

# Chapter 18

**B**ob looked concerned. The lines above his bushy eyebrows creased inwards as he frowned in thought. “So what are they being charged with?”

“I don’t know,” I exclaimed in exasperation. “No one’s told me a thing. They,” I stuck a thumb towards the front desk, “ignore me every time I go up and ask. That’s why I called you.”

The lawyer stared at me for a second, then got up and rapped on the partition again. “I need to see my client,” he insisted this time. “And I need to know what he’s being charged with.” The officer behind the desk hesitated, then got up and disappeared out a side door. The lawyer turned to me. “Ok. I’ll handle things from here. It’s better that way. You can go get some coffee or something, take a break.”

I looked at the lawyer as if he were crazy. “I’m not leaving.”

Bob sighed with resignation. “When they let me back there,” he nodded towards the door that led to the rest of the station, “I’ll be seeing Miles alone. I’m not sure if you thought you were going back there with me, but I don’t recommend it. I need Miles to feel comfortable telling me anything.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. *I do too*, I wanted to reply, *I need Miles to feel comfortable telling me anything too*. But I said nothing. I swallowed my feelings. I wasn't even sure who or what I was angry at anymore. The lawyer, for taking over and assuming such a patriarchal attitude, the police, for ignoring me all night, the world, for having dumped my son into this hot fucking mess. I wanted to ask *Bob* what the harm was in seeing my own son, but I knew deep down that he had a point and that I should probably just let him take over for now. I imagined what would happen if I went back there with him; it'd be like the conversations I had with Miles every time he brought home a bad report card. I'd face him across the kitchen table and ask how it had happened, he'd slouch in his chair and clamp his mouth shut, and our mother-son entrenchment would only deepen.

I rubbed the temples on the sides of my head and briefly closed my eyes. Then I watched as a police officer came out into the main waiting area, motioned for Bob to follow him, and then led this lawyer I didn't really know, and only barely trusted, into the back of the station. Into the cold, drab detention area where I imagined my scared, hungry son was nervously waiting.

I eventually walked over to the wall of the police station that was alongside the entrance and opposite the front desk. There was a short, rectangular window in the corner, though I discovered when I approached that it was epoxied shut. I pressed my fingers against its cold metal frame and felt the chill of the glass along my skin. I looked out into the grey sky. I recalled lying in bed with Miles when he was a baby, his body draped along my stomach, his curled fists pressed into my sides. His warmth against mine had been comforting. His smell had been newborn sweet. I remembered looking out the window of that bedroom and thinking: *this is exactly how I want to die*. That moment of maternal contentedness had been pure bliss. I'd wondered how I could preserve it, crawl into it, and never let go of it until my last breath. I had looked down, watching Miles's back lightly rise and fall, the baby blue curtains of the window next to us rustling as the heat in the house kicked on. There had been barely a sound as a few brown leaves on the tree outside desultorily fell to the ground.

A tear slid down my cheek now as I looked out the police station window. All I saw were the amorphous shapes of cars and a desolate parking lot. I could still smell Miles's smell, I could still feel his flesh. My son was a treasure; he was my love, my life, my joy. He gave me headaches sometimes, and lately we'd been fighting all the time, but it was only because we cared so much about each other. Because I loved him enough to fight for his future, and he loved me enough to hate disappointing me. He needed to be free so we could argue another day.

And then I had the sudden, frightening thought: does Miles even know how to act once detained by the police? I know he knew to be calm and deferential when being arrested, but afterwards? What about once you'd already been arrested, and were waiting in the back of the station, did Miles know to keep being deferential even then? Or was he talking back like he did with me, and lately, with his teachers at school? Miles' most recent defiant pose, with his weight thrown back and his arms crossed tightly against his chest, could be quite infuriating. My mind buzzed all over the place, forging ahead into dangerous scenarios I knew weren't good for me to imagine, but which I was unable to stop. Fear traveled along my skin and deep into my heart as I imagined Miles unwittingly making things worse for himself.

The last time I'd tried having The Talk with Miles, about the police and how to behave around them, my son had gotten up in the middle of our conversation and left the room. He'd actually walked out on me. We'd finished dinner and were about to have dessert - Oberweis ice cream with chocolate sprinkles on top, his favorite - and I was getting the spoons out when Miles turned on the television and a news reporter flashed on the screen. A group of Black teenagers had been arrested for leaving a local restaurant without paying the tab. It was the diner where Miles and I had eaten so many of our pancake breakfasts, and played so many of our games of *Which Do You Prefer*. Swarms of police vehicles and flashing lights filled the television screen. My son and I both watched without moving.

When the segment ended I handed a bowl to Miles. “You know you’re supposed to do whatever the police tell you to do, right? Even if it seems wrong or unfair, you just do it. You *don’t argue*. If the police stop you, you do what they say. Ok?”

“You know they didn’t do it,” Miles said, indicating the kids on TV. “You know they just got targeted.”

Truthfully, I had no idea what had happened. The two-minute clip wasn’t enough to tell me if the kids were guilty of something, or not. I’d done stupid things as a teenager, so it was possible, but I’d also been privileged enough as a small white female to get away with most of it. Those kids knew they didn’t have such leeway, so Miles was probably right, they hadn’t done it; it wasn’t worth the chance. I nodded. “Yes, but tell me you know to listen to the police. To always do what they say.”

