

~~A~~HER

Perfect  
Life

Rebecca Taylor



CHAPTER 1

# Eileen



SHE WAS HAVING ONE OF THOSE *EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE* MOMENTS their therapist was often trying to get her to understand. All the signs were there: short temper, racing thoughts, catastrophic thinking—check, check, and check. All confirmed and completely undeniable in light of the huge fight she and Eric had last night.

The memory of it, with the morning hangover beginning to bloom, made her take a breath and hold it tight. Shit, what exactly had she been raving about? Because all of it was absolutely going to get rehashed at therapy next week. Eric certainly would not forget her every word; he never did. Eileen placed both her elbows on the desk and her head in her hands.

“A whole bottle of cab,” she whispered to herself, shaking her head. “Come on, Eileen.” The normally endearing expression broke her. The tears gathered and pooled behind her closed eyes.

Eric hadn’t sung her that song in years.

No, not now. She sat up and checked the time on the computer screen. Shit and shit...what had she been doing? Twenty minutes

before they were all supposed to be out the door, and not a single one of her kids was even out of bed. Lunches, the laundry she didn't move from the washer to the dryer last night, homework? Had she checked homework last night?

Time hated her—and it was so clearly personal.

Eighteen minutes. An impossibility. A series of miracles would not save them this morning. Everyone would be late, again. Well, everyone except Eric, of course. Eric was already out of the house, showered, dressed, pressed, and cologned. His lunch—the only one he ever packed—would be placed calmly and professionally onto the back seat of his immaculate and always client-ready car.

This, she remembered suddenly, is what had started the fight last night.

“I'm tired. I'm tired of doing everything,” she had finally managed to say, standing at the sink and slamming a cast-iron frying pan into the stainless steel tub hard enough to dent it.

“Just tell me!” Eric said, throwing both his hands over his head. “What the hell do you want me to do?”

“Why do I have to tell you? Look around, Eric. The *To Do* is all around you. For fuck's sake, pick *anything*! Because I can't manage the kids, the house, the bills, the yard, the every-fucking-thing anymore. My car! My car has not had the oil changed in a year!”

“What?” Startled, he shook his head as if *this* was the most disturbing thing, the most pressing concern. “Eileen! A year?” His tone was accusing. “You're lucky it's still running. You can't let that go like that.”

She stared at him. A swift and unexpected calm moved over her so fast it made the hair at the back of her neck stand up. She couldn't

make him understand, but she absolutely knew what the next words out of her mouth needed to be.

“Will you please take my car and get the oil changed.” It wasn’t a question. It was a concession. She was telling him what to do. Never mind it solved nothing. Never mind her only thought was the impossibility of him ever understanding. Never mind the hopeless feeling creeping up her spine, squeezing her ribs, holding her breath and her words tight in her chest.

Eric looked relieved. “Yes. Yes, tomorrow I’ll take it to my guy down by the office.” For the briefest of moments, he had looked like he might have wanted to come to her at the sink, maybe kiss her forehead. *So happy we resolved all that. See, just tell me.*

She didn’t want his kiss. She wanted him to know how hard it was to make all the pieces keep moving. She wanted him to help, not because she told him or gave him a list, but because he saw their life, their children...her. She wanted him to notice what needed attention because he cared—not because it was assigned.

That was the fight last night, and that was how it ended. Well, and with a bottle of cab as she finished the dishes and Eric retreated to his office for the work he’d brought home.

Fifteen minutes before everyone needed to be in the car.

She sat back in the kitchen chair she used when working on her laptop in the kitchen, felt the tears slide down her cheeks, and considered the implications of calling it a “mental health” day for everyone—not even waking the kids up. Let them sleep, the dogs sleep, the lunches go unmade, the laundry sit in the wash. Crawl back into bed herself even.

Twelve minutes.

An email alert slid onto the screen.

“News: Clare Collins”

Eileen stared at the rectangular notice box for the full five seconds it remained on her screen until it slid back off. She shouldn't. She didn't have time. Plus, there was the whole already “emotionally vulnerable” state of affairs. Reading internet alerts about her sister was almost guaranteed to make her more “emotionally vulnerable.” She had promised herself, weeks ago, that she was going to turn these notifications off.

She stood up and walked to the bottom of the stairs. “Ryan! Paige! Cameron! Get up! Get ready!” she shouted before heading back to her computer.

*Just a quick look*, she told herself.

When she had learned you could do this, years ago, she thought it would be an easy way to keep up on any of the latest news about her sister and her books. Eileen never dreamed she would end up getting anywhere between five to ten alerts a day. She had always known her sister was a successful author. She could plainly see the evidence of it on the shelves of every store she walked into that sold books. It was only after she started reading about every book tour, new book contract, foreign rights deal, charity luncheon, celebrity book club endorsement, film adaptation option—only after seeing regular and daily evidence in the news of her sister's extreme success—that Eileen realized Clare was much more than a

successful author whose books flew off the shelves and into shopping carts.

