holding mine, my answer tearing up my insides as I looked into his eyes.

“I need some time,” I said.

Twenty-nine

“This is just ridiculous. I can’t support this, like, at all,” Sam said, tightening her arms on her chest.

“I’m sorry, Claire. I have to agree with her on this one,” Holl said, brushing a hand across my shoulder as she sat down.

I fastened the zipper on my skirt, twisting to inspect my outfit since it was clear I would get no help from them. But I couldn’t blame them. They stood by me as I struggled to piece my life together after Charlie left me, and now I was about to go on a date with him. It felt like I spat on their love.

“I know,” I said to them as I turned to face them.

“I mean, if you don’t know if you want to keep dating Mac, I get that,” Holl said and shook her head. “But Charlie isn’t the answer, Claire. You know that.”

I nodded, but I didn’t know that. Maybe all of this crap over the last two years was for us both to see we belonged together. Or maybe I was wasting good lip gloss on a jerk.

“I cannot believe you’re doing this,” Sam snapped. She had a mean glare. She always had a mean glare that penetrated every part of you. “I’ve done some stupid shit in my time, but damn, *this* is dumb, Claire.”

“Look, I don’t expect you guys to support this. I just need you guys here for me at the end of it all.” I sighed and plopped down on

the bed beside them. “Whether it’s a broken heart by Mac’s hand or Charlie’s. I just need you to be there for me when I screw everything up.”

Holly put a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll always be here for you, but we can’t always support your decisions.”

I nodded. “I know.” I stood up, took a quick glimpse in the full length mirror, and turned to face them again. “Well, I guess I’m ready.”

Sam rolled her eyes.

Going on a date with your ex-husband must be the pinnacle of uncomfortable. On the drive there, the sweat poured off me. My clothes stuck to my skin as I got out of the car, and now as I scanned the restaurant for him, I prayed I didn’t have a big wet spot on the back of my skirt. When I spotted his smile and wave, I thought my legs would give out. I stumbled for a second and tried to play it off as a heel wobbling on the carpet.

“You get more beautiful every time I see you,” he said, smiling as he held out his arms to me.

The warmth of his arms wrapped around me sent a tingling, shameful shiver through me. I betrayed Mac’s trust by asking to do this. I betrayed my own by letting Charlie get to me.

“Thank you,” I said as I took my seat. “Well...” I pressed my lips together and looked around with unease as I lay the napkin on my lap.

“It’s a little strange, I guess, you and me like this, huh?” Charlie chuckled. He reached across the table and took my hand in his.

I jerked. “Sorry,” I said. I tried to breathe and lay my hand back inside his.

“It’s natural, I guess.”

He smiled, the smile that always melted me into a brainless twit.

“So...how’s the baby?” I said, trying to ease myself into a smile.

“Good, I guess. Loud,” Charlie said as he chuckled. “Cries a lot. I guess it’s teething or something?”

I grinned and nodded. “Try and let him—is it a him?” I had never asked Charlie about his baby. Normally, I avoided the thought. “Try and let him chew on something frozen. It’s feels good on their gums, they say.”

“Monica handles all that stuff. I’m just along for the ride.” Charlie laughed. I knew I was supposed to laugh with him, but I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not. I tried to imagine Charlie as a doting father, hoping that would calm my tension. But that only brought Mac to mind. How he taught Nathan how to rollerblade, how to use a cordless drill to hang the shelves in my new office, and how he soothed Nathan when he didn’t want to go home on Sundays. I missed him.

“How have you been, Claire? I’ve missed you,” Charlie said, interrupting the flood of memories.

“Good. I have my own office now downtown, did you hear?”

“That’s wonderful. Congratulations!”

“Nothing huge, but it’s a start,” I said with a feeble shrug. “It’s a nice place though, off 7th Street, close to downtown.” Charlie smiled, nodding as I spoke. “It’s right by this little park I love. I go there a lot for lunch with Mac—” I bit my lip. Was it wrong to talk about my boyfriend on a date with my ex-husband? I wondered what Mac was doing.

“It’s okay.” Charlie grinned and squeezed my hands a little tighter. “Mac is a good guy. I can see why you fell for him.”

I tried to smile in appreciation.

“But whatever you guys had, it can’t touch what we have.” He pulled our hands up, kissed my finger, and caressed them against his cheek. I had forgotten how much I loved it when he did that.

