

Reinventing
Claire

by

Darlan Milk

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Reinventing Claire

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my husband I would never have come this far without his continued love and support throughout this journey. To my daughter, for her endless encouragement. My editors, Steve, for his patience and dedication through this project, and Tami, for her tremendous help and friendship.

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 gleam 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, snuffle 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 get 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 bawling 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.

Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed reading this exclusive sample Reinventing Claire. If you would like to continue reading, you can **purchase a copy here**. If you like to be notified of new releases by Darian Wilk, please **click here**.

About the Author

I live in ‘the burbs’ in the Detroit Michigan area with my husband and two children. When not writing, I enjoy spending time with my family and friends, reading, doing book reviews on my blog, crafts, and watching the 1980’s movies that are so terrible – they’re awesome. I’m an all around dork and wouldn’t change a thing about my life.

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