



MARY
HIGGINS
CLARK
AND
ALAFAIR
BIRKE

It Had to Be You

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Prologue

Ten Years Ago

As the moonlight painted a glistening path across the water behind the Harbor Yacht Club, fifty-four-year-old Sarah Harrington's eyes scanned the outdoor party, a serene smile gracing her lips. It was the kickoff of Memorial Day weekend and she was looking forward to having the family together for another summer. The unseasonable chill in the air was the only possible hint of the deadly turn this night of celebration might take, but Sarah's thoughts were focused instead on her children and how quickly life was moving.

How was it even possible that her baby boys—her twin sons, Simon and Ethan—had graduated from college? A sense of awe washed over her as she watched Simon twirl his girlfriend, Michelle, expertly on the dance floor. Ten feet away, Ethan and his girlfriend, Annabeth, danced hand in hand, ring-around-the-rosie style with Sarah's third child, twelve-year-old Frankie.

A flicker of memory transported her back to the days when motherhood seemed like an elusive dream. She and Richard had married fairly young, right after he graduated from law school. He was twenty-six at the time. She was twenty-four. They both knew they wanted children, but they were in no hurry. He was building his career in Boston. She was a budding artist. Their family would grow

when it was meant to happen. Seven years later, he was a successful law firm partner. She had landed a regular spot with an art gallery in Manhattan.

They were more than ready for a child. More than ready to stop waiting patiently. She was so devastated when the first round of in vitro failed that Richard wanted to stop trying, to spare her another heartbreak. Father Hogan from Saint Cecilia suggested an adoption consultant another couple from the parish had used.

But the second try at the clinic worked and then some. The first ultrasound showed two eggs sharing a single placenta. Identical twins. Not as common as fraternal twins, but still an increased possibility with fertility assistance. Just like that, she went from having no babies to two. And ten years later, when Sarah was forty-two, little Frances gave them a delightful surprise. Then the Harringtons were five, as Sarah had always wanted.

The twins, such proud and doting big brothers, were the ones who quickly decided that their beloved baby sister wanted to be called Frankie. Sarah wasn't certain about allowing it. She assumed the boys said it because they wanted a little brother instead. But the name managed to stick for good, even though Frankie never became the tomboy her brothers may have yearned for. Tonight, she wore a dress she had selected from the department store herself after Sarah told her that the theme was a "summer white party," meaning everyone would be wearing white. Sarah had never seen a dress with so much satin and tulle outside of a wedding. Frankie could not have been more thrilled.

Oh, how happy Sarah was that this party to celebrate Simon and Ethan's accomplishments had turned out so splendidly. The boys were strikingly handsome, their dark hair and tanned skin contrasting with their matching white outfits—collared shirts, linen blazers, skinny jeans. The clouds that had threatened to move the entire affair indoors had cleared. And though Simon and Ethan weren't exactly exuding brotherly love, there were no outward signs of the conflict they'd been having the last couple of days over that ugly

business about Annabeth. From the smile in Ethan's eyes, Sarah was fairly certain that the girl wasn't going anywhere. Maybe Richard would eventually see that, too, and come around. Maybe seeing how sweet she was being with Frankie tonight would change his mind.

"A candy for your thoughts."

Sarah had been so overcome by sentiment that she hadn't even noticed her best friend Betsy approach. They had met at an art camp in the ninth grade and were instant friends. They'd known each other so long that they couldn't remember which one of them had decided that a penny wasn't enough to trade for your innermost thoughts. Candy it was.

They weren't twins, but they had both managed to buy the same tailored white pantsuit for the party. Rather than flip a coin to see who had to return the purchase, they decided to embrace the fact that they obviously both had impeccable taste.

Even in matching outfits, no one would ever confuse the two friends. Betsy was five-foot-six, with an athletic build, and frequently referred to Sarah, small-boned and five inches shorter, as her *pint-sized pal*. Sarah, as usual, had opted tonight for an understated but refined look, choosing a white silk tank and classic pearls to coordinate with her pantsuit. Her chestnut hair, already slightly kissed by the sun from their time at the beach house, was swept back in a loose bun with a few playful tendrils to frame her heart-shaped face.