“And what, exactly, is it we have, Charlie?” I wasn’t sure if that came out playful or bitchy.

“A connection.” He kissed the top of my hand. “A connection nothing else can compare to.”

I let myself smile being caught in his gaze. God, he could make me swoon with just one glance.

“Let’s toast,” he said, grinning as he raised a glass. “To new begin—”

I pressed my finger to his lips as I laughed. “Oh, no you don’t. Not that one.”

Charlie chuckled and removed my hand from his mouth. “All right then,” he said as he raised his glass a little higher. “To true love.”

We clicked our glasses together, but the toast left me more confused than I was before. True love. Was I trapped in it with two men? Was that even possible? I guessed I was about to find out.

“I ordered for us,” Charlie said as I came back from the restroom.

I frowned, and he shrugged it off with a wave of his hand. “I figured we’d just get the usual.”

It disturbed me. Mac and I loved adventurous dinners, both of us trying something new at every new restaurant we tried. And as I attempted to relax through our date tonight, I was quite excited about deciding what new dish to try. My heart sank, taking my breath with it. I wasn’t with Mac. I was with Captain Routine.

I equated it to like being on a date with your cousin; awkward, unnerving, and endless. As I took note of all of Charlie’s habits, the ones that drove me insane and the ones I never noticed until we were divorced, nothing seemed to have changed. Or maybe I changed? Either way I tried to flip it, I couldn’t see staying with Charlie making sense. And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to leave.

“Charlie, after dinner what do you say we go down to the pier?” I said with a smile, my eyes wide with excitement. I could stand there for hours with Mac, taking in the calmness of an evening shoreline.

“What for? Won’t be any boats out there.”

I rested my elbow on the table, putting my chin in my palm. “Well, it’s so quiet this time of night, so peaceful, don’t you think?”

Charlie half-cringed as he shrugged. “I was thinking, well...” He set his fork down as he traced a line down my arm with his fingers. “Well, maybe we could go back to my place?”

I jolted back. At least, I think I did. Charlie’s sweet grin morphed into this ugly, twisted nightmare of some detestable creature. I blinked a few times, trying to bring my sweet Charlie’s face back to normal. But this hideous, selfish jerk remained.

“Charlie,” I said, gently brushing his hand off. I painted my face with a sweet, simple smile and took his hands inside mine. “What do you think we have here? I mean, what do you think will happen if we get back together?”

He seemed taken aback by my question, leaning away a little as he raised an eyebrow.

“See, how I figure it is that I’m about to throw a good relationship—with Mac—to the side. Well, a girl is entitled to know what she’s getting into.” I flashed another quick grin.

“Well, I, uh,” he said, reaching to rub the back of his neck. “I’m not quite sure what you mean, sweetie.”

His calling me *sweetie* felt like a cheese grater on my skin, and I wanted to curl up in a cringe.

“Like, how do you think things will be different?” I added.

“Well...” He leaned back, slinking down into the seat and drummed his fingers on the table.

Had he expected blind acceptance? I supposed that’s what I had given him our entire marriage, so it would be reasonable to guess that I would offer that to him again. I cocked my head, trying for a polite smile as I waited for a response.

“I’d treat you better, like the loving wife you always were, like, uh...” He ran a hand through his hair down to his neck. “You know, like I should have before.”

I smiled wider. “Yes, but *how*?”

He took a deep breath. “Well, better, I guess.”

“Yes, but how? Give me an example.”

“I wasn’t expecting to work out all the details right away,” he said through a chuckle. “I thought we could, you know, just slip back into it.”

“Well, for example, say it’s Saturday morning,” I said as I wrapped my arms around myself, “we’ve just woken up from sleeping in, and it’s a glorious day outside. What are we going to do for the day?”

Charlie tilted his head up as he thought, and I could almost hear everything that whipped through his mind. In the first place, my Charlie would not have wanted to sleep in. He hated when I slept in on the weekends, and said I was wasting my day. And he would want his morning coffee on the patio, alone, to clear his head. Then he would probably do the crossword puzzle in the paper and tinker in the garage for the remainder of the day. We’d end the day with pizza for dinner, because that’s what you do on Saturdays.

“Sleep in?” he said.

My expression went flat and lifeless as I stared at him. I had made a horrible mistake coming here.

“Well.” He scratched his head. “I suppose we could go for a walk to pick up the paper?” he offered.

