

CHAPTER 8

CLAIRE

At around the two-hour mark, we see a sign for a rest stop that contains a McDonald's and a small diner. I'm in the mood for some greasy french fries, but I get overruled and we end up at the diner. I'm still going to get some greasy fries. It's the only way I can make it through the rest of this drive.

The diner is surprisingly busy for a rest-stop location. The walls are lined with booths, with larger tables in the middle, and ironic street signs litter the walls. The entire place smells like grease and burgers. I inhale deeply, already decided I'm going to get a big juicy burger.

While the others are being led to a table, Lindsay and I go to the bathroom together to wash our hands. That's what we say anyway, and I actually do wash my hands, since the last thing I touched was that Porta-John. But Lindsay seems to be more interested in fixing her makeup. She stares critically at her face in the bathroom mirror, which is at least twice as pretty as mine—much

more if you take into account the circles under my eyes from Emma tossing and turning in our bed all week. I can't imagine what Lindsay is seeing in the mirror that she doesn't like.

She pulls out a tube of pink lipstick and applies a fresh layer to her lips. She smiles at me in the mirror. "So what do you think of Warner?"

"I've only known him for a couple of hours," I point out. We've barely exchanged any words—it's far too soon to form an opinion. "But he seems...nice."

"He's cute, isn't he?" she says.

"Definitely." Warner is far more than "cute." Noah is cute. Warner is drop-dead gorgeous. Even if I were single, I could never get a guy who looked like him. I wouldn't even want to. Everybody would just look at the two of us and wonder what the hell he was doing with *me*.

"Listen..." Lindsay places the cap back on her lipstick and turns to me. She lowers her voice a notch. "There's something I should tell you."

I raise my eyebrows. "Yes?"

Lindsay opens her mouth, but before she can say anything, the door to the ladies' room swings open. It's Michelle.

Michelle takes a step back, her fingers lingering on the door, as if she's not sure if she should turn around and leave. I sort of wish she would, because I'm dying to know what Lindsay has to tell me. But we can't talk in front of Michelle.

When Jack and Michelle were first dating, Lindsay and I made an effort to be friendly with her. The three of us went out to dinner a couple of times, but it was obvious we just didn't click. I also didn't like how Michelle *always*

found fault in her meal and sent it back. Doesn't she know people spit in your food if you do that?

Still, because Jack and Noah were such good friends, I kept trying to make an effort to invite her out. I figured if we spent enough time together, we would get to be friends. Jack liked her, after all. But after we went out twice, she always seems to have an excuse for why she couldn't go. When I gently asked Jack about it once, he mumbled something about how she was busy with work. I got the hint.

And of course, now that I'm sleeping with her husband, it's hardly the time for us to start bonding.

Michelle's sharp eyes dart between the two of us. Even in her blue jeans and fitted white T-shirt, she looks like she could be on her way to the office. I don't know how she manages to always look so put together. She's about five years older than us—she had already finished law school and was practicing when she and Jack started dating—but she has the kind of classic looks that make it hard to tell her age. She'll be as attractive at fifty as she was at twenty-five.

"Excuse me," she says to us as she moves toward the empty sink.

The three of us stand in awkward silence while Michelle lathers up her hands, then rinses them off. She's doing quite a thorough job cleaning them. I wonder if she sings the happy birthday song in her head while she does it, like we teach the kids in school. Probably not.

"It's good to be out of the car, isn't it?" I say, just to break the silence.

Michelle lifts her eyes to look at me, but she doesn't say anything. For a split second, I wonder if she might know the truth.

But no. She doesn't know. Jack and I were careful.

"I love your earrings," Lindsay says.

Michelle's fingers fly to her right ear. Her cheeks are pink with pride—Lindsay is amazing at knowing exactly what to compliment someone on. "Thank you. They were my mother's."

We wait for a beat, to see if Michelle will offer a compliment to either of us. She doesn't. Just as well, because it wouldn't be sincere.

