

CHAPTER 9

CLAIRE

It takes all my willpower to march back to my minivan and sit down next to Noah in the passenger seat. The others have already taken their seats in the back, and I'm tempted to ask one of them if they'd like to trade. I don't want to sit next to Noah. But it would be awkward to say that, so I sit down. And he shoots me a look like he wishes he had taken off without me.

Sometimes I look back on my marriage and try to figure out the exact moment when Noah and I started hating each other.

Like I said, we loved each other when we got married. We were one of those couples that never even fought. Like, we would have minor, stupid arguments about... I don't know, maybe I turned up the heat too high in the winter. Or I caught him drinking out of the milk carton. (Why do men do that?) But it was usually stuff we would laugh about—teasing more than fighting. We were both easygoing people who hated to fight, and sometimes

Noah would mumble something about “not wanting to end up like my parents.”

After Aidan was born, life got harder. We were excited to be parents but also scared. Noah would sometimes sit bolt upright in the middle of the night and not be able to get back to sleep until he went to Aidan's crib to make sure he was still present and breathing. Other times, we would have serious arguments about whose turn it was to change his diaper. Noah created a sign-in sheet on the refrigerator to keep track, but he took it down when he realized how far behind he was getting.

But still, I always thought we had a happy little family. Then Emma came along.

Emma is wonderful. Don't get me wrong—I love my daughter more than life itself and I'd do anything for her. But she was not an easy baby. She had colic, and all she did was scream. I mean, I suppose she also occasionally slept and ate, but it felt like 99 percent of the time, she was screaming. When I look back on that time, all I remember is this little pink baby with her eyes squeezed shut, her hands balled into fists, and her toothless mouth wide open as she hollered at the top of her lungs. And we also had a toddler to contend with. The first few months of Emma's life felt like a haze of the two of us passing her back and forth, stealing an hour or two of sleep whenever we could.

It was doable when I was on maternity leave. But then the summer ended and I had to go back to work. Emma was sleeping a little better by then, but not much. Noah and I were sleeping in shifts. It was awful.

On one particular night, I was determined to get a half-decent night of sleep because I had a big meeting at work the next morning where I was talking to the school

board about the special education program at our school. It was a really, really important meeting, and I didn't think I could get through it on an hour of sleep. I pumped Emma full of two bottles of milk, hoping she'd konk out but knowing it was a crapshoot. *hey Emma*

I told Noah about the meeting and emphasized how important it was. I *had* to get a decent night of sleep. He swore he understood. So when Emma woke up screaming at two in the morning, I expected him to get up with her.

"I've got a headache, Claire," he mumbled into his pillow. "Can't you get her?"

I had a headache too. I had a headache almost all the time those days as well as big purple circles under my eyes. Skipping out on my parental duties was never an option. "You know I have a big meeting tomorrow."

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. After a long minute of Emma's cries increasing in volume, he got out of bed and slammed the door shut behind him when he left the bedroom.

Just as the cries subsided and I started to drift off again, the screams abruptly started again. A few seconds later, Noah came back into the bedroom. He flopped down on the bed and covered his head with the pillow.

"I can't deal with her," he said. "You have to do it."

"But I told you, I have a meeting tomorrow!"

"Well, I have a headache. I'm not getting up."

And that was it as far as he was concerned. He acted like Emma was *my* baby, he was doing me a *favor* by trying to help, but if he didn't want to do it, he didn't have to. I remember staring at him in the dark bedroom, waiting to see if he would change his mind. He didn't budge. I had to get up and spend the rest of the night comforting Emma.

He never apologized for that one. Even though I was a wreck at my meeting the next day, and he ended up sleeping in after I dropped Emma and Aidan off at day care. It was so incredibly unfair.

After that, it seemed like we were at war more and more frequently. He never carried his weight when it came to the children and the housework, and what's worse, he didn't *care*. He told me all I did was nag him. We stopped doing things together as a family—I preferred to go out with the kids myself so I didn't have to watch him play with his phone instead of talking to me. And we never did anything together as a couple. I can't remember our last date night. For a while, we were making an effort to get a babysitter and go out, but I can't remember the last time either of us even suggested it.