Ahh, dear Charlie, so nice to see you haven’t changed a lick. I patted his hand, letting my eyes lock with his gorgeous puppy-dog stare. “Just for kicks, let me tell you how I think it’s going to go.” I

took a big swig of my wine and bit my lip as I scooted closer to him. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder. It felt good. Damn good. “See, this is what I think...”

“I don’t think I even want to ask,” Sam said as she threw her purse onto my table and slouched into a chair. “How did it go?” She rolled her eyes as she asked.

I settled in the seat across from her. I let out a breath trying to take it all in. “Not how I expected.”

“So, like, good or bad? God, I can’t believe I even care!” Sam threw her hands up.

“Of course you care. I’m living a soap opera, and you live for that crap.”

“It’s true. You have made your life a hot mess with this Charlie shit.” Sam nodded and scooped up a handful of Ruffles.

“Sam, he looked so good,” I said through a breath, closing my eyes as I remembered his tight pecks underneath his blue Polo. “I mean, *really* good.”

“Like delicious good or just cute good?” she said through a mouthful.

“Definitely delicious!” I let out a satisfied breath like after a night of passionate sex. “I don’t think he ever looked that good when we were married.”

“Guess being divorced suits him better,” Sam said with a sneer.

I snickered at her. “Anyway...” I said with exaggerated annoyance. “So, he looked delicious—”

“We covered that already.”

“I’m getting to the point. Simmer down.”

“Well, hurry up and get there then. I have a date tonight.”

“When don’t you have a date?”

“The point...” she urged with wide eyes.

“All right, jeesh!” I shook my head at her. “So we’re eating dinner, and man, it’s so uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, I bet. Eating with a loser—”

“Sam!”

“Just saying!” Sam held her hands up in defense.

“So I spent half the dinner trying to figure out if it really was uncomfortable, like, me and Charlie shouldn’t be together kind of uncomfortable—”

“Duh,” Sam muttered.

“Or,” I continued. “If I just need to get used to being with him again.”

Sam licked the grease and salt from her fingertips and closed the bag of chips. “I’m sorry, but it’s going to be really hard for me when you start bringing him around again. Like, really hard, know what I mean?” She crossed her arms on her chest and shook her head. “I mean, God, Claire, I really thought you loved Mac, and here you go,” she threw her arms up, “throwing it away for that asshole.”

“Are you going to let me finish my story?”

“I’m sorry, I really am, Claire Bear, but no, I can’t.” Sam stood and pulled her purse over her shoulder. “Just, just tell me so I can brace myself to see him at Sunday dinner. You guys are back together, aren’t you?” She took a deep, painful breath and stood stiff waiting for my reply. I knew she was bracing herself for my failure, my spinelessness when it came to Charlie’s charm and for me to tell her he was, once again, my Charlie.

I let out a deep breath and winced. “Well...”

Thirty

I wasn't sure how to take it when Mac wouldn't return my calls. I wanted to be angry, but I didn't have that right. *I* was angry with me. How I could expect him not to be as well? What kind of woman tells her wonderful, loving, doting boyfriend that she wants to date her ex-husband? The whole ordeal revolted me as I drove to his apartment. Whether he wanted to face me or not, I had to lay it out before us. So everyone could move on, a fresh start.

I held the railing as I climbed the stairs to his apartment, my sweaty palm sliding up it with every step. I stood in front of his door, staring at it and watching it grow before me like something out of *Alice In Wonderland*. I took a few breaths and knocked my jittery hand against the solid wood.

Mac whipped open the door, startled to see me standing there.

"Hi," I muttered.

Mac nodded hello.

"I've been trying to call you." I ran the hem of my sweatshirt between my fingers and twisted it around my index finger as I stood in agonizing silence. "Did you get my messages?"

"Yeah," Mac said, squeezing the edge of the door in his hand.

"Oh..." I looked down at my feet. I tried to practice what I wanted to say to him, but no matter what speech I spouted in front

of my mirror, it came out all wrong. “Well, I was hoping we could talk.”

“You said that in the messages.”

His harsh tone and firm stance would be easy to see as the attitude of an angry, jilted man. But as I locked my eyes on his, the hurt and betrayal laid itself before me. I wanted to touch him, to soothe the pain I caused.

“Why didn’t you call me back?” As if I deserved an answer.

“I’ve been busy. Christmas shopping and all that...” He shuffled a foot on the floor.