No. Her sister, Clare Collins, was, according to *Forbes*, one of the *Ten highest paid authors in the world*. Eileen remembered that morning, four or five years ago, staring at that ridiculously high number next to her sister's name sitting at the number-six spot on the *Forbes* list.

Fourteen million.

Dollars.

In a single year.

Her sister, the girl who had once shared a bedroom with her... who had loved eating Kraft Macaroni & Cheese after school...who used to sit next to her on their sagging couch and fight with her over the remote, now earned lottery win—levels of dollars—every year.

Eileen clicked open the email and steeled herself for whatever fresh self-esteem low she was about to plunge into.

It was a picture of Clare, poised and statuesque, long neck, face turned slightly away from the camera so her chiseled cheekbones and prominent chin were captured perfectly. A long, pale-blue dress looked poured over her toned body, revealing every tightly calculated proportion as it spilled into a short train over the red carpet beneath her silver-stilettoed feet. The second shot was from behind. Clare's long, auburn hair was styled in an updo so the dress's plunging back would not be hidden beneath her silky waves. The only flaw, if you could even call it that, was the hint of Clare's black inked tattoo, barely visible on her shoulder blade, creeping out from behind the dress. It hardly showed. Probably most people wouldn't even notice it—most people didn't even know Clare had that tattoo.

Eileen remembered the day she got it.

“Mom?”

Startled, Eileen jumped in her seat and turned to see her sleepy youngest child, Cameron, nowhere even in the ballpark of ready for school. “You’re not dressed.”

“I don’t have any clean shorts.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. Cameron’s load of clean clothes was still sitting in a damp lump in the middle of her washing machine. “I know, I’m sorry.” She racked her brains for some alternative. “We’ll just put what you’re going to wear today in the dryer. It’ll be faster.”

“School starts in five minutes.”

Defeated, and obviously with no good solutions for anything this morning, Eileen nodded at her son.

“Is that Aunt Clare?” he asked, his eyes focused on the screen behind her.

“Yes.”

“Why’s she so dressed up?”

“One of her books was made into a movie, and she went to the premiere last night.”

“Another movie?” Cameron beamed, his excitement erasing the last traces of sleepiness from his face. “Can we go see it?”

The pain—it was a real thing. Jealousy wormed through her gut like an infection. Eileen gave him a weak smile. “Of course.”

Cameron, her most sensitive and emotionally attuned kid, narrowed his eyes at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She turned in her seat and closed the internet

browser on her screen so her glamorous sister was replaced by Eileen's tangled mess of desktop icons.

"Are you sick?" Both of his hands landed on her cheeks and drew her face back to his.

She looked into his bright blue eyes, took a deep breath, sat up straight in her chair, and conjured a real smile. "I'm only a little sick."

"Are you going to stay home today?" The hope in his voice gave away where this questioning would lead.

"No. And neither are you, or your brother, or your sister. We are all pulling it together and getting on with the day," she declared. She stood up and went to drag Ryan and Paige out of bed. "Go pick something to wear out of the washer and put it in the dryer."

Cameron, giving up any last hope that he might spend the day at home playing video games instead of at school, slumped his shoulders and moved like a snail toward the laundry room. "You know, class starts in two minutes," he called back to her.

"Just keep moving," Eileen yelled back. "Faster." Her own slippered feet raced up the stairs. "Paige! Ryan!"

An hour later, and after a frantic search for her car keys, which were eventually found in the sink of the downstairs bathroom, Eileen herded the last of her kids out the front door.

"I forgot my ID," Ryan said, rushing back inside the house.

Eileen closed her eyes and took a breath. Something was wrong with her... It simply wasn't this hard to get three kids to school and herself to work. She knew it. Every day, millions of families all over the world seemed to pull this off, on time.

Ryan finally came barreling back down the stairs, "Got it!" he



said as he raced out the door. Eileen remembered to close the front door and lock it—something that hadn't happened yesterday.

She adjusted her tote and camera bags on her shoulder, leaning to counterbalance the weight, and pressed the unlock button on the key fob several times as she walked down the porch steps. When she rounded the edge of the house and could see the drive, she was surprised to see all three of her children, not inside her car waiting for her, but standing next to Eric's car.

Paige was pulling a large manila envelope from underneath one of the wiper blades on the windshield.

*What is going on? Where is my car? Hasn't Eric already left for work?* Then it hit her—their fight, her assignment for him. “*Will you please take my car and get the oil changed?*”

Ryan snatched the envelope from Paige and turned away from her, protecting the prize. “I'm opening it. It's probably for me!”

“I'm expecting something,” Paige countered, trying to snatch the envelope back.

“I saw it first.” Ryan clutched the envelope to his chest, his body turning and twisting against his sister's every attack attempt.

“Mom?” Cameron asked. “Can I open it? Please?”