When we get back out to the restaurant, the boys are seated at a six-person rectangular table. Noah and Warner are on one side, with an empty seat between them, which Lindsay quickly grabs. Jack is on the other side, in the center. Michelle sits on one side of him, and I sit on the other. Of the three couples, Noah and I are the only ones not sitting together. Which is fine by me, because I don't want to be anywhere near him right now.

"Everything on the menu looks so good," Jack says. His sneaker rubs against mine as he flashes me a quick, meaningful look. Are we really going to risk playing footsie under the table? I guess we are.

As she examines the menu, Lindsay plays with a strand of blond hair that came loose from her bun. Lindsay has the best hair of anyone I know. She always has. It's ash blond, perfectly highlighted, and silky soft. After college, she tried her hand at advertising and finance, but she ultimately decided to become a hairdresser. She's great at it.

"I love the burgers at these little diners." Lindsay inhales deeply. "You can smell them cooking."

"I know!" I say. "They're always so juicy and fresh."

Warner frowns. "You're not going to get a burger, are you, Lindsay? Those things have, like, a thousand calories."

For the first time since I met Lindsay's Adonis of a boyfriend, I feel a trace of misgivings. Is he really trying to control what she eats? I attempt to catch Lindsay's eye, but she's looking down at the menu.

"Lindsay and I are training to run a marathon next month," Warner explains. "We need to keep in good shape."

"A marathon?" My mouth falls open. "Lindsay, *you're* going to run a marathon?"

She smiles, but it looks forced. "Oh, yes! We're so excited!"

Warner throws his arm around her narrow shoulders. "Lindsay is doing great with her training. She's a powerhouse!"

This isn't like my best friend at all. Lindsay does Pilates, not marathons. She hates working up a sweat. And anyway, she doesn't need to watch what she eats. She's in great shape.

I get the greasy burger with french fries, and the best I can say is that there's no negative commentary from Noah. He gets a burger too: "Rare. Bloody. Maybe still mooing." Warner orders a turkey sandwich—no mayo. (At least he isn't a hypocrite.) And Lindsay gets a side salad—no dressing.

Right after we place our orders, Michelle looks down at her watch. Every time I've seen her, she always seems to be in a hurry. But I swear she's looked at her watch three times since we walked in here.

"Are things busy at work, Michelle?" I ask politely.

She smiles tightly. "Always. But yeah, it's been very busy lately." She laughs. "People really hate their spouses."

"What do you do, Michelle?" Warner asks.

She toys with the napkin in front of her. "I'm a divorce attorney."

"Oh?" Warner's lips twitch. "You must see some brutal stuff."

A smile touches her lips. "Are you divorced?"

It's sort of a personal question for somebody she just met an hour ago, but Michelle is used to being blunt. Anyway, Warner doesn't seem bothered. "No," he says. "When I get married, it will be forever."

And Lindsay beams. God, she's gaga for this guy.

"Nice sentiment. For your sake, I hope you're right." Michelle shakes her head. "Unfortunately, most people aren't so lucky."

I avoid looking at Noah. I don't want to admit that Michelle's statement has touched a nerve.

"I have this one client..." She pauses, uncertain if she should go on. "It's a bit of a long story."

"Tell us!" Lindsay demands. She puts her hand on Warner's golden-haired forearm. "Michelle tells the *best* stories."

Michelle smiles at another of Lindsay's well-placed compliments, although she knows it's true. "This one is a doozy. My client was married to this rich banker. He cheated on her multiple times, and we were going to take him to the cleaners. Like, the guy was going to be living in his car after this."

Jack and I exchange quick glances. There's no doubt in his mind that if he ever decided to leave Michelle, he'd be lucky if he even got to keep his car. He'd be living in a cardboard box. And not a nice cardboard box either.

"Anyway," Michelle says, "the guy was desperate. So..." I suck in a breath. "So...?"

