

# Chapter 3

*I*t was two in the morning when I'd gotten the call that my son had been arrested. The proverbial single phone call. Luckily, I'd been awake to answer it. Usually that late at night I was asleep and my phone was in silent mode, but I'd happened to stay up late binge-watching Netflix, and when I'd realized Miles had missed curfew, I decided to keep watching until he came home. I'd remembered to turn the sound up on my phone after getting nachos from the kitchen.

I wasn't particularly worried at first. Miles had only missed curfew a few times before, and never by more than an hour, so I figured he'd be home soon. He just lost track of time, I thought, or got held up for some reason. It wasn't until my phone rang from an unspecified number, and I realized quite how late it was, that I sensed something might be wrong.

"Hullo," I answered, my voice scratchy from lack of use. I coughed to clear it.

"Mom, it's me. I'm-, I'm at the police station. Can you come get me?"

My heart beat so loudly I thought Miles might be able to hear it.

"They've made a mistake," he continued, "I didn't do anything wrong. It's- It's- Just come get me, ok?"

“Of course, ok,” I said. “Are you al—”, and the line went dead.

I threw a jacket on, grabbed the wrong purse, and rushed to my car. I didn’t stop to think of what it might be helpful to bring, or who I should call to tell what was going on, I didn’t think of anything but getting to the station. Our conversation had been so short; my son had told me practically nothing. Had he witnessed a robbery? Tried to break up a fight? Been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Well obviously he’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but how bad was it? Anything could have happened and as I drove to the station my mind bounced from one awful imagined scenario to another. I had to keep reminding myself that at least he was physically ok. He hadn’t been involved in a deadly car accident. He hadn’t been shot. I’d heard his voice on the phone, just minutes before. And from what I could tell, he seemed physically ok.

I drove into the police station and parked haphazardly in the uncrowded parking lot. Grabbing my purse, which I realized only then had nothing in it but my wallet – no Kleenex, no ibuprofen, no pen, no chap stick, none of the items I always needed the minute I didn’t have them – I rushed into the building and strode up to the front desk, breathlessly asking to see my son. The reticent officer behind the partition yawned, and told me to have a seat. Somebody would be with me in a minute. I fought the urge to argue with him, to demand to see my son that very instant. Instead I swallowed, turned, and found a seat on the hard wooden bench in the middle of the waiting area.

A middle-aged woman with a large bosom and even larger purse sat across from me. Her face looked tired, her cheeks drawn. We glanced at each other for a second, and then she turned away and closed her eyes. When they didn’t open again, I realized she was praying.

I closed my own eyes for a minute and thought about all the ways in which my son was a good person. How he picked up litter when we walked together in the park and always carried it, unasked, to a garbage can. How some of his very first words were *thank you* and *please*, and how he never failed to say them when asking for anything or if anyone did anything at all for him. How

he gave hugs freely whenever he was asked, even past the age when most kids stopped giving their parents hugs in public.

Once, when Miles was five years old, we were walking in the neighborhood when we'd come across a little girl sitting on the curb, crying. Her red dress had bunched up in her lap and her skinny knees were sticking out vulnerably in front of her. I noticed a single puff of grass behind her legs, stuck in the nook where the curb met the street. Miles looked at me but I'd shrugged my shoulders, not knowing why the girl was crying. I tried to pull my son along but he'd let go my hand and walked up to her.

"Why are you crying?" Miles asked.

"My sister won't play with me," the girl replied, her pig-tails swinging from side to side. "No one will play with me."

Miles sat down on the curb next to her and offered her the toy he'd been carrying around all afternoon – a superhero figurine he'd only just gotten, and which he'd been coveting for months.

The yellow-haired girl looked at Miles, her tears no longer flowing. She reached a hand out and accepted the toy. They played together for twenty minutes before the girl stood and happily ran off. When my son returned to me I told him how proud I was of him for stopping, and making the effort to brighten the day of a stranger.

I looked down at my hands and my broken red fingernail polish. Miles was a better person than me in so many ways. We'd come across a homeless man once, asleep on the sidewalk just outside the doorway of a drug store downtown. It had been an incongruous sight, a grown man in his day clothes, boots and all, asleep on a couple of flattened cardboard boxes. My instinct had been to step around the body and simply keep walking, as with the girl crying on the curb. Miles' instinct was to stop, despite the smell, despite the oddity of a body in the middle of the sidewalk, and ask if the man was alright.

I continued to recount all the kind instincts that were inherent in my son; his generosity, his playfulness, his easy empathy. It occurred to me for a brief moment that most of these memories were from his early childhood, that since he'd become a teenager he'd grown aloof, abrupt, uncaring even, but I let those

thoughts fly right out of my mind, like a mosquito that buzzes your ear, but then is quickly gone. The disciplinary calls he'd recently been getting from the high school I pushed even further from my mind.

Miles is a friendly, affectionate, misunderstood person, I told myself. He shouldn't be here. Whatever he was being accused of, there was no way it was true.