

Any  
Minute

# Any Minute

A NOVEL *o*

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New York Boston Nashville

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*“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*

—ACTS 20:35

Happiness often sneaks in through a door  
you didn't know you left open.

—JOHN BARRYMORE

A woman is like a tea bag—you never know  
how strong she is until she gets in hot water.

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

To the ones who yearn to be happy;  
to those who live with hidden shame.

To those who keep trying to find a way home.

## Chapter One

Each morning as Sarah maneuvered her crème brûlée Lincoln MKX up the ramp into Smart Park Tower, the experienced drivers knew they'd best keep out of her way. She scanned her monthly access card and waited, her fingers tapping the steering wheel, for the robotic arm to lift. She made a tire-squealing beeline for the C-level spaces, which gave her direct access to the elevator and the walkway to her office building.

The experienced drivers had learned to practice the list of AAA defensive-driving tips whenever they encountered Sarah Harper. When she was behind the wheel, they put their pride in the backseat and didn't provoke her. They didn't speed up to try to pass or try to hold their own in the climbing lane. Above all else, they fastened their seat belts. Because they all knew Sarah believed life was there for the taking. To say that Sarah was aggressive would have been an understatement.

Sarah wanted the best of everything in life, including the best parking spot.

Newcomers would find themselves whipping around pylons, darting around blind corners, trying to find a way to cut through; it was impossible to get ahead of her. No matter how hard anyone

tried, Sarah would take you in that new crossover SUV. She'd downshift the Lincoln going uphill, zip into the spot she wanted, and switch off the engine without even glancing in your direction. She'd check her lipstick in the sun-visor mirror without giving a second glance. If she found a smudge on her lips, she'd touch it up with something called Garnet Burst, blot in a ladylike manner, and tuck the tube inside her purse.

Most annoying of all, the whole time you tested your driving skill against her, she'd be talking nineteen to the dozen, conferring with clients on her cell phone. She'd be setting up the schedule for her day, conversing with colleagues, instructing her assistant, Leo, to send out price memos to everyone on her e-mail list. She'd be mentally comparing currency rates and futures prices and trading strategies, trying to predict a market that had run amok, prices shooting up or tumbling down, terrifying clients who depended on her.

She liked to arrive early.

She liked to stay until the bitter end of the day. You could bet money she'd be the last to turn off the lights in her office at night. She'd be the last to leave the parking lot. She wouldn't depart her office until she had dotted every *i* and crossed every *t*, no matter how late it made her assistant.

This morning, ready to leave the comfort of her vehicle and stroll inside, she would speak one simple command to the SYNC feature in her Lincoln and, just like that, the music would shut off.

She'd tuck her cell phone away, keeping it close enough to hear in case it rang, and remove the keys from the ignition, depositing them inside her Gucci purse. She'd step from the SUV, adjust her blazer, fling her computer case over her shoulder, and lock the doors. That's when you could see for the first time that she'd

done all that perilous driving, all that squealing around concrete pillars and speeding up the multistory ramps, in a pair of pretty Prada heels. Name brands and labels were very important to Sarah, and she displayed them any time she had a chance.

Each time Sarah entered her offices in the financial district, you could see someone teasing her about her performance in the Smart Park; they loved to laugh about it on the trading floor. They joked about it as she entered the pit; they pestered her as she hooked up her nest of cables and wires and speakerphones and screens. How did she manage to snag the space with her name engraved on the gold plaque on the curb? Did she ever think of signing up to drive for NASCAR? Who did she think she was, Mario Andretti? And Sarah would shrug all this attention off with a puzzled smile, not understanding exactly why everyone made it such a big deal. She lived life in overdrive, but to her it was normal.

Sarah liked to have everything in her life just so, from the progression of the music selection in her iPod (from the latest pop on the charts to light jazz) to the lineup of roller-ball pens, three black ink and three blue, in the little trough built into her desk drawer. From the baby-soap samples and finger snacks she stored inside the diaper bag (so Kate could be dropped off at the babysitter's at a moment's notice) to the entryway of her house, where she kept Mitchell's shoes, knapsack, galoshes, jacket, and Cubs cap all within easy reach for a little boy darting out the door. From the color-coded Tupperware suppers in the refrigerator (a few of which she prepared ahead on the weekends, others she bought from the grocery or the caterers) to Joe's shirts, ironed and arranged where he could find them by sleeve length in the closet.

Sarah felt that having everything organized was a matter of survival for her, a necessary habit. She felt driven to be a supermom, as efficient in her home as she was successful at her job. She needed to squeeze everything she could out of her days.

