* *Prologue*

*I CAN’T REMEMBER* how I got here. I assume I drove, because I’m here and I’m holding my car keys, but I don’t remember leaving my house, which is probably normal under these cir- cumstances. I stare at the lights in the ceiling, counting no fewer than seven fluorescent bulbs, one of them continuing to buzz, and flicker, and flash because it can’t make up its mind as to whether or not it wants to stay lit. I chose a chair in the corner of the waiting room even though there were other seats available, and it’s underneath the air-conditioning vent. I’m cold, and I can feel goose bumps that I have an urge to scratch rising up on my forearms underneath my blue blouse. I focus on the glass coffee table in front of me, women’s magazines fanned out in a semicircle as if picking up a few new recipes or exercise strategies would make sitting in this waiting room any less torturous. I don’t know anything about Tara Redmond ex- cept that Tara Redmond doesn’t really sound like the name of a lawyer. Tara Redmond could be a class mom, or a Girl Scout troop leader, or a nursery school teacher. You want Tara Red- mond to hand out smiley face stickers, read stories, and help you sell cookies to the people in your neighborhood. You don’t

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necessarily want her to help you get your life back after you eagerly gave it away. You don’t want her to be the one respon- sible for fixing all of your mistakes.

I’m not the only person sitting in this waiting room, but I’m apparently the only one who’s willing to actually look around and acknowledge that anyone else is here. The other three women busy themselves staring at anything except each other, as if they could make themselves invisible simply by avoiding eye contact. One of them is pulling relentlessly at a loose thread on the cuff of her blazer that apparently needs to be ripped off right this very minute. She’s tugging at the string so fiercely I’m beginning to think she might unravel her sleeve before Tara Redmond comes and saves her from a completely self-provoked wardrobe malfunction. Another is reading a book, but she hasn’t flipped the page in twenty minutes. Unless she’s reading *Fifty Shades of Grey,* it’s pretty clear she’s checked out entirely and has no idea what’s going on around her. The third woman is playing some kind of game, I think Candy Crush, on her iPad. I know this because she didn’t turn the volume off and the stupid music is playing way too loudly in an otherwise silent waiting room. If I had the energy I’d go over there, rip the iPad out of her hands, and smash it into a billion little pieces on the glass coffee table, right next to the most recent copy of *Cosmo* and a small box of Kleenex.

I notice that we’re all in different stages of this process by the way each of us has chosen to deal with her wedding ring. The woman trying to rip off her own sleeve has her rings dangling around her neck, as if continuing to wear them on some part

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of her body will make her divorce a little less real. She’s still in the bargaining phase of the process, hoping that she can work things out with her husband. Meanwhile, her soon-to-be ex has probably thrown his ring down the garbage disposal with last night’s takeout, and she’s sitting here nervously ruining her clothing and affectionately stroking her pavé diamond ring as it hangs on a fragile gold chain. I feel badly for her. Holding on to the dream of how things should’ve been isn’t going to help. I’m still new to this, but even I know that. She should ditch the necklace, and the glazed-over stare, and start focusing on her new reality. That’s just my opinion. It’s too bad she’s not going to ask me for it.

The fake reader is still wearing her rings, a tasteful diamond solitaire and a platinum band, which are strange things to be wearing when you’re sitting in a divorce attorney’s waiting room. She’s in denial. She’s probably going to leave this office and text her soon-to-be ex-husband to ask if she should pick up his dry cleaning on the way home, even though they no longer live together. The younger woman playing Candy Crush twirls her ring around, and around, and around again on her finger nervously, debating whether or not she should just admit defeat and take it off. She’s probably the talk of all the other women in her morning barre or spin class (*Did you see that she’s still wearing her ring? Poor thing, her husband left her and she can’t even bring herself to take it off! How sad is that!*). I look down at my naked ring finger. My ring came off almost immediately, although I don’t remember doing it or have the faintest idea where I put it. I’ve been walking around totally numb now for

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two weeks, and I fear that this might be how I walk around for the rest of my life, which is a terrifying thought. I hope things work out for these other ladies, even though I don’t know them at all. We’re all just strangers in a room. All of us united by a piece of now useless jewelry, and by needing the services of Tara Redmond.

