

# Prologue

Felicity had walked by the brownstone on Waverly Place dozens of times without ever noticing it. The homes in this neighborhood were charming, harkening back to bygone horse-and-buggy days, but this particular house, tired and unadorned, asked to be ignored. The building had reached a certain level of disrepair wherein it was neither eye candy nor an eyesore. It was simply unremarkable. But the location! Felicity could not imagine how a potter could have landed such prime real estate in Greenwich Village, the only corner of Manhattan—with its rows of town houses and its famous park, mews and alleys, elms and sycamores—that reminded her of the best parts of London.

Looking up to double-check the number next to the peeling red door, she wondered: Was the ivy damaging the brick facade? Was the interior equally shabby? If so, would they gut the whole building? Install central air? Would they kick out that dive bar in the basement

and move the entrance to the lower level? Or dig deeper to build a garage?

As she climbed the worn stairs, her sandal caught on a broken step and the thin, blush-colored strap across her toes snapped. She took the shoe off, cursing under her breath, and rang the bell. She heard children shrieking from inside and placed a hand over her belly where her own little offspring, the size—according to her OB—of a turnip, was floating around obliviously, tethered to her insides.

When the door opened, a small girl (Five? Nine? Felicity wasn't especially familiar with the developmental stages of young people) and a large dog crowded the entry, both of them electrified by her arrival.

"Mommy!" the girl yelled into the expanse behind her. "There's a lady!"

Lauren came to the door, her hair half falling out of its clip. "Come in, come in!" she said, trying to restrain the dog from drooling on Felicity's tiered dress. "*Bumper, no!*" She clipped a leash on him. "We rescued him last week; he's three already, but you sure wouldn't know it. He's a handful."

"I apologize for inviting myself last minute," Felicity said, still standing in the doorway, "but I wanted to chat in person."

"No, I'm happy you came," she said. "We're in mid-move, so forgive the chaos."

Felicity was used to people apologizing for the state of their homes, even when those homes were lovely. It wasn't easy, she knew, to welcome a designer of some renown into one's living space. Felicity's TV show, still going strong after six seasons, demanded (for the sake of entertainment) that she say insulting things to the homeowner-victim-guests. But that was not, she had to explain all the time, *who she was*; that was only a persona. She was—in *reality* reality—perfectly kind and polite. Besides, Felicity had not come to the brownstone to judge.

"Watch your step," Lauren said as they entered the living room, and Felicity did, maneuvering around unpacked boxes, over stacks of books, and past dizzyingly unattractive seventies wallpaper. They went through the dining room and into the kitchen, with its avocado-green appliances and orange Formica countertops, to the back of the house,

which had a door opening onto a deck. “I thought we could sit out here,” Lauren said, “since it’s so warm.”

The children—there were three of them—were planting something in terra-cotta pots, their hands caked with dirt. The dog put his head in the watering can.

“Your sandal!” Lauren said, noticing that Felicity had one bare foot as she stood on the splintered deck.

“It broke,” Felicity said with a little lift of her shoulders, the sandal hanging off her pinky. It wasn’t tragic, but it was disappointing; she’d bought them last week on Bond Street in Mayfair.

“Charles,” Lauren said to the tallest child, taking the sandal and putting it in his muddy hands, “be a clever boy and see if you can fix this.” Lauren took that moment to introduce Felicity to her kids: “Charles, Harrell, Waverly, and, of course, Bumper, this is Mommy’s new friend, Felicity.”

“Did you say *Waverly*?” Felicity said. “Like your street?”

“Leo grew up here,” Lauren said, running a hand over the girl’s long hair, “and we always loved the name.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Felicity.

“Leo’s mother was Charley Aston,” Lauren said. “I don’t know if you’ve heard of her, but this was her house.”

“Really? How remarkable.” Felicity had indeed heard of Charley Aston, a pioneer of the American feminist movement, though she’d never seen one of her plays.

“We love the neighborhood,” Lauren said, “but the noise at night takes a little getting used to.”

“I live nearby, closer to the Hudson,” said Felicity. “It’s a smidge less lively.”

“Oh, you’re a neighbor,” Lauren said happily. “I didn’t realize.”

The children were fascinated by the task of repairing a real shoe that was meant for a grown-up’s actual foot.