"He hired a hit man to knock her off."

We're all wearing identical expressions of shock. Nothing like that ever happens at the school where I work. It's an exciting day when somebody gets pinched really hard.

"Unfortunately for him," Michelle says, "a neighbor was able to get the license plate on the hit man's car. The police caught up with him, and in exchange for immunity, he turned the husband in. Now, instead of living in his car, the husband is going to be living in a jail cell for the rest of his life."

Jack has turned two shades paler. The truth is he's wanted to leave Michelle for years. He realized a long time ago they weren't right for each other. And he had always been hoping she would change her mind about not wanting any kids, but she's made it clear that's not going to happen.

But what can he do? Best-case scenario, Michelle would destroy him.

And what if she finds out the two of us are having an affair? What will she do then?

"What sort of work do you do, Warner?" Michelle asks.

"Plastic surgeon," he says.

Michelle snaps her fingers. "That's what my client's husband did. He was a plastic surgeon too."

Warner tugs at the collar of his shirt. "Interesting coincidence. What's his name?"

She winks at him. "I can't share that information, unfortunately. Where do you work?"

"St. Mary's."

Jack leans forward and his knee brushes against mine.

"St. Mary's... Hey, my friend Buddy Levine is the medical director there. You must know Buddy."

Warner nods vigorously. "Of course I do. Good man."

"Say hi for me when you get back to work, will you?"

Warner smiles. "Will do, Jack."

When he smiles like that, he's so handsome you almost have to look away. Lindsay is almost slobbering over him, which unsettles me. I've never seen her so infatuated—she's usually fairly cool around the opposite sex—and I'm not convinced it's a good thing.

Warner turns his vivid blue eyes in my direction. "Lindsay tells me you're a teacher, Claire."

Despite my reservations, I have to smile. I'm pleased Lindsay was talking to her new boyfriend about my work, and I'm even more pleased he's considerate enough to remember details about her friends. This is a clear point in Warner's favor.

"That's right," I say. "I teach special ed."

Warner takes a swig from his water glass. "I really admire people like you. Honestly. I could never be a teacher."

"Oh?" I say.

"The salary is..." He shakes his head. "For such an important job, it's a crime how badly they pay you guys."

"Well..." I feel my smile falter—he's not wrong. "It would be nice if they paid us what we deserve."

"And it's so *repetitive*." He shudders. "I think you teachers deserve an award for what they put you through. Really—bravo, Claire."

I take a moment to absorb his words. He's paying me a compliment, so I suppose I should be flattered. But I don't appreciate being told how much my job sucks. Especially

because I do love it so much. "It can be a little repetitive at times," I admit. "But it's really rewarding. And every job eventually gets to be repetitive after a number of years."

He nods thoughtfully. "Yes, that's true. I feel rather fortunate to be in a field that never gets repetitive."

I raise an eyebrow. "You mean you don't get sick of doing boob jobs after a while?"

He flashes his straight, white teeth at me. I hope he had braces when he was a kid, or else life really isn't fair. "I *definitely* never get sick of doing boob jobs. I could do them all day long." He tightens his grip around Lindsay's shoulders. "You hear that, Lindsay?"

I flinch. Is he suggesting Lindsay needs a boob job? She absolutely does not. I wait for Lindsay to roll her eyes or elbow him in the chest, but she doesn't. Her cheeks grow pink, and she folds her arms self-consciously across her chest.

This guy might be great looking, but I'm beginning to wonder if Lindsay is trying to be someone she's not just to impress him.

When the food arrives, I pick up my burger and start eating practically before my plate touches the table. There's something about long car rides that makes you desperately hungry. I glance at Lindsay with her sad little side salad. We *really* need to have a talk later. I know she says she likes Warner, but I have to dig deeper. We can go on a hike together and she'll tell me the whole story.

I wonder what she wanted to tell me in the bathroom before Michelle interrupted us.

