

## Chapter 1

### Claire

I'm on my way home from dropping off the kids at school when he pulls me over. I see the lights in my rearview mirror seconds before he hits the siren, giving it two short bursts. I'm not speeding, or in violation of any traffic laws that I know of, but I pull to the shoulder and the police car slows to a stop behind my bumper. When the officer walks up to the driver's-side window, I hit the button to lower it.

"Did you know you have a taillight out, ma'am?" he asks.

"Really?" I crane my neck to look behind me—as if I could possibly see it from inside the car—and immediately feel foolish.

"Yes," he says. "Passenger side. Can I see your license and registration and proof of insurance?"

I nod. "Sure."

He doesn't look like any cop I've ever seen. He looks like a model pretending to be a police officer for a photo shoot. Or maybe one of those cops who shows up at a bachelorette party and then strips down to his underwear.

Suddenly, I can't remember where anything is.

He waits patiently while I locate the necessary documents in the console and pry my license out of my wallet. I hand everything to him and he takes it to his car, and when he returns he leans down by my window and hands it all back.

Up close, I notice that his eyes are green, the exact shade of a piece of sea glass I found on the

shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico two years ago when Chris and I took the kids to South Padre Island. He must be six two or three, and he's lean but broad shouldered. He doesn't look older than mid to late thirties, but there are a few flecks of gray in his dark hair, which only enhance his good looks. So unfair. He rips a piece of paper off the pad he's holding, glances down at the name he's written on it, and looks back up. "Claire?"

"Yes."

He hands me the ticket. "It's just a warning," he says, reading my expression and smiling to dispel my worry that I'm about to get slapped with a fine. His teeth are white and perfectly straight. "Have it taken care of as soon as possible, okay? It isn't safe."

"I will," I say, looking down at the ticket. It's been signed by Officer Daniel Rush. "Thank you."

He nods. "Have a nice day."

When I return home, my husband, Chris, is standing in the kitchen, a cup of coffee in his hand. He's wearing jeans and a polo shirt in accordance with casual Friday, and he smells like the cologne I gave him for his birthday.

"Have you seen my watch?" he asks, in lieu of a proper greeting. I unearth it under a stack of mail on the counter, and he straps it on. "Did you drive the kids to school?"

"Yes," I say, setting down my purse on the island. "Last day," I add, because even though I mentioned it, there's a fairly good chance Chris forgot; he's got other things, important things, to focus on right now. "I wanted to hand deliver the gifts for their teachers. I wasn't sure they'd arrive in one piece if they took them on the bus."

The kids are a safe topic, and politely exchanging information regarding their whereabouts and well-being has become our fallback method of communication. Neither of us raises our voice. I once read an article in a women's magazine that said it's a really bad sign when you and your spouse stop arguing. It means that you've given up and no longer care about saving your marriage. I hope that's not true, but I worry that it probably is. I walk to the dishwasher and start unloading it, not bothering to tell

Chris about the taillight; I'll take care of it myself.

He opens the cupboard, grabs the pill bottle, and shakes a capsule into his hand, swallowing it with water. He's probably wondering if I'll say something about the pills, but I won't. I never do. He's whistling and seems eager to head out the door this morning; I should just be grateful he has a job to go to, because the twelve months we spent at home together when he was out of work were almost our undoing. Still might be. He grabs his laptop and car keys, says good-bye, and walks out the door without kissing me.

I finish unloading the dishwasher. Tucker scratches and whines at the sliding glass door, and I open it. "Go, Tuck," I say, watching as he takes off in hot pursuit of a squirrel. He never catches them because the squirrel will scamper to safety on top of our fence long before he reaches it, but that seldom stops him from trying.

It's quiet now. I pour a cup of coffee and gaze out the window as summer beckons.

