

Chapter 19

The lawyer emerged from the back of the police station at 6:37 a.m. I could tell from the deepening tracks on his face that the news was bad. He walked slowly towards me, as if encumbered with a heavy weight.

“Tell me more about this girl Sarah,” he said, dropping into a chair beside me, like a stone to the bottom of the ocean.

I turned to this stranger who’d been lucky enough to lay eyes on my precious son and asked, “How’s he doing? Is Miles ok?”

The lawyer cracked a smile, as if only just remembering that he was talking to his client’s mother. “Your boy is fine,” he said. “Worried - he’s not sure what they’re going to charge him with - but physically ok. He’s also innocent. At least, he says he’s innocent,” the lawyer added, interjecting his own doubts, if no one else’s.

“What happened? Why are they holding him?”

“They’ve got him on assault, at least. And maybe rape.”

“Rape?”

The lawyer nodded. “There was some party. Parents out of town. Things got out of hand. The police were called and Miles was found up in a room with this girl Sarah. She says she was raped.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. There was no way my son had raped anyone. No Way. It wasn't just that he was a sensitive boy, a kind boy who naturally paid attention to other people and easily put himself in their shoes, but more than that, I had not raised him that way. I had read books to my son about famous women and their contributions to society. We had watched movies about suffrage and the early battles women faced in order to have their voices heard. When I bought Miles a puzzle in first grade, of all the U.S. presidents, it was he who turned to me after putting it together and asked, "Where are the girl presidents?" My son witnessed my daily struggle as a single mother. He admired Desmond's mother's strength and vigilance. There was *no way* he could do such a thing.

Especially not to Sarah.

Those two had a history. It was true, she'd turned him down after he asked her to the homecoming dance the year before, but it was also true that they were still friendly with each other. I'd seen them smile when they passed each other on the street, and I knew they sometimes texted each other. Miles had known Sarah for years, since we'd first moved to the neighborhood, and he adored her. He would never harm her.

"It's not true," I breathed to the lawyer.

"Well, yes, your son says the same thing. About the rape. But he admits to the assault."

The words hurt to hear. I tried to picture my son hitting someone. Who would he have gotten in a fight with? And when did my son learn how to throw a punch? I'd certainly never taught him. If this lawyer knew my son, he'd be as incredulous as I was about these charges. Besides, the more I thought about it, the more I realized how little sense it all made. Miles and Desmond never went to the neighborhood parties because, frankly, they were never invited.

The year before there had been a house party on the street behind our apartment, with what seemed like half the high school in attendance – you could hear the music and commotion blocks away – but not Miles and Desmond. They'd gone and walked by the party when we'd all first heard the strains of music filtering over the night air, but the boys had returned within thirty minutes,

shaking their heads and making jokes about the terrible music choices. I asked if they didn't want to stay and be with the other kids at the party.

"Nah," Miles said, glancing at Desmond. "We were invited to a party like that once, last year. But we found out it was only 'cuz they thought we'd bring drugs. When we showed up with nuthin, they were actually kind of pissed at us."

I looked at my son, then at Desmond, then back at my son. And then we had all devolved into laughter. We'd needed Kleenex, in fact, to wipe the tears off our faces. For once, I'd been grateful for the stupidity of racism.

"There's no way they were even *at* that party," I said to the lawyer, "let alone beating anyone up at it. Miles and Desmond don't go to the high school house parties."

The lawyer glanced at me sideways. "Well, this time it appears that they did."

I could tell that the lawyer was reevaluating my relationship with my son. The levers in his brain were clicking and pushing up signs labeled "ignorant mother," "stupid woman," and "unhelpful family member." I didn't want to lose his attention, so I started rambling.

"My son's a good kid, you have to understand. It's been hard in this neighborhood, with few kids who look like him, no role models for him to identify with. Basically, no other Black men. I do my best. We talk all the time. I try to make sure we always eat dinner together. He told me himself that he never even gets invited to those kinds of parties. The white kids only expect drugs out of him and Desmond, and they don't do drugs."

The lawyer nodded, but stayed quiet.

"What about Desmond?" I asked. "What's he being charged with?"

"Marijuana possession," the lawyer said, deadpan.

Nothing made sense anymore. I knew the boys didn't do drugs, be it pot, or anything else for that matter. *I'd* recently gotten some medical marijuana on the suggestion from my doctor that it might help with my migraines, but it hadn't, and my son had only lectured me afterwards on smoking's deleterious effects on a healthy pair of lungs. He'd brought back memories of my

mother and her lung cancer and her slow and painful deterioration, and I hadn't smoked again since. I'd never smelled pot in his bedroom, or seen it, not once. The boys certainly never acted high. And they'd never been caught with drugs at school, or anywhere else for that matter.

And then my next thought was, how did Desmond end up with the lesser charge?

I imagine there comes a moment in every parent's life when you realize, with a starkness that's as bright and painful as a glance upwards towards a harsh summer sun, that you do not know your child at all. You may have raised him and fed him and loved him and laughed with him, but you still do not have a clue the ideas that run through his mind. You have no idea how he behaves when you are not around. You have no clue how he talks to other people, what jokes he laughs at, what insults he abides. Your child could be a stranger you wouldn't even recognize from behind. I shivered at the realization. It was like looking down on a hike and finding your footing unstable, the ground beneath your feet dark with a soft, dank soil that was failing to hold your weight. I felt myself sinking now, the ground coming up fast.

"What are we going to do?" I asked the lawyer.

"I'm not sure yet," he said, shaking his head. "But you need to tell me more. What did you think your son was doing last night? Where did you think he was?"