

# Chapter 5

*I* shifted on the hard wooden bench in the center of the waiting area, wondering what it was I was supposed to do to get my son out of jail. I looked down at my watch. It was now 3:12 a.m., about thirty-five minutes since I'd arrived at the police station, a little over an hour since I'd gotten the phone call. How long was one supposed to wait before being allowed to see a child in holding? Crime shows always skipped right past this waiting part. I wondered if it was obvious how out of my element I was, how anxious I felt wishing I knew what it was I was supposed to say or do. I looked around the waiting area, seeking some sort of human connection. Didn't anybody else think things were taking too long?

Besides myself and the still-praying-woman across from me, there were three other people in the station, two girls that looked to be in their early twenties, and an older man. The girls sat huddled together with their heads nearly touching, talking at a quiet but intense clip, their hands moving, their gum occasionally snapping. They were wearing very high heels that looked rather dangerous to me. I couldn't help it, I wondered if their mothers knew where they were.

The older man sat next to a small side table stamped with coffee rings. He was hunched over with his elbows on his knees,

studiously cleaning dirt from beneath his fingernails. I wondered if he too was here for a son, or daughter. I coughed loudly, but didn't get his attention. Nobody, in fact, looked up when I coughed or cleared my throat or made any kind of noise whatsoever; we were all in our own little bubbles and nobody seemed in the mood for conversation with a stranger.

I stood, unable to help myself, and walked over again to the front desk. I rapped on the plastic partition that separated the police from the rest of us. The officer behind the barrier glanced at me, but didn't bother to come around to speak to me. He'd done it before, his expression told me, he wasn't going to do it again.

"Can I see my son yet?" I asked a bit too loudly. "Miles Zame? Miles Anthony Zame?"

"Still being processed," the officer said, without checking anything. He returned his attention to the computer screen in front of him.

A simmering rage boiled inside me. I stared at the bored-looking officer, trying to affect my frustration onto him with the steeliness of my gaze, but he ignored me. I wondered, yet again, what the magic words were to get him to get up and check on my son, but whatever they were, I didn't know them.

*Please help me*, a voice begged from deep within. But nobody heard it.

I sat back down and put my head in my hands. Most people called on family in times like these, but who could I call? Nate had been out of our lives for ten years at that point, and I doubted he would answer even if I did call. My parents were both gone, my only brother estranged. My thoughts turned to my cousin Chris, the only family member I could think of who had any history with the police.

Older than me by a few years, Chris was the cousin I'd idealized as a child. His family had lived a few blocks from ours, and on holidays we used to gather at his house, in their modest ranch filled with sports pennants and framed pictures of sailboats. His mom could be trusted to put out large piles of greasy finger foods.

I generally ended up following Chris around the house at such events, trailing him as he talked on the phone with his older, much cooler friends. The limited glances he threw my way were treasured signals I interpreted as meaning we were on the same team, the team that had to put up with these boring family gatherings.

In all the years of going over to Chris' house, however, I never grasped what was really going on. I heard stories of broken dinner plates and messes on the kitchen floor, but I hadn't understood at the time what they actually meant.

And then one day Chris disappeared. His parents got divorced and his mother moved with him to Texas, and like that, I no longer saw him. It was an abrupt loss, a painful loss I'd had no ability to process at the time. For years I only heard about Chris indirectly through the family grapevine, one aunt claiming that he was addicted to drugs, another mentioning that he'd dropped out of school, a third claiming he was wallowing under mountains of debt. It was never anything good anyone said about cousin Chris, and I heard less and less at all about him until one day, nearly three decades after he'd disappeared, he showed up at a family wedding.

I saw him standing alone at the bar, and after my initial shock had passed, I left my son on the dance floor and walked over to where he stood.

Chris smiled when he saw me and without hesitation lifted me up off the ground, in imitation of the hugs he'd given me when we were kids.

"It's good to see you," I said, close to tears though I couldn't have said why.

Chris offered me a drink and while we waited for it to be made we stood silently side by side, staring out at the dance floor.

"Is that your son?" he asked, pointing to Miles who was still toddling around to the music.

"Yes." I turned slightly and took in Chris' still handsome, if worn, older face. I tried to find in it evidence of what had happened, proof that whatever it was, he was all right now.

Our drinks came and Chris handed me mine saying, "It's got to be hard."