Life was there for the taking, and Sarah Harper was focused on taking all of it she could.

And when you were as busy as Sarah and you had all those plans, things must never be taken out of order. Sarah liked to keep her to-do list as finely tuned as the engine in the Lincoln she drove. This, she had decided, was the way to happiness. Sarah had similar expectations of other people. As a matter of fact, she strongly believed that to live any other way would equate to a wasted life.

This morning as Sarah tossed her dark hair over her shoulder and entered the Roscoe Futures Group offices, an alarm sounded on her personal data assistant, reminding her of an upcoming meeting with one of the firm's senior brokers. At the same time, she was exchanging shoptalk with a client, her cell-phone earpiece barely jutting from her head: "If you want to do this, we'll have to do it later in the week. You'll have to set up an appointment with Leo." Anyone who didn't realize she had a phone in her ear would have thought she was talking to herself. Added to that, she was thumbing through a report, searching the latest market forecast for any commodity prices that looked like they might rise.

"You get your parking spot again?" a guy from human resources teased her. "Wouldn't want you to start things off wrong. Sort of like getting up on the wrong side of the bed."

"How's it going, Andretti?" someone added. "Ready for another day at the races?"

Sarah ignored the parking-space comments and dropped a box of folders on her assistant's desk. She backed halfway through her own office door and eyed the intern, a small anxious-looking youth named Leo McCall. Leo took care of office duties; he'd gone through at least eleven different interviews to get the internship. Taking him on as an intern meant she could get away with asking him to do anything because he was in training. If luck held out and the market ever came back, he'd also become a commodities trader one day.

*Call me in a minute.* She pointed to her earpiece and cocked her thumb like the hammer of a gun. *I've got to get off this thing,* she mouthed. "No," she told the earpiece as she disappeared inside her office. "I can't. This evening is out of the question." And for a moment she considered explaining why, that she was meeting the two gentlemen in her life at the Cubs game, that something always got in the way when they tried to have time together, that even though Joe insisted they sit in the bleachers at Wrigley she was really looking forward to it this time.

She swapped her navy blazer for her trading jacket and, still talking on the phone, attached the rat's nest of wires to a microphone that curved under her jaw and referred to the small mirror on her shelf while she twisted her dark curls into some semblance of a bun.

With bobby pins aligned in her teeth, she examined her pale hazel eyes, her narrow oval face, with pessimism. Trading-floor rules required a smooth, contained hairstyle that wouldn't provide a safety hazard around all those miles of cable. She hated to admit how much hair she'd yanked out trying to get untangled at the end of a session.

*What is taking Leo so long?* She gestured through the glass

door, trying to get his attention, but he was busy distributing to-go coffee and didn't see her waving.

*Oh well.* If she couldn't get off the phone, at least she could check on the baby. Sarah situated herself in her leather chair and briefly noted the photograph of Joe with his heavy brows and his Italian good looks smiling at her. On the other side of the computer sat a snapshot of the kids taken last month, Mitchell, with his new glasses perched atop his nose, grinning at the lens while Kate (with her wisps of hair so much like Sarah's) looked desperate to wriggle from her brother's knee.

Sarah powered up her computer and entered the [www.nannyrating.com](http://www.nannyrating.com) Web site. She punched in her ID number and waited for the information to load. The nanny site appeared, and Sarah began to scroll through. Sarah had signed up for this service the same day she'd employed Mrs. Pavik. And even though Mrs. Pavik, in her sensation-seeking way, had pitched a fit ("You are *spying* on me with this machine!" "You do not trust me to do the right thing!" "I will let Kate do handstands in her car seat and find out who reports me to you then!"), Sarah wouldn't back down. Every piece of equipment even remotely associated with the baby—the diaper bag, Kate's favorite stuffed bear, the canister of baby wipes—had the same visible placard fastened to it: "How's my nanny doing? E-mail [5384@nannyrating.com](mailto:5384@nannyrating.com)." Even the stroller sported a bumper sticker. And even though Mrs. Pavik acted highly insulted by this process, Sarah preferred punching in a password to breaking up her finely tuned schedule.

"Your nanny has three new posts," the screen announced after completing its search. Sarah scrolled down the messages, each of them submitted by a stranger who had happened on Mrs. Pavik and Kate in the park. One of them was from a crackpot who

wrote, “This is ridiculous! Get a real relationship with something! Don’t use a computer to check on your babysitter!”

Another wrote, “It was a delight to see your baby playing on the slide.” Sarah didn’t know whether this was meant to be a good post or a bad one. Wasn’t playing on a slide dangerous? Yet the writer had chosen the word *delight*. You wouldn’t say, “It was a delight to see your baby playing on the freeway.” Or, “It was a delight to see your daughter juggling knives.” So . . . maybe let that one go.