“Oh, yeah, shopping...” I ached to take his hand off the doorframe, to cup it inside mine, and pray I could still feel the love in his grasp. “Look, I won’t keep you—” I cleared my throat, begging the gods from everywhere for strength. “I was hoping you would come by for dinner, so we could talk.”

“We’re talking now, aren’t we? Say what you need to say.”

I closed my eyes at the sting in his tone. “Please, I have something I need to say to you.” I shook my head as I continued, “But not like this. Please?” I raised my eyes to his, begging them to hold back the tears until I reached the seclusion of my car. “I’ll make lasagna.” I tried to smile, hoping his favorite meal would entice him. Perhaps standing there naked would have broken through his barrier better.

He sighed, scratched the side of his neck, and motioned at nothing. “All right, I guess. What time?”

“Would seven o’clock work?”

“Sure, I guess.”

I grew so nervous thinking about what I was going to say to Mac that I fumbled everything I touched. I dropped the casserole dish on the floor, ripped my skirt pulling the zipper too hard, and smacked my head on the counter when I bent to pick up the curling iron I dropped. What a mess I was.

I hoped I could make it through everything I had to say to Mac. I hoped he would let me finish. I envisioned him stomping through the house, berating me with obscenities, and refusing to let me get a single word in. All of which I deserved. I could only pray the man that loved me was still in there and would let me finish what I needed to say.

I pulled my hair halfway up with soft curls, like I wore it the night he said he loved me. I spent two hours rummaging through my clothes and anything my sisters would let me get my dirty hands on, but I didn't think it mattered. I couldn't remember what Charlie wore the night he left me, only the look on his face. I didn't think Mac would notice what I wore. He would only remember the look on my face when I asked him to let me see Charlie.

I zipped up my khaki capris as I sprinted for the door when he knocked.

"Hi," I said, scooting to the side so he could step in.

"Hey." He stood a few feet back from me, his stare shifting around at the floor.

I took a step forward, hesitated, and then moved forward again to quickly tip up and peck his cheek. I heard him take in a breath as my lips touched his skin.

"Dinner smells good," he said, trying to soften his tone.

"Thanks. I know it's your favorite." I smiled and lead him to the dining room where the steaming lasagna waited for us. I cut out some pieces and set them on the plates, but I didn't have the stomach for eating. Neither did Mac, looking at his barely touched food.

Mac set his fork down and raised his head to face me. "I'm not really sure what to expect here, Claire. What do you want to say? Last we talked, you asked me if you could go on a date with your ex-husband."

It hurt, hearing the truth. I hung my head. "I know. That's what I want to talk about."

Before he could restrain it, he took in a deep, shaky breath. He stiffened, nodding at nothing. "I'm ready," he said as he stared at the tablecloth.

I scooted my chair closer to his, ran my hand from his shoulder down to his hand, and slipped my fingers around his. He raised his stare to me, still distant, still keeping me at bay.

The memory of any of my silly speeches eluded me. "See the thing is, Charlie and I spent a lot of years together. Being with him is all I really knew, I guess." I traced my finger over the veins in his hand, trying to sort through the muddled mess of my thoughts.

"It took me a while after he left, but I started figuring out who I was without him. I lost myself in him, you know, in us."

Mac nudged the fork on his plate, lost in his own thoughts or just plain shutting me out. I couldn't tell.

"Then we ran into each other, and everything seemed to fit," I said as I started to smile. "It was good, *we* were good, and I liked it."

Mac said through a breath, "Yeah, we were."

"We really were, and Nathan too—" I touched my finger underneath his chin to turn his gaze toward me.

"And then you saw Charlie again." He pulled his head away from my hand.

It stung, seeing the damage I had done. "I don't know if I was confused, scared, or if it was because I spent a lot of my life loving him." I started to shrug as I pressed my lips together. "I wish I had a good reason for you, Mac. Something that made sense, to anyone. Hell, it doesn't make sense to me." I threw my hands up. Then I bent my head, hoping he would return my gaze. "Just saying sorry doesn't cut it, I know. I treated you badly." I hung my head, focusing my gaze on my strappy heels. "I guess, well..." I scratched above my eyebrow. "Well, I was selfish. Indulging myself in this stupid fantasy I was still clinging to. That somehow in this godforsaken mess of my life, Charlie and me still made sense, and we—we belonged together."