A short woman wearing black pants and Chanel loafers pushes open a door next to the table with the magazines and announces that Tara is ready to see me. I stand and brush my sweaty hands against the sides of my pants. I gathered my hair into a low tight bun before I left the house this morning be- cause I tend to play with my hair when I’m nervous, and I don’t want Tara Redmond to think I’m a mindless nitwit who didn’t even notice that her husband of less than two years was cheat- ing on her. My clavicle is too pronounced from the weight I’ve dropped since this whole mess started, so I opted not to wear a necklace or earrings. *Allure* magazine recently informed me that a delicate pendant or statement necklace could draw atten- tion to that area, which is fine if you’re trying to get a guy to fall in love with your clavicle. It’s not fine if you’re trying to pre- tend that you’re over the fact that your husband fell out of love with your clavicle and with every other part of you as well. The raging depression that immediately followed the surprise end of my marriage completely killed my appetite. It was as if an alien invaded my body and began to switch off every biological process that wasn’t absolutely necessary for survival, and my taste buds were the first things to go. I don’t understand people who eat when they’re depressed. Who finds out her marriage

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is over and says, “Sure, I’ll help you pack up your sock drawer, right after I make myself a grilled cheese with bacon”? I’m not suggesting that there’s a right or a wrong way to deal with this, I’m just saying that eating isn’t high on my list of things to do right now. I’ve decided to focus my waning energy on breath- ing and blinking instead.

I don’t even know how to introduce myself. “Hi, I’m Claire Stevens”? Or “Hi, I’m Claire Mackenzie”? How can Tara Red- mond possibly begin to help me when I can’t even tell her my own name? I’ve tried to find solace in the fact that she’s cer- tainly dealt with bigger messes than mine, but maybe that’s not actually true. I have no idea how big of a mess I am, rela- tively speaking. Maybe this situation is more messed-up than 99 percent of the cases she has. Maybe that’s part of her job description—for fi e hundred dollars an hour she’ll tell you how screwed-up you are on a scale of one to ten and then give you a bright green lollipop to make you feel better on your way out the door. Maybe she’ll give me a magazine off the glass coffee table as a parting gift when our meeting is over. “I’m sorry your marriage is over, Claire whatever-your-name-is, but please take my copy of *Good Housekeeping* on your way out. There are some great tips in there on how to deal with the really big problems in life: like how to disinfect your dishwasher, and clean the crumb tray in your toaster oven.” I really have no idea what to expect.

Tara is older than I thought she’d be, with silvery white hair and dark tortoiseshell glasses and sensible heels that she prob- ably kicks off next to her chair when she’s not seeing clients.

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“I’m Claire Mackenzie, but please just call me Claire.” It seems like an honest statement. I’m still married. I still have to use my married name.

“It’s nice to meet you, Claire. I’m Tara. What brings you to my office?”

“I need some help. I’m here to file for divorce.” Once again, it’s probably better to start with the basics.

“What’s the reason for the divorce?”

“My husband has been cheating on me for months with his high school girlfriend.” It hurt so much to say that sentence I could barely even stand it. I hadn’t really said it out loud to anyone, because I still couldn’t believe this was happening. My parents know—they’re the ones who directed me to Tara Redmond and who are paying her fee—but that’s it. I haven’t even told my friend Antonia back home in Chicago yet, because the truth is too painful to admit out loud. I don’t have any friends in Connecticut, and I doubt there are support groups for women like me, and if there are, I have no interest in join- ing one. It won’t make me feel better to share my story with other women suffering from similar betrayals. It will only make me feel worse.

Tara stares at me for a few seconds and I wonder if she’s wait- ing for me to give her all the sordid details. I don’t know what kind of woman she is. Maybe she became a divorce lawyer be- cause she likes hearing all the grit behind a sacred union that went from “’til death do us part” to “I want the silverware.” I stay quiet. I’m not going to fill her in on everything yet. I don’t want her to know that I came home when I wasn’t supposed to

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and my entire world shattered in an instant. How can I pos- sibly explain the details to anyone when I’m still having a hard time understanding them myself?

I don’t feel like I’m old enough to be a divorcée or that it’s a label I particularly like. Divorcées are older women who go to Jazzercise and call everyone “darling.” They have overplucked eyebrows that don’t match their hair color, and nails that are long, and square, and synthetic, and painted bright red. They hang out in piano bars wearing low-cut animal print tops while slugging martinis with extra blue-cheese-stuffed olives. They say things like “Don’t get mad, get everything!” and “Divorce means half as much husband and twice as much money!” I am not one of those women. I haven’t been married for that long, not even two years, so there isn’t anything for me to get. My nails are short and unpolished because I have a baby and my hands are constantly covered in ointments or shoved into scald- ing hot dishwater. I don’t like martinis or olives. I’m too young to have my marriage fall apart, but my marriage fell apart, and I didn’t even notice it was happening.

Men are supposed to cheat on their wives after years and years together because they’re bored, or they grow apart, or they de- velop irreconcilable differences. What kind of irreconcilable dif- ferences do we have that I’m not aware of? I had a baby. That occupied nine months of my body and then eight months of my entire life. That’s seventeen months that I’ve been busy creating a person and keeping him alive. We only had three months to grow apart! It can take longer than that to get a mortgage! It took longer than that to have my name changed on my passport!