"Excuse me, miss," Michelle speaks up as the waitress is getting ready to walk away.

The waitress brushes a stray strand of hair from her face and flashes Michelle a tired smile. "Yes, hon?"

Michelle pushes her plate away from her with the tip of her index finger. "I asked for my burger to be medium well, but this is really more medium. And the fries are burned."

I look over at Michelle's fries. They don't look burned to me. Maybe a little crispy, but still delicious.

"I'm so sorry," the waitress says quickly. She takes Michelle's plate. "I'll get you some new food right away."

Jack rolls his eyes at me so quickly I'm sure nobody else at the table sees it. He can't stand it when Michelle sends back her food. *Can't we have one damn meal where she doesn't find fault in her order?*

My phone buzzes with a text. I pull it out of my purse and see a message from Penny:

Emma settled down. I've got everybody watching cartoons, and I'm making mac and cheese for lunch.

I smile at the text. Emma's favorite food is macaroni and cheese. She would probably eat it for every meal, including breakfast, if I let her.

"Emma's okay," I tell Noah.

He grunts with a mouth full of burger.

"What's wrong with Emma?" Lindsay asks. She's Emma's godmother, and the kids think of her as family.

"She had this dream that a monster was going to eat us," I say.

Lindsay clasps a hand over her mouth. "Oh no! Poor thing."

"It's Claire's fault," Noah announces to the table. "She fills her head with nonsense, and this is what happens."

My mouth falls open. "It's *my* fault? I filled her head with *nonsense*?"

Noah puts down his half-eaten burger and glares at me across the table. "You're not honest with them. I mean, if you tell them the tooth fairy is real, why shouldn't they believe in monsters?"

This is an argument Noah and I have had many times before. He feels strongly that the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny, and even Santa are not things parents should ever lie to their kids about. But I hate the idea of my kids being the only ones at school who never believed in the magic of Santa. I remember the first time Aidan lost a baby tooth and I told him the tooth fairy was going to put something special under his pillow, and he said, "I know it's just you." It was a jab in my heart.

Aidan has always been more practical, like his father, but Emma is different. Even though Noah has assured her that all these things aren't real, she still secretly believes Santa comes down our chimney on Christmas Eve. I love that about her.

"There's nothing wrong with pretending the tooth fairy is real," I say. "It doesn't hurt them."

"Obviously it does." Noah's eyes are flashing, even through his glasses. "Because now she thinks a monster is going to eat us."

I appeal to the rest of the table. "I don't think there's anything horrible about a kid believing in Santa. Is there?"

"I loved waiting for Santa on Christmas Eve when I was a kid," Lindsay sighs. I can always count on her to stick up for me. "I looked forward to it all year."

"But it's all a *lie*," Noah frowns. "I'm sorry, but I can't

outright lie to my children. They deserve to know the truth."

"It's all just in fun," Warner says. "I don't see anything wrong with it."

Noah blinks at us. "So nobody has a problem with making kids believe that a morbidly obese man comes down the chimney with a giant bag of presents? Nobody else is troubled by that?"

"Geez, Noah," Jack says. "When did you get to be such a Grinch?"

I would have thought Noah would sit here arguing about the evils of Santa Claus for the next hour, but when Jack says that, he jerks his head back like he got punched. He stands up abruptly from the table, leaving his half-eaten plate of food. He reaches into his wallet, pulls out a couple of twenties, and drops them on the table.

"I'm done eating. I'm going to wait in the car," he says.

As Noah storms out of the diner, I feel Jack's hand under the table take my own. He gives me a squeeze with his big, warm palm. But it doesn't make me feel even a tiny bit better.

"I...I think I'm going to go get some air," I gulp.

Under I rise unsteadily to my feet and stumble out of the diner. I see Noah over by the minivan, so I go in the opposite direction. There's a little nook behind the diner that's quiet and isolated. And it only smells slightly like garbage.

