

HIDE IN PLACE by Emilya Naymark

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Laney Bird's son vanished the night she drove a busload of high school seniors to see Wicked on Broadway. He left home before she did, loping down their driveway toward marching band practice, his saxophone case swinging in his hand.

"Stew in the Crock-Pot!" she yelled at his retreating back. "I'll be home by eleven!"

He waved without turning around, a shimmy of raised fingers in the raw February wind.

The bus smelled like bologna sandwiches, fruity body sprays, and old soda and sounded like a monkey house. But she was used to it. And she needed the extra money.

Once the students erupted into the glittery Manhattan night, she parked and texted him but heard nothing back. This concerned her, though not overwhelmingly so. She figured he'd stayed late for practice or left his phone in his backpack on vibrate. She tried to nap. Listened to the radio. Played a game on her phone.

As icy rain turned to snow, the students clambered back on the bus, collapsing against green seats and smudged windows, and she carted them homeward through tortuous, storm-soured traffic toward upstate New York and their waiting families.

She wasn't home by eleven.

Laney walked into her empty, dark house a few minutes past midnight and dumped her keys onto the key dish by the front door. Alfie's saxophone did not trip her as it usually did, but she barely noticed, the long day hitting her hard.

After wriggling out of her bra (through her sleeves, blessed relief) and toeing off her shoes, she tipped the lid from the Crock-Pot and paused, unease needling her.

The beef and potatoes had gone cold, congealed. Untouched. She dropped her bra to a chair and walked over to Alfie's room. His door was open and, when she flipped the light switch, his bed neat, empty.

With shaking fingers, she called his phone, then again, and again. Again. The line rang through to voicemail every time. The GPS Phone Tracker showed him a block from school at five pm, then

nothing. He had either disabled the app or powered off his phone, both of which she had forbidden him to ever do.

Between the frantic phone calls, she glanced in every room and closet, climbed into the drafty attic, then into the dank basement, calling his name as if he were a toddler playing hide-and-seek and not a mercurial thirteen-year-old.

He was still not home by one am, when Laney rang and woke the few parents whose sons bothered with Alfie. They answered their phones with voices groggy or scared, turning quickly to irritation. He wasn't with any of them. But she'd known that before she called and made the calls anyway out of some dim, crazed hope. He never visited other kids, never texted, wasn't, as far as she knew, active on any social media.

At one thirty am she screeched into the Sylvan PD's parking lot, knocking over a garbage can as she slammed on the brakes. Sylvan, a sedate hamlet in Rockland County, population less than nine thousand, slumbered under a cloud-swept sky, and the station house in the middle of the night on a Tuesday was quiet.

Laney burst into the building, then hesitated as the doors clanged shut behind her. Ed Boswell was the desk officer on duty, and if he was not exactly the last person she wanted to see, he was right up there in the top five candidates.

"Laney," said Ed, turning his eyes from the screen, where, no doubt, he'd been watching the latest episode of CSI. He'd told Laney once it was his favorite show, and the midnight shift in Sylvan was so slow he usually spent at least half of it bingeing on some TV series or other.

It's not that she thought he was a bad police officer. He was all right, calm and steady, with a slow way of looking at every problem even when the problem required immediate, ten-alarm action. Laney had been a cop herself before her personal life imploded. In her deplorably short career with the NYPD, Laney had risen to detective and worked three years as an undercover, first in the Bronx, then in Brighton Beach.

As Ed Boswell clicked something on his computer, tsked in irritation, clicked again, then looked at her, she wished, not for the first time, she could call her ex-partner. But he didn't work in Sylvan. Ed did. Ed, who knew nothing of her past, nothing of the shield she'd earned by doing countless buy-and-busts, of her skills, her extensive knowledge of police procedures. Ed, who saw only what everyone else in Sylvan saw when they looked at her—a bus-driving single mom of an odd boy—and treated her problems with her child accordingly.

“It’s Alfie,” she said, her voice coming shrill and taut from her throat, hurting her. “He’s not home. Hasn’t come home.”

“Again?” asked Ed.

His eyes settled on her (with pity? condescension?), and she realized she’d run out of the house in her slippers, her coat still hanging on its hook in the hall and her bra on a kitchen chair.

Ed glanced at the window, where a wet sleet had started to slap against the glass. The storm had traveled north and was just beginning to hit their town.

“Did you check the high school?” he asked, just as Laney knew he would, because he’d been on desk duty the last time Alfie decided to disappear.

“The school is locked,” Laney said, thinking this should have been obvious, schools were like fortresses nowadays, hermetically sealed after hours. But she was not the cop, she reminded herself. Not anymore.

She said, “He’s not answering phone calls or texts. He’s disabled the phone tracker. I called three families who have sons he’s friends with”—to describe them as friends was a stretch, and she knew Ed knew this and her face colored—“and he’s with none of them. I left a message for his band teacher. Alfie was scheduled for band practice this afternoon. Prior to that he came home from school as usual at two fifteen, had a snack”—she paused, swallowed; that was the last time she’d spoken with him—“a PBJ sandwich, did his homework, then left for practice at four fifty. He was supposed to be home before seven.”

She closed her eyes, running through anything else she might have done, anything else she should say, but all she could envision was Alfie’s back in his maroon parka as he strode down the slippery driveway, saxophone case in hand, blond hair escaping from under his black knit cap. She hadn’t even hugged him, just waved as he stepped past her for the three-block walk to the high school.