They were about to get into a fight—a real one. She could practically smell kid fights rushing in, seconds before someone shoved just a bit too hard, initiating a return strike that actually hurt, leading to a defensive kick—running, arms flailing.

“Stop!” she commanded, rushing into the fray and grabbing the envelope from Ryan. “What is wrong with you two? Get in the car, now!”

“But—”

“Now!” Eileen finished. “For God’s sake, we don’t have time for this.”

“Well, whose fault is that?” Paige added in a withering tone as she sauntered to the front passenger door.

“I’m sitting in front,” Ryan called, rushing to get between his sister and the door. “I called it.”

“You did not!”

“I did! Ask Cameron. I called it before we came outside.”

“You can’t call it when everyone’s not there.”

Movement across the street caught her attention. Her neighbor with her erect spine and size-two body was pretending to not hear this “poor parenting” episode unraveling. Eileen watched as she slipped into her shiny black Mercedes. Her children were already at school. The nanny got them there on time every morning.

“Stop it,” Eileen hissed. “Get in the back, both of you. Cameron’s sitting up front.”

Paige turned on her. “Cameron’s not even old enough—”

“I. Don’t. Care. Get in the back. Now!”

Cameron beamed.

“It’s not fair,” Ryan whined.

Eileen ignored him and unlocked the doors. Finally, everyone got in the car—all unhappy except Cameron.

“What should we listen to?” he asked as he reached for the radio, defining the battleground for the fight that would happen on the drive.

Eileen put the key in the ignition and started the car, the

envelope from the windshield still in her left hand. Eric's full name was handwritten across the front in black Sharpie.

"No!" Paige declared from the back. "We are not listening to country music, Cameron!"

Eileen turned her body in her seat and stuffed the envelope down the side of her tote so she could give it to Eric later.

"No radio." She pushed the off button on the console. "We are having a moment of silence," she finished as she shifted the car into reverse and backed down the drive.



## CHAPTER 2

# Eileen



THE LIGHT WAS BAD. SHE HAD TRIED TO TELL THEM AT THIS TIME of day, on the east side of the lake, that they would be fighting the shadows. But when the client insisted on the location, you gave them what they wanted. Even though you knew ahead of time that it would lead to being unhappy with the results—you did it anyway.

“Okay, Mom and Dad,” Eileen directed from behind her camera. “Let’s try you two facing each other... Not quite that much... There you go.” This whole shoot was turning into a complete disaster. “And we’ll put the two tallest boys right in front of you. And the youngest in front of them, good, good,” Eileen lied and pressed the button of her camera, capturing a series of rapid-fire shots.

“Okay, so,” she started. Their middle child, one of the most sullen, uncooperative children she had ever worked with, refused to do anything but scowl. “I’m wondering if we can get a few with everyone smiling.”

Middle boy narrowed his eyes and deepened the already dark, furrowed creases in his forehead. The father smiled while also

looking completely annoyed, while the mother's eyes gave away her stress. The youngest child, a four-year-old girl in a florescent pink dress that would completely counterbalance every other person in her family wearing jeans and a white shirt, despite Eileen's explicit instructions to avoid white shirts, wandered away from the shot to inspect a black beetle on a flat, smooth stone nearby.

Only their oldest child, a boy of maybe eight, had enthusiastically smiled for every single shot they had taken so far.

Eileen sighed to herself, careful to do her best to hide her frustration from the clients. "Okay, so far so good. I'm thinking maybe now is a good time for a quick five-, ten-minute break."

"Sounds good to me," the father said as he pulled his cell phone from the back pocket of his jeans. The mother nodded and headed for her large purse, which she'd left on a nearby bench.

Eileen turned away from them. *It's money, Eileen.* Family portraits helped pay the mortgage—the same way weddings, graduations, promotional and publicity events, and the occasional bar mitzvah did. Landscapes, stills, and every artistic photo she'd ever taken did not.

"You're lucky to get to do it at all," Eric had snapped when she had once complained to him about a difficult family. "Would you rather be sitting in a cubicle? Would you rather be chained to a desk working on a spreadsheet, writing reports, watching the clock, and praying for five o'clock?" he had continued.

Because that was exactly what she used to do. And she had hated every minute of it.

Eileen closed her eyes, but she kind of hated this too. Not as

much, that was true. At least she got to spend her days with her camera in her hands. And certainly it was miles away from the confinement of the cubicle. But spending her days directing and constructing sullen families into image-worthy poses—it didn't do much to alleviate that sense of abysmal failure that had begun a slow creep into her own life image lately.

Eileen grabbed a new lens and attached it to the front of her camera as she turned back to her client family. The dad was still on his phone, and the mom was waiting for the youngest to finish drinking from her spill-proof cup. That was when Eileen saw it, the top third barely peeking out from the mom's purse—Clare Collins, in a large gold font.

She had seen it in the grocery store just yesterday, her sister's latest hardcover release, *A Perfect Life*, filling the endcaps in the checkout line. She hadn't touched it. She had willfully ignored it, and she certainly hadn't bought it—but here it was, following her, haunting her, reminding her that complete strangers continued to finance and support Clare's art.

