

Chapter 17

An hour after I made the call, at 5:57 in the morning, a lawyer walked into the police station. He was on the high side of middle-age, wearied looking, with a worn suit and dilapidated briefcase, but he was white, male, and unafraid of the police. After a quick glance around the waiting area he advanced towards me, unimpressed with everyone else in the room.

“Rachel Zame.” He said my name less as a question than as a statement.

I stood up. “Yes.”

“Good to meet you.” He pumped my hand while looking me up and down. “Your uncle’s an old buddy of mine from, well, the less said about that the better. We’re here for your son, correct?”

I nodded.

“C’mon.” He turned and I followed as the lawyer strode up to the intake desk and banged on the plastic partition with a knuckle. I stepped back, the sound startling, like thunder. I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. I was glad to have help, to not be on my own any longer in this horrible place, but the lawyer’s confidence was disorienting. I’d always approached the front desk with hesitation, and stood there

patiently when I wanted to talk with the officer behind the partition, but there was clearly another way to do things.

“Miles Zame,” the lawyer said authoritatively. “I’m here to represent Miles Zame.” The officer actually got up from behind his desk and came to stand at the partition. He’d never gotten up for me before. When I sought his attention, he generally raised his head to look at me, but he never bothered to get up off his ass for me.

“Still processing,” the officer said, his hands in the air as if processing was a mystery, to him included.

“No statements,” the lawyer said. “He doesn’t agree to give any statements unless I’m in the room. You got that?”

The officer nodded.

“And, of course, I need to see him as soon as possible.” The lawyer turned to me. “How long has it been?”

“Three, maybe three and a half hours already.”

“Oh, well, that’s nothing,” the lawyer said, leaning back and shifting the weight of his feet. “It can easily take four to six.” He nodded to the police officer who turned away and sat back down, an unspoken but understood common language passing between them.

“Let’s sit,” he said, putting his hand on the small of my back. “And you can tell me everything you know.”

The lawyer, who insisted on being called Bob, was a tax attorney, not a criminal defense lawyer, but he was available, he’d dabbled in stuff like this before, and he owed my uncle a favor. Besides, he’d recently gotten a divorce, he told me quite freely in conversation, and he had too much time on his hands that needed to be filled anyway. This was better than sitting up all night watching TV in one’s underwear. When he said this I had an image that was then difficult to dislodge from my mind.

“My wife left me six months ago,” Bob admitted, veering far away from the details of Miles’ case. “For a younger man. Usually it goes the other way – the husband cheats on the wife – but not in my case. No, ma’am.”

As I listened to the lawyer I nodded, wondering how to bring the conversation back to the topic of my son.

“Right in the middle of a load of laundry—”

“Are you representing both boys?” the officer at the front called out from behind the partition. “Miles Zame and Desmond Harrison?”

The lawyer looked at me and I shook my head. “No,” he called back. “Just Miles Zame.” Then he turned to me and asked, “Who’s Desmond Harrison?”

That was a good question. Who *was* Desmond Harrison? I no longer knew. I don’t think I had ever really known. He was the one other Black boy in Miles’ class, and he’d shown up in the middle of eighth grade, just a few years before.

It had been early January, the holiday break from school and work had just ended and Miles had returned to the classroom uninspired and unenthusiastic. I had had to bribe him with Reese’s peanut butter and chocolate cereal in the morning to get him up, and then yell at him at night to get off his Xbox and into bed. He claimed to do his homework some time in between, but I rarely saw it.

“I know!” Miles yelled, when I told him for the third time that it was time to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. The anger in his voice surprised me, and as I handed him a towel I told him to drop the attitude. But then, bending to pick up his discarded socks, I saw the thin black hairs newly sprouting on his legs. I sized him up and realized how much taller than me he was. I kissed my son good night, missing the days he asked me to stay with him and read him a story.

A couple of weeks into the semester, a smiling Miles returned to me. My son bounded into the car when I picked him up after school one afternoon, and he told me all about this new kid, Desmond. Desmond was tall, skinny, and Black, just like Miles. Desmond was an only child, also like Miles. And Desmond was devoted to Steph Curry and the Golden State Warriors – it was like Miles had found his soul mate. It didn’t take long after Desmond’s arrival at school for he and Miles to become the best of friends, and for their friendship to displace nearly all of the others Miles had made in the neighborhood over

the years. At first, I'd been overjoyed that they'd found each other.

"How's school going?" We were having dinner, and Miles had been answering my questions again, instead of shrugging at everything I said.

"Desmond wants to start a Black Student Union," Miles said. "Just the two of us. Our own BSU." My son laughed out loud and my heart had lifted to see him so joyful.

When summer came a few months later, if Miles wasn't at basketball camp or Desmond away visiting his father in Memphis, the two were inseparable.

"Who are you texting at eight in the morning?" I asked Miles one day as I got ready for work and he emerged from his bedroom, disheveled and sleepy-eyed. I'd long promised Miles a phone when middle school ended and before high school began, and in the very first week of summer he'd made sure I'd gotten him one.

"Desmond," Miles mumbled without looking up.

I watched my son literally walk into a wall as he headed to the bathroom. It took effort not to laugh out loud.

"Can I have ten dollars?" Miles asked when he joined me in the kitchen a few minutes later. "For lunch."

"The fridge is full," I said, pointing towards the refrigerator while pouring Miles a glass of orange juice. "There's lots to eat here."

"I know," Miles said, giving me the sly grin that made me think how handsome he was getting to be. He took the orange juice from me. "But we're going to the rec center to shoot hoops. And hang at the pool. We won't be coming back here."