I kept telling myself things would get better as the kids got older. But now they're older. And it turned out our marriage got too broken to fix.

And now we're stuck together in this car. For *hours*. It's become the most awkward car ride in the history of the world. I would give anything to get out of it. Occasionally, I hear some conversation from the back, but for the most part, we are all deathly silent. I am having trouble envisioning anything I could say that won't result in a fight between me and Noah, and I don't want to have another fight with him in front of everyone.

At this point, I just want to get the week over with so I can tell him it's over. Hopefully, he won't hire a hit man to take me out, but it wouldn't entirely surprise me.

For the last half hour, the road we're on has become progressively more narrow and isolated. I don't think we've seen another car in twenty minutes. The pavement here

is cracked and unkempt. My minivan's tires snap fallen branches in the road and lurch on the uneven ground.

"Turn left onto Appleton Road," the GPS voice instructs us.

Noah hits the brakes just as we come across the sign for Appleton Road. It's a tiny road that goes one way. The pavement has been uneven up until now, but this road is entirely unpaved. Noah hesitates with his foot on the brake.

"This is the turn here," Warner speaks up.

"Right." Noah taps his fingers against the wheel. He's anxious about going down this road. Unlike Jack, he's no former Boy Scout. We've never been camping together in all our years of marriage. "Okay."

Noah turns down Appleton Road, and immediately the ride gets a lot rougher. There are no other cars around—it's just us and the wilderness. I hold on to my seat as we make our way down this uneven path. But we're close now. It's not too much farther to the inn.

And then the picture on the GPS freezes.

Noah keeps his eyes on the road as he taps the screen. Up on top, the words appear: *Searching for signal...*

"Damn," he mutters under his breath.

"I've got the map," Warner speaks up.

I hear him shuffling through his duffel bag. I pull my phone out of my purse—there's no signal there either. I feel about as uneasy as Noah looks. I'm not any more comfortable with the wilderness than he is. I can't wait to get to the inn and have Wi-Fi access.

I wish I had called the kids back when we were on the main road. I had been thinking I would call them when we got to the inn, but now I wish I hadn't waited. Even though I gave Penny a heads-up, I imagine Emma being worried.

"All right," Warner says, "there's going to be a fork in the road coming up, and you need to go left."

"Right," Noah says.

"No, he said left," I say.

"I *know* he said left," Noah snaps at me. "I was saying 'right,' like I got it."

I swallow hard. "Okay. I was just making sure. I didn't mean to..."

"Could you just... Just don't talk to me, Claire. I need to focus."

Noah presses his fingers against his eyeballs under his glasses, then focuses his attention back on the road. We come to the fork, and he slows to a complete halt. The road diverges in two directions, but the right path seems much better paved. The left is more narrow and has branches hanging down everywhere. The sun is still in the sky, but the left path looks dark and foreboding. If there's a monster out here in the woods, it's definitely on the left.

"Are you sure we're supposed to go left?" Noah asks.

Warner looks up from the map. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," he recites in that rich baritone. "And I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Noah crinkles his nose. "What the..." he mutters under his breath.

I clasp my hand over my mouth to suppress a giggle, and for a split second, Noah looks proud of himself for making me laugh. For that half a second, it's almost like the old days again, before we hated each other. When we could share an emotion without even having to exchange words.

"Warner is quoting that poem," Lindsay says. "You

know. The one by Robert Frost?" She shoots her boyfriend a loving look. "He's *very* well read."

"Yes, I know it," Noah says tightly. "But what the hell does that have to do with how to get to the inn?"

"You take the path on the left," Warner explains. "It may be less traveled, but it's the correct path."

Noah doesn't look at all thrilled about it, but he takes Robert Frost's advice and turns left at the fork. It isn't even a road anymore. It's a dirt path. It's very hard to imagine that a reputable establishment wouldn't have a decent road to get there. I mean, what's next? Are we going to have to drive across some rickety drawbridge? *slapping*

After another twenty minutes of driving very slowly, Noah comes to a complete halt. He looks over his shoulder at Warner. "There's no way this is right."

Warner fumbles with the map in his hand. "No, we're on target. It's another two miles and we're there."