"Do you think we can wrap this up soon?" the dad asked, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

"Yes," Eileen agreed. "We've lost the light," she said, despite the fact that they had never had the light to begin with. "In fact...I probably already have something I can use."

Every single one of them looked relieved. Even the middle boy finally smiled, and Eileen, quick with the camera, snapped his picture several times before he could remember to be miserable again.

From the depths of her tote bag, her phone rang. The shrill, old-fashioned ringtone made her put her camera down and race to begin the frantic dig. Her tote was too big, filled with too much crap, and the phone was never, ever in the convenient phone-sized side pocket. By the time she managed to get her hands on it, the ringing had stopped—as usual—and she was left staring at a surprising notification.

Missed call, Simon Reamer

Why was Clare's husband calling her? When was the last time she had even spoken with him?

Christmas—three years ago? They had invited Eileen, Eric, and the kids to spend Christmas with them, in their huge cliffside mansion, and against Eileen's better judgment, they had gone. That was the last time Eileen had spoken with Simon Reamer, thanking him for having them and saying goodbye at the grand entrance to his and Clare's ridiculous house.

Eileen racked her brains. Clare's birthday was tomorrow, her fortieth. Given that Simon had rented out a ballroom at one of the most expensive hotels in San Francisco to celebrate Clare's thirty-fifth birthday with five hundred of her closest admirers, and fans, it wasn't hard to believe that he would be conspiring something completely over the top for her fortieth. Except, her birthday was tomorrow. If Simon were planning something, wouldn't she have received the ornate invitation by mail months ago? It wasn't like Simon to try to get away with a last-minute phone-call invite.

“So,” the father interrupted her thinking. “We’re good? What happens next?”

“Um...” Eileen tore her eyes away from the phone and stopped the thoughts that were forming about her mother and her deteriorating health in their tracks. “So I’ll go through everything we were able to get today and send a selection of proofs for you to review. Once you’ve made some choices, I’ll put the order together for you.”

“Sounds good,” the dad said.

“Thank you again,” the mother added, unable to hide the strain in her voice. She shook Eileen’s hand. “We hope there’ll be some good ones.”

Eileen smiled at her and the kids while the dad headed off to his car, presumably to get back to work. “I’m sure there are—you’re such a photogenic family.” There wasn’t a single good photo of them on her camera; Eileen was almost sure of it.

As the mom shuffled her kids away from the lake and toward her own car, Eileen’s phone beeped another notification.

Voicemail, Simon Reamer

Her mother. Was Simon calling because Clare couldn’t? Had something happened to their mom? Clare had moved Ella into that retirement home right before Eileen and her family had gone out there for Christmas. The Regency in San Francisco, the best care facility to treat Alzheimer’s patients Clare’s money would buy, and close so Clare could visit her regularly.

Had her mother died? Is that why Simon, who never called her,



was calling her now? She finished packing up her equipment, dreading every second that passed, knowing in only a few more moments she would need to stand here and listen to exactly what was going on. She tried to reassure herself that it was likely nothing—but she felt almost certain something was wrong.

She twisted the last of her collapsible light reflectors down into a smaller circle and pushed it into its black zipper case. The sound of her phone ringing again ripped the silence and sent an alarm out across her central nervous system. She lunged for her tote and grabbed her phone.

Simon Reamer

Eileen stared at it while it rang twice more, finally swiping to answer right before it could roll over to voicemail again. “Hello?”

Silence. Did they have a bad connection?

“Hello? Simon?”

“Eileen...Eileen,” Simon said, his voice strained. Was he crying?

She tried to picture Simon crying... She couldn't. “Simon, is something wrong?” she asked. Her limbs suddenly weak, she sat down in the grass next to her bags.

A loud sob, unmistakable, erupted from Simon on the other end of the line. Eileen could hear his breathing, erratic and broken. Guttural sounds, like a wounded animal, kept him from speaking. “She... Oh my God. Oh, my God, Eileen. I'm sorry I can't say it.”

Eileen's heart stopped. Dead in her chest. Frozen, her phone clutched in her hand, she waited for disaster.

“Clare!” he shouted, his sobbing wild with obvious grief. “She... she...”

“Simon,” Eileen whispered into the phone, tears now streaming down her own face even though she had no idea what had happened. “Simon, please. Please tell me what’s happened.”

“She, oh...no, no, no. She’s... I can’t say it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Simon!” Eileen shouted. “What? What is it?”

A long silence stretched across the connection between them. Had she lost him? Had he hung up? A second later, she heard him gasp, then clear his throat. “She’s dead,” he blurted. His next inhale was deep. He held it for a long time. “I’m sorry, but she’s dead. I needed to tell you myself...before you heard it...somewhere else.”

“Clare?” Eileen whispered. “Clare?”

Another sob from Simon. “Clare,” he said.

