

# There's More Than One Way Home

## Chapter One

### A Teachable Moment

May 2004

“Welcome to Minotaur Island.”

The park ranger stamped my hand as I stepped off the pier, the last of our group to do so.

Just in time. The kids were getting tired of Jack’s autistic parlor tricks.

At the head of the group Kristin Scarborough shrieked, “Hurry! We’re behind schedule already! Go straight to the picnic tables!”

Poor Ms. Scarborough. She could have had a fulfilling career in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. “Wanted: woman to accuse neighbors of witchcraft. Inquire Salem. Massachusetts driver’s license not requ’d.” Instead she was trapped in the body of a fourth grade teacher.

I’d spent the past half hour as her hostage, confined to a rotting wooden pier above the murky waters of San Francisco Bay with my son and his classmates. Jack and I had spontaneously volunteered as the entertainment, and he had played his part with goodwill: rattling off the names of vice-presidents in alphabetical order and calculating which days of the week various holidays would occur on in the year 2022.

But as we stepped on the shore, Jack announced, “I have to go to the bathroom...”

Jack often repeated the last word or phrase of his sentence in a squeaky, sing-songey version of his usual speech. He also liked to locate the bathroom in any new location we visited. He’d just used the head on the ferry so I was pretty sure this was part of his routine.

“Can you wait a few minutes? ‘Til we get settled?”

“I guess so... so...”

I pulled him gently along with the other children.

Our troupe inevitably mingled with the two public school classes that had arrived with us on the ferry. Jack’s class numbered fifteen while the other teachers were each responsible for thirty students. It was like navigating Macy’s the day after Thanksgiving.

“Stay together!” Ms. Scarborough walked backwards so that she could face us, motioning with both hands to follow. “Anna!” she addressed me. “Can you please divide the kids into groups? Or do you have your hands full with Jack?”

“Don’t worry, I can do it.” *One of these days, Kristin...* If the other moms had liked me better I would have recruited them into a fragging plot. You see, it was all right for me to become frustrated with Jack. No one else had better try it.

\*\*

The benches of the redwood tables were rough through my slacks. I never missed a field trip, but I preferred indoor destinations, like the Asian Art Museum, where I could wear Prada kitten heels without getting them stuck in a divot in the grass. Today I compromised with stacked heels on black

suede boots.

Ms. Scarborough had placed a mound of stapled pages in the center of each table. “There aren’t enough for everyone! You have to share!”

“Now?” Jack wondered about the bathroom. “Now...”

“But we’re supposed to do the project.” I pulled one of the stapled packs towards us. Each page depicted an endangered species of the region, drawn in outline.

Emily Batarski reached to touch my wrist. “Oooh, what a beautiful bracelet!”

“Thank you, dear.”

Emily was the alpha female of my Gal Pal Gang, four little girls who had attached themselves to me in kindergarten when Jack joined the school. Her mother, another chaperone, was next to her, and she shot me a venomous look.

I avoided her by turning to Jack. “Can you do some coloring first, hon? Just a couple of minutes.”

“I have to go. Go...”

No, I did not like field trips. Forget the Asian Art Museum – I wouldn’t have enjoyed going to the freaking Gershwin Theater with this crowd. I came along in part because Kristin-“Teacher of the Year”-Scarborough seemed convinced that Jack would set fire to the school bus seats if not guarded on either side by an adult with a fire extinguisher.

Thank God the school year was almost over. Third grade had been far less nerve-wracking, as we’d had a much more understanding teacher. And the fifth grade teacher was supposedly one of the most laid-back. So Jack’s dad and I had chosen to tough out fourth grade. But Jack’s dad didn’t have to go on field trips.

“...Go...”

Maybe he really did have to go by now.

That was when I made my mistake. All I had to do was to go with him.

But I didn’t, because I wanted Ms. Scarborough to see that he could be trusted to go to the bathroom by himself.

“All right,” I said. I pointed to the wood-shingled administrative building I had seen when we disembarked. It was the only man-made structure in evidence and I assumed it was where there would be public bathrooms. Jack would be in my line of sight except for the time when he was actually holding his penis in his hand. “Be careful, okay?”

Jack’s Asperger’s Syndrome diagnosis put him at the higher end of the autistic spectrum. At home he was just Jack: an easy-going kid if you followed his rules, which wasn’t difficult in a big house with three adults and only one child. Everything he did, from talking to himself to leaving toothpaste where no toothpaste had ever gone before, was normal – for him.

I watched as he waddled across the meadow with his jerky gait, legs sticking out at 45 degree angles behind him, until I was distracted by Ms. Scarborough’s next announcement. “It’s time for the lecture!” I hoped she’d brought her Robitussin. “I want you to listen to Candy!” was how she introduced the island’s resident ecologist.