Noah throws the car into park. "Let me see the map."

Warner hands it over. I look over Noah's shoulder—the map is not that easy to read. It's printed out on an eight-by-eleven-inch sheet of white paper, and everything is super tiny. Noah turns it ninety degrees, squinting down at the minuscule print.

"Do you want me to take a look at it, Noah?" Jack calls from the back row.

"I'm the one driving, so no." Noah clears his throat. "Okay. I think I see where to go."

He shifts the car back into drive, but the engine is strangely silent. Noah frowns as he presses his foot onto the gas. What now?

"The car stalled." He looks at me. "Does your car do this a lot?"

I bite my lip. "No. Never."

"When is the last time you got it serviced?"

"I don't know. Six months ago?"

"You don't *know*?" he repeats.

"I said about six months ago. Give or take." I think it was six months ago. I remember taking it to the mechanic right after a particularly brutal fight about why there was no fresh milk in the house. There was snow on the ground, so it was sometime during the winter.

Noah kills the engine, then tries to restart the car. I hear a clicking noise, but the engine doesn't catch. He tries again with the same result.

"The battery is dead." He blinks down at the dashboard. "The car won't start."

"I've got jumper cables in the back," I say.

He snorts. "Great. Do you also have a battery in the back that we can give it a jump off of?"

Oh. I guess he has a point.

He unbuckles his seat belt. "Let me take a look under the hood."

"Take a look?" I repeat. Noah may be a physicist, but he doesn't know anything about cars. "What do you think you're going to see under there? An on/off switch on the battery that's toggled to off?"

I probably shouldn't have said that. It was sort of mean. On the other hand, the idea of Noah looking under the hood and discovering something wrong with the car that can be fixed right here and now seems just short of impossible.

Noah shoots me a dirty look as he pops the hood and climbs out of the car. Jack and Warner get out too, and the three men huddle together under the hood, debating

what could have caused my relatively new minivan to suddenly stop working in the middle of nowhere. I watch Noah's face as he talks to Jack. The two of them have been friends for almost two decades. Does Noah know about me and Jack?

I can't tell.

"I'm sure they'll fix the problem," Lindsay says confidently.

"I don't know," I mumble. I wish I had her optimism. Noah and Jack don't know cars. It's possible Warner is a car expert, but he doesn't look like it, if I'm being honest.

What are we going to do if we don't get the car running? We're nowhere near the main road. And none of us have cell reception.

Noah slams the hood closed again and gets back in the driver's seat. I can tell from his face he's not optimistic. He turns the key in the ignition, and there's only that clicking noise again. He drops his head against the headrest. "Great." He cranes his head to look at everyone in the back. "Does anyone have a signal on their phone?"

The panic is starting to mount in my chest. I pull my phone out of my purse again with trembling hands—no signal. The negative responses echo from the back of the vehicle. None of us has a signal. We're stuck out here, and there's no way to call for help.

"Listen, don't panic." Warner shakes the map in his hand. "Like I said, we're only two miles away from the inn. We can walk there, and then we'll send somebody to get the car."

"Walk there?" Lindsay doesn't sound thrilled about that idea. She's not exactly outdoorsy either. "I thought if you get lost in the woods, you're supposed to stay put."

"Under some circumstances," Warner says and nods. "But nobody is going to be looking for us in the near future. We're not expected back home for a week. And we've got a map showing us exactly where to go. It would be stupid not to try to find this place."

Lindsay frowns. "Yes, but..."

"Trust me on this, Lindsay." Warner pats her shoulder. "You just don't know better."

I don't like the patronizing way Warner is speaking to her. Ever since he kept her from getting the burger she wanted at the diner, this guy has been getting on my nerves. Once I get her alone, I'm going to have a talk with her about him.

"I can't sit in this car waiting for somebody to rescue us for several days," Michelle says firmly. "I've got a lot of work to do, people."

Yes, we know.

"Also," Warner adds, "we don't have much food. Or water."

That last comment makes my heart skip a beat. He's right. Aside from maybe a bag of chips or some beef jerky bought at the convenience store, we don't have any food. Noah's got a half-full water bottle in the cupholder, but that's about it. The six of us aren't going to be able to survive here for several days if we stay put.

