

Chapter 8

A lock clicked and everyone in the waiting area looked up as the door next to the police partition at the front of the room opened. A woman walked out, escorted by a tall policeman. Her two friends quickly joined her and the three of them all stood together, hugging and talking. I watched as one of the women tucked the hair of her reunited friend behind her ear. It was such an intimate gesture I had to look away. Ten minutes later they were gone and the police station felt more desolate than ever.

A feeling of loss gnawed at me. It was similar to the loss I'd felt after Nate had left, only this time, it wasn't as if someone had unplugged my world to make it go dark, it was more like they'd taken a torch to it and burned everything to the ground. What was left was a charred emptiness, and a vibrating heat that made me unable to sit still. I stood, walked to the window at the far end of the waiting area, then turned and sat back down again.

If Miles' father were here, I wondered, would he be of any help right now? Either the father I tried to give him, or the one that was of his blood? We never found out who Miles' birth father was, his birth mother having declined to tell us at first, and then dying before she could tell us. I used to sometimes imagine his birth father showing up in our lives, tall, strapping, reflecting an older version of my handsome boy. When the doorbell rang it

would be a surprise, a miracle reunion like you saw could happen on daytime TV. Or, maybe Miles' birth father would show up at my work, bearing flowers and regret and courting me, as well as my son, and telling us both how he had been looking for us for years. Or maybe, just maybe, he would show up now, burst through the door of this horrid station, drawn somehow by the biological tug of a son in need, and rescue us from this nightmare that seemed to be taking forever.

I knew my ex-husband would never show up. I knew it would be useless to contact him, though he spent the first few years of Miles' life with us, and Miles still recalled him as something of a father figure. Nate hadn't been a bad father, really, but if I were honest with myself, he'd never been a willing one either. I'd dragged him through the motions of fatherhood, first the adoption classes, then the lessons on swaddling and feeding, while he'd stood woodenly by, nodding, his attention always elsewhere. After Miles was born, Nate tried, but less and less over time, reaching for the TV remote instead of his son, finding other outlets for his passions. When the divorce papers arrived in the mail I'd sat down and finally admitted that I'd layered my hopes upon him, like thin coats of varnish, hoping they'd build up to something shiny and durable, when in fact all they had done was dull and suffocate the person beneath. Nate couldn't breathe, and so he had left us.

I brushed the memory of my ex-husband from my mind. It hurt too much. I thought about my brother, Sam, who I'd been close to once. Sam was older than me by two years, and we'd been friends growing up. He had protected me from the mean kids on our block when I was little, and as I grew up he let me hang with his friends when they came over. He never made me feel unwanted and, indeed, as I got older his friends even seemed to enjoy having me around; they liked seeing how I reacted to a dirty joke, or a can of beer. By the time Sam and I were both in high school I'd been introduced not just to beer and cigarettes with my brother and his friends, but to pot and acid as well. I'd always thought it was so chill of Sam to include me in his circle. It only got awkward when his friends asked me to buy from the dealer for them and I refused.

But after high school, Sam and I drifted apart. We had other interests, other worlds, and Sam left St. Louis, hopping around the midwest before settling not all that far away, across the river, in Illinois. He ended up in a well-kept suburb about an hour's drive east, and when Miles was small he visited a few times. After Nate left and Sam heard about it, he called and asked if we needed anything, offering more often than before to come over and see us. It was the familial help I'd always hoped for. Sam would arrive bearing cookies and milk – he insisted that children needed lots of milk to grow – and sit with Miles and talk to him, interrupting the games they sometimes played to take selfies with his smiling nephew. I discovered later, after his calls and visits abruptly stopped, that he'd been using those photos to impress his boss at work; he'd been angling for a promotion from a lead manager that was Black, and he thought his Black nephew would win him points. Sam's visits pretty much stopped when the promotion fell through.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and realized that I needed to *do* something already. I needed to act. We didn't need a father, husband, or brother, but a lawyer. A well-paid lawyer that would wipe the smirk off those police officers' faces behind the front desk.

I hesitated for a little while longer, but as far as I could tell there was no movement on Miles' case and I was sick with worry. If I was handling this so poorly, I thought, what was Miles going through? How was he holding up? I did my best not to imagine it, not to picture the dark cell Miles might be sitting in, not to see the harsh tactics the police might be using on him, not to think about his hunger, his cold, his distress.

I didn't want to do it. I really didn't want to make the first move, but I took out my phone and stared at it. I looked up my uncle's phone number. My uncle was a well-paid lawyer. My uncle had contacts. My uncle would know what to do.

But my uncle was also a bigot.

Uncle Ian was my mother's brother, and though from the same gene pool as her, he had turned out unlike her in nearly every way. He was my proof that blood didn't matter, that people could turn out to be anything, that genetics predicted so little.

When I'd first announced to the family that Nate and I were adopting an African American child, Uncle Ian's response had been to storm from the room. It was the Thanksgiving holiday and we were stuck in a house together for the whole of the afternoon, but Ian was more than prepared to make the day uncomfortable for everyone who'd unwittingly shown up. By the end of that afternoon, he'd loudly argued with me over the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the iniquities of Affirmative Action, and the color of Barack Obama's skin. He insisted that Obama wasn't Black.

"Obama isn't Black?" I'd echoed in disbelief.

"No. Obama isn't Black, because he didn't grow up in the streets. I read his autobiography," Uncle Ian stated with misplaced pride. "You aren't Black if you don't grow up playing in the streets, dirty and shoeless."

"Ok, so," I stammered, "your argument is that because Obama wore shoes as a child, his skin today can't be considered Black?"

"Essentially."

I stared at my uncle's confident grin, the look that implied that what he'd said made perfect sense, the swagger indicating his assurance that he'd actually proven something. I could think of nothing good to say in response. I'd made Nate get up at that point and leave, even though he'd been hoping for a second piece of pecan pie.

I shuddered recalling all of the mean and hurtful things Uncle Ian had said to me over the years before I'd finally cut off contact with him.

Did it count as white privilege, I wondered, if I had to use a racist relative to get my Black son out of jail?

I stared at Uncle Ian's phone number for another minute, then I stood and walked outside the police station for some privacy.

I didn't know if my uncle would even answer a call from me. But I was Miles's mother, and this is what a mother did. She did whatever she had to, to help her child. I took a deep breath of the cool night air, and pressed dial.