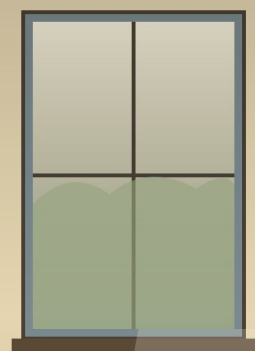


THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— Book One —



ROOM 12

*The Year We
Met Sammy*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

ROOM I 2

The Year We Met Sammy

BOOK ONE OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

Architecture of Grace, LLC

Room 12 · The Year We Met Sammy

Book One of The Architecture of Grace

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First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

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A Note Before You Begin

This is a book about a classroom you have never been in, full of kids you have never met, who learn the things I want you to know. There are ten of them, and a teacher named Ms. Calloway, and a puppet named Sammy.

The classroom is Room 12.

If you are six years old, somebody is probably reading this to you. Hi. I am glad you are here. Lean against the person reading and pay attention to how their voice sounds when they get to the parts about Sammy, because the parts about Sammy are some of my favorite parts. If you are the person doing the reading — a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, an aunt, an uncle, a big sister, a small sister with a loud voice — then I want to tell you something too. This book is going to do four things across the year inside it. First it is going to ask the kids in Room 12 who they are. Then it is going to teach them how to be kind to themselves when they get something wrong. Then it is going to teach them how to forgive someone else who hurt them. And then — last — it is going to teach them what grace is, which is the thing you give someone when they have not earned it but you choose to give it anyway.

That is the architecture. Four floors. We start at the bottom. A child who hears this book will not remember all of it. That is okay. A child who hears this book will remember Sammy, and the Mistake Wall, and the small heavy stones, and the day Mia almost cried but did not, and the day Marcus did. They will remember the kids by name. They will remember Room 12.

Many years from now — when the child in your lap is twelve, or twenty, or forty-five — something will happen, and a sentence from this book will come back to them without warning, and they will use it. That is the whole point of the book. The sentence comes back when it is needed. The book is the place where the sentence gets put in.

This is the part where I usually sign my name.

— J.A.R.

PART ONE



Knowing & Accepting Yourself

Who am I, when I am just me?

August. September. October. The year begins.

CHAPTER ONE

Who Am I?

The first thing Ms. Calloway did, on the first morning of first grade in Room 12, was take a small green frog puppet out of a wooden box. The frog had floppy legs and one slightly crooked eye and a felt mouth that opened with her hand.

"Friends," she said, "this is Sammy. Sammy is going to be in our class all year. Sammy is part of our class. Sammy is going to help us learn how to be a class."

She made Sammy wave at the ten children sitting on the carpet. "Hi," said Sammy, in a voice that was a little softer than Ms. Calloway's regular voice, and a little warmer. "I am Sammy. I want to know all about you. Can you tell me one thing that makes you special?" There was a long pause.

This is how every first morning of first grade goes. Adults forget this. There is always a long pause before the first child speaks, because the first day of first grade is enormous, and the ten children on the carpet have all just realized that they will be in this room every single day for the entire year, and they do not yet know who they are going to be in it. Marcus was the first to speak. Marcus is almost always the first to speak. He had a small chip on his front tooth from where he had fallen off his bike in May, and a sister at home named Aaliyah who was three, and a feeling in his chest that he wanted to say something good and was not sure what it would be.

"I am six," Marcus said. "I have a sister. Her name is Aaliyah and she is THREE."

Sammy nodded. "Six is a good age. Three is a good age too. Aaliyah is lucky to have a big brother."

Marcus sat up a little straighter on the carpet. He had not realized, before this moment, that he was lucky for Aaliyah. He had mostly thought of Aaliyah as somebody who broke things he was building. It was a new thought.

"Who is next?" said Sammy.

Amara was next. Amara had recently moved to a new town from a different town, and at the new town nobody had ever heard her name pronounced the way her grandmother said it. She had been deciding, all summer, what she would tell the kids at her new school when they asked. "My name is Amara," she said. And then she said it a second time, the way her grandmother said it. Amara. Three syllables. The a at the end soft, like a small breath.

"That is a beautiful name," said Sammy. "How does it sound when your grandmother says it?"

Amara almost smiled. "Like that," she said. "Like how I just said it." "Then that is the name," said Sammy. "That is your name."

Then Sofia, who had a worried stomach almost every morning, said she liked dogs. Then Priya, who was already a careful child, said she liked to write her letters very neatly. Then Darius said he liked the color red and almost nothing else, which made Ms. Calloway laugh. Then Jordan said something that was supposed to be a joke, and the other kids laughed, and Jordan looked pleased, and Sammy said, "You are funny. I will remember that you are funny."

Then it was Maya's turn, and Maya did not say anything.

Maya was the smallest child in Room 12. She had recently moved from somewhere else, like Amara, but unlike Amara she had not decided what she was going to tell people about herself. Maya looked at the floor. Ms. Calloway crouched down next to Maya, and her crouching was quiet — the kind of crouching adults do when they have been around children for a long time and know how to take up less space. "It is okay to be quiet today, Maya," she said. "Sammy already knows one thing about you. Sammy knows you are here. That is enough for today."

Maya looked up. Her eyes were big.

"Sammy already knows I am here?" she said, very quietly.

"Sammy already knows you are here," said Ms. Calloway.

That was the moment Maya decided to come back the next day.

Then Theo went, and then Mia, and last of all Kezia, who said she lived with her grandmother, which surprised exactly nobody because Kezia had told everyone about her grandmother at the door that morning. When all ten of them had spoken — or had been quiet, in Maya's case — Ms. Calloway said, "Now you have all told us one thing. There are a million more things to know. We have a whole year."

Then she put Sammy back in the wooden box, very gently, and the wooden box went on the high shelf where it would live for the rest of the year, and the first day of first grade in Room 12 was officially under way. This is how the year begins. With a question. Who am I?