Betsy, always the gutsier of the pair, had gone with a white tuxedo-style vest instead of a blouse. Her gold statement necklace arguably violated the all-white dress code, but Betsy always knew which rules to follow and which to bend. Her blond hair, streaked with threads of silver, cascaded in gentle waves around her shoulders.

Watching her boys, Sarah thought about how they, too, might appear very similar—physically identical, in fact—on the surface, but were so completely different. Simon the Harvard graduate would start Columbia Law School in the fall.

He'd had his life planned for as long as she could remember.

He announced in sixth grade he wanted to be a lawyer, just like his father. When Sarah and Betsy had proposed, half jokingly, that perhaps one of the twins would like to take Betsy's daughter, Michelle, to a ninth-grade dance, Simon had leapt at the suggestion. The two had been together ever since.

Ethan was more of a free spirit like Sarah. *Or at least the free spirit I used to be*, Sarah thought. He finished U Mass Amherst on time, but not without a stern talk or three when he wanted to quit. He was a talented guitarist who wanted to be a working musician. Richard told him he may as well buy lottery tickets for a living.

As for girlfriends, Sarah suspected there were many, even though she never met any of them—not until Ethan met Annabeth in Harbor Bay last June. She and Richard assumed it would be a few weeks of Cape Cod flirting until Ethan resumed his senior year, but instead, Ethan had developed a focus for the young woman that he'd previously only shown for music. *It will all work out for them*, Sarah told herself. *For all of us. Of course it will.*

How could she sum up all of these thoughts for Betsy and her offer of candy?

"Look at them, Betsy. I know I'm biased, but they're just perfect. When I think about how much I love my children, and how quickly they've grown up, I think my heart might literally burst."

"Well, let's certainly hope it's not literal. Bad for your health and would be quite a mess to clean."

"Perhaps an overly graphic choice of words," Sarah conceded.

Betsy wrapped one arm around Sarah's shoulder and gave a quick squeeze. "I know exactly what you mean. It goes by so fast. I still think of Dennis as my little boy, but he told us today he's planning on law school. He's starting to study for the entrance exams already. So we'll both have another generation of lawyers in the family."

"Where is Dennis by the way?"

"With my notorious early-bird of a husband. Don't be upset, but Walter was practically falling asleep at the table, so I gave him permission to go home. If I had to guess, Dennis would have stayed lon-

ger if the bartenders hadn't carded him when he tried to get a drink. His twenty-first birthday is in October, and I can tell he's counting down the days."

"Hopefully the day will come and go with less fanfare than the twins stirred up." Simon and Ethan had asked to spend their birthday weekend at the beach house alone with two friends. Sarah and Richard only found out about the raging party of almost a hundred college students when they got a call from their neighbor about a group of kids who had snuck into their backyard to jump in their hot tub. "Look at your Michelle out there with Simon. So smart and beautiful and grown-up already."

"If I had to guess, we two birds might have a wedding to plan in the not so distant future."

"It's certainly only a matter of time," Sarah said. "But knowing Michelle, we won't have a single bit of sway. That girl is even more stubborn than her headstrong mother."

Sarah noticed Betsy's gaze move from the Harrington children on the dance floor to Sarah's husband, Richard. He was talking to Howard Carver, one of Richard's two law partners at the small firm he founded when he walked away from big-firm practice. The other was Betsy's husband, Walter. Richard and Sarah were the first to announce thirteen years ago that they were building a vacation house on the Cape, only two short hours from Boston in Harbor Bay. Sarah soon convinced Betsy and Walter to do the same. Howard, seeing a good investment opportunity, soon followed.

Richard and Howard both held martini glasses half-filled with a dark liquid. Manhattans, if Sarah had to guess.

"Have you made any progress with him?" Betsy asked.

"Not tonight, Betsy, of all nights. Look how happy they all are. That's all I wanted out of this weekend." Richard's eyes connected with hers as he registered that they were looking in his direction. He smiled, his blue eyes gleaming with energy even at this distance. She felt herself returning his admiring gaze instinctively—the way she always did, the way he expected.

To any outside observer, it would look like a scene from a fairy tale. The perfect graduation party for the perfect twins from the perfect family.

