

## Chapter 2

*T*here was an evening, about five days after we'd brought Miles home from the hospital, where everything was perfect. I had just changed his diaper, fed him a bottle, swaddled him up tight, and brought his warm precious body close against my chest. His lips were pursed in a contented sleep, and I watched as his breath went in and out between them. I wanted to kiss them, but I refrained, afraid of waking Miles up. I sat in a rocking chair and sang softly to him instead, old lullabies that I knew my mother had sung to me.

My husband was still with us then. He hadn't left yet for the better job, the younger colleague, the easier life. He was still watching TV, beer in hand, a bag of Doritos splayed across his lap, when I'd gone downstairs later that evening. I had turned to him with Miles still in my arms and asked, "Can you believe this? That they just up and gave us a baby?" And we had both laughed, full-throated, from the gut. Miles had woken up then and gurgled along with us. Because if you thought about it, it was totally nuts that a stranger, with the blessing of a few officials and a mile of paperwork from the state, could just hand us a perfectly good baby and let us go home. Crazy.

But I was so, so glad that they had. Those first few months when Miles was a baby were blissful. I'm not saying that

he didn't keep us up all night crying and making a fuss, I'm not saying that he didn't regularly get sick in my hair, or spill formula on the carpet, but the problems were simpler back then, more obvious, more easily correctable. I didn't have to guess what was wrong, or wonder if there were years of institutional history behind it. I didn't have to consider if his Blackness or my whiteness made any difference about what to do – he was just a baby and he was either hungry, tired, or cold. And I was just a mother, ready to help him.

Things started to change when we started going out of the house more with Miles by our side. There was a Starbucks a couple of blocks from our home, and one Sunday morning I convinced my husband (though he wasn't much of a coffee drinker) to get up and get dressed and walk with us to the coffee shop for lattes and early morning pastries. I tucked Miles into his brand-new stroller, braced him on either side with a few of the myriad, colorful stuffed animals that now populated our home, and walked through the neighborhood with my husband and child. We were a happy family, a unit, a threesome that was at last whole and complete.

It was a glorious morning. The sun was shining brightly, the summer air heavy but clear. Our neighborhood was middle class, with broken sidewalks and streets that needed repaving, but everyone took care with their own patch of lawn, as if insisting that better things were yet to come. I'd never had much of a green thumb myself, but I'd tried the first few years after we'd moved into our home to plant a few things and make our garden colorful. The rose bushes I'd carefully picked out from the nursery and planted deep in the soil had been eaten by rabbits, nearly to the roots. I tried hydrangeas next and they'd bloomed, but then disappeared as swiftly as they'd arrived. Magnolias were described to me by the arborist as easy going, as if they liked to stay out late and have a few drinks, but I found them to be recalcitrant, leaving the party early and never making another appearance. I planted a few more things but my heart was no longer in it. I took to apologizing to the bushes as I brought them home from the nursery, knowing they were likely going to die. After a delicate pink shrub made it through an entire year, but then

withered away the next, I decided that a green lawn with no adornment was actually better. Neater. I kept on Nate to make sure it was mowed every two weeks.

As we neared the Starbucks I turned to my husband, who was looking straight ahead as if focusing on the finish line of a very distant race. His mood was always so inscrutable. I could never tell if the slight upturn of his mouth was a faint smile, or a sardonic smirk. He was my man of mystery, like all the fairytales described. Miles cooed and I bent over the stroller and cooed back, “Your first trip to Starbucks, it’s an event!”

Strangers passed us on the sidewalk and I imagined them thinking, my, what a cute family, aren’t they adorable? I looked for their smiles and appreciative head nods, like I always gave when I passed young families with newborn children on the street. So I was surprised when a middle-aged man in jogging shorts and Nike t-shirt glanced inside our stroller, and grimaced. He quickly turned his head to the side, as if he was only just taking the measure of the neighborhood around him, but he’d done a poor job of hiding the disgust that had momentarily stamped his features. Stunned, I stopped in my tracks.

“Did you see that?” I asked my husband, as the man swiftly moved past us.

But Nate refused to follow my gaze. “C’mon,” he said after a moment. “I want to get back to make snacks for the game.”

I wondered for a second if I’d seen what I thought I’d seen, but my husband’s refusal to look me in the eye made me certain. I didn’t know what else to say, so I pressed my lips together and walked on, not bothering to glance again at the jogger now well behind us. When my family got to the coffee shop no one cooed our baby, no one asked us how old he was, no one told us he was beautiful.

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But I knew that Miles was beautiful. No one needed to tell me. And not just beautiful, but smart and sweet and surprisingly coordinated.