You do not have to answer it all at once. You can answer one little piece of it every day. That is how it gets answered. One piece at a time, across a whole year, in a room with a teacher and a frog puppet and nine other children.

CHAPTER TWO

My Feelings Are Friends

A week later, Sofia's stomach hurt.

It hurt the way it sometimes did in the mornings, which was a hurt that did not have anything stuck in it — no bad food, no flu, nothing a doctor could find. Sofia's mom had taken her to the doctor in kindergarten because of this stomach, and the doctor had said, very kindly, I think Sofia's stomach is talking to her.

Sofia had not understood, at the time, what that meant.

She understood it a little more, today, sitting on the carpet in Room 12, with her stomach hurting before reading.

Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box.

"Friends," said Sammy, "today we are going to talk about feelings. All of them. Even the ones you do not like."

Sammy looked at the carpet. "Sometimes feelings show up and you think — I do not want this feeling. Please go away. But feelings do not work like that. Feelings are like little messengers. They come to tell you something. If you yell at them, they get louder. If you listen, they tell you what they came to say. And then — when you have listened — they leave." Sofia did not say anything, but her stomach felt a little bit better. Sammy put up a chart that had four pictures on it. A smiling face. A sad face. A face that looked scared. A face that looked mad. "These are four feelings," said Sammy. "There are more than four. But these are four good ones to start with."

Today I am going to tell you what each one is for. Because every feeling — every single one — has a job. A feeling is a friend. A feeling is information."

The kids in Room 12 leaned in a little. Even Maya. Even Jordan, who was trying to make Theo laugh and got distracted by Sammy in the middle of doing it.

"Happy," said Sammy, "is the feeling that says more of this, please. It is the feeling that points at the things that are good for you, so you remember to do them again."

"Sad," said Sammy, "is the feeling that says something I love is gone, or far away, or hurt. Sad is not a bad feeling. Sad is just a true feeling about a real thing. When you feel sad, you can ask: what am I missing right now?"

"Scared," said Sammy, "is the feeling that says be careful. Scared keeps you safe. Scared is your friend. The only time scared is not helping is when it is yelling about something that is not really there. Then you can say: thank you, scared, I see what you mean, and I am okay." "Mad," said Sammy, "is the feeling that says something is not fair, or something is hurting me, or something needs to change. Mad is also your friend. Mad is information. Mad is how you know something matters to you."

Then Sammy stopped. The class was quiet.

"Friends," said Sammy, "the feeling is never the problem. The feeling is the messenger. If a feeling shows up — let it tell you what it came to say."

Sofia sat very still on the carpet.

After Sammy went back in the box, Ms. Calloway gave them all a piece of paper and asked them to draw a picture of a feeling they had that morning. Sofia thought for a long time. Then she drew a picture of her own stomach — a small round

circle in the middle of a small round body — and inside the stomach she drew a tiny worried face.

She brought the paper to Ms. Calloway during quiet work time. Ms. Calloway looked at the picture for a long moment.

"That is a wonderful picture, Sofia," she said. "What is your worried friend telling you?"

Sofia thought.

"I think," she said slowly, "my worried friend does not want me to mess up reading."

"That is good information," said Ms. Calloway. "Now you know what your worried friend is worried about. Can you tell your worried friend that messing up reading is okay in first grade? Messing up reading is how you learn reading."

Sofia nodded.

She went back to her seat, and during reading time, when she missed a word and the class did not laugh because the class never laughed when somebody missed a word in Ms. Calloway's class, Sofia put her hand on her stomach, very quietly, and said, in her head, thank you, worried friend. I heard you. We are okay.

Her stomach got a little softer.

This is one of the first things to learn about feelings. They are not your enemies. They are your friends. They have come a long way to tell you something. If you sit still, and listen, they will tell you what they came to say. Then they will go. And the next time they come, they will be a little quieter, because they know you will listen.

CHAPTER THREE

Everyone Makes Mistakes

This is the chapter where Marcus knocks over a block tower.

The block tower belonged to Jaylen, who was in another first-grade class down the hall but who sometimes came to Room 12 for choice time on Fridays. Jaylen had been working on the tower for fifteen minutes, which is a very long time when you are six. The tower was almost as tall as Jaylen.

Marcus came over to see it. Marcus is a child who has trouble standing still when something interesting is happening. He did not mean to bump the block table. He did not even know, until it was too late, that his hip had touched the corner of it.

The tower fell.

It fell in the slow, terrible way that block towers always fall — first the top, then the middle, then a long pause, and then the whole bottom letting go all at once, in a sound that is louder than fifteen blocks should be able to make.

Jaylen stared at the blocks.

Marcus stared at the blocks too.

Then Marcus said the thing he always said, which was the thing that came out of his mouth before his brain had time to put on its shoes: "I am SO CLUMSY. I always break things. I am the WORST at blocks." Jaylen did not say anything. He was about to cry, but he had not started yet.

Ms. Calloway, who had been across the room, came over without hurrying. She has a way of arriving in a situation that does not make the situation bigger. Sammy was on her hand, which surprised Marcus a little, because Sammy did not usually come out during choice time. "Marcus," said Sammy, "I heard you say something just now."

Marcus looked at Sammy. He was almost in tears.

"I said I always break things," said Marcus. "I am clumsy."

"You said two different things," said Sammy. "You said I always break things. And you said I am clumsy. Those are two different things. The first one is about what happened. The second one is about who you are. Those are not the same."

Marcus blinked.

Sammy turned, very gently, to look at the blocks.

"Here is what is true," said Sammy. "You bumped a table. That is true. The tower fell down. That is true. Jaylen is sad about it. That is true. Those are true things. But I always break things is not true. You do not always break things. You broke this. That is different."

Marcus said, in a small voice, "But I did break it."