“I know what to do,” the shorter boy said.

“Surgery,” said Waverly.

Felicity loved an original name, but she didn’t love the idea of these scruffy children messing with her footwear. Before she could object,

they took her sandal inside, conspiring about what would work best. A stapler? Duct tape? Glue? A soldering iron?

“They’re between schools right now,” Lauren said, as if explaining their availability to take on this job.

“I’m sorry?”

“We moved boroughs, and it got complicated to transfer schools so close to the end of the academic year. So we’re homeschooling.”

A little alarm went off in Felicity’s head. Homeschooling was surely time-consuming. “Have you hired a governess or something? A tutor?”

Lauren laughed. “Nope, just me,” she said, and indicated the soil on the deck and the seedlings in the pots with pride. She must have seen the look on Felicity’s face because she quickly added, “Oh, it’s only for a few months. They’ll start at Perkins in the fall.”

She gestured with her arm, offering Felicity a chair. Felicity brushed off the seat before she sat down, putting her Celine bag on her lap to hide her baby bump, and looked out over the barren yard; in spite of the unseasonable warmth, the trees had yet to put out a single leaf. There was opera coming from an open rear window of another brownstone across the way, a house that had been made over top to bottom with a copper PH Artichoke lamp hanging dramatically over the dining room table. Everything at Lauren’s, on the other hand, from the rotting porch railing to the dog’s smelly fur to Lauren’s tired overalls, needed freshening. There were few arguments Felicity could come up with for conserving or treasuring the old and worn, and in this case, what she would do is blow out the whole back side of the house, replacing the north-facing wall with a Swiss-made, pivoting glass door that would let in the light and create a seamless transition to the outdoors.

“So,” Felicity said, coming to the point of her visit, “your samples arrived at our office last week, and they’re stunning. My team created an Instagram teaser to test the market, and it got over thirty thousand clicks in the first hours.”

Lauren put her hands to her cheeks. She wore very little makeup. From the moment they’d met a few months before, Felicity had instantly liked something about this woman—her lack of artifice maybe. Her edginess was apparent only in the context of her work; she was the

type of open, sweet human Felicity thought she *should* be friends with. And she likely knew a thing or two about mothering in New York City, a skill Felicity now considered interesting and even useful. Like this school—Perkins?—that her kids would go to; was it too soon to put her fetus on a waitlist?

“I’m not even on Instagram,” Lauren said. “Thirty thousand sounds like . . . a lot.”

“It’s very promising,” said Felicity. “And I’m not surprised. There’s something about the way you combine the appealing with the abhorrent that speaks to the zeitgeist. People want joy, but they feel evil lurking. Or maybe they want to know beauty can exist in spite of mutating germs.” Felicity felt she’d explained enough; she had a sense for what people wanted, and Lauren’s pieces were going to sell.

“I made you something,” Lauren said, “to express my gratitude for even considering my work.” She looked giddy, almost childlike, as she reached beside her chair and handed Felicity a fat ball of newsprint. Felicity unwrapped the layers of wrinkled paper and found one of Lauren’s pieces: a porcelain teapot with delicate sprigs of lavender hand-painted on the side and, of course, one of her signature grotesqueries: a revolting brown worm crawling along the spout. Felicity lifted the lid and to her delight, found a slug depicted on the underside.

“Oh, I love it,” said Felicity. “It’s classic *you*.”

“The only bad part of moving to this house,” Lauren said, her eyes still on the teapot, “is that my studio is way out in Brooklyn. It was only a block away from our old apartment, but it’s going to be a tough commute now.”

“You might want to find a new studio, then,” Felicity said, “because I have an offer for you. We’d like to sell your pieces exclusively this fall. We’ll feature them in our window displays on Mercer and Madison Avenue and possibly in LA too.”

Lauren made a squealing sound. “Are you serious?”

“Quite,” Felicity said.

Given the look of utter shock and disbelief on Lauren’s face, Felicity hoped this ceramist was up to the challenge. An opportunity to be on the shelves of her store was far beyond any craft fair where Lauren

had sold her pieces before, like at the holiday pop-up market where Felicity had discovered Lauren in the first place.