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We haven’t even been together long enough for him to feel the seven-year itch.

“I’m sorry,” Tara says. She doesn’t ooze sympathy, but I still believe her. It must be hard to do this for a living—to spend years listening to other people tell you about their heartbreaks, their betrayals, and their disappointments.

“Thanks. So, obviously, I need a divorce.” I sound equally unemotional. I don’t want Tara Redmond to know anything more than she absolutely has to. I want her to go home tonight and tell her husband about this incredibly strong woman she met in her office. She doesn’t need to know that I sat on the floor in my shower this morning and cried for twenty minutes before pulling myself up, and that if I had a bigger hot water tank I’d probably still be in there.

“Do you have any children?”

“We have a son, Bo. He’s eight months old.” I resist the urge to flip out my wallet-sized picture of him nestled on Santa’s lap at the mall three months ago.

Tara scoffs, as if to say, *It takes a special kind of guy to cheat on a woman with a baby at home,* and she’d be right. Owen is special. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that I’m not the only one who knows it. “Are you seeking sole custody?” she asks, writing in her notebook with a shiny silver pen.

“It’s more complicated than that.” *Here we go. Here’s where you earn your paycheck, Tara.* “I’m from Chicago.”

“Okay. Where is your husband from?” She’s still writing in neat cursive handwriting across a large white legal pad. I exam- ine Tara across her desk, and I decide that I like her. It takes a

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real woman to let her hair go gray like that without trying to dye it. She’s confident, and knows who she is. She’s probably never had to think twice before introducing herself.

“He’s from here. I moved east to be with him.”

“So, what are you saying, exactly?” Tara’s large brown eyes flicker with sympathy behind her glasses. It’s pretty clear that she knows where this is going, and that the information she’s about to give me is not what I want to hear. “You want to take the child away from his father?”

It’s a question I’ve been trying to answer myself since this whole mess started. Owen might be a lot of things, but he’s not a bad father, and a boy needs his father. I don’t want Bo to grow up without that relationship in his life, but I can’t stay in Connecticut when my entire life is back in Chicago. I’m go- ing to be a single mom. I need my own parents, and my own friends, and to be comfortable in my home. People say it takes a village to raise a child, and my village is in Illinois, not Con- necticut. What other choice do I have? “I want to go home. I know that taking Bo away from Owen isn’t ideal, but I’m his primary guardian, and I don’t know anyone here. I don’t have any friends. I don’t have a support system, and I have an infant. I want to take Bo to Chicago and start our life over there. Owen can come see him whenever he wants. He has a ton of frequent- flier miles. He travels a lot for work.”

“I understand, Claire. I wish I could tell you that this is go- ing to be an easy battle, but it’s not. Does your husband—”

“Owen. Please just call him Owen.” I feel rude correcting her, but I can’t stand to hear him referred to as *my* anything.

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“If I keep calling him my husband, then I have to keep call- ing myself Claire Mackenzie, and I’d like to rid myself of the moniker as soon as possible.” So far, I’m pretty happy with my performance of “strong woman in lawyer’s office.”

“Does Owen know that you want to go to Chicago?” “Yes,” I admit. “He told me that I can’t go. Do I have to

listen to him?” I know that it’s a stupid question, and one that won’t help my cause of trying not to appear stupid. I suddenly feel like I’ve swallowed nails. I researched this particular di- lemma on the internet, and I know I need his permission to move. I’m just hoping that someone who didn’t get her legal degree from Google would have some better information for me, or some interesting ideas as to how I could get around this particularly annoying law. I glance at the large framed diploma from Yale Law School mounted on the wall above her desk. Yale means she should be able to get creative, and get me the hell out of here without my needing to break mul- tiple federal statutes in the process. Yale means she should be able to fix me.

“Claire, it’s not that simple.”

“Things stopped being simple for me when I discovered this affair, so I don’t find that surprising.” I mean to sound sincere, but I’m afraid it comes off as dismissive. I’m not capable of feel- ing anything at the moment, but if I could, I’d probably feel badly about that.

“Unless Owen gives you permission to take your son out of state you’re going to have a hard time getting a court to give you permission to leave. It’s considered kidnapping.”

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“That’s ridiculous. I can’t kidnap my own kid. I’m his mother.”

“I feel for you, Claire. I really do. I see this all the time. It’s more common than you’d like to believe. I know it’s a horrible situation for you, but legally your options are limited without permission.”

“Oh, okay.” My eyes are dry and itchy and I wonder for a moment if maybe I’ve forgotten to blink since I sat down in this chair. “So he can actually keep me from going home?”

“He can. The law was designed to protect children from be- coming pawns in divorce hearings. It’s meant to provide safety and continuity in the child’s life, and to have both parents pres- ent. Sometimes, unfortunately, those same laws create uncom- fortable situations like the one you’re in right now. I know it’s not what you want to hear, but I want you to understand that realistically there’s not much you can do.”