"You did," said Sammy. "And now there are three things you can do, in order. The Three Things are: Oops. Then Fix It. Then Try Again." The class was quiet. Even the kids who had not been near the blocks were listening now, because Sammy's voice carries in a room. "Oops," said Sammy, "is the part where you say: I made a mistake. I am sorry it happened. I am sorry it hurt someone."

"Fix It," said Sammy, "is the part where you ask: what can I do to help? In this case — would you like to help Jaylen rebuild the tower?" "Try Again," said Sammy, "is the part where, next time you walk past a block tower, you remember to walk slower."

Marcus looked at Jaylen.

"Sorry I knocked your tower down," he said. "I did not mean to. Do you want help fixing it?"

Jaylen, who had still not cried, said, "Yes."

So Marcus and Jaylen got down on the floor of Room 12 on a Friday morning in September, and they rebuilt the tower together. The new tower was a little bit different. The new tower had a wider base. Jaylen pointed at the wider base and said, "If somebody bumps it now, it will not fall."

Marcus said, "That is a good idea."

They built the tower until the bell rang.

Now — here is something the kids in Room 12 did not know at the time, but which we know, because we are reading a book about them. What Marcus had almost done — what almost happened, in that first moment, before Sammy showed up — was a thing that grown-ups do all their lives without knowing it. Marcus had almost taken one thing that happened and turned it into who he is. He had almost said I am clumsy and I always break things, as if one bumped table proved a forever-truth about Marcus.

It does not prove a forever-truth. One bumped table proves that one table got bumped. That is all it proves.

Some kids learn this when they are six. Most adults learn it when they are forty. The kids who learn it when they are six get a head start on a kind of peace that takes most people a very long time to find. This is one of the small, secret reasons Room 12 matters. The kids do not know they are getting the head start. But they are.

CHAPTER FOUR

My Inside Voice — Kind or Unkind?

Sammy has two voices.

Most of the time, Sammy talks in the voice you have already heard — gentle, warm, slightly slow, the voice of somebody who has all the time in the world. That voice has a name. Ms. Calloway calls that voice the Kind Coach.

But Sammy has another voice, too. And on a Tuesday morning in October, the kids of Room 12 met it for the first time.

Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box. The kids smiled. They were used to Sammy now. Six weeks of school had passed and Sammy had become — without anyone making a big deal of it — a regular part of Room 12. Sammy was in the room. Sammy was here.

But on this particular Tuesday, when Sammy spoke, his voice was different.

"WELL," said Sammy, in a sharp, scratchy, theatrical voice — not scary, but new. "Look at all of YOU. Did everybody bring their HOMEWORK? Because I see SOMEBODY who forgot AGAIN."

The kids stared.

Priya, who never forgot her homework, looked alarmed. Maya, who sometimes forgot her homework, looked down.

"I am JUST SAYING," said the sharp voice. "Some of us are not as good as everyone else. Some of us always mess up. Some of us are bad at first grade."

A few of the kids made faces. Jordan started to giggle, because Jordan often giggles when he is uncomfortable, which is one of the things about Jordan that is going to matter very much later in this story but not yet. Then Ms. Calloway leaned in.

"Friends," she said, "meet Grumpy Gus."

The kids leaned in.

"This," said Ms. Calloway, "is Sammy's other voice. Sammy has a kind voice — the Kind Coach. And Sammy has an unkind voice — Grumpy Gus. They live in the same puppet. Just like the two voices live in YOU." She let that sit for a second.

"Everybody," said Ms. Calloway, "has a voice inside their head. The voice talks to you all day long. Sometimes the voice is the Kind Coach — you can do this, it's okay, try again. Sometimes the voice is Grumpy Gus — you are bad at this, you always mess up, why even try. Both voices live in everybody. It is normal. You did not make Grumpy Gus. Grumpy Gus came with the puppet."

Priya raised her hand.

"How do I make Grumpy Gus go away?" she said.

This is a Priya question. This is, in fact, the Priya question. Priya is going to ask a version of this question for the next ten years of her life. Ms. Calloway said, "That is the wrong question, Priya, and it is a very smart wrong question. You do not make Grumpy Gus go away. Grumpy Gus does not go away. What you do is — you notice Grumpy Gus when he shows up. You say hi, Grumpy Gus, I hear you. And then you ask the Kind Coach what she thinks. And then you decide who to listen to." Priya frowned.

"That sounds hard."

"It is hard," said Ms. Calloway. "It is one of the hardest things in the world. We are going to practice it for the rest of the year." Then Sammy did the thing that the kids of Room 12 will remember for the rest of their lives. Sammy switched, mid-sentence, from Grumpy Gus to the Kind Coach.

In the sharp voice: "Maya, you forgot your homework AGAIN, you are TERRIBLE at first grade —"

Then Ms. Calloway moved her hand a little, and Sammy's mouth shape softened, and the voice changed.

"— wait. That was Grumpy Gus. Let me try that again." (Softer, slower, warmer.) "Maya — you forgot your homework. That is okay. Homework is something we are still learning to remember. What can we do tomorrow to help us remember? Maybe a sticker on your folder. Maybe a note in your bag. We can fix this."

Maya, who had been looking down for the entire conversation, looked up.

"I like the second one," she whispered.

"Me too," said Sammy.

When Maya went home that afternoon, she told her grandmother — because Maya lives with her grandmother, like Kezia, although Maya does not like to talk about it as much as Kezia does — Maya told her grandmother that there was a puppet at school with two voices. "One of the voices is mean," said Maya. "And one is nice."

Her grandmother nodded.

"That is how it works inside your head too, baby," her grandmother said. "Both voices live there. You get to pick which one you listen to." Maya thought about this for a long time. She thought about it while she was eating her dinner.

She thought about it while she was brushing her teeth. She thought about it while she was lying in bed.

Then, very quietly, she practiced.

"You are okay, Maya," she whispered to herself, in the Kind Coach voice she had heard at school. "You are okay."