I open the door to seven-year-old Jordan's room, my arms full of clean laundry. She's made her bed without being asked, and her stuffed animals are lined up neatly on her pillow. There's nothing on the floor, not a stray sock, not her pajamas, not one of the hundreds of crayons and markers she's always drawing with. Nothing. It used to bother me until my mom pointed out that I did the same thing when I was her age. "Don't go looking for trouble where there is none, Claire. She relishes order the same way you do." I never did grow out of it either, this need to have everything organized, my life segmented neatly into tidy little boxes. How karma must have had a field day with me last year.

I open nine-year-old Josh's door next and immediately trip over a pile of Matchbox cars; it appears there's been a pileup. Josh likes to crash things. He does not, however, share his sister's fondness for neatness and order. I step around the cars and navigate my way across the room, dodging piles of clothes, sports equipment, shoes, and his guitar. His navy blue comforter hangs halfway off the bed, but the sheets are pulled up and both pillows are in the right spot. I'll give him an A for effort. After I put

away the clean clothes I pick up the dirty ones and reverse my steps.

In our bedroom only one side of the bed has been slept in. When he's home, which from now on will be rare, Chris often sleeps on the couch in the family room, a habit he started when his insomnia was at its worst and he didn't want to disturb me with his tossing and turning. In hindsight, I should have insisted that he stay because now I doubt he'll ever return.

I scoop up his boxer shorts and damp towel from the bathroom floor and add them to the pile in my arms, wondering if there will ever be more to life than laundry and sleeping alone in a king-size bed.

My neighbor Elisa walks into my kitchen later that morning, her yoga mat in one hand and a giant bottle of water in the other. Her light brown hair is in a perfect ballerina bun, not a messy one like mine, and her gray yoga pants coordinate nicely with her pink tank top. "I almost got run over crossing the street," she says. "What the *hell* is wrong with people? Do they not realize how many kids are in this neighborhood?" Elisa is a born and bred Texas girl whose husband, Skip, brought her back to his home state of Kansas after college, and when she's riled up you can really hear the twang in her speech.

Elisa and I live in Rockland Hills, an exclusive neighborhood in a suburb of Kansas City. We're on the Kansas side, and the single-family homes are large and stately, with a median price of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The architecture is a mix of styles, designed to lend a unique feel and keep the houses from looking too similar. Chris and I purchased our Tuscan-inspired four-bedroom home five years ago after we fell in love with the warm, earthy hues, expansive terra-cotta tile floors, and wrought-iron sconces. Our furniture is soft and oversize, chosen solely for comfort. We've been happy with this neighborhood except for the fact that the winding, tree-lined streets aren't heavily patrolled and not everyone watches their speed the way they should; the most frequent offenders are the newly licensed offspring of the affluent residents.

I grab my own bottle of water from the fridge. "Maybe we can check into getting one of those speed limit signs. You know, the ones that blink?" I ask.

"We need something. I can't believe how fast that car was going."

I drive us to yoga. When we walk in the front door I feel instantly calmer, the way I always do when I hear the New Age music and smell the lingering scent of incense. A potted aloe vera plant sits on a low table and paintings from local artists adorn the sage-green walls. It's all very soothing.

After we stow our gear in the locker room we stake out a spot in the back row of the studio, sitting cross-legged on our mats while we wait for the class to start. "I've got a taillight out. Can you pick me up after I drop off my car?" I ask.

"Sure," she says, stretching her arms over her head. "When?"

I take a sip from my water bottle. "I don't know. I'll call and make an appointment when I get home. I need to take care of it as soon as possible."

"Did you get pulled over?" she asks.

"Yes, this morning. By the most ridiculously good-looking cop I've ever seen."

She raises an eyebrow and grins. "Do tell."

"There's not much to it," I say, chuckling. "I was so flustered I couldn't remember where I kept my registration. It was like my brain left the building. He was nice, though." I don't tell Elisa that my mind keeps flashing back to this morning. I don't tell her that I keep thinking about the officer's smile. Maybe it's some kind of latent cop fantasy I didn't know I had. Maybe it's because it's been so long since my husband paid any attention to me at all. Maybe it's because I'm so damn lonely. It's not like it matters, anyway. There are approximately twenty-two thousand residents in this town, and the odds of running into him again are not that great.

