

Chapter 15

“*Hullo?*” My uncle answered the phone and in my surprise I nearly dropped it. I rushed outside the station to talk with a bit of privacy. “Hello?” My uncle’s familiar, raspy voice came through again, louder this time. The cool night air whipped my hair and jacket.

“Uncle Ian, it’s me, Rachel.” I watched as a couple of cars drove by on the highway overpass in the distance. “It’s been a long time,” I said. “I’m sorry I’m calling so late. How are you?” In the silence that followed I watched a few more cars drive past.

“What do you want?” my uncle finally replied. “No, wait, let me guess.” And without possibility of interruption he dove into an extended harangue on why I must be calling him. It was as if the years of silence between us had been but a moment, and we were continuing our last argument exactly where we’d left off. “And because of those bad decisions,” my uncle surmised, “you need money.”

I recalled my mother telling me how her older brother had once defended her from a bully when they were children. She was being dragged by the hair by an older boy at school and my uncle, though shorter and decidedly smaller at the time, had started a fight to free her. Uncle Ian had been roughed up a bit himself but the bully had been embarrassed in front of his friends, which was

worse, and so he'd left my mother alone after that. Every time Uncle Ian said or did something stupid or mean, my mother would remind me of what he'd done for her that one time as a child. It didn't matter that over the subsequent years he'd beaten her up himself, or stolen her allowance, or pulled apart her favorite dolls until the stuffing covered the floor like the fluffy innards of a heaven-sent horror show. Everyone had some good in them, my mother would tell me, you just had to wait for the moment when it came out.

But I'd yet to have such a moment with Uncle Ian myself. The majority of our interactions since Miles had been born involved snide or condescending comments to me or my son, hurtful judgements about our lifestyle that he didn't deserve to make. I wondered for years why I was supposed to put up with it; why Uncle Ian get to be an ass, just because he was my uncle.

"Well, no--," I tried to say, but he wasn't done yet.

"And let me tell you where I've been..." I gripped my jacket around me as the wind continued to cut. A solitary leaf from a tree that was nowhere in sight skittered past my feet.

Relationships were hard. Life was hard. And I'd never been very good at maintaining interpersonal connections, as evidenced by the solitary life that Miles and I now led. I wasn't proud of it; I would have preferred to have close family and even closer friends, but over the years I'd often felt that I'd had to choose between friendships, or forthrightness; trust, or the truth. And in the end, I couldn't help but give in to honesty, and I'd opened my mouth and pointed out to cousins and aunts and uncles and neighbors the way their actions were hurtful, and how their offhanded comments could be perceived. No one ever appreciated my insights.

So people dropped out of our lives, and I never did do much to stem the tide. I was pretty sure that a better person than me would have been able to navigate such minefields without making everyone upset, but I seemed wholly unable to do it. It hurt too much. It cut too close. I stopped seeing Uncle Ian after the divorce when he'd taken Nate's side, but to be honest, the worst thing he'd ever done had been a few years after that when

he'd made me - for the first and only time - question if adopting Miles had been worth it.

Miles had been about to turn twelve, and the other mothers in the neighborhood were talking about sending their kids to an overnight camp for one, or even two-week sessions. At first, the idea struck me as ludicrous, giving your child away for multiple weeks at a time, trusting complete strangers to take care of, love, and be there if, and when, he needed them. And Miles would definitely need them, he was only eleven years old. He still had a favorite blanket and wasn't certain there *weren't* monsters in his closet at night.

Yet, I wanted my son to fit in around the neighborhood and do what all the other kids were doing, and I did like the idea that sleeping in the woods would teach my son resilience and independence. In the end, I'd scrounged together the money for the expensive overnight camp, bought the over-sized duffel bag and heavy-duty flashlights required, and sent Miles away for two weeks in the middle of June, just before his twelfth birthday.

It took only three days before I got a call from the director of the camp, telling me I had to come pick up my son. There had been a fight, a bunk door slamming, a boy being knocked unconscious, Miles running away and hiding in the chapel, the counselors having to look for over an hour to find him. He wasn't welcome at the camp anymore.

I'd been standing in my office at work when I got the call, dressed in a navy-blue pencil skirt and heels, and I'd had to hold on to the desk for support as I got the news. It didn't sound like Miles to start a fight, but boys developed rapidly at that age, and he was in an unfamiliar environment; I supposed anything could happen. I told the director in an unsteady voice that I'd be right there, and in the middle of the day on a Wednesday, I left work to drive three hours into the heart of the Ozarks to collect my bruised and chastened son.

Half an hour into the car ride I lost the only good radio station I could find. It had been mostly commercials anyway, so I reached over and turned the thing off. An uncanny silence deepened around me as trees brushed past, the road narrowed, and I moved further and further away from all that was familiar. As the landscape entered a more wild state, so did my mood.

I'd been about to leave on a long-planned business trip when the camp had called, and this unexpected upending of plans had come at a particularly bad time. Ever since I'd adopted Miles I'd turned down opportunities at work in order to be there for my son, to volunteer at his school and pick him up on early release days, to take him to the doctor and all of his various appointments. I hadn't received a promotion in over ten years because I'd always put Miles first, and always had to. When I signed Miles up for the camp three months earlier, I'd told my boss at work and asked to be given an out-of-town assignment with a new client. To earn any kind of promotion at work outside travel was required, and I wanted to show my boss that I was entering a phase where I could do what he needed me to do. Everything had rested on this being a successful trip, and for weeks I'd researched the clients, worked up a detailed report, even meticulously planned the outfits I'd wear for the various meetings. I was embarrassed to admit how much I'd been looking forward to the mid-rate hotel and company-paid dinners. Staring at the relentless blue sky as I drove deeper into the Ozarks, thinking ahead to two unplanned weeks at home with Miles with no child care or day camps set up, instead of the first two weeks to myself in over ten years, I couldn't help but cry with disappointment. Stupid, fat tears that I didn't bother to stop. Everything flowed in an unhindered release until my phone jarred me out of my self-pity with its vibrating ring.

