



### 3

“A-LEEE-ZAAAAAAAAAAAAA—” Resa cries out to anyone in a two-mile range, picking up the froggy boots as if by squeezing them tighter, her daughter will overflow out of them and reappear before her. That does not happen.

Running out of the women’s restroom, hugging the rubber boots tightly to her chest, looking in both directions frantically, Resa freezes noticing everyone else seems unbothered and moving in slow motion. Sprinting directly to the cart she left parked by the table just moments before; Resa’s body swells with hope—sandwiching the bubble of it between the chest walls and the rubber boots she still tightly embraces.

Aleeza, sitting at the table finishing her lunch, chowing fresh, will be next. Resa just knows that will be the case, as she pushes through other customers with their big, fat, obstructing carts. A uniformed Allmart employee pops out of nowhere calling, “Stop!” and blocking Resa from getting back to her cart, her table, her lunch, and her daughter waiting.

But she isn’t waiting.

\*\*\*

Every view the same—scenes continuing to play out in front of Resa as if nothing has changed. An employee near Resa extends his arms toward hers asking, “Ma’am, did you pay for those items in your hand?”

“What? Are you kidding me? Let go! These are my daughter’s, and I have to get to her!” Resa shouts, drawing a crowd of curious, non-helpful spectators.

“Could I just check those, Ma’am?” the employee asks, reaching for the boots again, “I have to check. Um, you were running toward the door. It’s suspicious.”

Resa could not care less about suspicions right now. Desperate to be reunited with her daughter, she pushes through, ignoring the employee calling for her, *Ma’am, Ma’am*. Those calls

from ten feet away from her, along with the overhead speakers alerting security teams to come to the front, were both only background noises to Resa right now.

“She’s not here—Oh my Go—” cries Resa, clinging to froggy boots, and standing in front of a table displaying half-eaten sandwiches wrapped up in a paper, where less than fifteen minutes before her daughter had wished that complete strangers would light a 3-wick candle and celebrate her birthday with her. “How can she not be here—” asks Resa out loud, but no one responds. *Think Resa! Where would she go?* Resa turns around to run right into the arms of a security guard, but it provides no security to her now.

“Help...me,” says the weak voice coming from Resa’s face, so pitiful she didn’t recognize it, “My daughter...she’s missing!” Resa needs to get back to the bathroom where she last saw her baby, so she tries to charge through the security guards, now on their radios talking in code, but they stop her, promising that the entire building is on alert and that no one could possibly leave with her daughter. This brings Resa little comfort. *What if someone already did?*

\*\*\*

Telling a mother that *lots of kids end up finding the toy department or wander off to see the fish aquariums* before reuniting her with the—only—child she has, Resa finds less than helpful.

“How old is the child?”

“Almost three,” replies Resa, in a soft voice.

“We are going to help you find her. We have activated a Code Adam within the store by in-house telephone. Please keep in mind that sometimes, well, many times, the children pop up relatively quickly after taking a tour of the toy department or pet department.”

“So I hear.” *Please define relatively quickly for me.*

“Can you tell us what she was wearing and we can update the Code Adam with a description right away?”

“Um, a black top, I mean, a black turtle neck, a yellow tutu, black and white striped tights, and green frog boots,” answers Resa.

“These boots, Ma’am?” Pointing to the boots that he notices still in Resa’s clutch, the security guard speaks into a walkie-talkie, “the missing child is not wearing shoes.”

At the sound of the words “missing child” Resa sinks to a squat dropping the boots in front of her. Aleeza had begged to wear the froggy boots that morning, and they truly were the best choice for the slushy, snowy weather outside. Resa could have never anticipated that these boots would splash here in a puddle of tears instead. She looked up solely because the security guard tugging at her arm, attempting to help her up, suggests that they move to the office in the front of the store. Resa only agrees because he mentions that she could watch the monitors of the security cameras placed throughout the store and parking lot. She hopes audibly that the cameras better be set low enough to see someone the height of a very tiny child. The longer Aleeza is gone, the tinier she seems.