I take a shaky breath. My eyes are watery and I swipe at them with the back of my hand. I don't want to cry right now, because my eyes will get all red and puffy, and when I get back to the car, everyone will know. I've got to keep it together.

Keep it together, Claire. Only a couple more hours and you don't have to see him again for the rest of the trip.

I don't know what to do anymore. I had thought I could stay with Noah long enough to get through the kids at least being in high school, but I don't know if that's possible anymore. This trip has opened up my eyes. We hate each other.

God, I don't know what to do.

"Claire?"

Lindsay is standing behind me, her pink lips pursed. I had thought Jack might be the one to come check on me, but of course he couldn't. Not with Michelle sitting right there.

"Hey," I say.

She chews on her lip. "Are you okay?"

I nod, even though I'm not actually okay. "Yeah. I just needed some air."

Lindsay opens her mouth, but she doesn't look quite certain what she wants to say. She's been around since Noah and I first started dating. She used to do my hair with the curling iron before he and I would go out. I've confided in her some of the problems I've had with Noah, but I've played it down. I don't want to bore her with all my married-life problems. She doesn't want to hear about our millionth argument over the toilet paper.

But when she finally does speak, what she says surprises me: "I saw you and Jack at the gas station."

My heart skips in my chest. Is she saying what I think she's saying? Maybe not. I'm going to play dumb. "What... what do you mean?"

Her face falls. "You know what I mean. I saw the two of you...you know, *kissing*. I was going to tell you in the bathroom, but then Michelle walked in and..."

"Oh." I drop my eyes and kick at the ground with my sneaker. "I see."

"Claire..."

"Don't say it." My eyes fill with fresh tears. "You see the way he treats me."

"I know." She steps closer, and I can feel her soft hand rest on my shoulder. "I don't blame you, honestly. He's horrible to you. But to do it with Jack... I mean, he's—"

"He's Noah's best friend. I *know*."

Lindsay throws her arms around me, enveloping me in a hug. And that pretty much does it—I start sobbing. I'm getting tears and snot all over Lindsay's tank top, but she seems okay with it. It makes me realize how long it's been since I've had a really good hug.

We stand there for way too long before I finally pull away. I can tell without looking in a mirror that my eyes are swollen. "I'm sorry," I say.

"For what?"

I shake my head. "I'm a terrible person."

"You're not a terrible person." Lindsay brushes a wet strand of hair from my face. "But if you want to leave Noah, you should leave him. Don't mess around behind his back."

"You're right." I accept the crumpled tissue Lindsay hands me. "I really don't want him to find out about me and Jack."

She tilts her head to the side. "You don't think he already knows?"

My heart sinks into my stomach. "You...you think he knows?"

"Well..." She shifts her weight between her boots. "Yes. I do. I think he knows."

"Why?"

"It's just a feeling I get." She cranes her head to look over at the minivan. Noah is sitting inside, in the driver's seat. He's just staring straight out the windshield, unmoving. "I mean, I've known Noah for fifteen years, and I've never seen him act this way before. He's generally pretty even-tempered."

"Yeah."

She's right. Noah has recently stepped up his game when it comes to being obnoxious to me. Things had been getting gradually worse for so long, I just thought it was part of the trajectory. But maybe there's a reason things have gotten so much worse lately. Maybe he *does* know.

Once again, I get that strong feeling I should back out of the trip now, while I still have a chance. As much as I'm looking forward to having a room alone with Jack, it isn't worth the risk. Michelle could find out. Noah could find out, if he doesn't know already. And this trip seems to be putting the final nail in the coffin when it comes to our marriage.

But I don't know how I'm going to get home at this point. We've been driving for two hours, so it wouldn't be a quick ride back home. It would cost a fortune.

It looks like I'm stuck. This trip is happening. But I'm going to take Lindsay's advice. As soon as we get back to Castle Pines, I'm telling Noah it's over.