I answered the call blind, unable to see who it was through my tears and while trying to stay focused on the road. It turned out to be my uncle.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand as I listened to him talk. He needed to know if Miles and I were coming to his annual 4th of July party. Every year Uncle Ian hosted a neighborhood BBQ with two smoke pits and beer that spilled with

abandon out of the tailgate of his truck. There was usually a lot of smoking, some drugs, and enough fireworks to get somebody in trouble. It wasn't really kid friendly and while we'd gone a few times in the past, I hadn't taken Miles in years.

"Are you crying?" Uncle Ian interrupted himself to ask. There was judgement in his voice.

"No. Yes. Maybe." I grabbed an old McDonald's napkin and tried to wipe my nose, but the scratchiness of it just made me sneeze. I was a mess.

"Why?" he asked, and like an idiot, I spilled the story to him in its entirety. I guess I needed to get it out, I guess I needed someone, anyone, to shoulder it with me, but I should have known better, even in the moment.

"So was it worth it?" he asked when I was done.

"Was what worth it?"

"Adopting that baby. Was it worth the loss of your husband, the loss of your home, the loss now of your career, just to adopt that crack lady's baby?"

When I got to the camp my tears were gone and my face cleaned up. I found my son sitting alone on a wooden bench outside the main dining hall, waiting for me. When he saw me walking towards him he looked down. He didn't jump up, or run to me, or even seem happy to see me. I felt a wave of anger towards him, then a surprising coolness. I sat down on the bench beside him and asked what had happened.

"I hit someone," Miles admitted.

"Ok." I took a breath. "Why?"

Miles shrugged. My usually talkative son was remaining closed-lipped; another change I'd started only recently to notice in him. I tried to get the story out of him from his perspective, but all I could get was a curt repeat of the facts: an argument, a punch, an escape into the chapel. Miles didn't attempt to deflect blame or defend himself in any way.

"What about your friends?" I asked. "Hunter and Josh, where were they? Didn't they stand by you?"

Miles turned his head to the side so I couldn't see the expression on his face, and mumbled something. I was beginning to understand that maybe the boys weren't as close of friends as I'd thought they were.

"C'mon," I finally said, looking out over the treetops of a camp I knew we'd never return to, "let's get out of here." I smiled at Miles and that was when he reached over and hugged me. I kissed the top of his head and inhaled his familiar scent. *So was it worth it?*

* * *

A few days later, Miles and I went to our favorite restaurant for breakfast. Things had started to return to normal at home. We still hadn't talked about what exactly had happened at the camp, but I no longer felt I needed to know. It had been a stupid idea to begin with. Not only was an overnight camp a difficult experience to begin with, but I had sent Miles to a camp of over 300 kids, only a few of which were Black. Whatever had happened, I doubted the place had been that welcoming.

"I'm sorry," I said to Miles. "I never should have sent you to that camp. I just thought you might like it, because your friends were going."

"They aren't my friends."

"I'm starting to understand that."

"Can you teach me how to ride a bike?"

"Oh," I said, nonplussed at the change in topic. I watched as Miles looked to his plate and poured an enormous quantity of syrup over his defenseless, now drowning pancakes. "Sure. It's about time to do that, isn't it?"

"Um, yeah, everybody else knows how to ride but me."

"*Everybody*," I laughed, "that can't be true."

"Actually, it is," Miles said defensively, looking up at me. "There wasn't a single other kid at camp that didn't know how to ride a bike but me. I was the only one." We stared at each other across the table and I realized that I was finally getting a hint of

what had happened. I also understood that, on some level, my son had already blamed me for it, for this never-ending not-fitting-in theme of his life. He didn't know how to ride a bike, he didn't have a Brady jersey, he didn't live in a two-story house, he didn't have his father. I'd always assumed that teaching a kid to ride a bike was a father's responsibility, and so of course I hadn't thought to do it, and it hadn't been done.

"I'm sorry, baby, we'll do it this weekend. I promise."

The following Saturday afternoon Miles and I borrowed a bike from one of the neighbors whose kid was still away at camp, and went out onto the streets to learn how to ride. We worked at it for hours, Miles trying, and failing, to balance by himself.

"I can't do it!" he yelled after we'd been at it for more than an hour. A visible frustration stretched every muscle in his tight body.

"You can," I told him calmly. "Try again."

Miles swung a leg over the seat and steadied himself.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

I pushed Miles off, but pretty quickly the bike began to wobble. In his determination to ride already Miles refused to let go, and he steered straight into the curb. He toppled to the ground and I saw blood pour from his knee. I ran to my son and embraced him in a tight hug. The grip of his skinny arms around my sweaty neck as tears fell from both our eyes made everything right again between us.

"I'm sorry baby," I said. "I'm so, so sorry."

The world could be mean and cruel and confusing and difficult but it was never a child's fault. As a mother, you were supposed to be there for them, no matter what. My own mother, and not Uncle Ian, had been right about the most important thing, that there was nothing so great as the love of a mother for her child. It was worth every skirmish, every argument, every disappointment, every loss. It was worth losing a promotion for, it was worth driving across the Ozarks for, and it was certainly worth begging for.

SEEKING FORGIVENESS

I collected myself. “Uncle,” I said, at last cutting off his harangue, “I don’t need money, but I do need help.”

And my uncle, god bless him, gave me the number of a lawyer to call.