Jack would have been obsessed by the coincidence if he’d stayed: he usually had a personal aide in the classroom whose name was Candy, but I’d given her the day off.

Ecologist Candy was very young, with a pert nose and blonde hair that danced in the wind. She was also tragically unequipped with either microphone or baseball bat, and so she, too, had to shout if she wanted to be heard by all three classes in attendance. Still, she lectured passionately about our overuse of pesticides and preservatives, our failure to recycle and to compost, our essential heartlessness. She was addressing the earth's last hope: the generation that must call forth unprecedented wheat from the fields, must sew closed the gash in the ozone layer, and finally harness the power of the sun.

I knew Jack's M.O. He would hide in the bathroom until exactly time to eat lunch. *Not on your life, Boychik.* I'd go after him before that.

\*\*

But somehow – and this was unlike me – I lost track of time.

Emily and her sidekick Sophie told me about their new heroine, Tyra Banks. (“She has her own TV show now!”) until Emily's mother interrupted, “You're getting all the wrong values from her.”

The pronoun “her” struck me as ambiguous.

Laurie Batarski was also an alpha female, but of a less appealing sort. She had a chokehold on classroom politics, being Ms. Scarborough's chum and a cruelly inventive fundraiser who would demand parents' help in selling chocolate to diabetics.

I remembered her censure later, but not much else; although I must have checked my watch repeatedly, because I always did, the numbers didn't stick with me. I helped a couple of other boys and then began filling in the wings of a California least tern with an improbable violet, when suddenly Kristin Scarborough was screaming, “It's time to clean up! If we don't eat lunch now we won't have time to hike to the top and back!”

While Kristin ran around our table like a sheepdog, barking orders and collecting art projects, I beat my crayon against my palm a few times before announcing to no one in particular, “Jack went to the boys' room. I'm going to go get him.”

God only knew what he was up to. Staring at the graffiti on the wall. Or maybe he'd never found the boys' room, even though I *had* seen him disappear into the side of the building. At any rate, I had to find him. So I put my purse on my shoulder and trekked across the meadow. If I had to stand at the restroom door and shout his name, it wouldn't be the first time. I had been proud of him when at age eight he had refused to go into the ladies' room with me. I worried about his safety, but any move toward independence was worth some risk.

I weaved my way through the milling public school classes, now breaking up for their own lunch. Jack's dad and I had dismissed the public school system as an option after we toured a number of special needs pre-school facilities, and found them understaffed and rating about a notch above the state prison system in aesthetics and upkeep. And so we had been squeezing Jack's octagonal needs into the pentagonal hole that was the Pathways School, with its small class size and expensive computer lab. But the public school teachers, with classes twice as large as Pathways', had better control over their students.

The bathrooms were just where I thought they'd be: on the side of the office, hidden by an L-shaped wall creating a semi-private passageway to two doors. I knocked on the door of the men's room. No answer. I knocked again. This time a gruff male voice called back, “It's open.”

“Are there any kids in there?” I asked.

A moment later the ranger who had greeted me at the shore emerged, zipping his fly. “Not that I saw. You know, y'all shouldn't let these kids run around unsupervised if they can't go to the john by

themselves.”

“I – I’m sorry,” I said.

His grouchiness dissolved. “They’s slippery devils, ain’t they?” He had red veins in his nose and crowded, yellow-stained teeth. “Well, he can’t get far ‘less he has a canoe. What’s he look like?”

“Small for his age, black hair, pale skin, big eyes. Grayish.”

“Looks like you, then,” he said. He winked, but then he passed me with an impatient grunt, and turned into the administration building.

The next place to look was among the other schoolchildren. That would be like Jack, always eager to introduce himself to new people. Suddenly I saw the naïveté of my frequent warnings about strangers.

“Anna!”

Raven Fernandez was jogging toward me, crossing the grassy divide between the schools. Raven was the third chaperone mom, and one of the few women at the school I counted as a friend. Most of the others were cowed by Emily’s mother, Laurie, who hated me both for bringing the stigma of autism to the school and for being the only woman who didn’t wear jeans every day. I was too busy to serve on her committees and too proud to kiss her behind.

“Scarborough’s having a meltdown,” she panted. Raven was in remission from breast cancer but still weak from chemo, and lost in clothes that had fit her not long ago. “But with good reason for once.” She stopped to catch her breath.

“What is it?”

“Three of the boys are missing. Tyler, Dylan and Cesar.”

A ball dropped from my throat down to the bottom of my stomach. Raven must have seen what I was feeling in my face.

“Isn’t Jack with you?” she asked.

He was not.