She did not know it, but that was the first time she had ever spoken kindly to herself.

It would not be the last.

CHAPTER FIVE

Oops vs. I Am Bad

Kenji is not in Room 12.

Kenji is in the other first-grade class, down the hall, with Jaylen and his block tower. We mention him here because something happened to Kenji on the playground on a Wednesday in October that the kids in Room 12 saw, and they brought what they saw back into the classroom. What happened was this. Kenji told a secret that his best friend Elijah had told him not to tell. The secret was not a big one — it was that Elijah was getting a puppy on Saturday. Kenji had been so excited that he had told three other kids before he remembered that Elijah had said do not tell anyone.

When Elijah found out, on the slide, Elijah did not yell. Elijah just turned away from Kenji and went to play with somebody else.

Kenji stood by himself on the slide for almost five minutes. Then he came inside, and he sat down on the carpet of his own classroom, and he started to cry, and the thing he said over and over — loud enough that the kids in Room 12 heard it through the wall — was: I am a TERRIBLE person. I ruin everything. I am the WORST friend. The kids in Room 12 were quiet. Even Jordan was quiet.

Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box.

"Friends," said Sammy, "I want to tell you about a thing that just happened next door. A friend over there did a thing that

was not okay. He told a secret he should not have told. That is true. He needs to apologize. That is true. But here is what is also true: he just said something about himself that is not true. He said I am a terrible person. That is the part I want to talk about."

Sammy let the room get quiet.

"There are two ways to be sorry," said Sammy. "There is Oops. And there is I Am Bad. They feel almost the same. But they are not the same. They are very, very different. And one of them helps you, and the other one hurts you."

Ms. Calloway held up two pieces of paper.

On one piece, in big letters, it said: OOPS.

On the other, in big letters, it said: I AM BAD.

"Oops," said Sammy, "is when you say: I did a thing that was not okay. I am sorry. I am going to make it right. Oops is about WHAT YOU DID. Oops makes you stronger. Oops helps you fix the thing."

"I Am Bad," said Sammy, "is when you say: I am a terrible person. I always mess up. I ruin everything. I Am Bad is about WHO YOU ARE. I Am Bad does not help you fix anything. I Am Bad just makes you feel small. I Am Bad makes it harder to do the next right thing." Sammy paused.

"Friends, here is the secret. Everybody does Oopses. Everybody. Adults do them. Children do them. Teachers do them. Sammy does them — Sammy is a puppet and Sammy still does them. Oopses are part of being a person. Oopses are how we learn. An Oops is not who you are. An Oops is a thing you did."

"When you do an Oops," said Sammy, "you say Oops. You make it right. And then — and this is important — you let it go. You do NOT carry the Oops around like it is who you are."

Marcus, who was thinking very hard about the block tower from a few weeks ago, raised his hand.

"What if it was a big Oops?" Marcus said. "Like a really, really big one?"

Ms. Calloway came over. She crouched down next to Marcus.

"Even a big Oops, Marcus, is still an Oops. Even a big Oops is still a thing you DID, not who you ARE. The bigger the Oops, the more important it is to remember the difference. Because if you tell yourself a big Oops means you are bad — you have a much harder time making the Oops right."

Marcus nodded. He did not say anything else. But Ms. Calloway saw, on her way back to the front of the room, that Marcus was sitting up a little taller than he had been. Whatever the weight was that he had been carrying — Ms. Calloway did not know what it was, and she would not have asked — that weight was a little smaller now.

This is the moment the Mistake Wall first started.

Ms. Calloway taped a long sheet of butcher paper to the back wall of Room 12. At the top, she wrote: THE MISTAKE WALL — Oopses, Big and Small.

"For the rest of the year," she said, "any time somebody in Room 12 has an Oops they want to put on the wall — they can. Anonymously. We will not put names. We will not point fingers. We will just say: here is an Oops that happened. And then we will write next to it what we DID to make it right. So we can see, all year, that Oopses happen, and Oopses get fixed, and Oopses do not make anybody bad."

The first Oops on the Mistake Wall was written by Ms. Calloway herself.

It said: I forgot to send home the field-trip permission slip on Monday. I sent it home on Tuesday. I told the parents I was

sorry it was late. I am going to put a reminder in my planner so I do not forget next time. Ms. Calloway turned around and looked at the kids.

"That was my Oops this week," she said. "Now you know one of mine. Whose Oops is next?"

Marcus put his hand up.

He did not say what his Oops was out loud. But he came up to the wall, very quietly, and he wrote — in his slow, careful, six-year-old handwriting:

I knocked over a friend's block tower in September. I said sorry. We rebuilt it. I walk slower past blocks now.

He stepped back.

Ms. Calloway read it once. She did not say anything. She just nodded. That was the first Oops on the wall.

It would not be the last.

CHAPTER SIX

I Can Change and Grow

By the end of October, Maya was a little louder.

Not a lot louder. Not loud, exactly. But louder than she had been on the first day of school, when she could not answer Sammy's question about what made her special, and Ms. Calloway had said Sammy already knows you are here.

Maya had a few favorite things now. She had a favorite spot on the carpet (the corner near the bookshelf). She had a favorite color of crayon (the dark blue, the kind that looks almost like the night). She had a favorite friend at lunch (Sofia, because Sofia did not talk too much during eating, which Maya appreciated).

She also had a small idea, in the back of her head, that had not been there in September.

The idea was: I can be different from how I started.

Maya had not put the idea into words yet. She did not have all the words. But the idea was there, growing slowly, the way the bean plants in the science corner of Room 12 were growing slowly, even though it looked, day to day, like nothing was happening to them.

On the last Friday of October, Ms. Calloway put a chart on the easel that the kids had not seen before.

At the top of the chart, it said: I AM A WORK IN PROGRESS.

"Friends," said Ms. Calloway, "I want to tell you about something today. It is one of the most important things I will

tell you this year. So listen."

