# Chapter 6: Smile

“I often wish that I could save everyone, but I’m a dreamer.” — Scarface (feat. 2Pac)

He was ten years old.  
  
Shoulders shaking. Face flushed. Trying to hold back tears but losing the fight. He wasn’t hurt. He wasn’t scared of contact. He wasn’t being dramatic.  
  
He was just… done.  
  
And nobody moved.  
  
The game continued like it wasn’t happening. The coaches kept barking. The players kept running. And his mother—she just sat there.  
  
That moment split something open in me. Not because I judged her. But because I understood.  
  
If a stranger had been yelling at her son in the grocery store, she would’ve stepped in. No question. But in this gym, in this system, she froze.  
  
Because we all have.  
  
We’ve all watched this machine run over our kids and called it toughness. Called it preparation. Called it normal.  
  
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I left that gym.  
  
Not because I couldn’t take it—but because staying would’ve made me part of it.  
  
I’ve walked out of a lot of gyms lately. Not in protest. In protection. Of my peace. Of my values. Of the breath I refuse to let be stolen from someone else’s child while we pretend it’s just “part of the game.”  
  
The problem isn’t the game. It’s what we’ve turned it into.  
  
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Another moment. Different gym. Different kid.  
  
This one wasn’t mine either. But he played with joy. Loose shoulders. A smile on his face that hadn’t been coached out of him yet.  
  
On the way home, in the car with his mom, he said, “I like basketball now because Coach Hold makes it fun again.”  
  
He didn’t say it to me. He wasn’t performing. He was just breathing.  
  
That sentence crushed me. Not because it was flattering—but because he was eleven.  
  
What kind of world are we building where eleven-year-olds need to be rescued from basketball?  
  
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This chapter isn’t about rage. It’s about grief.  
  
The quiet kind. The kind that simmers under your ribs. That builds in silence. That grows heavier every time you see a kid breaking and no one calls it broken.  
  
I’ve seen parents chase “better opportunities” for their kids that led to worse outcomes. Not because they were selfish—but because they were scared.  
  
I’ve been that parent. I’ve chased that ghost. I’ve confused pressure with preparation, and exposure with evolution.  
  
And now, I coach with that grief in my bones.  
  
Not as shame. As memory.  
  
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We are sacrificing becoming on the altar of visibility.  
  
We’re trading joy for clout. Teaching kids that their value is measured in minutes, rankings, mixtapes—and calling it growth.  
  
We’re preparing them to perform—but not to love.  
  
Not the game.  
  
Not themselves.  
  
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So yeah, I smile.  
  
Not because it doesn’t hurt. But because smiling is my resistance.  
  
Because that smile is the most human thing I’ve got left in a culture that rewards coldness.  
  
It’s how I breathe when the air gets tight.  
  
It’s how I hold space for kids who’ve forgotten what joy feels like.  
  
It’s not a performance. It’s protection. For them. For me. For the work.  
  
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And no—I can’t save everyone.  
  
But I can show up.  
  
I can build spaces where kids rediscover love through play.  
  
Where parents exhale.  
  
Where coaches lead with care instead of control.  
  
That’s what this is.  
  
It’s not a business plan.  
  
It’s a blessing.  
  
I’m still here.  
  
Still holding joy like it’s oxygen.  
  
Still smiling.  
  
Because Umi said, shine your light.  
  
And I believe her.  
  
Even when the light feels heavy.

## Chapter Style Rationale

Chapter 6 is built on emotional quiet. It resists the urge to rant and instead mourns—softly but unrelentingly. The pacing is slow and breath-centered, allowing the reader to sit with the grief, confusion, and compassion that define the chapter.  
  
The voice here is a whisper in a loud gym. It's steady, reflective, protective. The choice to anchor this chapter in empathy rather than critique sets it apart from the rest of the book—and makes it arguably the most human. The smile becomes metaphor, method, and shield. It’s less about what the author does—and more about who he’s choosing to be.