

# Chapter 21

A few minutes later, at 6:54 a.m., Cierra burst into the police station. She was still in her hospital scrubs and looked not just disheveled, but disoriented, panic streaked across her face. Cierra was usually rather put together, hair done up tight in a bun, clothes neat and pressed, expression impenetrable. But now her blue nurse's uniform was stained and crumpled, and dark strands of hair stuck up at odd angles from the back of her head. She looked frantically around the waiting area, and when she spotted me, she ran to me and gripped me in a hug. We'd never hugged before, and the contact surprised me.

"How long have they been in there?" she asked, pulling back.

"All night."

Cierra glanced at her watch. "I was on shift, I didn't know. My phone doesn't always ring in the hospital. Why are they holding them? What happened?"

I told her what little I knew. She seemed as suspicious as I was, and the comradery was heartening. I was grateful to finally have a real ally. Cierra let go my hands, nodded politely to Bob after I introduced him, and then approached the front desk. She stood there, talking through the plastic partition to one police officer after another, pointing fingers, engaging them enough so

they approached her from behind the desk and talked directly to her. I was impressed. She seemed to be making more headway in ten minutes than I had in three hours.

I closed my eyes, the tendrils of a migraine continuing to lengthen behind my eyes, and prayed it wouldn't blossom and take hold before I saw my son again, before we were able to get Miles and Desmond both out of this place and back home.

I opened my purse and stuck my hand inside, hoping to find a loose ibuprofen or Xanax tablet. I knew it was basically empty, but I rooted around anyway, letting my fingers probe the dry pockets and lint-filled corners. My heart lifted when I brushed past something hard, though I quickly realized it was much too large to be a pill. I tugged on whatever it was until it came loose from the fold of pocket it was tangled up in. My breath caught when I saw that it was the brown-haired, mini-skirted Lego minifigure that was supposed to be me.

I suddenly couldn't keep the tears in any longer. I pictured the desk in Miles' bedroom, the last place I could remember seeing this minifigure, but there were no Legos there now – the room had become a teenager's bedroom, with loose change strewn across the desktop, basketball shoes abandoned on the floor, an unmade bed with the impression of Miles' long limbs stamped in the covers. That was where Miles was supposed to be. His bedroom was where he should have ended up last night.

Bob handed me a Kleenex and I stepped to the side to get a hold of myself. Miles was the most important person in my life. I couldn't imagine my days without him. After Nate left, Miles had taken his place for me in so many ways. He'd become my food taster when I experimented with dishes in the kitchen, he was my judge when I tried on new outfits for work, he was my hiking companion on trails around St. Louis. Hiking was how Miles and I had stayed connected in recent years, even as things got rough between us. Something about the open air, the rustling trees, the delight of a new path, could bring us back together after weeks of adolescent distance. This past summer we'd driven out to Elephant Rocks State Park, to hike the couple of trails there among the tall, rounded boulders. We'd packed gorp and granola bars and two bottles of water each. The ground had been smooth,

for the most part, though an exposed tree limb winding across one of the paths had tripped me up early on. We talked little as we moved forward, communicating with the occasional grunt or hand gesture. At the end of the second trail we rested side by side on a bench, drinking water and observing the other hikers as they made their way back to the parking lot.

“Why didn’t you have another kid?”

I’d been gazing at a brown and blue butterfly that had landed on the bench beside me, watching its wings open and shut languidly, and was unprepared for the seriousness of Miles’ question. For years when Miles was younger he had asked for a little brother, or sister. He’d wanted a companion, a ready playdate, a captive audience for his games and stories. I shifted on the bench and gave Miles the answer I’d always given him before. “Because you were perfect. There was no need for another child.”

This time, however, Miles snorted and looked away. I looked at my son’s profile, the smooth skin, the strong, defiant jaw.

“We wanted another child,” I admitted, “but, to be honest, kids are a lot of work. And your father and I didn’t have any help. Most people have their parents, or a sister or an aunt, someone who can come over and at least take care of the laundry. We really could have used that. We didn’t know what we were doing in the beginning. I kept losing your binkies, we’d run out of diapers, the house was a total mess, and no one could remember to run the dishwasher so your bottles never seemed to be clean when we needed them.” I was trying to be funny, describing the utter chaos of those first few weeks after we’d brought Miles home, but my description was falling flat. Miles was looking at me now, but he still wasn’t smiling.

“We did talk about it, your father and I,” I said, clearing my throat, “when you were a year or so old. Just after your adoption was formalized, we talked about doing it again. But my parents, as you know, are both gone and your dad’s parents live in Florida and don’t travel. It just seemed like it’d be too much for us.”

Miles looked away from me again.

“It’s my biggest regret,” I added. “You would have made a great big brother. I wish we could have given you a little brother, or sister, I do. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just so unfair,” Miles blurted out. I noticed that he was crumpling and uncrumpling a granola bar wrapper, and I reached over and steadied his hand.

“What’s unfair?”

“My life. It’s so totally unfair.”