"Oh, ok. I guess. But don't come home so late again tonight. After dinner is way too late, I get worried. Be here by dinner."

"Sure Mom," Miles said, looking down at his phone again. A minute later he was headed out the front door. I watched my son get on his bike and ride towards the rec center without turning around to wave goodbye.

I tried to get Miles to read some books that summer, or engage in a conversation with me longer than two minutes, but it was a futile effort, and what was summer for when you were young, anyway? I was happy that Miles seemed happy, and that he had finally found a best friend. Everyone should have a best friend, I remembered thinking.

For a while, I'd hoped that Desmond's mother would become my new best friend too. She was a single mother, like me, having gotten a divorce from Desmond's father the year before. She was also a professional, like me, working long hours as a nurse at the local hospital. I thanked god she wasn't one of those wealthy, stay-at-home moms, that littered the neighborhood in the mornings jogging in their too-tight spandex and bouncy pony tails. No, Cierra could be seen shuffling Desmond out of the house they now shared with her parents, harried, annoyed, exasperated, real. She seemed relatable, she seemed like someone I could share a bottle of cheap wine with, someone who wouldn't mind telling an embarrassing story about a bad date. I invited Cierra over for dinner multiple times, but she always turned me down. And I never knew why.

The first time I had any doubts about Desmond was a year after he'd moved to the neighborhood, during Christmas break from school the boys' freshman year of high school. The bank where I worked closed early during the winter holidays, so I was home more than usual, baking cookies and watching old movies on Netflix. I don't know if it was the games on Miles' Xbox, or the latitude I gave both boys to stay up late, but they gravitated to our apartment that holiday, and spent most of their time with me. I remember feeling like the cool parent, the with-it parent, the parent kids willingly chose to tell their secrets to and spend their time with. I imagined it was my amazingly good chocolate chip cookies, which disappeared five minutes after coming out of the oven, that made the boys want to be with me, not my look as an easy mark.

One afternoon, just before Christmas, Desmond came over to our apartment with a present for me. It was the holiday season,

after all, so not entirely out of place. Indeed, my initial reaction when Desmond pulled the box out of his backpack and handed it to me was that it was quite thoughtful of my son's best friend to think of me at that time of year. I thanked him for being so considerate. I assumed the rectangular box he handed me held a pen, or a tube of gumballs, or some other trinket a fifteen year old boy might think I'd like. I didn't know how to react when I opened it and saw that it contained an intricately braided thin silver bracelet. I stood there, the boys watching me, and it was quiet for a moment before I remembered to thank Desmond. I let him snap the jewelry on my wrist, I listened as he told me how when he had seen it, he knew it would fit me perfectly.

I wanted to call Cierra, but I didn't know if that was the right thing to do. No parent likes hearing suspicions about their child. And unless I knew for certain that the bracelet was stolen, what was the point? I knew Desmond sometimes got beatings from his grandfather, and I didn't want to be the cause of another one of those. I wanted Desmond to trust me. I wanted the boys to keep spending so much of their time at our apartment. When I asked Miles about the bracelet later, he assured me that Desmond's part-time job at the mall paid well, and that he definitely could afford it. I wondered if my son was naïve. I didn't know if my son was lying.

When I thought about it more at night, I had another fear: that I was thinking the worst of Desmond because he was Black. If Miles' best friend had been white, and had shown up with an expensive Christmas present for me, would I have been so quick to wonder if it had been stolen? If I were honest with myself, probably not. If it had been Hunter or Josh or one of Miles' other ivory-white school friends, I probably would have assumed he'd earned the money from a summer job, or been given the money from a rich parent's too-generous allowance. I would have much more easily brushed the incident off, and worn the bracelet with a smile. And because I didn't with Desmond, I was ashamed of myself.

This was a recurring experience for me. Suspecting myself of racial bias, and then being extremely embarrassed by it. A few months before I'd been driving in downtown St. Louis and

was stopped at a stoplight when a group of three Black teenage boys approached my car. Immediately, I'd locked the doors and pushed my purse beneath the passenger seat. And then in the very next instant, I noticed the white bucket the boys were carrying, stenciled with the name of a veteran's charity in black ink on the side. I'd been overcome with shame. A red hot shame that actually made my hands shake as they fell into my lap. Had it been a group of white boys, not only wouldn't I have instinctively locked the car, but I was pretty sure I would have smiled and lowered my window instead, calling out to the boys with a \$5 donation.

Another time I'd been walking along the sidewalk downtown, and as I passed the corner of a Metro station, I noticed a Black woman standing by the ticketing machine, hunched over, rifling through her purse. I assumed she didn't have enough money to buy a ticket, so I'd stopped and offered her some. She looked up at me curiously, declined the money, and then told me pointedly that she'd actually been looking for her new iPhone, which she was pretty sure now she'd left at home, in her condo, up a few blocks on swanky Lindell Street.

The problem wasn't just that I was embarrassed by these episodes, the problem was that they brought home to me the warning message of that adoption article from years before. I was white, and so didn't understand racism. I was white, and so couldn't relate to the daily life of a Black American. I was white, and so unfit to be a parent to a Black son. The possibility of the truth of these sentiments haunted me. It made me question everything I did, every thought I had, every action I took. It definitely made me not want to question Desmond about the bracelet, or the \$19.99 porn film that showed up on our cable bill, or the too-loud music, too-low pants, or anything else for that matter. What did it say about me that I so easily assumed the worst about my son's best friend?

"Desmond is Miles' best friend," I told the lawyer. "He's a good kid."