

CHAPTER 4

CLAIRE

It takes nearly half an hour to drive from our house in Castle Pines to Lindsay's apartment building in Denver, during which time Noah and I fail to exchange a single word. He won't even look at me.

The logical part of me is saying that we should call off this trip. Or at least, I should back out. The four-hour drive is bad enough, but now we have to spend an entire *week* together without the buffer of our work and the children? It sounds like hell.

Then again, I have my reasons for wanting to go.

The plan is that we're all going to meet in front of Lindsay's building, because it's a place where everyone can park easily for the week. We're ten minutes early, but Lindsay is already standing outside her building with two huge pieces of luggage—more than I've got. I consider pointing that out to Noah, but I decide not to break our code of silence.

Lindsay waves enthusiastically when she sees the minivan. She looks fantastic. Her blond hair is pulled into a

perfectly messy bun, she's got a pair of Ray-Bans on her nose, and her skinny jeans are tucked into the cutest pair of black hiking boots. I'd like to think I have kept in good shape since college, but of the group of us, Lindsay is the only one who looks *better* than she did in college. It's like her butt gets higher every year.

I glance over at Noah to see if he's giving her a once-over. He isn't. He's still sulking about our conversation.

We pop the trunk for Lindsay to throw her bags inside, then she slides into the middle row, right behind me. We do a quick seat hug, and Noah breaks his silence to say hello. Even though Noah has known Lindsay nearly as long as I have, they don't hug. Noah isn't the kind of guy who goes around hugging people left and right—hugs are reserved for close family only.

"So!" I say. "We finally get to meet Warner! *Very* exciting!"

Lindsay's porcelain skin flushes with happiness. "I can't wait for you to meet him, Claire. He's...well, he's amazing. I really think he's the one."

"Is this the doctor?" Noah asks. He sounds utterly disinterested, but at least he's being polite.

She tucks a loose strand of her ash-blond hair behind her ear. "He's a *surgeon*."

I can see him eyeing her in the rearview mirror. "What kind of surgeon?"

"A plastic surgeon." Before Noah can comment, she quickly adds, "But he doesn't just do boob jobs and face-lifts. He does facial reconstructions. He works *miracles*. You should hear what his patients say about him online." She flops back against the seat. "But he's not full of himself at all. He's really sweet and down-to-earth."

I wink at her. "And cute?"

"So cute!" She giggles. "And you know what the best part is? He's a Scorpio."

Noah lets out a loud snort. "*That's* the best part?"

Noah doesn't believe in horoscopes or zodiac signs or anything that doesn't have rigorous experimental evidence behind it. He's not shy about saying so either. It doesn't bother Lindsay though. According to her, he's a typical Capricorn.

"It's perfect because I'm a Virgo," she explains to him. "Virgo is an earth sign, and we are the pickiest of the earth signs. But water signs, like Scorpio, soften us up and give us an emotional outlet." She regards us solemnly. "It's a very powerful balance."

"I see," he mutters. "So how is it that such an eligible young Scorpio finds himself still single?"

She furrows her brow. "It's sort of a sad story. Warner was with a woman for the last seven years, but a year ago, she...died."

I clasp a hand over my mouth. "Oh, that's terrible."

She nods soberly. "Cancer. It was very hard on him."

"Of course."

"So...we've been taking it kind of slow." She glances out the window. "But things are getting pretty serious now. He was even hinting at looking for rings the other day."

"Wow," I breathe. "That's incredible. I wasn't even sure you wanted to get married."

"I wasn't sure either," she admits. "But Warner is just so amazing. Ever since I met him, it's like I can't imagine ever being with anyone else. But I'm sure you know what that's like."

I suck in a breath. I glance over at Noah, and it's pretty clear he's thinking what I'm thinking.

"Ooh, there he is!" Lindsay squeals.

I snap my head up and follow Lindsay's gaze out the window. She's been telling me about this guy for the last six months, but she's never let me meet him, and she's been pretty stingy with the details. So none of my internet searches turned up anything, and I've been dying to meet the guy.

And now that I've finally seen Warner, well...

Let's just say that this is exactly the sort of guy I would've imagined Lindsay would finally decide to marry.