“Ma’am, we would like to ask you a few questions,” one of the security guards says, directing Resa’s attention from her unsuccessful fishing expedition through both pockets for her phone to call to her husband. With a flash of dropping her cell phone down in her purse while in the bathroom, she suddenly sees an image of Aleeza’s sweet face, looking up at her through a couple of strands of dark curls, smiling and requesting a selfie, as she often does with just the

sight of a phone. Resa had quickly squashed her daughter's request at the time, enlightening the girl that selfies on the toilet are inappropriate. Appropriate or not, Resa wishes now that these were photos she had taken.

Soon many security guards began asking Resa questions and recording answers as if the situation isn't overwhelming enough trying to respond to questions in each direction. "What's your daughter's name?"

"Aleeza. Aleeza Hamilton" answers Resa.

"Name?"

"Aleeza Hamilton"

"Your name is the same as your daughter's name?"

"No, no, sorry. I'm Resa Ham—, Teresa Hamilton."

"Does your daughter have a middle name or initial?"

"Rosamond. Aleeza Rosamond Hamilton. I always loved...the story of Sleeping Beauty."

"Any nicknames that you call her consistently?"

"Oh, of course. Leez, Leeza, Leezie Rosa, Oh my, there so many. My husband calls her Princess Rosamond when he rescues her from her bed in the morning."

"Rescues?"

"Well, not really. He just pretends, you know, to cut down all of the vines and shrubs that have grown while she was sleeping," with a sound close to a laugh, Resa rambles on trying to explain. "There are not really any. He is just playing." *Why is he writing all of this down?*

"Okay."

"It's just a game we play...like she is...Sleeping Beauty," adds Resa nervously. *Where are the seven good fairies acting as Godmothers now when you need them?*

"Okay, Ms. Hamilton, let's get back on track. Where is the last place you saw your daughter?"

"In the bathroom. She went under the door while I was still in the stall. It was really quick."

"Did you see or talk to anyone in the bathroom?"

"No," answers Resa.

"How long before you realized she was missing?"

"Eight, uh, well, I counted to eight in the game we were playing. It couldn't have been more than a minute,"

"Did you hear anything at all outside of the stall?"

"No. And that's when I should have known. My baby girl is never quiet, not that quiet," Resa cries.

"It's not your fault," handing tissues, one of the security guards tries to console.

"Ms. Hamilton, I know this is hard, but any details would be helpful to us finding your daughter. Where was the last place you and your daughter were before you went into the restroom?"

"Subwagon. We were sitting. Having lunch," answers Resa. Her words were choppy, short sentences with a slide attached to each one—each a flash of her daughter in the last moments at the table. First her daughter's swaying dance as she chanted "Chow fwesh" in front of anyone and everyone watching, then the image of her daughter reconstructing her sandwich, and eventually the scene her daughter had caused, bringing laughter to everyone there. Resa walks the security guard through each of the flashes as he records every detail.

"So it sounds like you and your daughter both had some interactions with people around you at the restaurant, can you tell me about any of those people?"

"There was a lady, actually a mom with her three boys...having lunch. She was friendly, really friendly, taking a big interest in Leeza. It was pretty quick interaction, though, and then Leez, she had to go to the bathroom," says Resa, apologizing and wishing she could give a better physical description or something helpful.

"This is helpful; you are doing fine. You say she took an interest in your daughter...did this woman say or do anything to make you suspicious of anything?"

Resa freezes in her spot.

"I ask because she was the last person you talked to and she had to be in close proximity to the door, right?"

"Yes," answers Resa remembering the conversation with the lady sitting at the tables near the exit. "She said that she has all boys, five total, and that she could only imagine what it would be like to have lunch with a—" sobbing again trying to say the words, "a princess." What I once took as a compliment, could now be the missing key to letting someone take my baby, thinks Resa, again beating up herself silently.

"Do you remember at all what she looked like? Or what she was wearing? Anything that may help?"