“Look at that,” I exclaimed one afternoon, when Miles pulled himself up by the coffee table and toddled two steps forward. I glanced at Nate beside me on the couch, tapping away on his phone.

“That’s great,” he said distractedly.

Miles giggled and fell over and I went to him and picked him up. “Good job,” I cooed, kissing my son’s chubby cheeks. “You’re practically walking!”

Within months Miles was careening around the house and following me from room to room. I’d park him in front of an Einstein video in the living room and go to fold laundry in the bedroom, but within minutes he’d have toddled to my side and gripped a hold of my leg with both arms. I’d swing forward, limping to the dresser with my son firmly attached to my leg, and we’d both devolve into laughter when he eventually fell off. When I made dinner in the evenings Miles bopped along beside me for awhile, and then settled himself in the middle of the kitchen floor and observed my every move, like a concerned movie director. It was as if he knew he’d lost one mother already, and he was absolutely determined not to lose another.

“You smell so good,” I told Miles after dinner one evening, bending over to kiss the top of his head. “Like pine,” I kissed him again, “with maybe a hint of honey behind it.”

“You compliment him too much,” Nate said, walking by.

“Can you compliment a child too much?” I’d asked, surprised by the very notion.

“Of course you can. He’ll start thinking he’s king of the world, then he’ll be spoiled, and then we’ll have a brat to deal with.”

For years I’d appreciated Nate’s honesty and ability to help me focus on reality when I let my dreams and crazy ideas get the best of me. He’d counseled me on how to talk to my colleagues at the bank – how not to expect too much help from them, and how to instead offer my own assistance in a way that made them feel complimented and smart. It had worked wonders

in that I'd gotten two raises and a promotion since I'd started taking Nate's advice. But this time, his advice just sounded mean.

"I've got to pee," I said, straightening up and walking towards the bathroom. Miles pushed himself up off the floor and followed me, clearly planning on heading into the bathroom with me.

"Isn't that a bit much?" Nate asked. "You look like a duck and her chick, but I don't think even ducks go to the bathroom together."

Perhaps I did indulge Miles too much. But truth be told, I adored the devotion. I treasured having someone need me so much they refused to let me out of their sight even for a bathroom break. "We're bonding," I called over my shoulder, and didn't draw the door to a close when I entered the bathroom.

That evening, when it was time for bed, Nate finally drew a line. "No," he said, stopping my hand when I pushed the covers aside to make room for Miles' tiny body in our bed. "Children shouldn't sleep with their parents."

So I went with Miles into his bright blue bedroom and stayed up with him until he fell asleep in my arms. Nate didn't seem to have a problem if I stayed up late into the night with Miles, I just had to do it in a sitting position, in the rocking chair in his bedroom, or on the couch in front of the TV. Miles simply couldn't enter our bed. Looking back, I've sometimes wondered if this was Nate's single feeble attempt at keeping our marriage alive; if it was his attempt to carve out a space for our love to deepen and grow, rather than wither and disappear as it eventually did.

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Miles began talking in full sentences just after he turned two years old. He'd been saying a few words and phrases before then, *Mama*, *Dada*, and *tank you*, but I'll always remember the day he simply started talking.

We were on the floor of his bedroom and the sun was streaming into the room in patterns as the wind outside rustled the late summer leaves. We'd finished playing first with his red and blue trucks, then with his plastic phone that lit up and made astonishing noises, and finally with his Mega Bloks that snapped together in colorful towers. I'd wondered if it was time to take a nap, but instead pulled out the baby puzzles he'd just gotten for his birthday. "Let's try these," I said, and Miles nodded encouragingly.

There were two puzzles, a chunky alphabet one cut out of wood where the goal was to fit each letter to its place in the board, and a similar board puzzle, but with the cutouts being of various large trees. The alphabet puzzle had so many pieces I thought it might overwhelm Miles, so I tipped over the tree puzzle instead. Miles smiled as the pieces tumbled to the floor. I picked up a large green elm and slid it in its slot to show Miles how it was done. He picked up a weeping willow and worked to fit it in the bonsai's spot. His lips pouted in a frown, but he kept trying to fit the piece into the same incorrect slot. After a minute I reached over to help, and that's when Miles looked up at me and said with certainty, "No mommy, I do it."

I stopped perfectly still, withdrew my hand, and watched my son. The determined brow. The body bent over in concentration. The fingers that wouldn't stop moving.

He reminded me of my mother, committed to making a wrong right. A woman who'd volunteered with the homeless and knit countless blankets for the sick. He reminded me of my grandmother, brooking no failure. A woman who'd taught herself bookkeeping when my grandfather refused to let her attend college, and eventually landed a decent job. Miles looked up at me, and I smiled, recognizing the confidence in his clever wide eyes. He was clearly one of the family.