My stomach lets out a low growl. I only ate about a third of the burger at the diner. I lost my appetite after Noah stormed out. Now I wish I had finished it.

"I've got my compass," Jack volunteers. "It shouldn't be difficult to navigate there."

Lindsay shakes her head and hugs her chest. "I don't know. I really think we should stay put."

"You can stay in the car if you'd like," Warner tells her. There's a bit of an edge to his voice that I hadn't heard before.

Her blue eyes dart around the car. She leans forward in my direction. "Claire, are you going to go?"

"I don't know."

She grabs my wrist with her long, skinny fingers. "Let's stay in the car. It's safer here."

I look out the window of the minivan. The path ahead of us is littered with branches and rocks and God knows what else. Why oh why did we have to take the road less traveled? What a mistake. Stupid Robert Frost.

But I don't want to be left behind in the car. What if everyone else reaches the inn and they can't find the car again? I don't want to be stuck here. If Lindsay and I stay behind, we have no chance of finding our way there. Neither of us has the slightest clue how to navigate through the wilderness. Warner has the only map, but even if I had a copy of that confusing guide to the inn, I doubt I'd be able to follow it.

And we have almost no food or water.

"I think we should stay together," I decide.

Lindsay frowns. "Are you sure?"

I nod, even though I'm far from sure. But it seems like the better of two bad options. Jack will make sure nothing happens to us.

"Okay," Lindsay says, but she doesn't sound thrilled.

Warner swings his arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, babe. We know what we're doing. It's only two miles."

Two miles. It's two miles from our house to the children's school. When I walk it, it takes me about forty

minutes. But it's got to take longer to walk through the forest. It'll probably take two hours. So in two hours, we'll be at the inn. I'll be able to kick off my shoes and take a long, hot bath in my private bathroom. I can't wait.

For the most part, we leave all our bags in the minivan. It's going to be hard enough to get through the woods without carrying a bunch of junk. I bring my purse, and Noah gives me his water bottle to put inside, which I nestle next to my phone. On the off chance we get a signal somewhere, I want to be prepared. Also, I want to make sure to send Penny a text the second we get there so that the kids know we're okay—especially Emma. Jack brings a backpack with supplies he brought for hiking, including a large water bottle that's nearly full. He stuffs his compass into his jeans pocket.

It's hot outside the car. Sweltering. Before the battery went out, the temperature gauge from outside the vehicle read eighty-nine degrees. We haven't even started walking yet, and I already feel hot and sticky. While I feel lucky to be the only one wearing shorts, my bare legs are too exposed. What if I step in poison ivy? What if a snake bites my ankle? I sort of wish I were wearing jeans instead, but my luggage is at the bottom of the pile, and I don't want to go through the hassle of changing inside the minivan. The shorts will be fine for a quick hike.

The dirt road disappears rapidly and is barely a road anymore—I can't imagine how the minivan would have made it any farther, even if the battery hadn't died. But the men seem confident as they lead the way. Jack has his compass and his Boy Scout experience, and Warner has the map and is the only one who has been here before. The three of us women bring up the rear.

"I'm sure it won't be too far," I say. I'm not by any means sure of that, but I'm trying to be optimistic for Lindsay's sake.

Michelle shoots me a look. "Don't you ever service your car, Claire?"

I flinch. "Yes. I service it regularly."

"Well, it seems to me," she says, "if you were going to take your vehicle on a trip out into the wilderness, you might want to bring it to the mechanic first to make sure it doesn't break down in the middle of nowhere."

I already got yelled at by Noah. I'm not in the mood to take it from Michelle too. But at the same time, I'm reluctant to get into a fight with her. I'm afraid of what might come out. "The minivan is new. There's no reason it should have broken down."

"Yet it did."

I take a deep, calming breath. "Look, we'll be there soon. This isn't that big a deal."

Michelle shakes her head at me, then without another word, she picks up her speed until she catches up with the men, leaving Lindsay and me behind.

"That was rude," I mumble.

Lindsay watches Michelle in the distance. "Maybe she knows."