They're not horrible, though.

I realize that these are not the thoughts of a happily married woman, but at the moment I am not very happily married.

After we return from yoga I take a shower and work on my laptop for a few hours, then cross the street to take a plate of cookies and a bowl of fruit salad over to Elisa's. Her and Skip's contemporary two-story is the polar opposite of mine: It boasts sleek, modern furniture and clean lines, and the color

palette features icy blues and soft grays.

Elisa's the consummate entertainer, and her end-of-the-school-year party has become a tradition on our street with the adults looking forward to it almost as much as the kids do. I help her set up a long table on her covered patio, and we stack paper plates and sort plastic utensils. Elisa fans out a pile of brightly colored napkins.

It's barely June, but a fluke heat wave has stalled over the Midwest, and the record-breaking temperature hovers near eighty-seven. The heat and humidity make it feel as if my neighborhood has been relocated to a tropical island.

"What time are you coming over?" Elisa asks.

"Five thirty. Chris said he'd be home on time."

My guess is that Chris will still be the last one to leave the office today. If past behavior is any indication, it won't take long for Chris's workaholic tendencies to kick in, weekends and holidays be damned.

We stand back and survey our work. "I think I'm all set," Elisa says. "Thanks for helping."

"Sure. See you in a little while."

She waves. "Bye, Claire."

I'm waiting on the sidewalk an hour later when the school bus pulls up. Jordan is the first child off, and she flies down the steps and into my arms, her backpack bulging with all the treasures that used to live in her desk. She cradles a figurine in her hands; it looks like a turtle. Or maybe it's a swan. I don't dare ask. "I made you a peacock, Mommy," she says, proudly handing it over. Her expression turns somber. "Please don't break this one."

I examine the peacock and kiss her on the forehead. "It's beautiful, honey. I'll be more careful. I promise."

Jordan looks like me, except her hair is a mass of short, sunshiny-blond ringlets. My hair is longer, the curls stretching into waves that reach my shoulder blades, and at thirty-four I need a boost from

quarterly highlights to help brighten the shade. My daughter and I share the same small nose and full lips, but she has dimples and a smattering of freckles across her cheeks. She takes my breath away.

Josh, who follows sedately behind his sister, takes after Chris. He has the same golden-boy good looks that attracted me to his father twelve years ago when we were twenty-two and fresh out of college, the ink barely dry on our degrees, Chris's in business and marketing and mine in graphic design. They're the kind of features—distinct, symmetrical, strong—that make people listen to what you have to say, buy what you're selling. When Mindy, my best friend from college, received our Christmas card and family photo a few years ago, she jokingly asked, “Has anyone ever mentioned you all look a little Stepfordish?”

I suppose we do. I'm the anomaly, though. We all have blond hair, but only Chris and the kids have blue eyes. Mine are brown.

“How was the last day of school?” I ask, taking Jordan's hand and reaching over to ruffle Josh's hair.

“Awesome!” they answer in unison. We sing a few lines of Alice Cooper's “School's Out” at the top of our lungs and walk into the house. “Who wants a snack?” I ask.

While they're eating peanut butter crackers and sipping juice I go through their backpacks, sorting the contents into piles. “Find a place in your rooms for everything you want to keep, okay?” I put Jordan's peacock on the counter.

Chris walks in the door at 5:29 and sets down his laptop and cell phone. “Daddy!” The kids barrel toward him, and he gathers them in his arms. “Do I have time to change?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say. “We can wait.”

He runs upstairs and returns two minutes later wearing a faded T-shirt and cargo shorts. “All right,” he says, scooping up Jordan and placing her on his shoulders. She beams, liking this happy Daddy. “Let's go.”

We cross the street and walk around to the back of the house. “Greetings, Canton family,” Skip says

as we enter his yard and approach the patio. He scoops me up in a bear hug and kisses me on the cheek. Josh and Jordan scatter, off to join the kids jumping on the trampoline.

