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Chapter One

“I really need the job man,” Derrick Shaw said to the owner of the 99¢ And More store. The owner called himself Wes, but, in his past and many miles away, he was Waleed. Wes was almost as dark-skinned as Derrick, but he was from Iraq. The store sold everything from food to clothing and cosmetics.

Wes looked the boy over. Derrick was tall and broad shouldered. He probably was never too clever, but he looked honest, though you never could tell. “Kid, what I need is somebody to clean up after we close, straighten up, and something else too. Some customers, they

don't come in to buy, if you know what I mean."

Derrick Shaw was struggling to keep a C average at Harriet Tubman High School. He suffered a lot of bullying and abuse because he wasn't sharp, but he managed. "So what do they come in for?" Derrick asked.

"To steal. Shoplifters, you know?" Wes replied.

Derrick frowned. "You'd expect me to stop them?" he asked. Derrick was a peaceful person. In spite of all the humiliation he suffered at the hands of fellow students like Marko Lane, he never struck back. When they mocked his slowness, he tried to laugh along.

"No-no," Wes said, "that's just the thing. I don't want no trouble with the customers, not even the crooks."

Derrick smiled in relief. "That's good, 'cause I don't want any trouble either," he agreed.

"But you got to deal with them, kid. This is what we do," Wes explained. "When they

first come in the store, you make eye contact with the customer. You say a friendly ‘Hello there and welcome to the store.’ Shoplifters don’t like contact with the clerks. They don’t like to be noticed. So right away, the shoplifter is discouraged. The customer, he smiles back and is happy you are friendly, but the shoplifter, sometimes they’re gone right then and there and that’s good.”

“Yeah,” Derrick said. He could do that. He liked people. He had an easy smile. When people took the trouble to get to know Derrick Shaw, they usually liked him. He had a lot of nice friends at Tubman—Jaris Spain, Trevor Jenkins, Alonee Lennox, Sami Archer.

“But sometimes, kid, they will try to steal anyway,” Wes went on. “They’ll pull some stuff off the shelf. Like, for example, they’ll see these T-shirts they like. They look around quick—like, nobody seems to be looking—so they stuff ’em in their purse or bag they got. But you’re looking at that big mirror we got in the back of the store and you see what just happened.”

“Oh,” Derrick said. He was getting worried again. Was he supposed to wrestle the thieves for the stolen merchandise? He didn’t think he could do that.

“You wear a big smile, kid, and you go up to this thief and you say in a real friendly voice, ‘Hey, we got a sale on shorts that match those T-shirts you got there in your bag. You might want to look at the shorts.’ Something like that. So you’re not being aggressive. You’re just letting them know you seen them take the T-shirts. Nine out of ten times, they’ll put the shirts they swiped back before they leave the store. You saved my stuff from being stolen and there’s no hassle. You think you could do that, Derrick Shaw?” Wes asked.

Derrick smiled broadly. “Yeah, I could do that, Wes. I can’t get into fights with people, but I can sweet-talk ’em into doing the right thing,” he said. “I hate trouble.”

“Me too,” Wes agreed. “I don’t want no trouble with people, even bad people.” Wes was a short, round man. He was forty-three

years old and he'd immigrated to the United States ten years earlier with his wife and four children. "Okay then, Derrick," Wes continued, "I can only pay minimum wage. If that's okay, you come here after school tomorrow—we'll work out which days then—and you work until we close, usually around nine. On Saturday I'll need you all day, but we close on Sunday. How does that sound to you?"

"Sounds great, Wes," Derrick responded. "Like I said, I need a job bad. We got five kids in our family. My pop, he's a good carpenter, but they ain't building as many houses as they used to, and he's lucky if he works a coupla days a week. I'm the oldest kid. Mom was really hoping I could bring in some money to help out with the rent and stuff. So could I start tomorrow?"

"I'll look for you tomorrow, Derrick," Wes nodded. "After school."

"I ride my bike to school and I could ride it here too," Derrick thought out loud. "Thanks a lot, Wes! It'll be great to go home

and tell Mom and Pop I got a job. Man you really made my day, Wes. You won't be sorry either. I'm a good worker. I can stock the shelves and mop the floors, and I'll keep an eye on that big mirror in the back and do my best there too."