A feather, long and bright white, lay in a tangle of brown grass and small stones a few feet away. Eileen stared at it. Cameron would want that. She should collect it and bring it home for him.

“Eileen? Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Can you...can you come? I need, um...I need help.”

“Yes. I’ll come,” she said, pulling her eyes from the feather. “How? What happened?” And when? Hadn’t she just this morning read about Clare attending the premiere of her movie last night? Was this even possible?

Simon sobbed uncontrollably into the phone.

“Simon.” She kept her voice steady, her mom voice, the one she’d used when Ryan broke his arm. “I’m coming. I’ll get a flight

today. Tonight,” she corrected. She’d need to make so many arrangements before walking out of her house with a suitcase. “But please, try to tell me what happened.” Because Simon was right, the news would be reporting on Clare’s death soon. They might already have more details than Eileen did. She didn’t want to hear about it from the internet.

“Eileen...she shot herself.” His voice was barely audible over the cell connection, but Eileen heard enough to understand perfectly.

She just couldn’t believe it.

“No,” Eileen said, her voice more matter-of-fact than she had intended. “Clare wouldn’t...” Would she?

“People are here... I have to go. There’s some other problem. Please let me know what flight you’re on,” Simon said, and hung up.

She sat, her phone pressed to her ear for a long time after the call had ended. Clare Collins was beautiful, talented, successful, internationally adored—but that wasn’t what made it impossible for Eileen to believe her sister had committed suicide.

Long before Clare had become Clare Collins, she had been a force in the world. Audacious, fearless even. It didn’t add up. It didn’t make sense.

Why?

Why?

“Why would you do it, Clare?” she breathed.

She looked for the feather to take home for Cameron, but it was gone.



CHAPTER 3

# Simon



Two years before Clare's death

"SIMON!" CLARE CALLED. HER BARE FEET RACED ONE AFTER THE other down the west side of the split marble staircase. "Simon! The internet is down!"

Simon Reamer, Clare Collins's husband and literary agent, sat at their kitchen table listening to his wife's voice echo through the hallways of their massive home. *Think, think, think*, he pleaded with his brain to come up with an acceptable excuse that she would believe. Because if she knew he had unplugged their modem to keep her from reading the *New York Times Book Review*—she would kill him.

"Simon!"

"In here!" he called back, his eyes closed, dreading the whole rest of this Sunday.

He couldn't keep it from her forever. He had slipped from their bed while it was still dark out, long before her alarm was set to go off, careful to take Charlie from his dog bed with him so the

six-month-old Maltese wouldn't wake her. He had a bad feeling about this book. He needed to see for himself before Clare did.

With the puppy curled on his lap, Simon had pulled up the review section prepared to scan for the write-up of Clare's latest release, *If You Knew Her*. He didn't need to hunt for it; *If You Knew Her* was this week's lead title.

With one hand resting on Charlie's soft head, he scrolled down the page as his eyes raced over the recent National Book Award-winner, Donna Mehan's, scathing takedown of Clare's book. He finally reached its painful final conclusion, "Collins seems to have lost her footing, or perhaps worse, taken on characters and subjects beyond her ability to effectively convey." Simon sat back in his leather office chair and tilted his head back, eyes focused on the ceiling above him where his wife, and client, still slept, blissfully unaware of this public fallout.

She would hide it, even from him—but this was going to devastate her.

Without thinking, Simon stood up with Charlie cradled in his arms, opened the cabinet on the wall, and pulled the plug on the modem. "Come on, Charlie, let's get you outside."

"Simon," Clare said again, arriving at the entrance to the kitchen still in her midnight-blue satin pajama set with the matching robe cinched tight around her waist. Her hair, not yet brushed, hung over her shoulders just past her breasts.

Before they had gotten married, he had wondered if his amazement about this woman would eventually fade—if waking up to her every day for a lifetime might become commonplace. From his place

at the kitchen table, his coffee still steaming, his toast now cold, he looked up into her frustrated expression. It had been fourteen years since he met her and six since their wedding day—she still devastated him. His chest tight with fear, he looked into her dark brown eyes.

“Yes? What’s up?”

Her eyes flew wide with irritation. “Didn’t you hear me? The internet! It’s down!”

“Is it? That’s weird. I’m sure it’s the service provider. They’ll have it up soon enough.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Want some?”

Clare stood at the kitchen door, one hand on her hip, staring him down. She narrowed her eyes, then turned on a dime and headed across the marble entrance.

“Clare!” he called, sloshing his coffee down his T-shirt. “Shit. Clare, wait!” he shouted after her.

She was already past the mahogany circular table with this week’s large floral display featuring five dozen white roses and light-blue hydrangeas, shoots of spiky green somethings that Simon couldn’t identify reaching tall with the purple hollyhock. Her robe fluttered out behind her, her bare feet silent but determined and headed right for his office door.

“Please,” he begged her.

