

Chapter 16

“Zame!” an officer called out, and I jumped to attention. I walked quickly up to the partition. “Are you Miles Zame’s mother?”

Of course the first person to ever ask me that without a hint of doubt would be a police officer. “Yes.”

“How old is he?”

“Sixteen.”

“Date of birth?”

“July sixteenth—wait, why do you need that? Are you charging him with something? Are you booking him?” Suddenly I wondered if ‘booking’ was the right word, or if no one actually used that except on cop shows.

“Just paperwork ma’am. Any history of arrest?”

“No.” But the officer had heard me pause. He looked up from his desk and directed his gaze directly into mine. “No,” I said again, this time with more confidence. And technically it was true. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t come close.

“I’ve called a lawyer,” I said. “If you have any other questions you can ask him, when he gets here.” I turned before the officer could say anything more and sat back down. I worked to steady my breathing. I was scared. I was really, really scared, in a way that I didn’t know it was possible before to be scared.

Like I imagined soldiers felt deep in the trenches in WWII, the bombs flying close, the muck at your feet, a pervasive sinking feeling with the stench of death surrounding you.

I closed my eyes and saw again the frightened look in Miles' eyes the first time he'd been accosted by an authority figure, the time that he was almost arrested. That was it, I suddenly realized, that was the day the change in Miles had happened. If I were to pinpoint a moment to tell my uncle when things had diverged down this darkened path in our lives, it would have to have been then, not the volunteering at the shelter, not the overnight camp, but that day at Wal-Mart. Miles' awareness of his circumstances in life, his out-of-placeness, his uniqueness, his Blackness, had been building and cresting until this was the event that finally tipped him over into another place.

Miles had been twelve years old, and we were in a local Wal-Mart shopping for half-priced chocolate after Valentine's Day. Miles was over five feet tall at that point, and entering the transition I'd been told about from friends like Tiffany, the one I'd been warned to pay attention to, the one where he turned in the eyes of the rest of the world (if not to his mother), from a cute and adorable young boy, into a scary and threatening Black man. I'd been warned about it, but no warnings can really prepare you.

We'd had a good morning that day. We'd slept in, had a large breakfast, and exchanged Valentine's Day gifts - I'd given Miles a Naruto t-shirt, and he'd given me a card with a poem he'd written in school. It was a cold February day, but despite it being the thick of winter, it didn't feel that bad when we got in the car, and streaks of green could be glimpsed beneath the melting snow on the sides of the road as we drove into town.

We'd found a lot of good candy still in stock, and were happily checking out at the register and heading towards the exit, when it happened. My son was lagging behind me, trying to open a bag of individually wrapped Kit-Kats with his teeth. I was walking ahead of him, unawares, tapping on my phone as I strode forward, when a woman popped out of nowhere and abruptly stepped in front of my son.

"You need to return what you stole," she said to him, loudly enough. The automatic doors of the Wal-Mart opened and

closed, the ebbing sun of the late winter day flashed blindingly. The few other customers near the exit walked discreetly around us. “What?” my son asked. I slowly put my phone into my back pocket and watched what was happening as if it were a show, not thinking fast enough to get in the middle of it.

A side door I’d never noticed in all my years of coming to Wal-Mart opened, and a uniformed, heavy-set man strode menacingly out of it, up to my son. He grabbed Miles and pushed him towards the secret surveillance room he’d just emerged from. There was no hesitation, no debate, no concern or kindness for a twelve year old boy’s fear or consternation. There was only barely restrained anger as a large, older white man in uniform grabbed my son and took him away.

“What are you doing?” I yelled, finding my voice. “What is going on?”

“This doesn’t concern you,” the woman said, blocking my way and trying at the same time to give me some sort of look of common understanding. “We have evidence that this boy stole that candy he was just eating. He walked right past the register with it. We need to question him now.”

“I paid for that candy,” I said. “You do *not* need to question him, you *need* to let him go. Right Now.”

The woman looked at me. Seconds ticked past.

“That is my son,” I said, as if she were stupid. I tried to get around her, but she moved quickly to block me.

“What the hell are you doing?” My son had just disappeared behind a heavy metal door into a room I’d never seen before with a man I didn’t trust. I was ready to knock this woman down if she didn’t get out of my way. “Get out of my way,” I said, with barely restrained anger. “That is my *son*.”

The woman seemed to hear me for the first time. “He’s with you?” she asked, perplexed.

“Yes.”

“Can I see your receipt?”

I searched frantically through the bag I was holding, imagining the entire time what could be happening to Miles that very minute behind that closed door. Finally, I located the receipt. The woman held it critically before her eyes while many more

slow, agonizing seconds passed. Then she turned from me and spoke softly into a walkie-talkie. After what seemed like an interminable minute, the secret door whose outline in the wall I could now discern, opened again. My son emerged, his clothes disheveled, his face distraught. The natural joy in his eyes, the joy of a child, the joy of a boy who knew no injustice, no longer there. I ran to him and hugged him, but Miles was wooden; he didn't hug me back.

I could tell that my son was scared. I attributed his silence to confusion. I spoke a rush of words at him, explaining what had happened while trying to console him, but he didn't hear me – his attention was elsewhere. My son's beautiful brown eyes were blank.

I found out later, much later, that in the moments he was alone with the male security guard, the man had roughly lifted Miles' shirt and pulled down his pants and searched him all over for hidden merchandise. My son had done nothing wrong, and yet he'd been horribly violated, without explanation or apology. He had stolen nothing, while from him was stolen the trust of a child. It didn't escape my son's notice that I'd been *right there*, and yet, I, his mother, the most important person in his life, had been unable to protect him.

My son never went shopping with me again after that, an errand he used to enjoy. And as Tiffany had warned me, the light in his eyes never shone quite so bright again either. The childhood look of curiosity, joy, innocence, and discovery, had been replaced with an adult's look of hesitation, fear, uncertainty, and distrust. And though I tried, I never could get the old cheerfulness back. I hugged him and kissed him, bought him the electric scooter I knew he'd been wanting, told him how much I loved him and how special he was. But all my efforts seemed to do, was make a mother's desperation obvious. My son knew he could no longer trust me to keep him safe. He grew even more reclusive after that, retreated even further from his friends, from me, from everyone around him. I stayed awake at night for weeks after the incident, thinking that my son had finally realized not just the injustice of the world, but that he never should have been given to me in the first place.