"She doesn't know."

"I don't know. She seems even more ornery than usual."

"Yeah." I squint at Michelle's backside. She's in pretty good shape considering she spends her days behind a desk. I wonder if she works out. "But I think if she knew, she'd say something. She wouldn't just keep it to herself. That's not her style."

"Maybe." Lindsay cocks her head to the side. "But maybe she wouldn't say anything. I mean, it's not like either of us knows Michelle very well."

She has a point. Despite all our efforts, neither of us knows Michelle at all.

That thought hangs in my head as we trudge through the dirt. We continue to hang back, just out of earshot of the others, which isn't entirely coincidental. I hope we're almost there.

"This sucks," Lindsay comments as her right boot sinks into a puddle of mud. "This is *not* what I had in mind for this trip."

"Well," I say, "you wanted to get away from civilization, right?"

"No!" She seems affronted by this suggestion. "I just wanted to get Warner away from the hospital for a week. I wanted him all to myself."

I look at the three men up ahead. Warner's blond hair is almost gleaming. He definitely has the best butt of the three of them. And even though we're in the middle of nowhere, he walks forward without any hesitation. I have to admire his confidence.

"So you really like him, huh?" I ask carefully.

A smile lights Lindsay's face. "I really do. I don't think I've ever felt this way about somebody before. He's... perfect."

"Yeah, but..." I step gingerly over a branch on the ground. "What was the deal with lunch? Why wouldn't he let you have a burger?"

She narrows her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." I don't want to hurt Lindsay's feelings, but at the same time, I want to make sure she's not with a guy

who's going to break her heart. Or manipulate her. I owe her that much. "You wanted to get a burger, and he told you not to. Then you got that teeny tiny salad instead."

"Oh." She waves her hand. "That has nothing to do with him. I'm trying to lose some weight, that's all."

"You don't need to lose any weight!" I don't point out the obvious, which is that she's at least twenty pounds skinnier than I am. If she needs to lose weight, I'm in big trouble.

"Bullshit." Lindsay holds out her bare upper arm and grabs a handful of flesh. "Look at this! Warner does not have an ounce of fat on him. It's...embarrassing."

"And why was he looking at you like that when he mentioned boob jobs?" I press her.

"Well..." Lindsay glances down at her chest. "You have to admit, I'm not exactly well endowed."

I'm so upset I nearly trip over a branch on the ground. "Did he say that to you?"

"He didn't have to!" She rubs her neck, pushing away sweaty strands of blond hair. "I mean, it's a fact. And I should be grateful he's nice enough to offer me a free surgery. How many guys would do that?"

I make a face. "None."

"Claire..."

Everything she's saying is making me uneasy. It's not like I married such a great guy, but I have to hand it to Noah, he was never judgmental about my looks. He always used to act like I was the most beautiful woman in the world. He certainly never suggested I should lose weight or have *plastic surgery*. And now...well, obviously he doesn't act like he thinks I'm all that attractive anymore. But he doesn't say anything *negative* about my looks, at least.

Who am I kidding? I can't throw stones.

"As long as you think he's a good guy," I finally say. When we get to the hotel, we'll have to talk more about this. I need to make sure she doesn't proceed with an impulse boob job.

"He is, Claire." She takes a deep breath. "In fact..."

"What?"

She ducks under a low-hanging tree branch, and a leaf comes free in her hair. "I think he's going to propose to me this week!"

"Oh." My heart sinks at this revelation. "That's... wonderful! And you...you want to marry him?"

"Of course!"

"I thought you loved being single." Even though Lindsay was my maid of honor, she was never that into weddings or the idea of getting married. She loved her job and her freedom. She dated sometimes, and a few of her boyfriends seemed head over heels in love with her, but she never seemed the slightest bit interested in settling down. And my own marriage hasn't exactly provided her with a shining example of how wonderful it is to be tied to another person.

"Well, I did," she says thoughtfully. "But that was because all the guys I dated were such losers. Warner is perfect. I'm so glad I waited."

I plaster my best smile on my face, hoping she doesn't notice it's phony. It's obvious that when Warner pops the question, Lindsay is going to say yes. There's nothing I can do about it.