Two hours later, as thirty-six-year-old Jenna Merrick drove past the Harbor Yacht Club, she could see the twinkling white lights from the party. She rolled down her car window to take in the sounds of laughter and music soaring above the coastline. The Harringtons, always so kind, had invited her to attend. She had been tempted. She'd worked the Yacht Club before as catering staff, but had never actually been a guest. But how would it look for the local diner waitress to show up at a fancy summer party with the vacation-house crowd? And what would she possibly wear?

Maybe it would be a Cinderella story. She'd find her future prince at the ball. Or maybe not and she'd end up standing alone in a corner or, worse, handling requests from people who assumed she worked there. If someone asked her how she knew the twins, what would she even say? *From the diner and then somehow ten years ago, I became their family's summertime dog walker and sitter?*

Jenna had declined the invitation, offering instead to give Bacon a nighttime walk during the party as her graduation present to the boys. She was actually there nine years earlier when the kids had named the boxer puppy. The family's previous dog, Picasso, had passed away the November before, and the grief had passed enough for the Harringtons to welcome a new canine friend.

Continuing prior tradition, Sarah wanted to name the puppy after an artist. She narrowed the list to Warhol, O'Keeffe, and Pollock. Simon, the same kid who had mastered at a young age the fine art of requesting a menu substitution politely, asked his parents if he and his siblings could research other options. Onto the Internet they went. As Simon read aloud a list of artists the children had never heard of, he reached Francis Bacon. Sarah explained that he was an Irish-born portraitist known for his dark, unsettling paintings of the

human figure, but all the kids cared about was his funny last name. Their delighted giggles were even louder than the sound of tonight's graduation party. Bacon the Boxer it was.

When Jenna reached the Harringtons' house, she stopped at the gate and entered her personal passcode into the keypad. As the gate slid open, she took in the grandness of the house that awaited. It had a traditional rambling Cape Cod shingle exterior with a gable roof but was three times larger than the neighboring homes. The lush, manicured gardens burst with color. The nights she spent alone in the home with Bacon were like a luxury vacation.

Her key was in the front door when her stomach tightened with a sudden unease. Something felt different.

The night was completely silent. Even when she closed her eyes to try to hear something—anything—all she came up with was a faint thump in the distance, likely music bouncing off the water from the yacht club.

Instead of turning the key in the lock, she rang the doorbell. She heard the resulting chime clearly, even from the front porch. And yet, the night silence returned immediately.

Where was Bacon?

Bacon had an uncanny ability to sense who was at the other side of a door. And to Bacon, all humans fell into two camps—friends and strangers. Strangers were assumed to be home invaders and were greeted with a thunder of deep-throated barks that would send the toughest of criminals running for dear life. But with friends, Bacon was pure joy, whining with the anticipation of an imminent playdate.

Bacon was a nine-year-old dog, which was getting up in years for his breed. Maybe he had lost his hearing or his magic people-detecting skills. But it might be worse. She didn't want to find him that way. And how would she possibly break the news to the Harringtons about their sweet boy, Bacon?

She had no choice. She couldn't exactly call the police because of a dog's silence. She turned the key and pushed the door open

slowly, steeling herself to find him if the worst had in fact happened.

She saw the blood immediately, and then the bodies. A broken strand of pearls was spilled in the blood. Richard was facedown, but Sarah's eyes were open, frozen in death with confusion. It wasn't until Jenna began to scream that Bacon joined her, howling in anguish from the back of the house.

The dog knew his mom and dad were gone.

Almost Ten Years Later

Chapter 1

Thirty-three-year-old Michelle Ward heard the clatter of scampering feet above her, a sure sign that the children were up and that her two and a half hours of early morning solitude were coming to an end. The words were flowing quickly onto her screen and she wanted to finish this chapter while she was on a roll. The sound of her husband's voice telling the kids to brush their teeth assured her that he had everything under control, and she found herself smiling as she finished writing the scene where her novel's two main characters first met in the cutest way.

She knew Simon's legal career wasn't the one he'd dreamed of when he first went to law school. While his father thrived in the elbow-rubbing world of small-firm practice, Simon had wanted to clerk for the Supreme Court and then become a complex commercial litigator with one of the largest law firms in the world. He was the guy who planned out his entire life from a young age until life decided it wasn't going along with his plans.