First of all, he's gorgeous. So gorgeous that I find my jaw dropping open a little bit. Not that Noah isn't a decent-looking guy—my husband can be downright handsome on the rare occasion he puts on a suit and tie. But Warner looks like he could be a movie star. Sun-streaked blond hair, clear blue eyes, bulging muscles visible under his fitted T-shirt. And he has a chin cleft. Lindsay loves chin clefts. She has this theory that every truly good-looking person has a chin cleft.

"Wow," I say aloud.

"I know, right?" Lindsay looks pleased by my approval. "Isn't he hot?"

Noah is rolling his eyes next to me, but even he has to realize how gorgeous Warner is. When I look back at Lindsay, I can see how smitten she is. She's always been the pickiest person I know when it comes to men—she has dropped a lot of perfectly good ones for no discernible reason—but I have to admit, she knew what she was doing when she held out. She really likes this guy.

The other thing I notice about Warner is that he only has one piece of luggage. One small bag. Noah packed pretty light, but this guy wins. All he's got is a single, small

duffel bag that looks like it could only fit maybe a day or two worth of clothing.

Lindsay opens the rear door, and Warner ducks into the van. He flashes a smile that makes him look even more attractive, if that were even possible. He holds out his hand to me—his handshake is warm and firm. If this man were my surgeon, I would feel like I was in very capable hands. He could suck fat out of my love handles any day of the week.

"You must be Claire," Warner says. His voice is a rich baritone that reverberates within the car. "I've heard so much about you."

"All good, I hope!" My voice trembles a bit. I'm oddly nervous.

"Exclusively." He winks at me, which makes me titter like a schoolgirl. He turns his attention to Noah. "Noah, right?"

Noah shakes his outstretched hand with considerably less enthusiasm. "Nice to meet you. You're the one who recommended this inn, weren't you?"

Warner nods energetically. "I've stayed there many times before. You're going to love it. I heard you were interested in going fishing?"

Noah shrugs, even though it's all he could talk about for the last week. "I thought I might give it a try."

"The fishing is great out there. The trout are jumping out of the water. You'll love it."

Lindsay reaches for Warner's hand, and she slides her fingers into his. He grins at her with lust in his eyes. They make a very attractive couple. I pretend not to watch. I certainly don't want to admit the whole thing makes my chest burn with jealousy. Noah and I used to be that way. But that's just a distant memory.

As Lindsay and Warner get all cuddly in the back seat, I stare out the window, wondering where Jack and Michelle are. Michelle is always very prompt, but Jack sometimes makes the two of them late. I glance at the back seat, hoping they arrive before Lindsay and Warner start outright making out. He is stroking her chin, and I'm worried it's not far off.

"So how did the two of you meet again?" I ask loudly.

Lindsay breaks away from Warner, her eyes bright. "Oh, it's a great story! We were at the supermarket. I had just checked out and was carrying two bags of groceries to my car, and wouldn't you know it—the bottom fell out of one of the bags!"

The corner of Warner's lips quirks up. "They always overpack the bags at that supermarket."

She tilts her head affectionately in his direction. "Anyway, he was right behind me and he helped me to get all the groceries to my car." She giggles. "Even though I later found out he was on his way to do surgery and I made him late!"

He throws an arm around her and pulls her close. "It was just a boob job. Not life or death."

Lindsay is positively beaming. She loves a good meet-cute. She has been convinced none of her prior relationships worked out because they didn't have a good story about how they met. Now, finally, she's got her great meet-cute.

For a second, I catch Noah's smirk, but then he quickly looks away. Noah and I don't have a great meet-cute story. We met because he lived down the hall from me junior year of college. We didn't so much meet as we saw each other around a lot over the first half of the year.

He often helped me carry heavy packages up to my room. I guess that's sort of romantic. Usually, after he helped me with my packages, we would chat in my room for a while. One day, he had just carried up a care package from my mother, and after he set the box down on my desk, he rubbed at the back of his neck and flashed me a crooked smile. "You want to grab some dinner?" he asked.

"Thai?" I asked.

"Great!" he said. I only found out later he hates Thai food.