Lauren got up abruptly and went inside; was the pressure too much for her? Maybe her excitement needed to be expressed in private? Maybe she needed a moment to think? Felicity had no idea. The dog lifted his big head and drooled, watching her in a way she found slightly terrifying, his tail wagging through the wet potting soil the kids had splattered on the deck. Felicity did not move.

To her relief, Lauren returned. She had tears in her eyes and an open bottle of Freixenet under her arm. She handed Felicity a glass filled almost to the rim and held up another, saying, “This is unreal. I never in a million years imagined my stuff being sold at a place like Felicity.”

“*Stuff?*” Felicity said as she placed her champagne on the table. “An original work of art like this”—she held up the little round teapot—“will be priced starting at five hundred dollars. You’re going to be a household name. Well, an upper-class household name anyway.”

“Incredible,” Lauren said, wiping her cheek with the sleeve of her plaid shirt. She sat back down and took a sip of her champagne. The glass had red lipstick, clearly not Lauren’s, ground into the rim. “How will I ever thank you for finding me?”

“I like to think we found each other,” Felicity said.

“No, really,” Lauren said, briefly placing a hand on Felicity’s wrist, “I was starting to worry I’d never get my career back on track after having kids. They can really break up a trajectory, you know? And then you came along. . . . You amaze me, really, and not just because of what you’re doing for me. When I think about all you’ve built in such a short time? It’s phenomenal.”

Felicity did not believe that children should ever be allowed to knock a woman’s career off course, and she hoped Lauren’s kids would not get in her way now; the order Felicity was placing would require Lauren to commit fully to her work.

“Leo!” Lauren said as a man came through the door and joined them on the deck. “Come say hi.”

The dog, his leash dragging on the ground, bounded over to greet

Lauren's husband, who was wearing a helmet, the strap still clipped under his chin. There was some kind of zip tie around the right leg of his ill-fitting khaki pants.

"Hello there, yes, welcome," he said, shaking her hand too hard.

Where, Felicity wondered, would one begin to make over this man? The wire-rimmed glasses? The black tube socks? The T-shirt that had some kind of triangular diagram with the caption, *Here's looking at Euclid?*

He leaned over and hugged his wife, the top of her head lodged in his armpit. He smiled at his dog, at the unattractive porch, at the blue sky; Felicity had never seen a person look so utterly content with so little.

"Looks like you'll be in charge of the kids this summer," Lauren told him, "because Felicity here is putting me to work, starting . . .?"

"Right away," said Felicity.

"How exciting," Leo said, straightening his back in an exaggerated way. "Corporal Aston reporting for duty." And he gave a silly salute.

Lauren did not seem the least embarrassed. "The kids are inside trying to repair Felicity's shoe," she said. "Can you make sure they're not going overboard with the hot-glue gun?"

Felicity flinched at the very idea, but Leo seemed intrigued, tapping his lips with his index finger. "Ahh," he said, "the craft of the cobbler," and he nodded wisely. He then pretended to doff his cap, saying in a lame attempt at a British accent, "At your service, m'ladies," and backed up through the kitchen door, opening it with his rear end.

Lauren was smiling. "If we give them enough time, they could probably replicate your sandals in the 3D printer."

Felicity doubted that very much; they were Alexander McQueen.

But something about the dynamic between these two appealed to her. Leo took orders from Lauren; did that come naturally or had she trained him? Or was it a perfect combination of nature and nurture?

"So, how does this work?" Felicity said, pointing from Lauren to the space her husband had just occupied.

"What do you mean?"

"Having a partner who's so dedicated to you? A supportive person by your side, day in and day out?"

Lauren looked confused at first, but then her eyes opened wide. “Felicity! Have you met someone special?”

Felicity felt herself blush. “Guilty,” she said.

“Wow, that’s great,” Lauren said. “I somehow thought . . . On your show once—or was it in an interview?—you said—”

“I told the women on *The View* that having a life partner was not for me. And I meant it. But then I happened to meet this man, and things have changed, or it seems so anyway.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Lauren.

*Was it though?* Felicity wasn’t sure the specific circumstances would fit Lauren’s idea of wonderful.

“It’s a tad complicated,” she said. “I’ve become involved with someone who’s technically unavailable.”

“Oh. Is he . . . *married?*” Lauren said, dropping her voice to a whisper, like she hadn’t known such a thing was even possible.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Lauren seemed to require a moment to process that information, looking as though she were being asked to swallow the slug she’d painted on the teapot. “Oh, dear,” she said.