He was in no condition to begin law school after the gruesome murders of his parents, so Columbia promised to hold his place in the following year's entering class to give him time to grieve. By the time he felt ready to focus on his studies, a group of current students and alumni had petitioned the dean to revoke his admission in light of what they called "more than probable cause to believe he either committed or was complicit in a double murder." Michelle had wanted him to sue when the school pulled its offer, but her parents advised that a lawsuit was unlikely to prevail and would only

call more negative attention to Simon and his brother. Instead, her father called his own alma mater, Suffolk Law School, and got the son of his deceased law partner quietly enrolled.

Even when Simon sat for the bar, two lawyers who didn't know him at all had contacted the state bar's character and fitness committee trying to ban him from being sworn in. Their efforts failed, but employers weren't exactly pounding on the door to hire one of the notorious "Deadly Duo."

So instead of the big, flashy career at a big, fancy firm, Simon worked at the same little law office his father had, accepting a job offer from Michelle's father to join the practice. When Michelle's brother, Dennis, graduated from Boston College Law School the following year, he joined the firm, too, and now Dennis and Simon were partners. In truth, Simon was a far brighter attorney than her brother and did most of the actual legal work behind the scenes, but Dennis was the face of the firm, lest Simon make any potential clients flinch. Where Simon's father had been the unquestioned leader at Harrington, Ward & Carver, the tables had turned at the newly formed Ward & Harrington LLC.

Maybe it was her natural disposition toward optimism, but Michelle chose to believe that, despite the utter horror of that awful night, in some ways their life was happier than if Simon's professional dreams had come true. His hours were routine, he rarely traveled, and he was home to have dinner every night with her and the kids.

And unlike most of her writer friends, who complained about husbands who didn't understand how hard they worked, Simon made a point to help her carve out time when she could write in peace and quiet. That's why she was currently in the kitchen in her PJs, writing a smile-inducing meet-cute scene. These early morning hours were for her to work while Simon got the kids dressed and ready for a breakfast that he would cook for them all before heading to the office. She'd written four successful romance novels so far, using a pseudonym to avoid any whiff of notoriety.

Her laptop was closed by the time her children, Daniel, six, and Sophie, four, came thundering down the stairs.

"I'm hungry," Sophie said, her cherubic face still sleepy-eyed.

"You're always hungry," Daniel teased. "You're an eating machine."

"No, *you're* an eating machine."

Simon soon trailed them into the kitchen wearing a fluffy white robe, his hair damp from a shower. "You're both eating machines, which is why I'm going to make a giant stack of pancakes."

Sophie clapped, and Daniel let out a satisfied "Yesss." Where did they pick these things up?

As she was clearing their breakfast plates while Simon finished getting ready for work, the shrill ring of the house phone startled her. These days, they usually used their cell phones, and it was so early for an unexpected call.

"Hello?" Michelle said, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"May I speak with Simon Harrington?" a voice on the other end inquired. The caller was female with a hint of a Southern accent.

"May I ask who's calling?"

The voice on the other end was calm, almost detached. "My name's Lydia Martindale. I have a podcast called *Deadly Secrets*."

Michelle's heart quickened, and she felt a chill run down her spine. "Why do you want to talk to my husband?"

"You probably know that it's been almost ten years since his parents were murdered. We'll be talking about the case to mark the anniversary. We'd like him to come on our show."

It had taken so many years for them to settle into a new kind of normal. Simon, worried what his own future would look like, almost hadn't proposed to her, even though they had both known in high school that they would spend their lives together. Then after they were married, they weren't sure whether it was prudent to have children in the event Simon was ever formally charged. All these years later, she had trained herself not to fear developments they could not control. Their life was their life. Time moved on.

Michelle tightened her grip on the receiver. “I’m going to hang up now —”

“If he doesn’t talk to us, but Ethan does, how will that look?” The question sounded to Michelle like a threat. “Does Simon still speak to Ethan? What about Frances? Is she on good terms with her brothers?”

Michelle hesitated at the mention of Simon’s sister, Frankie. After the murders, Frankie had moved in with Michelle’s parents. She was only twelve years old at the time. Although she was told that her parents had been killed, she did not know that her brothers were suspects until she overheard children at her school talking about them. When Frankie came home crying, Michelle’s parents told her children could be misinformed and cruel, and assured her that her brothers were innocent, a position that both of Michelle’s parents clung to, even to this day, despite the evidence. Michelle wasn’t certain whether her parents actually believed someone else killed the Harringtons or if they simply loved Richard and Sarah’s children too much to allow themselves to entertain the alternative.