I hadn't been looking for any sort of relationship at the time. I had one serious boyfriend the year before, but it ended abruptly when I caught him cheating on me. We had actually been thinking about getting back together over the summer, but then I found out he drowned tragically when he was away at some summer program, and the whole experience left me shaken and reluctant to get involved again. But Noah and I had a great time at dinner. I always knew he was smart, but I didn't realize how funny he was. And cute. Still, I thought we were just friends. Until he walked me home and he kissed me in front of our dorm.

I remember being surprised at how well he kissed. I had kissed a few boys before, and it was always okay, but with Noah, it was on another level. Until that night, I had thought of him as my somewhat dorky neighbor, so this was an extremely pleasant surprise. And then the way he looked at me when he pulled away... I knew right then that if he asked me out a second time, I would say yes.

I look over at Noah now. When was the last time he kissed me like that? I can't even remember. I'm pretty sure it will never happen again.

A rap on the passenger-side window jolts me out of

my thoughts. Jack and Michelle Alpert are right outside the car, trying to get our attention. Jack is waving wildly. And then he mouths the word "Sorry."

Finally! They're almost ten minutes late.

Noah unlocks the rear door, and Jack wrenches it open. "You're late," Noah snaps at him.

"Good to see you too, buddy," Jack says.

Noah has to get out to help them squeeze their luggage into the back. Noah and Jack usually joke around a lot when they get together, but Noah seems too tense for that now. Like Lindsay and me, Noah and Jack were roommates back in college. It's an opposites-attract sort of situation because the two of them are very different. Noah was the physics nerd, whereas Jack had long hair and played the guitar. When he strummed at that guitar, singing old Beatles songs, my knees got weak. Even now, he's got that rugged look—his hair is still shaggy compared with Noah's and Warner's, and his hands are calloused from manual labor and playing the guitar.

Something I never told Noah is that between the two cute guys who lived next door to me during my junior year, *Jack* was the one I had been hoping would ask me out. And later in the year, at a party where we both had too much to drink, Jack admitted he had wanted to ask me out, but he chickened out and Noah got to me first. As we both sipped our rum and cokes, he grinned and asked if I thought there was any chance I might ever want to switch.

I was slightly drunk, but I still said no. I was not interested in switching. No way. I loved *Noah*. At that point, even though we had been dating only a few months, I was beginning to think he was the man I wanted to spend my life with.

What a mistake.

Michelle slides into the back seat first. Her jet-black hair is pulled into a flawless bun, and she's wearing a crisp, fitted white T-shirt that looks like she ironed it this morning. I don't think I've ever seen her with one hair out of place. She works as a divorce lawyer, and rumor has it she's the best divorce attorney in all of Denver. If Noah and I end up going in that direction, it's going to be a race to see which one of us can retain her services. She's the opposite of Jack in a lot of ways, but they've always seemed happy together.

Maybe it's because they don't have children. According to Jack, Michelle has never been interested in having kids. So they've never had the vicious argument at two in the morning over whose turn it is to get up with the screaming baby. Or fight number 179 over who's changing the poopy diaper.

"Sorry we were late," Michelle crosses her legs as she shoots Jack a look. "I caught this one trying to pack a gun."

"Jack!" Lindsay gasps.

"Jesus Christ." Jack runs a hand through his shaggy dark hair. "I wasn't packing a handgun. It was a rifle. I heard there's a place to go hunting over there."

"That doesn't make it any better, Jack," Michelle says sharply. I feel sorry for him, trying to best her in an argument. It must be impossible.

"Hunting is barbaric," Lindsay sniffs.

Jack makes a face at her. "You eat meat, don't you, Lindsay? How do you think it gets to your plate? Do you think those animals die of natural causes?"

"It's different when you're hunting," Lindsay says.

"Have you ever seen *Bambi*? Remember when the hunter

shot Bambi's mother? Is that what you want, Jack? To be the one who kills Bambi's mother?"

One corner of Jack's lips tugs upward. "Don't be fooled. If a deer had the chance, it would kill you and everyone you care about." Michelle pokes Jack in the ribs and he yelps in pain. "I thought it was something we could do together, Michelle."

