

Chapter 7

At 3:38 a.m. the glass partition slid open and an officer called out a name. The two women in high heels I'd noticed earlier stood and walked forward together, their shoulders touching, their hands nearly clasped. I felt a surge of jealousy for their obvious friendship. I hadn't had anyone stand by my side like that in years. In high school Tiffany and I were that close. And for a couple of years early in our marriage Nate and I were. But it'd been a long time since I'd had a friend to hold hands with.

Miles was my support system now. And when he wanted to, he was great at it. Just a few weeks before he'd comforted me at the end of a terrible day where I'd made a mistake in front of my boss, had a near car accident on the way home, and then spilled wine on my favorite blouse at dinner. All relatively minor upsets in the scheme of things, but compounded together in a single day they had left me battered and unmoored. I'd been standing in front of the kitchen sink, drenched in water as I scrubbed my blouse, when Miles had rebalanced me. He'd come up next to me and just started talking, telling me about the experiment he'd done in science class that day, about the book he was reading in English, about his Fortnite account and the latest skin in the item shop. It wasn't a conversation so much as Miles sharing pieces of himself, and those pieces clicking together into a

delicate butterscotch that kept me upright. He knew how much I treasured his stories, and he didn't always share them with me now that he was a teenager. But that day he did, and I closed my eyes recalling the past comfort of his presence.

A phone buzzed loudly in the police station, startling everyone in the room. I locked eyes with the woman across from me, but we both shrugged, neither of us knowing whose phone it was.

"Shit," the girl standing closest to me said, "that's mine."

"Don't get it," her friend said.

"You know I have to." She fumbled through her purse and brought out a rhinestone encrusted iPhone. As she cupped it to her ear her long brown hair cascaded over her shoulder like a waterfall. "I know," she said, annoyance clipping her voice, "yes, I know." She turned then and angled her body away from the police partition and more towards me. In a quieter voice she continued, "but you don't understand. We didn't have a choice. No, that's not right— We tried. We—"

I could hear a deep, authoritative cadence on the other end of the line. The girl shifted her weight, glanced at her friend, and then her gaze landed on me. I smiled, trying to appear friendly, wanting her to understand that I knew what she was going through. She stared at me for a second, then rolled her eyes and turned away. It was the same sort of dismissive gesture that had become common with Miles over the past year and a half.

"Don't you walk away from me," I yelled at Miles not that long ago.

"Whatever, Mom."

"This conversation isn't over. Get back here right now."

"You can't order me around. I'm not your slave. You can't just tell me what to do, and all up in a second, expect me to do it."

"That's exactly what I can do. I am your mother."

"And a terrible one at that."

Miles had hit the nail on the head, and it had gone in deep.

I'd stood there speechless, wondering how we'd gotten to that point. Wondering when our relationship had devolved into a

constant argument that seemed both endless and unfathomable. Where was the moment when things had gotten so far off track?

I had wondered it then, and I was still wondering it now.

I'd righted our ship from a misdirected course once, years ago, when I'd pulled Miles from that awful preschool with the ignorant Mrs. M. It had taken effort, locating a new preschool where Miles would actually fit in. Where Black families and white families and Black-and-white families like ours all came together and didn't have a problem with it. I had had to spend hours researching facilities on the computer, and then days driving around St. Louis to preschools far from our home, poking around during operating hours to see if they were actually diverse (as opposed to just the pictures they displayed on their websites), if they offered quality educational programs, were reasonably clean, and fully staffed. A surprising number were not. But at last, in his final six months before kindergarten, in that last year we could still call ourselves a family of three, Miles went to a school where he belonged.

And he flourished there. I hadn't realized the extent to which he wasn't flourishing before, until I saw the progress at his new school. Miles learned to write his name within weeks, and came home bearing large pieces of paper with M I L E S rendered in bold green crayon. He developed the ability to keep a beat on a djembe and quickly gained a fascination with music and instruments of all kinds. His creativity in so many areas exploded.

One afternoon I went to pick Miles up from the preschool and found him building a city out of Lego with two other children. They'd made a model of the street the school itself was on, including the gas station on the corner, the office building next door, and the large garden and playground out back. I bent to look admiringly at the little desks with computers on them in the office building, the trucks with drivers in the gas station, and the swing sets in the mini Lego playground. The children had even made rows of bushes in the garden, where they'd been learning about planting seeds and growing vegetables.