She turned the handles on the double doors to his office and flung them both wide before her. In two steps, Clare had her hands on the cabinet hiding the modem and other various wires and receivers from view. By the time he reached her, she had the modem in her hands and was inspecting the backside.

“The provider is down?” she asked, her tone clearly accusing.

She grabbed the exact right cable and plugged it into the exact right port. Shit, he didn't even think she knew what a modem was. "How bad is it?" she asked, closing the cabinet and turning back to him. "I mean, for you to do this and imagine for even half a second you'd get away with it. It must be bad, right?"

Simon, his shoulders limp with defeat, stared at his wife. "It's bad, yes."

Clare's chin jutted forward, her nostrils flared slightly as she sucked in air and filled her chest. "Okay," she said, exhaling long and hard. She closed her eyes, shook her head once, and shrugged. "What can you do?" She was talking to herself. "A bad review from Donna Mehan...in the *Times*." She paced toward his desk, then back. "How bad? Be honest, because I'm going to go upstairs and read it anyway as soon as I calm down."

Simon hesitated for a moment. There was no way to even soft-sell it. The review was brutal. "Scathing," he said.

Clare sucked another lungful of air through her nose, chest full, shoulders wide, her hair a tangled halo around her face. "That bitch," she hissed. "That pompous, full-of-herself...overrated, bitch!" Clare spun away from him and headed for the office doors.

"Clare." He trailed after her. "Don't—"

"Don't what?" she snapped, already climbing back up the stairs.

"Don't do anything you'll regret." He raced after her and Charlie, the dog's long white hair bouncing as he chased his mom up the stairs. The puppy clearly thought this whole morning was fantastic fun.

"Like what? Shoving Donna Mehan's National Book Award right up her tight ass?"

“Yes, obviously don’t do that. But moreover...” On the landing halfway up, where the single staircase split into two, he caught up to her and managed to grab hold of her wrist. Clare stopped and faced him. “I need you to make me a promise.”

“What?” she snapped.

“No social media. Not today, not tomorrow...not for the whole week, in fact.”

“That’s barbaric.”

“Can you honestly tell me you’re capable of not biting right now?”

“Of course not.”

“Exactly my point, and you haven’t even read the review yourself yet. When that happens, your head is going to explode right off your shoulders. In that frame of mind, well, I don’t like to even imagine the flame war you’re likely to start.” He tried smiling at her.

Clare pursed her lips and turned her head, softening...barely.

Simon took a step closer, then another, daring to pull his seething wife to him. He wrapped his arms around her. Charlie, feeling left out, pawed at their legs. Simon lowered his lips to her ear, “Besides, you’re setting a bad example for Charlie.”

They both looked down at the fluffy Maltese, wagging his tail, tongue hanging from his mouth. Clare’s shoulders sank a few inches.

“Oh, you damn dog,” she whispered, and bent down to pick up his squirming, happy body. “How’s a woman supposed to stay enraged at her mortal enemy with you and that stupid cute face always ruining the moment?” She nuzzled the dog’s ear and took a deep breath. “Fine,” she said to Simon. “I promise, no social media for the day.”



“For the week.”

Clare scowled at him, but Charlie licked her face. “This dog, he’s your dirtiest trick yet.”

“A week?” He kissed her other cheek, then her lips.

“Fine, a week,” she said, pulling away. “But if I’m even still a little mad by next Sunday,” Clare declared and started back up the stairs with Charlie in her arms, “I’m going to find a way to publicly annihilate that puffed-up bitch. But don’t worry, it’ll be subtle.”

So, that was settled. The plan was a *subtle, public annihilation*—they were maybe going to need two weeks.



CHAPTER 4

# Eileen



THE LAST-MINUTE FLIGHT FROM DENVER TO SAN FRANCISCO HAD cost a fortune. Eileen put it on one of their almost maxed-out credit cards and hoped the charges would clear. For the last six months, the realization that she was almost assuredly going to have to go back to spending her days doing work she hated had sunk in deeper with the arrival of every ballooning credit card statement.

As usual, she pushed the thoughts aside. She didn't have the strength to mourn her sister and worry about money at the same time.

Her afternoon had been spent moving mountains. Buying a ticket, picking kids up early from school, cancelling afternoon music lessons, arranging rides for the rest of the week—trying to explain to everyone why she was leaving. A whirlwind of purpose driving her forward, keeping her busy, and her mind off the fact that her only sister was not in this world anymore.

It didn't seem possible.

"Aunt Clare?" Paige had asked, bursting into tears almost

immediately. Cameron and Ryan had followed her lead. Holding it together while her children had an opportunity to fall apart...that was the toughest mountain of all.

Next was walking out the door with a suitcase before their father was able to get home. "I'm so sorry," Eileen told her kids at the door.

Paige, who was only fourteen and had only that morning been fighting with her little brother, gave her a hug. "Don't worry, Mom. We'll be fine." She stepped back and placed her hands on both Ryan and Cameron's backs. "I'll make some mac-n-cheese. We'll do homework in the dining room."