“Their marriage is devoid of passion,” Felicity said, “while he and I have this intense connection. He’s so . . . solid, you know? He’s a lawyer and absolutely brilliant. He adores me.”

Lauren nodded, hanging on her every word.

“And then,” Felicity said, “we were utterly astonished when—and this is confidential, so please keep this between us—I somehow got pregnant.” As soon as the words came out, Felicity regretted sharing them. Aside from Russell, she had not told a single person this monumental news, not a friend and certainly not anyone she knew professionally. A baby had not been in her plans, but she also knew this would likely be her last opportunity to become a mum, which was something she thought she might like to do, though not something she wanted to do entirely on her own. With the right partner, however, it might be nice to push a pram down a New York City sidewalk, or snuggle a baby wearing one of the white French terry-cloth onesies she sold in her boutique, or share pictures of her pregnancy journey on Instagram.



“Gosh, Felicity!” Lauren was beaming at her, and Felicity wondered if she was *really* happy for her or if she was merely excited to have a minor celebrity confiding in her. “Congratulations,” she said. “How far along are you?”

“Not far at all,” Felicity said. This was not true, but due to the loose, graceful cut of her dress, her naturally slim hips, and her personal trainer, she was barely showing. “It took me—it took both of us—totally by surprise. He wants to leave her, his wife. But I said no, absolutely not. I cannot be responsible for the death of a marriage. And I *could* raise a child by myself.”

“Of course you can,” said Lauren with an encouraging nod of her head.

“But I don’t especially want to. Given my rather *intense* career, being a single mother would present big challenges. And this lovely man keeps telling me how much he wants to be a father. That’s sweet, right?”

Lauren looked down and patted her scruffy dog on his head. “Yes, well . . . If there’s no passion between them, like you said, and if he really wants to raise the . . . boy? Girl . . . ?”

Felicity knew the answer to that already but kept it to herself. “He wants this baby more than I do,” she said, and laughed, although she wasn’t being funny; he actually did. “He’s a sensitive, caring man, so he’s in anguish about his wife, who sounds dreadfully dull.” She sighed and waved a fly away from her face. “But what he wants most of all is to be the baby’s father.”

“How sad,” said Lauren. “I can’t imagine telling Leo that he’s not part of our family.”

“But that’s exactly what I did,” Felicity said. “Because I imagine his wife’s situation, and I feel so . . . *bad*.” But “bad” was not accurate. What she felt was more a nagging sense of being *supposed* to feel bad. It wouldn’t be a good optics for her brand anyway; she was not a home-wrecker of *that* sort.

“Oh, how difficult,” said Lauren, putting her hand back on Felicity’s arm.

Lauren was looking at her so earnestly then that Felicity found it almost off-putting.

“I mean, people *do* get divorced,” Felicity said curtly. “It’s a reality. And the baby has me rethinking everything. Russell and I have tried to stay away from each other, but it’s proving to be difficult, especially now, given the new circumstances.”

“Of course. If you two—I mean, if you *three* are meant to be together, I don’t know what choice you have.”

“I could tell him to bugger off and raise the child on my own.”

“I don’t see how you can tell the father—especially since you seem to love him and all—that he can’t be with his own baby,” said Lauren.

And then she said, “You’re kind of famous for having good instincts, right? I would trust those. Follow your heart.”

Felicity put a hand to her chest, just as the baby caused some kind of faint flutter, a small ripple from deep within her. She did have good instincts; her entire career was based on her ability to know what was best. And her instincts were telling her that she needed him. If he would quit his job and agree to take the lead with the baby, then she would agree to be with him.

“My instincts tell me we should be together.”

“Well, there you go,” Lauren said.

Felicity sat back, tingling with resolve. “Thank you so much, Lauren.”

“You’re welcome,” said Lauren.

There was the slightest wrinkle in her brow, Felicity noticed. A Botox injection would clear that right up.

“Yes,” Felicity said, and she let out a huge breath. Her instincts had rarely failed her. “*Follow your heart*; oh, I love that.” She slipped her foot out of her other sandal; she would take an Uber directly to Russell’s, barefoot and pregnant.

Felicity picked up her glass of champagne. “I read that one little sip won’t hurt.”