Mac watched me as I spoke, his long, filled frame slumping lower with each word passing my lips. As if he shriveled up before me, lifeless – heartbroken by my doing.

"But then I'm sitting there with him during dinner." I took a gulp of wine. It was now or never. I had to get it all out between us and hope that he still saw something in me worth loving.

"I felt guilty and rotten, sitting there with him, because I was thinking about *you*. And I kept trying to figure out what the hell I was even doing sitting there!" I shook my head at myself as I chuckled. "You know, I spent almost two years trying to figure out what went wrong with me and Charlie. And I thought everyone's advice was full of crap."

Mac raised his head, turning toward me slightly. My heart leapt at the chance that he might open himself up to me again. I inched closer until our knees touched, and I could put a hand on his leg. I slowly lay my other hand over his on the table.

"But I'm sitting there with him, feeling all awkward and uncomfortable. Like a traitor, really. And it hits me," I said, smacking a palm on my forehead. "All this time, I was trying to figure out how

to get him to love me again, but the truth is...we're just not good together. Everyone was right."

Hopeful, I scooted closer. "I was sitting there, and I knew, every inch of me knew. I was sitting there with the wrong man. You and me." I raised our clasped hands to my chest, my heart pounding harder as I spoke. "We're good together, this, us," I said as I motioned to our sitting together. "This is good. It's great." I inched even closer to him, almost falling off the edge of my chair. "Mac, I love you. You're the guy for me."

I tried to breathe, waiting as I watched his void trance. My heartbeat thudded faster, and my lips tried to bend to a smile. The silence and the blank stare draped over his face was agony. I knew it. This was the part where he told me to piss off. I told him I loved him and then asked to date another man. I had betrayed him. Maybe he would stand, and in a fit of rage, he would use every curse word in the dictionary on me. I wouldn't like it, but I couldn't say I deserved better than that.

Mac cleared his throat and scratched his jaw. "Claire, babe..."

There it was, *babe*. I clung to the smidgen of hope I hadn't ruined us.

"How do I know this won't happen again?" he said through a breath, leaning back and running a hand across his forehead. "How do I know in two, or five, or fifteen years you won't see him, and some part of you will want to be with him? I love you. Claire I do, but—"

I ached from my scalp to the tips of my toes, radiating out from my heart everything in me hurt. I thought for a moment I collapsed, passed out, died of a heart attack. Everything went black. For just a moment, I felt no life in me.

"Claire?" Mac cocked his head, yanking me back to life.

"Mac, honey, please," I scooted forward, my watery eyes locked on his, and squeezed his hands in mine. "I screw up, a lot. I don't know if that's just what I'm really good at in life or what." Tears rolled down my cheeks as I started to plead. I couldn't lose him. Not for a man I would never let love me again.

"But I do. I mess up. I say stupid things. I guess I'm a little selfish. I make bad decisions." I bit my lip, the tears coming faster than I could hold them back. "I, I mess up. A lot." Hesitant, I reached for his hand. "But, I do learn. Through my mistakes, I learn, and, little by little, I get better and make less mistakes."

Mac wiped a tear from my eye, and I reached up and pressed his hand to my cheek. “I made a *huge* mistake,” I said as I attempted to grin. “I mean, huge!” I held my arms out wide, happy to see a hint of a grin on his face.

“Just, just, shhh,” he said, pressing a hand to my lips. “Just shut up, will you?”

I had lost the battle. I knew it. He didn’t see through my pleading and didn’t believe that, with every ounce of my being, I knew he was the man for me. My lips started to quiver.

“I already know that.” He reached behind him, tossing me the box of tissues from the buffet table. “You know, you really suck at apologies,” he said, grinning at me as he wiped a smudge of mascara from my face.

I chuckled, still crying as I smiled. “See? I mess those up too.”

“Would you shut up now, so I can say something?”

He smiled at me, but I knew better. If Charlie could take me out to dinner and tell me he wanted a divorce as easily as asking me to pass the salt, well, Mac could definitely dump me with a smile on.

Thirty-one

“So you told him you’re a disaster?” Sam said in a low voice, hunched toward me to not catch the attention of everyone at the dinner table.

“Well, something like that,” I said.

“So, what did he say?” She leaned closer, watching me with wide eyes.

“He told me to shut up, basically, so he could talk.”

Sam inhaled deeply, her eyes growing wider and ready to rip into Mac.

“So honey, how are...things?” Mom said over the chatter of Sunday dinner.