The last post proved more beneficial. Finally, someone had given Sarah information she could use. “I don’t know if you mind this or not, but I saw Nanny #5384 feed your daughter peanut butter for a snack. Isn’t your daughter too young for you to determine whether she has a peanut allergy?”

The phone finally beeped, signaling she had another caller. Through the door she could see Leo holding his phone in his hand. At last, an opportunity to break in! *Took you long enough*, she mouthed to her assistant through the glass. *Where have you been? Why didn’t you do this sooner?*

“I need to let you go,” she told her long-winded client. “I’ve got another call I need to take.”



There were other things Sarah believed in taking besides the prime parking spot. When she stopped by Starbucks, she helped herself to a great number of sweeteners and stirrers for her desk; you never knew when you might need some Splenda. When she happened upon the cosmetics counter at Macy’s, she selected an assortment of disposable applicators and mascara wands for her own use. When she and Joe got the babysitter and had a night out

at Ambria in Lincoln Park, she always managed to slip a few of those rose-shaped French chocolates at the hostess stand into her purse. But Sarah's talents for getting the most out of everything became most evident of all when, armed with her cell phone, her laptop in its satchel, her headphones, and her microphone, she tried to make sense of the world's slumping economies on the crowded floor of the Chicago Board of Trade.

Sarah usually arrived at the office by seven o'clock. An hour before trading started, she would leave her desk, plod up the LaSalle Street canyon, and march through the art-deco doors that had guarded the building's hallowed halls ever since the days of the Great Depression. Her Prada heels would click purposefully across the marble tiles. A bell would ring when the elevator reached lobby level and, moments later, she would disappear behind sliding doors of brushed champagne steel.

The quotations board would already be blinking when she arrived on the trading level. Prices would be showing in red, green, yellow—these days mostly red. The pits would be full of frantic, gum-chewing traders ready to buy and sell, trying to lock in prices, making hand signals to show the quantity of their bids.

Sarah thought nothing of jumping into the fray, and according to Tom Roscoe from the brokerage firm, that's when her instincts became extraordinary. In a place where you could lose your shirt just by holding a hand the wrong way, Sarah had an uncanny knack for knowing exactly what to sell and when to buy.

By the time she arrived that morning, she'd already shot Mrs. Pavik an e-mail message about Kate's inappropriate snacking ("No more peanut butter, please," she'd written) and had forgotten about it by the time the market opened. Sarah was quick to

correct any error she perceived in her nanny and other people she worked with, but she was not quick to compliment or show appreciation. She wasn't mean-spirited; she was simply busy and very focused on getting what she wanted in life. "Let's get going." She elbowed Leo and pointed toward a number streaming overhead.

Leo followed behind her, frantically scratching observations in his notebook. Sarah's focus darted between the boards and her computer screen. She typed madly on her keyboard for a while before she stopped to wait—crouched, ready.

When the board changed, Sarah acted. "Here we are." She held up her hand with four fingers, her palm faced toward herself. "We're taking!" she hollered as she bounced on her toes. "Taking!" Although buying could be a risk. "All the way!"

There wasn't much time to celebrate before another bargain purchase presented itself. Then another. And, after that, something else looked like a good sell. By the end of the closing bell, Sarah had locked in a favorable price on a good share of crude oil futures as well.

"Great job out there, NASCAR," one of the ninth-floor guys congratulated her.

"Ah," another said, offering a high five as she passed in the hall. "Just another day of healthy risk-taking, I see."

"Yep," she said, pretending to wave a checkered flag.

Leo, who'd returned to his administrative duties sometime between the closing bell and the dismantling of Sarah's many wires and screens and coax cables, leaped from his chair and followed her when she returned to the office, relaying a long list of messages even as her PDA alarm sounded again, reminding her of a meeting with the trading strategists. Sarah's adrenaline was

running high, her emotions and thoughts racing as if she was in high gear and could not slow down. She felt excited and was ready to tackle more before the day was over.

“Gary Rothman was wondering if you had any gut instincts about those T-Bonds. He’s making his decision tomorrow.”

“Why can’t he make a decision without me?”

“You know he likes to get your opinion. You know he won’t stop bugging you until you give it to him.” Sarah made a face as if to say she was aggravated, but Leo knew deep down inside she liked it when other people depended on her. “And Bill Morris’s clerk needs your file on the Davis contract.”

“I thought I pulled that for him last week.”