Elisa's husband is one of my favorite people. He played football at Baylor, and he's a big strapping guy with broad shoulders and a belly that's just beginning to show the effects of too much beer and barbecue, but he's a teddy bear. I once watched him dodge traffic to rescue a turtle so it wouldn't get run over, and I saw him wipe away tears when ten-year-old Travis—his and Elisa's only child—accepted an award for collecting donations for a family who lost all their possessions in a house fire. And boy does he love his wife.

Skip sets me down and then shakes Chris's hand, clapping him on the back. "How's the job going, man?"

I tense up, forgetting for a moment that this question is preferable to "Have you found a job yet?" which is what everyone wanted to know for the twelve months Chris didn't have one. Chris answers that it's only been a month but so far things are going well, then ambles off in search of a beer, oblivious to the blip on my emotional radar. Oblivious of me entirely.

I survey the group on the patio. Julia and Justin, who live behind me and Chris, are sitting next to each other holding drinks. Justin has a beer while Julia clenches her customary glass of chardonnay; I won't know until I talk to her how many she's already had at home. Bridget and Sam and their brood, who live next door to us, our houses so close I can sometimes smell what Bridget's cooking for dinner if the windows are open, have yet to arrive. They're perpetually late; the wrangling of four boys, each born eighteen months after the last, is such a daunting task that they've mostly given up. "We'll be there when we get there," Bridget likes to say.

Justin has registered our arrival, and his eyes linger on me a bit too long. He rises from his chair and walks toward me, handing me the can of Diet 7Up he plucked from the cooler on the way. "Hey, Claire," he says, kissing me on the cheek, eyes scanning leisurely from head to toe. "You look great."

I doubt my shorts and tank top will win any fashion contests, but I smile and open the can of pop.

“Thanks.” This one-sided flirtation, which first developed at Elisa and Skip’s Christmas party when Justin complimented my dress and then, after having way too much to drink, gave me a kiss under the mistletoe that was definitely outside the parameters of acceptable neighbor behavior, has chugged along harmlessly since December. His confidence in his own appearance borders on arrogance, and I doubt he’s ever been turned down in his life. But there are many reasons I’d never open that can of worms, not the least of which is my friendship with Julia. It’s nice to be noticed, though.

Justin gives me a knowing grin and then drifts off to join the men clustered near the grill. Skip takes the platter Elisa hands him and begins slapping burgers and hot dogs down on the grate. The smell of charcoal and sizzling beef fills the air. The husbands stand around watching the meat cook, drinking their beer, while the wives congregate on the patio. Even after all this time, our teen years far behind us, the boys are still across the room from the girls.

I sit down next to Julia and do a quick scan of the yard. Josh and Jordan have moved on from the trampoline and are playing freeze tag with Travis while Julia’s daughters are sipping juice boxes and playing with their Polly Pockets. Elisa drops into a chair next to me and opens a beer. “Do you need help with anything?” I ask.

She tucks a tendril of hair behind her ear and exhales. “Nope. Skip’s handling the meat and everything else is ready. I just want to sit for a minute.”

Julia swivels toward us. “I have big news,” she says. Her eyes are glassy and her words are clipped, but she’s not slurring. Two glasses at home, I’d say. Generous pours. Julia weighs all of one hundred and five pounds and can’t hold her wine at all, though not for lack of trying. Her brown hair is cut in a sleek, chin-length bob that frames her pretty face, and her blue baby-doll dress brings out the color of her eyes. But her skin is starting to show the effects of daily alcohol consumption, flushed or sallow depending on whether she’s drunk or hungover, and she always looks tired.