"Great," Wes said.

"I like people," Derrick added. "I've always liked people. I can deal with them. I've had paper routes and all my customers liked me. They really did."

Derrick left the store and jumped on his bike. Derrick was a fast biker. He could get home from the store in about fifteen minutes.

The Shaw family lived in an apartment on Choctaw Street. There were apartments up and down the street, not in excellent repair, but not run-down either. Most of the tenants were hardworking people who tried to keep their places clean. When somebody dumped an old mattress or sofa in the alleys, the men would get together and drag it away. They didn't want this to be like some areas across

Grant where kids grew up amid mountains of trash and rats scurried around their places.

“Mom, Pop!” Derrick shouted as he came into the apartment. “I got a job at that ninety-nine-cent store. Real nice guy hired me. His name is Wes. I’m starting tomorrow.”

Mom came to give Derrick a big hug. Pop stood behind her, smiling. “I knew you’d get work, boy. You got the touch,” Pop beamed.

The other kids in the family gathered around Derrick. Bruce was fourteen, Kayla was twelve, Juno was ten, and little Talia was six. “I like that store,” Kayla said. “You can get nice bracelets and stuff real cheap.”

“Now, we’re not goin’ to be spending money on foolish geegaws,” Mom chided. “You know your daddy ain’t been working steady, and Derrick’s money gonna help pay the rent and the gas and electric.”

Derrick’s father was a burly, good-natured man who earned good money while the building boom was going on. “Now Florida,” he said to his wife. “It ain’t gonna bust us for the

kids to spend a little extra. We ain't goin' to be without electric lights if Kayla buys a hair ribbon or Juno gets a bag of bubblegum. I'm still working. I'm bringin' in money and things are gonna be lookin' up real soon."

Florida Shaw looked at her husband. She loved Guthrie Shaw as much as the day she married him, when she was eighteen and he was twenty. She'd just graduated from Tubman High, and Guthrie had finished the two-year course at a community college that made him a carpenter.

"I'd like to get me a job too," Bruce chimed in. "Lotta things I can do."

Derrick grinned at his little brother. "You're just fourteen, boy," Derrick told him. "You gotta do good in middle school. You're smarter than me, Bruce. You gonna be the brains in the family that gets to go to college."

"You can go to the community college too, Derrick," Mom assured him. "You can do that."

“No Mom, I’m too dumb,” Derrick protested. “I got one more year after this one at Tubman and then I’m done.”

“You are letting those no-good boys at Tubman cut you down, baby,” Mom insisted indignantly. “Don’t you pay no never-mind to trash-talking boys like Marko Lane who try to make their own selves better than they are by cutting down other people.”

Derrick smiled at his mother. He knew she loved him and thought highly of him. But deep in Derrick’s heart he feared he just didn’t have what it took to rise much above minimum wage jobs.

The next day at school, Derrick could think of little else but his job. He’d be making more money than he’d ever made on his other jobs. He had run paper routes, picked fruit, and done yard work. But this was a real job, and Wes seemed like a good guy. It would be nice working in the store and getting to meet the customers. Derrick even enjoyed the thought of the challenge: Could he prevent

shoplifting without getting anybody mad? Derrick thought of himself as sort of a friendly peace officer, stopping crime without getting rough on anybody.

After his last class at Tubman, Derrick jumped on his bike. He'd told all his friends about his great new job. Jaris Spain, who was much smarter than Derrick, had a really crummy job at the Chicken Shack. "I'm dishing out this greasy food all night," Jaris complained, "and you'll be working in a real store, dude. Way to go!" Jaris clapped Derrick on the back and high-fived him.

Derrick was on top of his world as he rode off to work.

"Hey kid," Wes shouted when Derrick biked up to the shop. "You're ten minutes early. I like that!"

Derrick hurried inside and began straightening up the merchandise and sweeping the floor. He had been working for about an hour when two girls from Tubman High came in. He recognized them. Ryann and Leticia were