Eileen stared for a moment at her daughter, suddenly taller than she remembered, then gave them all a kiss. "Thank you. And I won't be gone long," she said, although she had no idea if that was even true. "Sara's driving you for the rest of the week. You have her cell?"

"I've got it. You're going to miss your flight," Paige warned her.

"Okay, you're right." The tears she'd been fighting all afternoon welled up. "It's just..." Her voice cracked, and all three of her kids rushed in and held her.

"It's okay, Mom," Cameron said.

She took a breath and swallowed the lump in her throat. "Okay, yes, I'm okay."

"And we're okay," Ryan added.

Eileen nodded. "Okay." She picked up her tote and lifted the handle on her rolling suitcase. "Your father should be home"—she checked her phone for the time—"in three hours."

"We know... Go," Paige said and kissed her cheek.

She didn't want to leave them, but she gave them each a big hug,

kissed their foreheads, then turned and walked out the door. "I'll call you when I get to the airport," she said over her shoulder as she dragged the case down the porch steps and out to Eric's car.

He would be stuck with hers for several more days.

Since she'd made it out of her house about two hours before rush hour, the expressway out to the airport had been practically empty. Denver International Airport, with its peaked white canvas roof, was a beautiful mini range of snowcapped mountains sprouting up in the middle of the Colorado plains, still mostly surrounded by nothing but grass. Only a few hotels and restaurants had staked claims. Suburban homes and neighborhoods were beginning to creep closer every year; and once the enormous convention center was completed, Eileen imagined this once-remote architectural wonder would eventually get dwarfed and hemmed in.

She parked Eric's car out in the economy lot, rode the shuttle bus with her suitcase and tote into the terminal, collected her boarding pass at the automated kiosks, and blew past security with no more trouble than an extra look at her camera and the one extra lens she'd packed safe into the center of her case. By the time she was on the concourse checking the departure board, she had an hour to wait before her flight boarded.

It occurred to her that she was both hungry and thirsty. She'd been in such a storm of activity all day that food had never even occurred to her. She turned away from the departure board, set on investigating the restaurants in the B concourse, and came face-to-face with her sister.

The Tattered Cover, one of Denver's independent bookstores,

had a small airport shop. She stood staring into it. Other passengers browsed the shelves. One man and his son were purchasing something at the counter, and two women stood at the center display table picking up copies of Clare's newest book, *A Perfect Life*.

Eileen watched the two women as they noted their common interest. She couldn't hear them, but the woman in yoga pants and a sweatshirt said something to the woman wearing the gray pantsuit. They both furrowed their brows, shook their heads, then took their copies of Clare's book to the register.

The news about Clare's death was out.

Eileen pulled her suitcase to the display table and stared down at the stacks and stacks of hardcovers with her sister's name. In true sibling rivalry fashion, it had been years since she had either purchased or read one of her sister's books. At the beginning of Clare's career, it had been easy to support her. A struggling writer, no different from the millions of other struggling artists, Clare had lived in a run-down one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with three other starving artists, subsisting on canned soup and apples. Back then, confident in her choice to put her camera down and pursue accounting as a major, Eileen had enthusiastically read every story draft her sister sent her. Most of them had been mediocre at best, and not a single one of them was ever accepted for publication.

Until one day, one was.

Eileen picked up her sister's latest book and got in line behind the two other women clearly eager to read Clare's last words.

After she paid, with another credit card that made her hold her breath, the cashier asked her, "Would you like a bag?"

Eileen forced a smile. “No thanks.” She picked up her book, along with the free bookmark, and opened her tote. “Shit,” she said.

“Excuse me?” the cashier asked.

“Um, nothing. Sorry. I just realized—thank you,” Eileen mumbled and headed with her suitcase out past the other passengers, who were now congregating around the table displaying Clare’s book. Back out in the concourse, she opened her tote again and saw the large envelope addressed to Eric still in her bag. “Damn it,” she whispered. She’d meant to leave it on his desk in his office before she left.

She pulled out her cell phone and checked the time; she still had forty-five minutes before they would start boarding her flight. She opened her recent calls list and tapped Eric’s contact. With her phone pressed to her ear, she stuffed Clare’s book in her tote next to the envelope and began walking toward the restaurants on the other side of the concourse.

“Hello?” Eric answered.

“Hey,” she said, adjusting her bag on her shoulder and taking the phone back into her hand. “I’m at the airport.”

“Everything okay? You made it on time?”

“Yes. I actually have a few minutes, so I was going to grab a bite.”

“Is that Mom?” Ryan’s voice echoed in the background.

“Yes,” Eric said, his mouth aimed away from the mouthpiece. “She’s at the airport.”

“You’re at home?” Eileen asked, surprised. All the kids were now talking at once in the background.

“Yes. Guys, be quiet so I can hear. Yes, after you called, I cancelled my last meeting and came home. How you holding up?”