“He was my only reason for being here. What am I going to do? I haven’t been here long enough to make any kind of life for myself. We moved here a month after I had my son. I don’t know anyone. I barely leave my house.”

“Custody battles are never simple, and there’s not much you can do unless you file suit for sole custody. But, that’s not easy to get either. You would have to prove that Owen is an unfit parent. Do you have leverage you can use against him? Is he involved in Bo’s life?”

“He travels all the time for work. He’s never around. Is that reason enough?”

“Again, I’m sorry, but no. Plenty of parents travel for work

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and if that could be used as a reason to have sole custody then there’d be a lot of women with a major problem, too. When I ask if he’s unfit, I’m referring to drugs, alcohol, abuse, or ne- glect. Has he ever endangered Bo?”

“No,” I admit. “I have a better shot at being able to prove him to be an unfit human than an unfit parent. Owen loves him. He travels a lot, but when he does he always calls home and talks to him on FaceTime and he always goes directly into his room when he gets home late to kiss him good night. He even wakes up with him in the morning most weekends so he can have some one-on-one time with him and so that I can sleep in. The only leverage I have is that he cheated on me in my own house. Is that enough to get sole custody?”

“No. It’s not. It sounds to me like you’re going to have to work out a joint custody schedule where you both are involved in Bo’s life. If Owen wants to be a part of his parenting, then a court will rule that it’s best for Bo to let him. You just described a loving father.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding that any of this is happening, and now you’re basically telling me that there’s nothing I can do?”

“Imagine what the courts hear every day, Claire. There’s child abuse, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, violence, neglect—they’ve seen it all. An ex-girlfriend breaking up your marriage . . . well, I know it seems like the end of the world to you, but it’s not.”

“So what are you saying?” I ask, even though I fully under- stand what she’s saying. There’s no way out for me. I’m stuck. “The deciding factor in cases like these is what’s in the best

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interest of the child—not what’s in the best interest of the wife. I know it’s hard to hear, but relocation is very hard to win un- less the man involved has some really serious demons. Is he offering to pay you child support?”

“Yes. He said he’d pay me alimony, too, and that I could keep the house.” Somehow, as this conversation progresses, Owen’s managing to look more and more like a good guy. He has no problem paying child support! He’s offering me alimony! He moved out of the house no problem! He won’t contest the di- vorce! What a gem.

Tara removes her glasses and folds them gently on top of the desk blotter. I hold my breath, because I know she’s about to seal my fate, and brace for the impact. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I wish I had some better news for you, but I have to be honest. No judge is going to hear this and think that your moving home and re- moving Bo’s father from his life is the right course of action. If you try to fight this in court, you’ll lose. I don’t want to waste your time, money, or energy pursuing that option.”

“I see.”

“The rights of the parent are paramount to everything else. Without his permission you don’t have much of a case, and I don’t want to give you false hope. If he decides to let you go, then we can have a very different conversation. What you need to focus on is setting up a joint custody agreement you’ll both be happy with. That’s your goal as your divorce moves forward.” This is my new résumé: Claire Stevens–then Mackenzie– then Stevens again, Connecticut divorcée, mother of one, wife

of no one, lonely, isolated, thirty-six-year-old mess.

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“What about the girlfriend? My son is only eight months old. He can’t tell me what’s going on in Owen’s house. I don’t want her around my Bo. Please tell me that there’s something I can do to prevent her from being in his life.”

“There is. You can absolutely work that out in the custody agreement, and considering Bo’s age, and the fact that your husband and the other woman haven’t been together for a long time, you can definitely restrict her access to him. We can take care of that, no problem.”

“Okay, good. That’s something.”

“We’ll work out a custody situation you’re comfortable with. If Owen violates the agreement in any way, then you may have a few more options, but let’s talk about that if it happens.”

“Okay. Thank you for your time. I guess it’s helpful to know where I stand.” It’s the first time since this started that I feel like I really understand anything, even if it’s something that I don’t want in the slightest. Nothing else in my life makes any sense at all, but at least I have some clarity as to where I’ll be living. That’s good. That’s a good thing. I need to try and find the smallest sliver of a bright side in all of this because if there’s not one I’ll probably go to bed and stay there forever.

“We’ll still file for divorce. If he’s agreed to give you child support and alimony it should be pretty straightforward, and easy. I want to help you, Claire. If anything changes and you can bring me something we can use to show a judge that Owen is unfit, we can go over your options again.”

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“I understand. Send me whatever papers you need to send me in order to get the divorce started. Thank you.” I exit her office and walk through the waiting room, the sleeve unraveler, the fake reader, and the game player all still in their seats. Maybe they’ll have better luck.