Miles rolled his eyes. “I know.”

That was fast becoming my son’s favorite phrase. *I know*, as in I know mom, now leave me alone. *I know*, I’m not stupid. *I know*. My son took his bowl from me and left to eat his ice cream in his bedroom. Another conversation between us had ended, before it had really begun.

We’d first had The Talk years earlier, of course. I’d broached the subject when he was still in middle school, when he’d turned thirteen and was growing out of his clothes so fast I couldn’t keep up. He was a Black boy tottering on the edge of manhood, and in certain lights and from certain angles he already looked like an adult. Even then, it had been hard to tell if Miles had taken my talk seriously. I wasn’t a fellow Black man, who could tell him earnestly and with lived experience how important it was to monitor your behavior, especially around the police. To not make sudden moves. To always sound respectful. To reply with nothing but a ‘yes, sir.’ I related to Miles stories I’d heard, or read about in the paper, of incidents where things had gone terribly wrong, but I could tell it wasn’t the same as sharing the vulnerability with him; it wasn’t the same as living the fear.

The next time Tiffany called I asked if she thought her husband could help me. She put Cedric on the line and I admitted that I’d given Miles the talk about authority figures and what to do

if stopped by the police, but that I'd thought he hadn't taken it seriously. He needed to hear it from a Black man.

"Yeah, that's about right," Cedric agreed in his deep, bass voice. "But it shouldn't be over the phone. When's the next time you all are coming out here?"

"I don't know," I replied. "As soon as possible?"

"Yeah, that's about right," Cedric said again.

We'd driven out a few weekends later, Miles annoyed at having two days of sleep, hoops, and Xbox interrupted, and I feeling a kind of resignation towards the trip, a sadness that I needed such parenting help. After we got in the car and started the drive, however, my mood lifted. A trip would be good, I thought, Miles might even talk to me on the five-hour drive to Chicago.

Instead, within minutes of hitting the road he'd put his headphones on and proceeded to watch *Rogue One*, and then *Solo*, on his tablet. He thanked me when I bought him skittles and iced tea at the rest stop, and flashed for a second his brilliant smile, but that was all the attention I got.

When we arrived at Tiffany and Cedric's house, on a tree-lined suburb outside Chicago, Miles quickly disappeared with their son Jayden and some kids from the neighborhood. I went inside the house and caught up with my old friend. Tiffany looked good – older, time was wearing us all down bit by bit, but the lines around her mouth and beside her eyes framed a happiness, a contentedness with life that looked handsome on her. I stood by Tiffany in the kitchen and, along with her mother-in-law, rolled biscuits, seasoned chicken, and fried up green beans in bacon fat. There wasn't any danger we weren't going to eat well.

When everyone gathered together around the table for dinner that evening, there were so many people - a quadrupling of the usual me-and-Miles dynamic - that the loudness and the laughter were disorienting. I looked over at Miles but he seemed fine, smiling and stuffing food into his mouth as if he feared its sudden disappearance. When dessert was brought out, a pound

cake topped with strawberries and whipped cream, Miles blurted out, “I wish I was here every night!”

It got quiet for a moment and I bent my head in shame.

“No, you don’t,” Jayden said, rescuing the moment, “’cause if you did you’d have an annoying sister to deal with.”

“Hey!” Zariah protested, punching her brother in the arm. The laughter quickly picked up again around the table.

Cedric talked to Miles sometime before bed. I never learned exactly what he said, and I never asked, but the drive back down to St. Louis was very different than the drive up. No feet on the dashboard, no listlessness, barely any attitude. It made me wonder if Cedric had also talked to Miles about respecting one’s mother. Miles sat straight up in the seat next to me, his seat belt tight around him without my having to ask him to put it on. His backpack was settled neatly on the floor beside his feet, clearly visible from the side window. Ten minutes into the drive he asked if I had a copy of his birth certificate.

“Your birth certificate? Sure, somewhere. Why?”

“Until I get a driver’s license, we need some sort of ID for me. And we need to keep it in the car, or in your purse, somewhere easily accessible.”

“Ok.”

“So if we get stopped I can prove who I am, that I’m your son, that I’m still a minor.”

I looked over at Miles and nodded.

“And you need to clean this thing up,” he said, indicating the fast food bags still littering the back seat from our drive up.

“Everything makes an impression, mom. Everything.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, nodding.

While I never learned exactly what was said between Cedric and Miles, I realized now, waiting in the drab police station, that I’d always assumed it was enough.

I turned away from the window and sat back down on the wooden bench in the middle of the waiting area. I leaned over

and put my head in my hands. The tendrils of a migraine tickled the back of my neck. I reminded myself that I knew that Miles was physically ok. I had heard his voice and I knew, at least, that he hadn't been shot. But that bit of truth didn't hold as much comfort as one would have thought. Sandra Bland had died *in* jail, in police custody, not outside it. And what exactly *was* the protocol after you were arrested, after the police detained you and you were waiting to prove your innocence? Had Cedric talked to him about that too? I felt a desperate need to see my son. I ached to look into his eyes, touch his skin, to gather him into my arms. I am his mother, I thought, I deserve to know what is happening. I ought to be in the room.