“Right. It’s in the mail. Double-check.” Leo hesitated a beat. “Oh yeah. Your husband called to confirm tonight. You can get him on his cell; he’s still at the shop.”

“Oh, right. Joe.”

“He says to remember that you *promised* them.”

“I remember.” Her tone said she was half deserving of this prompt and this was half none-of-his-business.

“DarCo guy will be in town Thursday. Wants to talk about upgrading software.”

“Leo. Hey. In case you haven’t noticed, that’s why we’re paying you the big bucks around here. So you can get rid of people like the DarCo guy.”

“This is an unpaid internship,” he reminded her.

She ignored his comment.

“Leo McCall takes care of the DarCo guy.” He scratched the item off his list with zeal.

“Those plans for tonight?” Sarah announced happily, and anyone could tell that, for the moment, everything felt satisfactory

in her world. “Did Joe tell you? I’m meeting him and Mitchell at the Cubs game.”

“Oh man.” Leo’s voice flooded with envy. “Joe got tickets to that? It could be the best game of the year.”

Sarah pondered the panoramic view of Chicago, what seemed like miles below their enormous window—the plaid grid of sidewalks and streets, the occasional turquoise patch of a rooftop swimming pool, the elevated train track that sliced the fabric of The Loop like an oversized zipper. One of the pools caught her attention; she liked the idea of installing a pool when the baby got older. Mitchell and Kate would love a pool once Kate got old enough to take lessons. Maybe it was too early to plan, but a pool would ensure her children plenty of friends during the sweltering Illinois summers. After all, having things like swimming pools was what she was working so hard for. *I want my children to have the best of everything*, she thought. Anytime Sarah felt even a twinge of guilt about all the time she spent away from her family, she always convinced herself she was doing it for them.

“Back in Michigan I told my friends that when I lived in Chicago, I’d be close enough to Wrigley to lean out the window and spit on the field,” Leo said.

“I thought you lived in Bucktown. With five roommates,” she reminded him.

“Back in Michigan, I exaggerated sometimes.”

A Midwestern whiz kid come to conquer the city. There would always be an endless supply of them. Sarah smiled.

“I’d give my right kidney to go to that game,” Leo said.

“I’ll phone the medics for you,” she said, teasing. “Let them know they can drive right over and pick it up.”

He rolled his eyes at her calling his bluff. “You get the Roscoe

corporate seats?” Although the company had cut back, Tom Roscoe had not given up the baseball tickets. Phone in hand, Leo looked ready to call the CEO and make sure everything had been arranged.

She shook her head. “The bleachers.”

“You? A Bleacher Bum? What happened with that?”

“It’s Joe’s deal, for once. He says the bleachers are the best place to experience the people of Wrigley.”

“I’d give anything to be in the bleachers. But knowing you, are you sure that’s the experience you’re looking for?”

A yellow warbler flittered past outside the mammoth window. Sarah wondered absently how such a small bird could find a place to perch this far above the ground. How had something so small flown so high?

Sarah followed up with her husband as she settled herself atop Leo’s desk to sort through pages of numerical data. *Can you make sure these add up?* she mouthed as she fluttered two pages in Leo’s direction. “Joe,” she said after she heard the click. “Joe?” But she’d only gotten the recording.

“See you when I see you,” she said after the beep, picturing him with a customer, their heads together beneath the hood of his latest car project.

As fond as Sarah was of conversing with her husband, she was glad to leave a message. She didn’t have time for anything else right now. But maybe she ought to add extra information so she wouldn’t sound too abrupt.

“It’s been another one of those days over here.”

She narrowed her eyes conspiratorially at Leo, who shared this madhouse with her and understood. For the hundredth time she couldn’t quite believe her luck that she’d gotten an intern this

year. Leo McCall, at the top of the Kelley School of Business from IU at Bloomington, who'd ridden his scooter to save gas money and parked it on the sidewalk for each one of those grueling Roscoe interviews. Leo was determined. Sarah liked determined people.

She continued her message to Joe. "Leo's drooling to be in my place. He says it'll be quite the game."

Her intern glanced from the adding machine and gave a thumbs-up sign. With a fortifying nod that said *I'm sticking by you*, Leo returned to the scads of figures, his fingers skittering over the adding-machine keys.

"So don't worry, Joe," she said with added confidence, basking in Leo's enthusiasm. "I promise I won't let anything get in the way of me being there." She needed a night to forget about work and be with her family and let her hair down.

"See you in a few hours then, honey," she said, swinging her leg, absently tapping her heel against the desk. "I might be late, but I'll be there. You know I wouldn't miss this for anything."