Sam let out an annoyed breath. “Hang on, Mom. We’re talking here.”

I held a hand up to halt Sam. “It’s okay,” I whispered.

“No, it’s not. What happened—”

“Things are ok Mom,” I said with a smile.

Mom warmed with a hesitant grin. “Should we be expecting Mac today?”

“Speaking of,” Daddy interrupted. “I’ve got a problem with those parts he ordered for the mower. Damn things don’t have any directions.”

“Yeah, Mom. He’s running a little late, but he should be here soon,” I said, smiling as I looked at Sam from the corner of my eye.

She beamed and smacked me on the leg. “You bitch! Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Hey, language!” Mom snapped as she motioned to Seth and Anna sitting beside her.

“I was getting to that part,” I said to Sam, rubbing my throbbing arm.

“*Getting* to that? You should’ve *started* with that!”

“I like a good lead up to a story,” I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

“Bitch,” Sam mouthed as she chuckled.

“Can I come by the house later? I need to get my drill,” Mac said, pulling me into his arms as we stood on my parents’ driveway.

“Absolutely, but only if you stay for a little bit.”

Mac cringed. “I can’t, really. I have laundry to do before tomorrow. Unless you want me to go to work naked?”

I raised an intrigued eyebrow. “That could make for an interesting Monday morning.”

“Egh, public nudity really isn’t my thing. I went streaking once in college, but I was pretty drunk.”

“Can you stay long enough for me to show you something?” I asked, pulling him closer. Charlie’s arms never felt as secure to me as Mac’s did. I wanted to stay wrapped up in them forever.

“Sure, what is it?”

“Well, I’m not really good at descriptions. And it’s not really for you anyway.” I wiggled my jaw. “Well, it sort of is.”

“I can’t find it,” Mac hollered from my garage. “What shelf?”

“Not the shelf, the hutch,” I replied as I finished wiping down the kitchen counter.

“Got it,” he said as he walked in and set the drill on the counter. “Now, what did you want to show me?”

I clapped my hands, bouncing a little as I stepped toward him to grab his hand. I smiled wide. “I hope you like it.” I started pulling him toward the spare bedroom, talking to him over my shoulder as

we walked. “I finished it the other day. It took me longer than I planned because of...” My voice trailed as my head hung a bit. “The Charlie situation. But it’s finished. I’m really excited to show you. It’s two things, actually,” I said. I stopped in front of the closed spare room and turned to face him.

“What do you think?” I said as I opened the bedroom door.

Mac stepped in, taking in the entire room.

“I couldn’t decide on the decals,” I said as I bit my fingernail and pointed. “But I think Nathan will like those, don’t you?” I pointed to the various sized baseball decals I placed on the walls.

Mac took a few steps, not speaking as he ran his hand along the top of a small bookcase.

I took a step toward him. “I refinished that.” I traced my hand along the freshly painted, cobalt blue bookcase. “He said he liked blue, like the Detroit Tigers logo.” I waited for Mac to speak, to say anything. I wondered if I had crossed the line, if he wasn’t ready for this, if I hadn’t mended his heart enough after I just broke it only weeks ago.

“I, um, I got these and did them too,” I said, my tone starting to sound desperate. I held up old wooden milk crates I painted in the same Tigers blue and orange. “I thought they would be good for his baseball cards, or toys or something.”

Mac glided a fingertip along the length of the baseball team logo on the comforter atop the new twin sized bed for Nathan.

Restless in his silence, I bit my lip. “I, well, I thought—” I scratched my temple as I shuffled a foot. “I thought it would be nice for him on the weekends to have a nice room of his own.”

Mac spun around to face me.

“Maybe it was too presumptuous of me...” Embarrassed by endless assumptions, I turned slightly away from him.

He took a step forward, holding his arms beside him as he slowly spun around and looked at the room. “This is really...” He shook his head as he smiled. “He’s really going to love this.”

My mouth raised to a hesitant smile. “Really? You think so?” I said, grinning as I stepped toward him.

“Absolutely. This is...” He pulled me into his arms. “This is really amazing, Claire.” Mac kissed my forehead.

“Great,” I said, grinning as I bounced away. “Because I have to show you the other half.”

Mac looked at me questioningly.

“I told you there were two things. This is the first one,” I said, winking at him as I pulled him toward my bedroom.

He stepped in the bedroom behind me and held his arms up. “Looks the same to me.”