Miles had been using that word a lot since high school had started – unfair. The internet wasn’t working and it was unfair. The Doritos bag was empty and it was unfair. A favorite sock was missing and couldn’t be found and it was totally unfair.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Miles threw his hands in the air. “Out of all of us my life is the most unfair. Think about it. I never knew my birth parents. Yours is next, I guess, ‘cause you lost your parents, though at least you got to know them first. Dad’s isn’t unfair at all. Grandma and grandpa are still alive in Florida. He gets to see them whenever he wants.”

“That’s true.”

“I’ll never get to know who they were. For all I know, I even have brothers, and sisters, like that family that just walked by,” Miles said, waving a hand to where a family of six had recently walked past us on their way to their minivan. “I could have a lot of cousins for all I know. I just don’t know. There’s no way to know.”

I moved closer to my son and wrapped my arms around him in a hug, even though he rarely let me do that any longer. After a minute, he relaxed into my embrace. “No,” I said to Miles, “you’ve got it wrong. Your father is the unlucky one, and I’m the luckiest one of us all. Because I have you. Because I get to have you in my life every single day.”

When I returned to my seat after getting my tears under control, I found that Cierra had somehow talked her way into getting Desmond out of detention. She was standing near the back detention door, arms folded across her chest, Bob standing

next to her. Before anyone could explain to me how this had happened, the large metal door clicked and we all turned and watched Desmond emerge from the back of the station, tentative, frightened, more childlike than I had ever seen him. He stepped forward and fell into his mother's arms.

My heart ached as I watched them. A wave of jealousy swept over me. I'd been waiting all night, for hours at that point, when would I get to see my son? I felt hot, then cold, then hot again. I knew I was unhinged after a night of no sleep and constant worry.

The warm maternal feelings from my memories of just minutes before disappeared and I suddenly felt, watching Desmond and Cierra, that I was a terrible mother; that I must not deserve to have my son back. Sure, Miles and I had companionable hikes sometimes on a Sunday morning, but much more often, we had infuriating, bitter arguments.

"Why are there dishes in the sink, Miles? Go do the dishes."

"Uh-huh, I will."

"Now, Miles, go do the dishes now."

"In a second," Miles said, not moving from his spot on the couch.

"Miles!"

"Just because you want it done, doesn't mean it has to be done *right now*."

"Actually," I said, my voice rising, "it does. Besides, I've asked you three times already. Had it been done when *I* wanted it done, it would have been done after we finished eating, an hour ago. Get up off your ass, and do the damn dishes."

"Geez, Mom," Miles grumbled, looking at me as if I were a crazy person. "You don't have to yell at me like that."

Later that evening Miles came to me with a video he'd found on YouTube, of a pimple-faced teenager in baseball cap and headphones, explaining to the camera how parents just didn't understand that you couldn't pause a game, that it was, like, interactive. Parents just didn't get how things were nowadays.

I snatched Miles' tablet out of his hands, and threw it in the trash.

That was just days after a blowout we'd had over homework, which Miles never seemed to find important enough to complete. I often found his math worksheets or his book reports crumpled up at the bottom of his backpack, torn, half completed, treated with something bordering contempt.

"You can do better than this," I'd said, holding up his mangled papers.

Miles had shrugged, and turned away from me.

"You need to at least try, Miles. Why don't you even try? You can do this."

"No," Miles had said, "I can't."

"Of course you can."

"I can't."

And we had stared at each other in something of a stand still.

"I'm not like you," Miles said. "Not like that," he quickly added when I looked exasperated, "like school. I don't like school, and I'm not good at it."

Perhaps because the words had been hard to hear, I'd ignored them. Instead of saying something sympathetic, I'd shook my head dismissively and told Miles he could do it, that he was like me and that he just needed to try harder.

I stood still in the station as it sunk in that I was a horrible, nagging, mean mother who clearly didn't deserve her son back.

Desmond walked over to where I stood. Before I could say anything he grabbed me and hugged me as if I were his other mother.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Z," Desmond said after a moment. "I never wanted to go to that stupid party in the first place. It wasn't my idea."

I pulled away from the embrace and nodded.

"We never should have split up. It's like in those horror movies, when you're yelling at the dudes not to split up, but then, they do. We did that. I can't believe we did that. My gramps is

always telling us to stick together, but I didn't listen to him. I'm sorry. I never should have let Miles go up those stairs alone."

"It's ok," I whispered, with the little voice I could control. "How is he though?" I asked, clearing my throat. "How is Miles?"

"He's a'right. The police got him on trumped up charges though. He's pissed. He's worried. He's scared."

"Can you tell us what happened?" Bob asked, stepping forward.

"I already told the cops. I told them they was making a mistake, that Miles had been with me, that we were together the whole night, but they wouldn't listen to me."

"It's ok," Bob said, "we'll listen to you. Do you mind?" Bob asked, turning to Cierra. "If I talk to your son and ask him a few questions? It might be helpful."

Cierra nodded, and the three of them stepped outside to talk in private. I found that I couldn't go with them. I was suddenly too weary to stand up any longer; I thought I might fall if I didn't sit down. I sank into a nearby chair and steadied my breathing while *My son is innocent* played on a loop in my head.