She paused. The class leaned in.

"You are not finished," said Ms. Calloway. "None of you. You are not done becoming who you are. You are in the middle of becoming who you are. Every day, you become a little bit more of who you are going to be. You are a work in progress."

She pointed at the chart.

"This means that if you were quiet in September — you might not be quiet in March. This means that if you were scared of math in September — you might love math by May. This means that if you knocked over a block tower in September — by next year, you might be the kid who builds block towers."

Marcus grinned.

"This means," said Ms. Calloway, "that nobody — nobody in this room, nobody in this school, nobody in this town, nobody in this country, nobody in this whole world — gets to tell you who you ARE going to be. They can tell you who you ARE RIGHT NOW. Right now is a thing about you. But who you are RIGHT NOW is not who you are FOREVER. Because — say it with me, friends — you are a work in progress."

The class said, in ten small voices, I am a work in progress. "Again," said Ms. Calloway.

I am a work in progress.

"One more time."

I AM A WORK IN PROGRESS.

Then Ms. Calloway took out a piece of paper and gave one to each child, and on the paper there were two columns. The left column said Me in September. The right column said Me Now.

"Draw a picture of yourself in September," she said. "And then draw a picture of yourself today. Do not worry about

making them perfect. Just show me how it feels."

Maya looked at her piece of paper.

She drew a picture in the September column of a small girl with a sad mouth, sitting on a carpet, with her eyes looking down.

Then she looked at the Right Now column for a long time.

She drew a picture of a small girl, still small, still sitting on a carpet — but this time with her eyes looking up. Looking at something. Looking at — Maya thought about it, and then she added one more thing — looking at a small green frog puppet sitting on a shelf.

She turned the paper in to Ms. Calloway during quiet work time. Ms. Calloway looked at the paper for a long moment.

She did not say anything. She just put her hand, very gently, on the top of Maya's head.

Maya did not know it, but Ms. Calloway kept that picture in her file all year, and at the end of the year, she gave it back to Maya in an envelope, with one line written on the back.

The line said: Maya. You looked up. — Ms. C.

That picture is going to come back later, in a chapter you have not read yet.

For now, just remember: Maya looked up.

That is a thing she did. That is a thing she became. She was not always going to be a girl who looked up. In September, she had not been one. But by the end of October, she was on her way.

That is what it means to be a work in progress.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unit 1 Wrap-Up

At the end of October, Ms. Calloway gave each kid in Room 12 a small notebook.

The notebooks were not fancy. They had brown paper covers and lined paper inside. Ms. Calloway had bought them at the store down the street from her house, ten of them in a stack, because she always bought ten notebooks at the end of October, and she had been doing this for fourteen years.

"These," she said, "are your journals."

The kids looked at the notebooks.

"A journal," said Ms. Calloway, "is a place where you can put your private thoughts. Nobody else reads it. I do not read it. Your parents do not read it. Your friends do not read it. Sammy does not read it. It is just for you. Sometimes you will draw in it. Sometimes you will write in it. Sometimes you will sit and look at it without doing anything. That is all okay."

She gave them ten minutes that first day to decorate the covers. Marcus drew a picture of himself with Aaliyah. Amara wrote her name across the top in big careful letters — Amara, three syllables, the way her grandmother said it. Sofia drew a small stomach with a calm face inside it. Priya drew nothing on the cover because she wanted to think about it first. Darius colored the entire cover red. Jordan drew a frog. Maya drew, very carefully, a small girl looking up. Theo drew a star. Mia

drew her family. Kezia drew her grandmother holding her hand.

When they were done decorating, Ms. Calloway said, "Today is the last day of Unit One. We have been together for eight weeks. We have learned five big things in those eight weeks. Can anybody name one?" Marcus's hand shot up.

"Who am I!" he said. "We learned who we are!"

"Yes," said Ms. Calloway. "Anybody else?"

"Feelings are friends," said Sofia, who had been thinking about her stomach all morning.

"Yes."

"Oops and Fix It and Try Again," said Mia.

"Yes."

"Sammy has two voices," said Maya, very softly.

"YES," said Ms. Calloway. "Beautiful. Beautiful, Maya. And the last one?"

Priya raised her hand.

"I am a work in progress," she said. "Even though I do not really feel like one."

The class laughed a little. Priya is a child who already has very high standards for herself. She is going to have to learn, slowly, across many years, to extend to her own work-in-progress self the patience she extends to other people's work-in-progress selves. She is in the very beginning of that learning. She does not know it yet.

"Yes, Priya," said Ms. Calloway. "Even when you do not feel like one — you are. We all are."

Then Ms. Calloway said: "In your journal today, I want you to write or draw one thing you have learned about yourself since September. Just one thing. And then — at the very bottom of the page — write the date. So that some day, when

you read this journal back, you know when you were the person who learned this thing."

The kids wrote. Some of them wrote one word. Some of them drew. Maya wrote the words I look up in her own handwriting, very carefully, and then she wrote October. And then she closed the journal and put it in her cubby.

This is the end of Part One.

Part One was about knowing who you are. Part Two — which starts after Halloween, in November — is about being kind to yourself when you are still figuring out who you are.

That is harder than Part One. We will get there together.

For now: it is the last day of October. The ten kids in Room 12 have ten brown journals in their cubbies. Sammy is in his box. Ms. Calloway is at her desk, looking out the window at the gray fall sky, thinking, the way she thinks at the end of every Unit One: we got through. We got to know each other. We are a class now.

This is what a class is. A class is what happens when ten different people, who did not choose each other, decide to learn together, anyway. Room 12 is a class now.

PART TWO



Self-Compassion & Self-Forgiveness

*How do I be kind to myself, even when I
mess up?*

November. December. The middle of the year.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Is Forgiveness, Really?

Sofia had a question.