Julia pauses for dramatic effect and then says, “Justin and I are putting in a pool. It’s a bit late in the season—we really should have gotten the ball rolling in the spring—but Justin’s big commission finally

came through, so we decided to go for it.” Justin is some kind of commercial real estate whiz, and I can’t help but be impressed that he’s still able to do so well in this economy. We listen as Julia shares the pool’s dimensions and the fact that there will be not one, but two waterfalls. Construction will begin immediately, and if everything goes according to schedule, they’ll be jumping off the diving board by the end of July.

Elisa, the eternal hostess, asks all the right follow-up questions and Julia prattles on, enjoying the spotlight, but then she stops suddenly and pulls a bottle—no, actually it’s a jug—of cheap chardonnay out of the cooler and tops off her glass, concentrating on not spilling a drop. The fact that her next drink has so quickly replaced her enthusiasm about the pool worries me more than a little.

Bridget, looking harried, finally arrives with her four boys, but Sam does not accompany them and I wonder if we’ll be graced with his presence at all; I can’t remember the last time I saw him.

Skip calls out that the meat is done and everyone lines up. I make sure Josh and Jordan eat something other than potato chips and add some fruit and baby carrots to their plates. Justin brings me another Diet 7Up, smiling and popping the top before handing it to me.

After dinner I coat my children in a heavy cloud of bug spray, which they protest against. Loudly. “You’ll thank me tomorrow when you’re not covered in mosquito bites,” I tell them. “We’ll make s’mores and light sparklers in a little while, okay?” I send them off to play with the rest of the kids.

Fourteen-year-old Sebastian, Bridget’s oldest, has become our de facto DJ, and the iPod blasts a variety of tunes, everything from Skip’s classic country to Elisa’s adult contemporary and Travis’s hip-hop.

Chris stands in the yard next to Skip and Justin. The smell of cigar smoke permeates the air, and their laughter mingles with the music. It’s nice to see Chris with a smile on his face, even if it isn’t for me. He’s gained back a little of the weight he lost and his shorts don’t look so baggy anymore. His body language—shoulders back, head held a bit higher than before—tells me he’s feeling a little better about himself. Watching Chris interact with the other men is bittersweet. Six months ago he might have stayed

home, but now that he's here I can't help but wonder how he can effortlessly return to the way things were with his friends yet find it so difficult to get into some kind of groove with me.

The sun sets, and Justin finds me on the patio. He sits down in the chair Julia vacated when she went in to use the restroom. He says something, but I can't hear him over the music. Leaning over, he brushes my hair out of the way and says, "Julia won't mind if I take her chair." His lips graze my ear, and his fingers trail down my neck, unnoticed in the darkness.

I've known Justin for two years, ever since he and Julia moved into the neighborhood, and he's never paid this much attention to me before. Can men sense when a woman is sexually frustrated? Maybe it's like those high-pitched whistles only dogs can hear.

Justin looks up when Julia comes back outside, but he doesn't move away. I fidget and check to make sure my body language isn't giving either of them the wrong idea; I don't want Julia to think I'm remotely interested in her husband. Then again, she doesn't appear to be all that observant right now. She trips and I'm embarrassed for her, so I don't say anything. She sits down next to me. "What's going on?" She's slurring a bit and has the hiccups. I don't say anything about that, either. Justin pretends not to notice any of this, though how he can ignore it I'm not sure. "Do you want some water?" I ask, as the hiccupping sends her into a fit of giggles.

"Nope," she says, with the cheerful disposition of someone who has bypassed buzzed and is heading full speed toward blissfully wasted.

Julia never used to act this way, but in the last year her drinking has increased dramatically. I'm certain there's a reason, something it can be attributed to. None of us are doing her any favors by pretending not to notice, and someone really needs to say something. I vote for Justin. Maybe he's already tried.

Elisa brings out marshmallows, chocolate bars, and graham crackers, and Skip threads the marshmallows onto skewers and toasts them over the grill. The music is way too loud, and Bridget tells Sebastian to turn it down, threatening him with his life if he so much as glances at the volume dial on

the iPod. “Where did you say Sam is?” Elisa asks when Bridget plunks herself down in the nearest chair.