“What will these be?” I asked with delight, pointing to the tiny green plastic leaves.

“Vegetables,” Miles confirmed.

I noticed at the end of the build the rectangular outline of something new being constructed. “What’s that going to be?” I asked.

“A library.”

I tried to recall seeing a library somewhere on this street, but couldn’t. “A library?”

“For you,” my son said. “Because you love books.”

I blinked.

“It going to be blue,” he continued, “your favorite color.”

As the days passed the Lego city grew in complexity. More minifigures were added, including workers in chairs with pencils in their hands, teachers in the playground with megaphones and clipboards, even an attendant at the gas station in hat and uniform. Miles would come home and we would talk about the build as I made dinner, imagining the things he could add to it, sometimes going through our own Lego pieces to see what might work as a sign post or a revolving door. Miles asked Nate to join him once, but when he said no, Miles didn’t ask again.

As the months rolled by Nate spent more and more time in the basement, if he came home at all. I knew that things weren’t good between us, that we needed to work out some disagreements over money and issues with the house, but I maintained the delusion that we were just in some sort of a phase; that couples had ups and downs and while the troughs could get pretty low at times, inevitably there would come an upswing.

By the end of summer, however, I had started to sense that it was more than a phase. I woke up one morning in August without Nate by my side and had the feeling like you get on a hike, when after a bright and sunny start you turn around, the cold wind whipping your hair and shirt, and realize that the horizon behind you has gone dark.

“Where were you?” I gathered the courage to ask Nate one evening, when he finally showed up as Miles and I were eating dinner. It had been so unexpected, his appearance that night, that Miles and I both stopped chewing mid-bite to stare as the back door opened and he entered the kitchen.

Nate struggled with a response. After a minute he gave up and shrugged his shoulders. “Out.”

It was such a trite, uninformative answer I found myself laughing. I laughed so hard my sides hurt, and then as Nate gathered his things and kissed Miles on the top of the head before leaving again, I started to cry.

I felt like a failure. That’s what no one tells you – divorce is so common nowadays you think before it happens to you that it’s no big deal, that it’s just another familiar, if unfortunate, inconvenience, like a root canal – but it’s so much more personal than that. When someone leaves you who you thought would be by your side forever, who you thought had made a promise to stay with you, who you assumed would put in the effort, it’s a betrayal of the bitterest kind. And you can’t help but wonder what you did to deserve it. It felt as if someone had pulled the plug on my life, and both the electricity and the light had gone out.

I could sense Miles by my side and I looked up from my crying. I knew I needed to pull myself together for my son. Miles was patting my back, like I always patted his when he was sick or sad.

“Momma,” he said softly.

“Yes baby,” I replied, drying my eyes with the bottom of my t-shirt. Miles was holding his hand out in a fist.

I looked at it, confused, until I realized that he wanted to give me something. I reached my hand out to his and my son opened his palm over my own. His fingertips grazed my skin and I felt a Lego minifigure drop into my grip.

I looked down at the figurine, straight brown hair, round dark glasses, short skirt, a determined expression on her face. She looked remarkably like me.

“It’s you,” my son confirmed, “and she’s got your favorite things – coffee and a book.” The minifigure was indeed holding a little square book in one hand, and a round red mug in the other.

I was wide-eyed at the likeness. I turned the minifigure over in my hands. “It’s perfect.”

“I keep it with me,” Miles said, as if admitting a secret. “In my pocket. At the other school, I’d bring it every day, and hold on to it.”

“You brought this to school, every day?” How did I miss that, I wondered. How did he not lose it, or have it confiscated by the teachers?

“Yes, but you need it more now.”

“Thank you,” I said hoarsely, taking the Lego figurine from my son and wiping away my tears.

That minifigure became a sort of talisman between my son and I. When he had a bad day at school or a hard time sleeping at night, I’d slip it into his coat pocket for him to find later when he needed it. Miles would keep it for a few days and then, when I seemed particularly sad, usually after another argument with Nate, I’d go to my room and find it nestled on the pillow of my bed. We quietly passed it back and forth between us, never admitting anything out loud, never having to. It was just a Lego minifigure passed between mother and son, a reminder that we were loved, that someone was paying attention.

“Ok,” the girl said, ending the call and putting her phone back in her purse. When she straightened up she glanced my way again, and this time, she smiled.