The question had been bothering her since the field trip to the apple orchard the week before, when she had — by accident — bumped into a kindergartener who was carrying apples, and the kindergartener's apples had gone everywhere, and the kindergartener had cried, and Sofia had said sorry, and the kindergarten teacher had said it's okay, accidents happen, and they had all picked up the apples together.

That was a week ago. The kindergartener had forgotten about it by the time they got back on the bus. The kindergarten teacher had forgotten about it by Friday.

Sofia had not forgotten about it.

Every night, for a week, when Sofia was trying to fall asleep, she thought about the apples rolling on the ground and the kindergartener crying. She thought about how she had bumped a smaller kid. She thought about how she should have been more careful. She thought about how she was supposed to be a first-grader and she had made a kindergartener cry, and that was, somehow, worse than if a kindergartener had made her cry.

So when Ms. Calloway said, "Today we are going to start Unit Two," Sofia raised her hand before Ms. Calloway had finished the sentence. "Yes, Sofia?"

"How do I stop feeling bad about something I already said sorry for?" The class went quiet.

Ms. Calloway smiled a small, tender smile. She came over and sat down on the carpet, the way she did when something important was about to happen.

"Sofia," she said, "what a wonderful question to start Unit Two with. That is exactly the question Unit Two is about. Friends — Sofia just asked the big question of the next four weeks."

She took Sammy out of the box.

"Friends," said Sammy, "today I want to tell you about a word. The word is forgiveness. A lot of people use it wrong. So we are going to use it right."

Sammy looked at the class.

"Forgiveness is not forgetting. You do not have to forget what happened. Sofia, you do not have to forget about the apples. Forgetting is a different word. We are not asking you to forget."

"Forgiveness is not saying it was okay. You bumped a kindergartener. That happened. That was not okay. Saying I forgive myself does NOT mean what I did was okay. It means something different."

"Forgiveness is not making the feelings disappear. The feelings might still come. They might still come tonight. They might still come next week. Forgiveness does not erase the feelings."

Sammy paused.

"So what IS forgiveness?"

The class waited.

"Forgiveness," said Sammy, "is choosing to put down the heavy part. The mistake is over. The sorry has been said. The thing has been fixed. The heavy part is the part where you

keep punishing yourself for something you have already taken care of. That is the part you can put down. Forgiveness is the choice to stop carrying the heavy part — because the heavy part is not helping anybody anymore."

Ms. Calloway nodded.

"Sofia," she said, "you already did the work. You said sorry. You helped pick up the apples. The kindergartener is fine. The kindergarten teacher said it was an accident. You did everything you were supposed to do."

"So why do I still feel bad?" Sofia said.

"Because feeling bad," said Ms. Calloway, "is not the same as doing the work. Feeling bad is something extra that you have been carrying. You can put it down. The kindergartener is not carrying it. The teacher is not carrying it. Nobody is asking you to carry it anymore. You are carrying it all by yourself, for nothing."

Sofia thought about this.

"How do I put it down?"

"You start," said Ms. Calloway, "by noticing you are carrying it. Which you just did. That is the first step. The next step is to say, out loud or in your head: I did the work. I am allowed to put this down now." Sofia said it. Out loud. In a small voice.

I did the work. I am allowed to put this down now.

"How does that feel?" said Ms. Calloway.

Sofia thought.

"A little better," she said. "Not all the way better. A little better." "That is exactly right," said Ms. Calloway. "It does not all go at once. It goes a little. Then more. Then more. The trick is to keep saying the sentence, until one day the heavy part is not heavy anymore." Sofia nodded.

She wrote the sentence in her journal that afternoon. She wrote it very carefully, in her best first-grade handwriting:

I did the work. I am allowed to put this down now.

Then she drew a picture next to it, of a small girl putting down a backpack full of apples.

That is what forgiveness looks like, in first grade. It is putting down a backpack full of apples that you have already picked up.

CHAPTER NINE

Carrying Too Much

This is the chapter where Ms. Calloway shows the kids the backpack. The backpack is a regular backpack — blue, with a small tear on one of the straps, because Ms. Calloway bought it at a yard sale fourteen years ago and has been using it for this lesson ever since.

"Friends," she said, "I have a backpack here. Today I am going to put things into it, while you watch."

She put the backpack on her shoulders. Empty.

"Right now," she said, "the backpack is empty. I can walk around. I can move my arms. I can do anything I want."

She walked around the front of the room. The kids watched.

"Now," she said, "I am going to put something in the backpack." She picked up a small heavy stone from her desk — she had a basket of them — and dropped it into the backpack.

"This stone," she said, "is something that happened to me. Maybe somebody said something unkind to me. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I am worried about something. It does not matter what it is. It is something. And I have put it in the backpack."

She walked around again. The backpack was barely heavier.

"I can still walk. I can still do most things. One stone is not a problem."

Then she put another stone in.

"Now I have two stones. Still okay."

She put another in. And another. And another. With each stone, the backpack got heavier, and Ms. Calloway moved a little slower, and her shoulders began to bend forward, just a little.

By the time she had eight stones in the backpack, she was hunched over. Her shoulders were almost touching her chest. She was walking like an old, old person.

The kids stared.

"Friends," she said, in a voice that was a little wheezy from being hunched over, "what do you think happens if I just keep walking around like this all day? All week? All year?"

"Your back would hurt," said Marcus.

"You would be tired," said Priya.

"You would not want to play," said Mia.

"You would be sad," said Maya, very quietly.

"All of those," said Ms. Calloway. "Yes. All of those things." She took the backpack off. She set it down. She stretched, and her shoulders went back to normal, and she smiled, and the kids smiled because she was Ms. Calloway again and not a hunched-over old person. "Here is what Unit Two is about," she said. "Every one of us, every single day, has the chance to put stones in our backpack. The stones are the heavy feelings we carry around after something happens. I should not have said that. I should not have done that. I made a mistake yesterday and I am still thinking about it. My friend was mad at me last week and even though we made up, I am still carrying it."