I looked at him quizzically, suddenly on my guard, afraid that my cousin was about to say something stupid and I'd have to reevaluate how much I'd always admired him. I didn't want to have to classify him as yet another of my obtuse relatives who didn't know how to handle me or my son, whose discomfort with us was obvious. I took a long sip of my long island iced tea. "What," I said, "being a mother?"

"No." Chris shook his head. "Having a Black son."

I put my drink down on the bar. My cousin's straightforwardness had confused me. No one in my family ever said what they were actually thinking. They made obtuse comments about having had a Black best friend in college, or watching the movie *Roots*, and I was supposed to infer from this that they were a "good person." But no one ever brought up Miles' race directly, as if it didn't exist, or weren't obvious, or weren't a profound and significant fact of our lives. I understood that talking about our interracial family made people uncomfortable, so I didn't bring it up, they didn't bring it up, it was never discussed, and instead this barrier remained upright between us. But Chris had never respected barriers of any kind, that was one of the reasons I'd always liked him.

"Sometimes," I admitted.

"I've long thought," he said, glancing at me before returning his gaze to the dance floor where Miles continued to giggle and squirm with abandon, "that if I'd been born Black, I'd be in prison right now."

I coughed and grasped for a napkin to cover my mouth. Chris leaned over and handed me one. After I'd recovered myself I stood on my tip toes and kissed my cousin on the cheek. "I've missed you," I said, wondering what had happened over the years to make my cousin so honest, so aware of the truths in life, instead of the lies we often told ourselves.

"I've missed you too, little cousin."

"Why'd you and your mom leave?" I suddenly asked.

"What happened?"

"You don't know?"

I shook my head.

Chris smiled with one corner of his mouth. It was an attractive smile, but I saw the pain it masked. “I was arrested, for shoplifting.” For a moment, all the negative things I’d heard about my cousin seemed to be true, but then, I knew there had to be more to the story.

“It was dumb, I shouldn’t have done it, but I was mad at my dad for taking my Halloween candy. He found a way to punish me every single night, did you know that? If I looked at him wrong, no dinner. If I spoke before I was spoken to, a slap across the face. If I tried to watch TV on my mom’s lap, I was told I was a baby and ordered to my room. I don’t even remember why exactly he took my candy that year, but I do remember that I didn’t get to eat even a single piece of it. After all that walking, after wearing that uncomfortable costume for hours, so much effort to earn it.” Chris shook his head, still in disbelief. “So I snuck out of the house and went to the corner store – remember Naders?”

I nodded, remembering the corner store between our two houses, where we used to go to buy our gum and candy.

“Well I snuck off to Naders, but then when I got there I realized I didn’t have any money. I was such a dumb kid.” Chris squeezed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. “I was determined to have some candy though,” he continued, “so I stuffed a bunch of Babe Ruths in my pants, not very well, and tried to walk out.” Chris laughed. “No technique. I had no technique at all, man.”

“I’m surprised old man Nader called the police. He always seemed so nice.”

“He was nice. He didn’t call the cops. He called my dad, and my dad did.”

“But why—” I stopped, and started again. “How old were you?”

“Twelve. My mom wanted to just take me home, but my dad wouldn’t let her. He insisted I spend the night in jail.” Chris looked across the dance floor, remembering that night.

“My mom told me later that they fought about it all night, but in the end, my dad won. He always won.”

Chris signaled for another drink, and I accepted another one too.

“It was the worst night of my life. That’s all I’ll say. Jail is not the place for a young boy. For any reason.” Chris paused for a moment, and then continued. “When my mom came to pick me up in the morning, she already had our bags packed. And like that, we left.” Chris turned to face me. “Can I offer you a piece of advice?”

I nodded.

“Should something ever happen to your son, never leave him in jail overnight. Anything could happen to him there. None of it any good.”

It was as if Chris were speaking to me from the past; he’d already given me the advice I needed to hear. I closed my eyes now and tried not to think about what could happen to a small boy in a jail cell when no one was looking. *I’m trying*, I pleaded. *I swear, I’m trying*.

I never saw Chris again after that wedding. He died in a drunk driving accident the following year, his life never really recovered from his unhappy childhood and his early run-ins with the police. I pictured Chris’ mother, her bouncy curls and round hazel eyes, and I thought about what she must have gone through. The heartbreak she must have felt unable, in the end, to save him.