"Dark hair, thin, maybe tall. I don't know really. She was sitting."

"It's okay, we have people collecting surveillance footage now. Could you tell us more about anyone else that you or your daughter may have interacted with?"

"There were men—a table full of them, on their lunch break. They spoke to Aleeza. She talked to them, mostly to one guy. He was big. They all seemed big and stron—" an uncontrollable noise escapes her throat, "I cannot do this."

Resa's racing thoughts take over, and her body quivers. *If you have people looking at surveillance footage then why hasn't someone recovered my baby and brought her back to me—from the toy department or from the pet department! She is not just feeding fish anymore, right? It has been too long for that. She is gone.* "I have to go look for her!"

"I promise, we have people in place, searching everywhere. Your answers in here help more than anything you can do out there."

Resa sits silently, still shaking.

"I now this is hard, but anything you can tell us may help. Was there anyone at all that knew that you and your daughter would be in the store at this time?"

"My husband," answers Resa, "Could I call him now?"

"The child's father?" asks the security guard, continuing with no visible sign that he heard her request.

"Yes, Aleeza's father."

"Anyone else know that you were here?"

"My mother. Oh, and a neighbor. I asked my next-door neighbor this morning if she needed anything from the store. Her German chocolate cake mix...it's in my cart." The important details and the useless details blur together; apparently, the mind goes kerflooey as suddenly as the situation has. It is all fun and games until the unimaginable happens.

Resa catches a glimpse of the clock on the wall. She needed to get home, put the groceries away, and help Aleeza pick the perfect book before nap time. *The whole afternoon schedule would be completely off now.*

"Okay, that's good. Any patterns, like: you come here every Friday, anything like that?"

"No. definitely not. I am usually at work at this time. A-lee—, I'm sorry. She is usually at her sitter's house right now," Resa says crying harder to think about Aleeza. *How could this happen? How can her daughter be safer with the babysitter than with her own mother?*

"I'll be right back, Mrs. Hamilton. While I step out, use this pad to write down your sitter's name, number, and address. Also, you can use that phone right there. You may want to call your husband," he adds. *Really? Should I call my husband?* Resa has asked a couple of times already with no response.

Jeffrey answers with the same tone he always has when he doesn't recognize the number—the one that says: I definitely don't have time for this, okay your time is up, thanks for calling.

Wasting no time, Jeffrey is ready to hang up when finally, a high-pitched sound that is not from a recording or an electronic caller squeak through the phone. The words "I lost—" are all that are decipherable, the rest just the contrast of shrill and raspy sounds escaping the receiver. The unidentifiable caller tries again, this time with complete success, "Jeffrey, It's me. I lost—," one gasps and continues, "my cell phone."

"Res, I almost hung up. Where are you?" Jeffrey's tone softens realizing he is conversing with someone he knows. He still doesn't have time for this he thinks, glancing over to his co-worker across the table, but he will make time. There is no way of foreseeing how much time this issue will take.

"I'm at...the store...at Allmart."

"Still? Well, if you have been shopping ever since this morning I sure hope you lost your credit card too," teases Jeffrey.

"Just get here. Please, get here."

"Okay, What, Res? Did you lose your whole purse? I'm assuming you lost your car keys too if you need me to come?" asks Jeffrey.

"I," a deep breath in, "lost everything."

When the door opens again, it is an actual law-enforcement officer instead of the security guards that she had been talking to before. Every hair on Resa's body stand upon the sight of his official uniform. She remembers her words to Aleeza. Every time they would see a police officer, Resa would remind her daughter their role, with words like, "helpful" and "brave" she would instill in her head. She had always been so careful because she never wanted her daughter to associate any policeman or policewoman with trouble. *They were always helpful and brave.*

"Mrs. Hamilton, I have just been briefed on the situation, I would like talk with you until your husband arrives, and then take you...and your husband, down to the station for some more questions."

*Helpful and brave.*

Brave man, thinks Resa, asking a mother to leave the one place where she last saw her child would be helpful, to anyone.