"Some stones," she said, "have to go in for a little while. That is normal. If you make a mistake, you carry a little bit of it for a little while — because that helps you fix it and remember not to do it again. Stones are not bad."

"But — and this is the important part — every stone has to come out eventually. Because if you do not take the stones out, you walk around hunched over for the rest of your life. And that does not help you. And it does not help the person you might have hurt. And it does not help anybody."

She picked up the backpack again.

"This week," she said, "I want you to think about your stones. What is in your backpack? What stones have you been carrying that you could put down? What stones are old stones, that you do not need to carry anymore?"

The kids in Room 12 went quiet.

Sofia was thinking about the apples.

Marcus was thinking about Aaliyah, and a thing he had said to her over the weekend that he had not yet told anyone about.

Maya was thinking about why she didn't live with her mom. (Maya thinks about this often. Maya has not figured out, yet, that this is a stone she did not put in her own backpack — that this stone was given to her, and that she has been carrying somebody else's stone all this time. She will figure that out later. Not in this book. Maybe in the next book. We will see.)

Priya was thinking about a spelling test. She had gotten three words wrong. The test was from two weeks ago.

The kids all had stones. Every one of them. Even Jordan, who looked like nothing ever bothered him, had a stone — though we will not find out what Jordan's stone is for a long time, because Jordan is very good at hiding stones, and one of the things he is going to learn this year, slowly, is that hiding stones is not the same as not having them.

Ms. Calloway put the backpack down at the front of the room. "That is enough thinking for today," she said. "For now —

just notice. Just notice what is in your backpack. We will figure out what to do with the stones later."

Then she gave each child, very ceremoniously, a small smooth stone from her basket. The stones were the same color and the same shape — gray-blue, smooth, the size of a small egg.

"Keep this stone," she said. "Put it in your desk. We are going to use it later. It is going to mean something."

The kids put the stones in their desks.

Theo, who is a careful and observant child, was the one who said, on the way out for recess: "I think the stones might be important." He was right.

CHAPTER TEN

Saying Sorry and Meaning It

Marcus's stone was Aaliyah.

Specifically, Marcus's stone was the Saturday before Thanksgiving, when Aaliyah had — as three-year-olds will do — knocked over the LEGO castle Marcus had been building for two weeks. Marcus had been working on the towers all morning. Aaliyah had been told, three times, to stay away from the table. Aaliyah had not stayed away from the table. Aaliyah had stepped on a corner of it, and the castle had collapsed, and Marcus had — very fast, before his brain put on its shoes — picked up a single LEGO and thrown it at his sister.

It did not hit her hard. It hit her arm. She started crying. Marcus's mom had come into the room and seen the LEGO on the floor and Aaliyah crying and Marcus standing over the wreckage of the castle, and Marcus's mom had said, in a voice that was not yelling but was very, very serious, Marcus. We do not throw things at people. Ever. Marcus had said sorry. Right away. He had said it three or four times, fast, the way kids say sorry when they want the moment to be over. He had hugged Aaliyah. Aaliyah had stopped crying within two minutes, because three-year-olds do not hold on to things very long.

But here, six days later, Marcus was sitting on the carpet of Room 12, and he was carrying the LEGO around in his backpack.

He had not told anyone. He had not put it on the Mistake Wall. He had not written it in his journal. He had said sorry to Aaliyah and he had been forgiven by Aaliyah within ten seconds, and the whole household had moved on by dinnertime — but Marcus, by himself, had been thinking about that LEGO for six straight days.

On Tuesday morning, Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box.

"Friends," said Sammy, "today we are going to talk about saying sorry. About what makes a sorry a REAL sorry. And what makes a sorry not enough."

Sammy held up a chart.

A REAL SORRY HAS THREE PARTS 1. I NAME WHAT I DID.

2. I NAME HOW IT HURT.

3. I NAME WHAT WILL CHANGE.

"A real sorry," said Sammy, "is more than just the word sorry. The word is part of it. But the word is not all of it."

"First, you NAME WHAT YOU DID. You say it out loud. You do not say I'm sorry if you were upset. You say I am sorry that I — and then you say the thing. Because if you do not name it, the person you hurt cannot tell whether you understood what you did."

"Second, you NAME HOW IT HURT. You say that was unkind. That must have made you sad. That was scary. Because if you do not name how it hurt, the person you hurt cannot tell whether you understand them."

"Third — and this one is the most important — you NAME WHAT WILL CHANGE. You say next time, I will — and then you say the thing you will do differently. Because a sorry without a next time is just words. A sorry without a next time might be the same sorry you have to say again next week,

about the same thing. A sorry with a next time is a sorry that DOES something."

Marcus stared at the chart.

He was running, in his head, through the apology to Aaliyah. He had said I'm sorry about four times very fast. He had not named what he had done — he had not said I threw a LEGO at you and that was wrong. He had not named how it hurt — he had not said it hurt your arm and it scared you. He had not named what would change — he had not said next time, when something I built breaks, I am going to take a breath instead of throwing.

He had said sorry. But the sorry was missing two and a half of its three parts.

Marcus stayed quiet during Sammy's lesson. He stayed quiet during quiet work time. At recess he did not run around the way he usually did. He sat on the bench near the basketball hoop and thought.

When he got home that afternoon, he asked his mom if he could talk to Aaliyah for a minute. His mom said yes.

Aaliyah was on the living room floor with her stuffed elephant. Marcus sat down on the floor next to her. He was nervous. He had never done what he was about to do before.

"Aaliyah," he said.

She looked at him.

"I want to say sorry. For the LEGO. The one I threw."

Aaliyah, who had not thought about the LEGO in five and a half days, looked confused.

"It is okay," she said, because she had heard adults say it is okay and she had filed it as the thing to say when somebody says sorry. "Wait," said Marcus. "Let me say all of it. I threw a LEGO at you. That was wrong. It hit your arm and you cried and it must have hurt and it was probably scary. Next time the

thing I am building falls down, I am going to take a breath, instead of throwing. I am really sorry."