“At the track.” She shrugs. “Or the casino. I don’t know. Does it matter?” Bridget glances over to where Chris is helping the kids with their sparklers, making sure they put the burned out ones in a metal bucket so no one will step on them. She watches as Skip hands Chris a skewer and he slides off the toasted marshmallow and sandwiches it between a chocolate bar and a graham cracker, handing it to whoever is next in line.

“I wish Sam was more like Chris,” she says.

*No, you don’t.*

But Bridget can’t see the forest for the trees and doesn’t realize there’s a big difference between a good father and a good husband, and she probably doesn’t care. Greener grass and all that. She doesn’t know the mess Chris and I have made of our marriage. Neither does Julia. Elisa is the only one I share my secrets with. I’ve worked hard to keep the facade of this marriage, this life, intact, but only to avoid becoming fodder for the neighborhood gossip mill.

Frankly, I’m exhausted.

It’s late. We gather up our children, who are tired and sticky with marshmallows and chocolate, and say our good-byes.

We’re the Cantons. Sun-kissed, all-American, picture-perfect. By all appearances, we’re the ideal suburban family.

As long as you don’t look too closely.

## Chapter 2

### Chris

On Monday morning, I stop for coffee on the way to the airport. The line for the drive-through at Starbucks reaches clear around the building and tapping impatiently on the steering wheel does nothing to make it move faster. I take a deep breath and remind myself that I've allowed plenty of time to get to the airport, and I'm in no danger of missing my flight.

Stopping at this Starbucks has become part of my new routine, and worrying about my rapidly increasing caffeine consumption accomplishes nothing, so I don't. I don't let myself worry about all this travel, either. I didn't have any choice. Claire understands; she gave me her blessing. Reluctantly, but still. The kids, though. That's another story. I try my best not to think about it.

I'm grateful to be able to spend one day at company headquarters, but my cube's chest-high walls provide zero privacy. I loathe open-plan offices, but a lot of the big software companies have embraced it like it's the next big thing. Whoever said it was better for company morale and collaboration has never tried to get anything done. The constant interruptions are a productivity killer, at least for me, which is why I don't arrive at the office earlier than 8:00 A.M. on Fridays; I get more done at home.

I miss my old company, which had one thousand fewer employees than this one. I miss my old office, with its four real walls and a door that closed.

I miss my kids and my house, and even though she probably wouldn't believe me if I told her so, I miss Claire.

I miss a lot of things.

## Chapter 3

### Daniel

Traffic is light on the parkway a little after 10:00 A.M on Monday morning. Drivers who aren't speeding slow down anyway, and the ones who are going too fast slam on their brakes when they notice my police car in their rearview mirrors. I pull them over and listen to the same worn-out excuses before I write them a ticket. A man wearing a three-piece suit and driving a BMW rolls his eyes and mutters under his breath when I hand over the citation for speeding. I stand there until he looks at me. "Slow down," I say, and I don't smile when I say it.

The next car I pull over has a woman behind the wheel. She gets pissy almost immediately, exhaling loudly and glancing at her watch like I've ruined her morning on purpose. "Do you have any idea how fast you were going, ma'am?" My guess is no, because using her rearview mirror to apply her makeup and talking on the phone probably used up all her awareness. "The speed limit on this stretch is fifty-five. I clocked you going seventy."

She opens her mouth, ready to protest, but then hands me the documents I asked for and sighs loudly. "I'm going to be late," she says. She pulls a lipstick out of her purse and goes to town on her mouth as I walk back to my car.

I patrol the parkway until lunchtime and then pull into Subway to grab a sandwich and a Coke to take back to the station. Later I'll head toward the suburbs, hoping that it's quiet and that there are no unpleasant surprises waiting for me, like a missing child or a domestic dispute.

I think back to the woman I pulled over the other day. The pretty blonde in the SUV with a burned-out taillight. I remember her smile and how nice she was.

And how for the rest of my shift I kept picturing her face because she reminded me so much of Jessie.