“It’s very different. A huge change, I assure you,” I said as I rested a hand on my hip.

“I’m a guy. I’m no good at spotting little details. I don’t know.” He shrugged. “A new vase?”

“Nooo,” I teased. I walked to the dresser, pulled out a drawer, and stood back for him to inspect it.

“It’s empty,” he said, looking into the barren drawer and then back to me.

“Exactly, and there’s three more like it.” I stepped toward him and wrapped my hand around his forearm. “There will be closet space too, but that will take a little longer. Lots of dresses and stuff to sort through,” I said with a smile.

Mac grinned and wrapped an arm around my waist. “I’m not good at hints either. You just have to kind of spell it out for me, all nice and obvious.” He laughed as he looked down at the empty drawer.

“Well,” I said, enveloping myself in his arms. “Nathan has a room here, but what good is that if you don’t have any place to put anything? So...” I stretched on my toes and kissed his cheek. “I thought, if you want, to that is, I wanted you to have room for your things too. Should, you know...” I bit my lip. “You want to stay all weekend, or...” I glanced down as I cocked my lip to the side. “Or maybe longer. You know, if you wanted to.” My mouth stretched to a hesitant grin. “There’d be room for your stuff then. If you wanted to...” I bit my lip again, afraid to look up at him.

“My own drawers, huh?” He scratched his jaw.

“Four of them,” I said with a playful nod.

“Four of them, huh?” He looked down at me with a teasing grin.

“And closet space too. Pretty soon anyway.” I returned the grin.

He nodded, looking back down at the drawer. “I guess four can work. I don’t have much stuff.”

My smile perked up, and I stretched again and peppered his cheek with kisses. “So you’ll stay?” I said with an excited nod.

“Thing is,” he said, turning to me and pulling me into his arms, “my lease is up at the complex in a couple months.” He raised an eyebrow. “I was thinking about whether I should renew the lease or, gee, I don’t know, maybe move somewhere else? Someplace with, maybe, four empty drawers. Something like that. What do you think?”

“Somewhere else, definitely,” I said as I laughed and pulled him into a hard kiss.

Six months later, Mac moved in, and I couldn’t imagine my cramped home being any happier. I never thought the transition from dating to living together could be so seamless. I accepted his snoring in my ear every night, and he accepted my squeezing the toothpaste from the top instead of the bottom. And Nathan loved his room.

We sat on the back patio, watching Nathan roll on the grass with the new Labrador puppy we bought him for his birthday.

“A puppy,” I said through a chuckle as I shook my head. “How did I let you talk me into that?”

“What? Every boy needs a dog buddy.” He laughed. “Besides, spring is a great time to housetrain.”

I playfully swatted his arm. “There’s never a good time for cleaning up puppy poop.”

“I got you something the other day,” he said between sips of coffee as he watched Nathan.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Took me a long time to find it.” He smiled at me from behind the mug pressed to his lips.

“Oh, really now? Now I’m interested!”

“It’s a surprise though, so you have to close your eyes.”

I let a playful glare rest on him before I shut my eyes.

“Now, men aren’t very good at guessing sizes, so we might have to exchange it.”

I was worried for a moment, imagining a hideous dress or dreadful shoes. I hoped he wouldn’t be offended if I didn’t like it.

“You can open now,” he said.

I opened my eyes to Mac kneeling before me with a simple, white gold ring tucked inside a velvety box in his shaky hand. The

diamond sparkled perfect shades of pink, yellow, and lavender from the sun's glare.

"This is good, you and me, don't you think?"

I bit my lip as tears welled up in my eyes. I tried to nod, but I couldn't pull my focus off the brilliant ring and the silly grin on his face.

"I, well, I was hoping we could..." He took a deep breath trying to steady himself. "Claire, my Claire, will you marry me?"

I jumped into his arms so hard it knocked him over. "Is that a yes?" he laughed as we fell to the ground.

"Yes! Absolutely, yes!" I squealed, holding out my hand for him.

Mac slid the ringer onto my finger.

"It's perfect," I whispered and drew him in for a kiss.

Darian Wilk

About the Author

I live in ‘the burbs’ in the Detroit Michigan area with my husband and two children. When not writing, I enjoy playing Rock band with my friends, reading, doing book reviews on my blog, crafts, and watching the UFC. I’m an all around dork and wouldn’t change a thing about my life.

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