With the encouragement of Michelle’s parents, Frankie remained close to both of her brothers as she grew up, even as they became estranged from each other. But once she moved to California for college, her calls and texts became increasingly rare. Simon tried to tell himself that it was because she was busy, but even on her trips home to Boston, she seemed chilly, so different from her usually sunny and playful personality. When Michelle pressed her mother on the point, she finally explained that Frankie had been reading the details of her parents’ murders and was now wondering if in fact her brothers were involved. Simon was devastated when Michelle broke the news to him.

“No comment,” Michelle said, the sadness of their fractured family casting a shadow over her thoughts.

The podcaster continued, undeterred. “Ethan’s wife, Annabeth, is having a child in three months. Will your children meet their new cousin?”

With a growing sense of unease, Michelle hung up the phone. She had an unfocused gaze when Simon returned to the kitchen, his robe replaced by a suit and tie. “Hey, did I hear the phone?”

She told him about Lydia Martindale and her prying questions.

“I guess we should have known that TV show that called your mother a few years ago wouldn’t be the end of the media trying to profit from my parents’ murders.”

Almost three years ago, someone from a true crime program had inquired about the family’s interest in appearing on her television show. Unlike this Lydia Martindale person, that woman had not called their home first thing in the morning. Instead, she had gone to Michelle’s parents. As Michelle understood it, she had wanted to make sure Frankie was comfortable with the idea before approaching Simon and Ethan. Frankie was not, and that was the end of the discussion.

“Did you know Annabeth was pregnant?” Michelle asked.

He was silent as he shook his head, but she could see the pain in her husband’s eyes. Until the murders, he and Ethan had been not only twin brothers, but best friends, confiding everything to each other.

But that was before Ethan killed their parents. Simon would never forgive him, and nothing could change that.

After Simon left for work, Michelle found herself watching her children, blissfully unaware of the phone call that had pulled their mother’s thoughts into the past.

The murders of Sarah and Richard had left scars that might never heal completely, but Simon had worked so hard to make peace with the fact that the investigation had gone cold and the police would never prove Ethan’s guilt, meaning the rest of the world would be free to wonder whether Simon had been involved, too. She and Simon had built a life together with the kids, far removed from those grim memories.

Had it really been almost ten years? There were days that had felt endless, but somehow the time had flown by so quickly.

When their children first asked why Grammy and Papa were their only grandparents, while many of their friends had two sets, they had explained that Daddy's parents had died when he was twenty-two years old. She and Simon did not know when and whether to tell the fuller story, but eventually it would be out of their control.

Those tablets in her children's hands. This morning, Sophie was using hers to tend to her plants on a game of the Very Hungry Caterpillar, while Daniel was mastering Candy Crush. It wouldn't be long before they learned how to use those miniature computers to Google information on the Internet. Eventually they'd type in their father's name.

How do you tell your children that strangers believe their father murdered their grandparents in a conspiracy with an uncle they didn't even know existed? Maybe some extra attention to mark the anniversary of the deaths could be a blessing in disguise if it might finally clear Simon's name.

She reopened her laptop and looked up the *Deadly Secrets* podcast with Lydia Martindale. She hit play on one episode and immediately recognized the voice. The audio was tinny, and the show only had seventeen online reviews. She should have known from the 8 a.m. phone call that it was not a professional operation.

She googled "true crime media" and found a flurry of articles about the boom of the true crime genre. She clicked on an article called "When Crime Solving Becomes Entertainment." She hadn't heard of any of these podcasts or television shows, even the popular ones. After everything that had happened with the murders and the investigation that followed, Michelle could not imagine using her free time to think about crime.

Her eyes widened at the claim that one television show, *Under Suspicion*, had managed to crack nearly every case it had covered. The narrator was a handsome man named Ryan Nichols, who looked more like a TV anchor to Michelle than a detective. Appar-

ently sources at the studio attributed the successful case outcomes to someone behind the scenes, a producer named Laurie Moran.