Eileen found an empty table outside a Mexican food restaurant that looked cleanish and lowered her tote onto the empty seat. “I’m not sure. I think I’m just moving from one thing to the next.”

“I’m so sorry. I wish I could be there with you.”

Eileen closed her eyes. She wouldn’t cry again. Not in the middle of the airport. “I wish you were too. But honestly, I’m glad you’re home with the kids.”

“Speaking of that...what have you told them, exactly?”

“I said she had an accident. Not that she shot herself.”

“They’re reporting her death on the news,” he whispered into the phone. “It won’t be long before the details come out.”

Eileen took a deep breath. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll talk to them.”

“I feel awful. I’m sorry. I never meant for you to have to handle that on your own.”

“I think it will be awful no matter how they find out.”

He was right, of course. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re there. I love you.”

“I love you, too. We’ll get through this.”

Eileen opened her tote, took out the envelope, and laid it on the table. “Actually, I was calling for another reason. Thank you, by the way, for taking my car in today.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

“But there was an envelope on your windshield this morning. I meant to leave it for you, but with everything, I forgot.”

“An envelope? That’s weird... Oh, I bet it’s from Carl next door. We were talking last week. He’s started selling insurance on the side,

trying to make some extra money. He hit me up. I didn't know what to say. We don't need to be messing around with insurance right now. He was going to put together some quotes."

"Do you want me to open it?"

"Sure."

Eileen bent back the brass tabs holding the flap in place.

"I'd say just throw it away, but I'm probably going to have to talk with him and find a way to tell him we're not interested right now. God, I hate when friends try to sell you shit. No," Eric said to the kids, his mouth away from phone. "I did not say the S word... Well, how about you mind your own business?"

Eileen reached into the envelope and pulled out several thick pages.

As she stared down at the pages in her hand, she vaguely heard Eric ask the kids, "What do you want for dinner?" She didn't breathe. A sickness rushed through her bloodstream, stunned her senses, paralyzed her limbs.

They were large, eight-by-eleven-inch black-and-white pictures. There were six. Her fingers gently pushed them apart, spreading them out across the table to reveal different scenes, different settings, but always the same main characters. Each picture a punch in her gut more powerful and painful than the last.

She stared at them.

There was a handwritten note in black ink torn from a spiral notebook paper-clipped to the photo that most clearly showed Eric and Lauren's faces. The note was signed—*Dave, Lauren's husband*.

A man in a dark gray suit walked toward her table. Pulling a



black carry-on suitcase, he held his phone in his free hand as he spoke into the headset attached to his ear. His eyes swept over the table as he passed by, then met hers for the briefest of moments, understanding igniting between them before he looked away. Eileen heard him keep speaking into his headset. “What was that? Yeah, sorry... Brian’s quotas weren’t met for that quarter.”

She looked around, suddenly remembering she was in an airport surrounded by people. A woman with two small children sat at a table only three feet away, their paper-wrapped tacos half eaten.

“Eileen?” Eric asked. “Are you there? Can you hear me?”

She listened to the sound of her husband’s voice. She loved him. Too much—that’s what Clare had once told her: “You love him too much.”

“Yes,” she managed to say. “I’m here.” She raked the photos and the note together, aligned their edges, and hid them back in the envelope.

“What was it?” he asked her.

“What?” Eileen pressed the flap of the envelope down over the sharp brass tabs and spread them flat.

“The envelope? Quotes from Carl?” he reminded her. “Are you okay?” She could tell from his tone that he was referring to Clare’s death. He was asking if she was okay. He was implying that maybe she wasn’t, because she had learned a few hours ago that her sister had shot herself. He had no idea what she’d just seen.

“Eileen? Can you hear me?”

“Yes. It was just insurance sales stuff...from Carl.”

They had been married almost fifteen years. They had three

children. She loved him more than she should—too much. “Sorry,” she choked. “Um, they’re actually boarding. I made a mistake about the times.”

“Are you sure you should be traveling alone right now?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“Eric... I have to go. They’re boarding my flight,” she said.

She hung up and placed her phone facedown on the table next to the envelope. Near her spine, a black hole cracked open and spread across her back, through her stomach, wrapped around her heart, pressed her lungs. An empty space of loss so large, her whole life fell inside out.

Eileen closed her eyes, willed herself to breathe, and swallowed back the agony clawing its way up her throat. The images of her husband fucking Lauren Andrews were burned into her field of vision, as if she had been staring at the sun. Their entwined limbs, his naked ass, her spread legs. Eric on top of her, behind her. His exposed throat, her full tits. Expressions contorted at the height of orgasm.

And worse. Their bodies spooned, outlined by only the drape of a sheet, faces slack with sleep. Eric’s arm hung over Lauren’s thin waist, her cropped brown hair spread across the pillow they shared, his lips resting at the base of her neck.

Eileen put her hands over her face, pressed her eyes, willed the scenes to disappear. Images she knew she would never unsee.

“You love him too much,” Clare had once said.