Ed sighed and typed something. “I’m sure he’s fine, Laney. He’s done this before. We’ll have a patrol car out to the school.”

But it wasn’t the same, Laney wanted to scream. That last time, a month ago, she and Alfie had had an argument—a real, honest-to-God shouting and crying fest. She had (had she really?) slapped him and ransacked his room for the drugs she was sure he’d hidden there. His blown-out pupils, his clammy skin, his overly cautious movements, as if he didn’t trust his own limbs, terrified her, reminded her of the lost souls she’d had to lock up in the past. He cried, bawled, his face red and swollen, a child, even though he was thirteen and would be fourteen soon, in two more months. He denied everything, and by morning she had to admit she might have overreacted—the years buying drugs on

the street as an undercover had skewed her vision, darkened her interpretations of the most normal behaviors. He might have simply been fighting off a cold. Mightn't he?

By morning it was too late to make amends. Alfie had left and didn't come home until the next day.

Afterward, after the missing-child reports had been filed and alerts issued to local police, after hours of searching, Alfie simply walked up the driveway and into their living room. He'd spent the night in the school theater's backstage, among the dress forms and discarded curtains. In the morning he'd washed in the gym locker room, ate in the cafeteria, and walked to the frozen lake a mile away, where he spent a few hours sliding along the thick ice until he grew cold and hungry, at which point he came home.

Laney wanted to ground him, punish him, take away screen privileges for running away, because didn't he know what he meant to her, didn't he know he was all the family she had in the world? But the sight of him, tall, pale, thin, worried about her reaction, destroyed any disciplinarian instincts, and she clung to him wordlessly. She then cooked them a big pasta dinner.

And after she put away the dishes and Tupperwared the leftovers, she installed the GPS Phone Tracker on his phone.

"Look," Ed said, "I'm sending the patrol car out now. We'll start at the school. How about you go home and get warm. We'll call you as soon as we find him. What's the band teacher's name? Is that Mr. Andersen?"

So placid. So sure. Laney ground the heels of her hands into her eyes. It's possible she was overreacting again. But what did Ed know of her and Alfie? Certainly she hadn't told him—or anybody—the reason Alfie skedaddled the last time, of that god-awful argument. Most depressingly, nobody who knew her had asked why he might have disappeared then, not even Ed Boswell, who had taken the report and should have.

Alfie was strange, a loner, prone to both inappropriate outbursts and intense shyness, and never mind his near expulsion following the fall talent show. Consequently, any strange behavior from him was not surprising. Certainly not to Ed, whose son was also a Boy Scout in Alfie's troop. That's how Laney and Ed knew each other, through their children, even though Ed's son ignored Alfie at best and sometimes, when he thought no parents were in hearing distance, ridiculed him with the sharp, callous cleverness of the smart and popular.

"So," she said, trying to keep her voice neutral, "should I tell you what he was wearing?"

"Oh." Ed peered at the paperwork in front of him. "Yes, let's do that. What was he wearing?"

She pictured Alfie, her stomach clenching with fear. Where was he? Things had improved lately. A lot.

He'd been sweet, even-tempered, talkative with her, had even been mentioning a friend.

"Blue-and-gray-striped sweater, horizontal stripes. Dark-blue jeans"—skinny cut, Christmas present and already floods on him two months later—"white socks, black sneakers, maroon parka, black watch cap.

He had his sax with him when he left."

Ed sat back and sighed. "Got it. He's fine, Laney, really. It's Sylvan, not the inner city. Go home. I'll call you as soon as we find him."

She nodded, her eyes welling, then gestured to the hallway. "Gonna use the ladies'," she said, already walking toward the bathroom.

It wasn't so much that she minded crying in front of people—she really didn't. Feelings were feelings and everyone had them. But being inside the station brought back her old ways. Cops didn't blubber, and if you were a female cop, you better keep yourself zipped shut or you'd never hear the end of it. She splashed cold water on her face and dried off with a paper towel, kneading it into a tight, brown ball before shoving it into the metal bin.

A little of Ed's sureness had penetrated her swooping panic, and she felt a touch easier now. He was right about one thing—Sylvan was not the inner city. The nearly nonexistent crime rate and country setting were why she had moved here in the first place. Alfie was being his difficult self. That was all.

She walked out of the bathroom tired but composed, willing to let the situation take its course, if only until morning.

On her way out, she passed an office and would have kept walking except she heard Alfie's name. She stopped just behind the doorway, keeping out of sight.

"That kid's got problems," said a man's voice. "Listen, I had to come out five times last fall to the high school because of him. Five times! What's he even doing in a normal school? Shouldn't he be up in Pinelane?"

"Apparently not," another man answered. "I know what you mean, though." He sighed. "That boy is overtime waiting to happen. And it doesn't make me happy to say it."

"What? You not happy about overtime?" the first man said.

"You know what I mean. What if your kid was like that?"

"Nope, not me. That's why I ain't having kids. I got snipped."

Laney looked up to see Ed coming toward her, his lips a line across his face. Without saying anything to her, he marched into the office and said, "I'm happy to hear you won't be reproducing, Raguzzi. Now get the hell to work and shut the fuck up."

She turned and ran out into the spewing snow, her slippers instantly soaked and her face burning with shame and guilt and worry.