Michelle Googled the producer's name and landed on a *New York* magazine profile. The journalist daughter of the NYPD's former first deputy commissioner, she was motivated to reinvestigate unsolved crimes after the murder of her own husband was unresolved for five years.

At the mention of the homicide, Michelle realized that Laurie Moran was the same journalist who had once contacted her mother and Frankie. According to her mom, the woman seemed serious and empathetic, not at all like the podcast woman who called this morning.

When Michelle got to the part of the article where Laurie described those years as "living in limbo," she found herself nodding along, tears forming in her eyes. Michelle couldn't help but wonder if it was finally time to confront the shadows of the past.

She found her phone on the kitchen counter and scrolled down to a name that was close to the top of her contact list. She had never been able to bring herself to delete it.

Annabeth. Annabeth, to whom Michelle had been so cruel the last time they ever spoke. Annabeth, who was apparently expecting her first child in three months with Ethan.

She hoped the number hadn't changed.

Chapter 2

Laurie Moran noticed that she was smiling in the mirror as she applied a thin layer of tinted moisturizer and a single coat of mascara, her only makeup on a typical day.

For as long as Laurie could remember, her early morning thoughts focused on how to get her son out of bed and both of them out the door. The nightmares she suffered for years after Greg's murder did not help, but the bad dreams became less frequent over time, and Timmy eventually grew into his own morning routine. As certain as she had been about marrying Alex, she had worried that blending their households would shake up the sense of order she'd worked so hard to achieve.

Now, six months into their marriage, Laurie was smiling to herself because she had woken up to the aroma of freshly brewed coffee in the air, the quiet sound of jazz music from Tim's bedroom down the hall, and the feeling of her husband's arms wrapped around her waist. No hint of chaos.

Her heart only soared higher when she made her way to the kitchen. Ramon was humming a tune she couldn't quite place while overseeing a griddle of French toast. At the breakfast nook, Alex and Tim sat side by side over the *New York Post*, hashing out where the national hockey teams ranked in the weeks since the all-star break.

They were completely at ease together. Even though Alex had dark, wavy hair, while Tim's own hair was sandy-blond and wispy, any stranger who saw them like this would assume they were father and son.

“Our team will be unstoppable once Tim Moran’s at the net,” Laurie said, hoping that her use of *at the net* was correct. At least she’d finally grown accustomed to calling her little boy Tim. Back when he was still Timmy, he declared he wanted to be the Rangers’ goalie by the time he was twenty-one.

“Tim might be too busy playing trumpet in a jazz quartet for professional sports,” Ramon said, proving that he never missed a beat of a conversation, no matter how hard at work he appeared.

Alex gave Tim a friendly pat on his shoulder. “This guy can do it all,” he said.

“Just like my mom,” Tim said with a satisfied expression. “We were waiting for you to come down, Mom.” He looked to Ramon in anticipation and began to whisper a shared countdown: three, two, one . . . “Happy Six Month Anniversary!”

The same four words Alex had said to her that morning. She dropped a kiss on the top of Tim’s head, still damp from the shower. “You two are so sweet to remember.” Speaking of big days, Tim, your birthday is in two weeks and you haven’t given us any hint at all about what you want.” *How was he almost eleven years old already?*

“But then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

Tim bounced from his seat at the sound of a knock at the apartment door. The doormen no longer called upstairs to announce the arrival of Laurie’s father, but Leo still insisted on knocking instead of using the apartment key she had given him.

“Good morning, Grandpa! Ramon made cinnamon French toast! Do you want some?”

While Tim admired musicians, athletes, and YouTube stars like the other kids at school, he still looked at his grandfather like he was Superman. The former first deputy police commissioner of the NYPD, he might have been the city’s next commissioner if he hadn’t retired to help Laurie raise a child alone when Greg was killed. Leo Farley was indeed a real-life superhero.

“No thanks, buddy. I made myself a veggie egg white omelet this

morning the way Ramon taught me,” he said, patting his stomach lightly. “Got to keep the old ticker ticking.”