"You *know* I've got a ton of work to do during this trip," Michelle sighs. "I'll be lucky if I leave the room except for meals. But even if I didn't, I would *never* go hunting. Ever."

And now everyone is glaring at Jack.

"Look," Jack says, "I didn't bring the gun. I'm not going to kill Bambi's mother. Let's just get going."

"Great idea," Noah says. And once again, he hits the gas so hard that my neck snaps back.

CHAPTER 5

ANONYMOUS

The thing I remember most about my childhood is my mom's car.

It was a green Dodge with a long scratch on the passenger side and a big dent in the front fender. She got it used before I can remember—that car was older than I was. She used to tell me how my dad went with her to the used-car lot and negotiated with the sleazy salesman to get her a good deal. My dad was a salesman too. That's how he knew the tricks. That's also why he traveled so much.

My dad bought a car seat for the back when I was a little kid. He used to make a big deal about strapping me inside. "You all snug and safe back there, sport?" he would ask.

But when my father went away on his trips, my mother would get depressed. She didn't give a shit if I was strapped in snug and safe. When we went out, she said to get in the back and gave me ten seconds to get my seat belt on. If the seat belt wasn't on by then, too damn bad. *You think I have time to wait the rest of the day for you to strap yourself in?*

Mostly, she would take me to the grocery store. She didn't take me to friends' houses, playgrounds, or anywhere fun. Just grocery stores. Or the gas station.

When I was four years old, when my dad was out of town, she took me out in the car. I couldn't get the car seat buckled on my own so I just sat next to it in the back, behind the driver seat. The strap on the seat belt went over my neck and cut into the skin. I knew better than to complain.

When we got to the grocery store, I started to follow her, but she shook her head. "I just need to get a few things," she told me as she hung her big purple purse over her shoulder. "You stay in the car. I don't need you slowing me down."

Then she closed the door to the car with me inside.

She had left me in the car before. Lots of times. But today was hot. Hot enough that everyone on the street was wearing shorts and wifebeaters and fanning themselves as they talked about how damn hot it was.

When my mom was in the car, the air conditioner was going. You could barely feel it in the back, but it was circulating. Unfortunately, after she killed the engine, the temperature in the car started to go up.

At first, it wasn't too bad. Hot, but I didn't mind hot. Then it got hotter. So hot it was hard to breathe. You know why it's hard to breathe when it's hot? Heat causes molecules to disperse, so each breath takes in less oxygen.

I was suffocating.

She said she would be right back. As I waited, it became clear it wasn't going to be a quick grocery trip like she promised. But if I got out of the car, there would be consequences. Bad consequences.

So I sat there, the sweat beading on my forehead. And my eyes drifted shut.

I was jarred awake by pounding on my window. It was a woman about my mother's age. I lifted my head and blinked my bleary eyes. The woman was yelling. "Are you okay? Can you open the door?"

I didn't know what to do. My mom would be angry if I opened the door. But this woman kept pounding on the window. My head hurt. So I unlocked the car, and before I knew it, the woman was wrenching the door open.

Even though it was at least ninety degrees outside, the fresh air felt good. I took a gulp of air.

"Oh my God," the woman was saying as she unbuckled my seat belt and pulled me from the car. I weighed very little, even for my age, and she lifted me easily. "Are you okay? Can you say anything?"

There was concern in her eyes. My mom never looked like that. Too bad this woman couldn't take me home. I could be her kid instead. "I'm okay."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" My mother's voice rang out across the parking lot. "What are you doing to my child?"

My mother and the woman started yelling at each other. The woman was saying I could have died. My mother told her to mind her own damn business. The woman said she was going to report my mother. Finally, my mom shoved me back into the Dodge and we took off before I had a chance to get my seat belt buckled again.

"What did you unlock the door for?" she snapped at me.

"It was hot."

"Well, I hope it was worth it. Now she's going to report me for being a terrible parent and you're going to

get taken away from us. They'll put you in a foster home. You'll never see me or your father again."

The thought of never seeing my mom again? Not so bad. But the thought of never seeing my father again made me sick. So sick, I had to make her pull over so I could vomit.