It had been nearly three years since her father had been rushed to Mount Sinai for a cardiac fibrillation episode that led to the insertion of two stents in his right ventricle. Laurie felt like a broken record, always lecturing him about dietary restrictions while her father complained she was trying to make him a miserable gluten-free vegan. It wasn’t until Ramon and his culinary talents got involved that her father began to accept some lifestyle changes. He still indulged in the occasional steak or his legendary “Leo lasagna,” but not enough to worry her.

The list of requirements when she and Alex had been searching for an apartment had been long. Lots of space for a home office and at least one extra guest room. Thick walls to protect the neighbors from Tim’s enthusiastic trumpet practices. A separate living area for Ramon, who insisted on being called a “butler,” even though he was Alex’s honorary uncle at this point, not to mention a kitchen that complied with Ramon’s exacting demands. But top of the list was *location, location, location*.

Laurie’s former apartment on 94th Street had been only a block from her father’s and five blocks from Tim’s school. Someday, maybe soon, Tim might announce that he wanted to walk to and from St. David’s on his own, but until that happened, no apartment in the world was important enough to deprive her son and grandfather of their cherished daily tradition. Laurie had worried that even the move to 85th Street might be too far, but her father assured her that he’d benefit from the extra steps.

While Tim grabbed his backpack from his bedroom, Laurie pulled her father aside. “Can I ask you to put on your former detective hat?”

“My detective hat is never off,” he said dryly.

She smiled. “Of course not. *Tim* is apparently too grown now to drop his usually heavy-handed hints about what he wants for his birthday. Can you try to sneak it out of him?”

Her father's shoulders shook gently as he chuckled.

"What am I missing?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Timothy tries so hard to be grown, but on our walks? For every old cop-on-the-beat story I give him, he mentions a new video game or concert he wants to see. Trust me, your old man's got a list. You may need to take a loan out on this place by the time we're done."

"I should have known Farley was hot on the case."

"Always."

It was the usual morning rush on the subway platform, another morning tradition that Laurie wouldn't change, despite Ramon's repeated offers to drive her. Laurie was a journalist. As grateful as she was to have other people's help, she couldn't completely remove herself from the real world.

She noticed a young woman seated on a bench, trying to type a text on her phone with one hand while holding onto the wriggling toddler on her lap with the other. The woman's eyes darted between her screen and the subway tunnel, anticipating the inbound train that could be heard in the distance.

"Is everything all right?" Laurie asked. "I'm sorry to pry, but you seem a bit overwhelmed."

When the woman looked up, Laurie could see that her eyes were tired. "It's just a rough morning. I've got to get this guy to daycare but we're running behind schedule, and if I'm late to work again . . . I can't lose this job. I've got to at least email my boss before I get on the train and lose the phone signal, but I can't let go of my son, not when you won't sit still, Jake, and with the train coming and all the horrible things you read about subway platforms." The woman's words were spilling out of her so quickly, Laurie thought she was close to tears.

"Let me help. Please." The woman shook her head immediately, but then she looked up at Laurie's face again. "I'm a mom, too."

Please. I can entertain Jake or type the text for you, whatever you want.”

She hesitated for a moment, as if wrestling with the decision. Finally, she nodded and gave a grateful smile. “That’s so kind of you.” She handed Laurie her phone. “Jake, this is our friend . . .”

“Laurie. Hi Jake. It’s nice to meet you.” Laurie read the message the woman had started and then finished it on her own with two thumbs. When she was done, she read it aloud.

“It’s perfect,” the woman said.

“And sign it?”

“Tara. I’m Tara.”

“She’s not Tara,” Jake said, sticking out his tongue. “She’s my mommy.”

“You don’t know how much this means to me,” Tara said. “It’s just been so hard lately. Sometimes I wish I had family who could help out, but then I remember why it’s just the two of us. Sorry, that’s a lot—Let’s just say that when a family no longer speaks to each other, there’s usually a good reason.”

As they stepped onto the train together, Laurie gave the woman a sad smile, feeling even more grateful for the support she and Tim had found in their lives.

Fifteen minutes later, she arrived to the sixteenth floor of 15 Rockefeller Center, home to the offices of Fisher Blake Studios. As she stepped from the elevator, she saw Ryan Nichols sauntering into the office of her boss, Brett Young. Within seconds, she heard her boss welcome the host of her show with an enthusiastic assurance: “My door’s always open for Ryan!”

What were the two of them up to now?