Aaliyah considered this.

"Okay," she said. And then, because Aaliyah is three and emotional events do not last long for her: "Can you play elephants with me?" Marcus played elephants with Aaliyah for forty-five minutes. He came back to school the next morning. Before the bell rang, he walked to the back of the room and added one new line to the Mistake Wall, under his September entry.

It said: I threw a LEGO at my sister Aaliyah in November. I said sorry the wrong way at first. Then I said sorry the right way, and I told her what I would do next time. Next time something falls down, I will take a breath.

He stepped back from the wall.

Ms. Calloway, who was over by her desk pretending to be busy with attendance — because she had seen him go to the wall and she did not want to make a big deal of it — looked up just for a moment, and caught his eye, and gave him a small private nod.

That afternoon, when Marcus got home, he reached into his backpack to look for his journal — and he realized, with a small surprised feeling in his chest, that the LEGO was not in his backpack anymore.

He had not put it down on purpose. He had not thought about putting it down.

It had just — fallen out, somewhere between the Mistake Wall and the bus, when he wasn't looking.

That is what a real sorry does. It empties the backpack. Not because the thing didn't happen — because you finally did the whole sorry, and the whole sorry is what the heavy part was for.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Being Kind to Myself

In December, the class did the Friend Test for the first time. The Friend Test is one of the most important tools the kids of Room 12 will learn this year. It will follow them, in different forms, all the way through Book Five, when they are seventeen and eighteen and about to leave home, and they will still be doing it then.

Here is the Friend Test:

If your best friend said about themselves the same thing you are saying about yourself right now — would you say what you are saying to them? Or would you say something different?

Ms. Calloway introduced it on a Wednesday morning. She put Sammy on her hand and Sammy held up a small dry-erase board with two lines on it.

THE FRIEND TEST

What I say to MYSELF: ____ What I would say to my BEST FRIEND in the same situation: ____ "Friends," said Sammy. "Most of you talk to yourselves all day long. Inside your own head. And most of you are MEAN to yourselves in a way you would NEVER be mean to a friend. You do not even notice you are doing it, because it has been going on for so long that the unkind voice just sounds like thinking. But it is not thinking. It is Grumpy Gus, and Grumpy Gus has been quietly running the show."

The kids leaned in. They had heard about Grumpy Gus in October. They had not put it together with the inside voice yet.

"Today," said Sammy, "we are going to do an experiment. I am going to give you a piece of paper. On the left side, I want you to write something unkind that you have said to yourself recently. Something inside-your-head unkind. Like I am stupid. Or I am bad at this. Or Nobody likes me. Or whatever Grumpy Gus has been saying."

The kids took their papers.

"Then," said Sammy, "on the right side, I want you to imagine that your best friend just said that thing about THEMSELVES. And I want you to write what YOU would say to YOUR best friend in that moment. The exact words."

Priya, who is a careful child, started writing immediately.

In the left column, Priya wrote: I am bad at spelling.

In the right column, Priya thought for a long time. Then she wrote, slowly: You got most of them right. You are still learning. Three wrong is not bad at all. Spelling takes practice.

Priya stared at her paper.

She had never, ever, in her whole six and a half years, said anything like the right-column sentence to herself. She had said it to other kids — many times. She had said it to her little brother. She had said it to her cousin. She had even said it, once, to a girl in kindergarten who had been crying because she could not spell her own last name.

But she had never said it to herself.

Priya put her hand up.

"Yes, Priya?"

"Why don't I talk to myself the way I talk to my friends?"

The room got quiet.

Ms. Calloway came over and sat down on the carpet next to Priya. "That, Priya," she said, "is one of the most important questions in this whole book — I mean, in this whole year. Most adults do not even know to ask it. You just asked it when you are six years old. Wow."

Priya did not smile, exactly. But she sat up a little.

"I do not know the full answer," said Ms. Calloway. "Nobody knows the full answer. Some of it is that we forget that we are also a person. We treat ourselves like we are not on the team. We treat our friends like they ARE on the team."

"What we are going to practice in this room, all year, is putting yourself BACK on the team. You are on your team. You have been on your team this whole time. You forgot. We are going to remember together." Priya thought about that.

"Okay," she said.

Then she did something interesting. She picked up her paper, very carefully, and she crossed out the left column — the I am bad at spelling line.

In its place, she wrote: I am still learning. Three wrong is not bad at all. Spelling takes practice.

She read it twice.

"Better," she said, to no one in particular.

Then she put the paper in her journal.

Sofia did the Friend Test next to her, and her left column said I am clumsy and I make people cry. (She was still thinking about the apples.) Her right column said You apologized. The kindergartener is fine. Accidents happen.

Sofia read her right column three times.

Maya did the Friend Test, and her left column said Nobody really wants me here. Her right column took her a long time to write. But she wrote, eventually: Everybody in your class

knows your name. Sammy already knows you are here. You belong here.

Ms. Calloway walked the room slowly, reading over shoulders. She did not say anything. She just put her hand, very lightly, on the top of each child's head as she passed.

Some of the things she read that day she would carry with her for the rest of her teaching career.

Maya's right column was one of them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Letting Go — The Practice

Now we come to the stones.

The smooth gray-blue stones that Ms. Calloway had given each child in November and told them to put in their desks. The stones the kids had almost forgotten about — except Theo, who had not forgotten, because Theo never forgets anything, and who had been watching the basket on Ms. Calloway's desk for two weeks waiting for something to happen. The stones were going to be the thing.

On the last Monday before the winter break, Ms. Calloway said: "Everyone, take your stone out of your desk and hold it in your hand." The kids took their stones out. Marcus's stone. Amara's stone. Sofia's. Priya's. Darius's. Jordan's. Maya's. Theo's. Mia's. Kezia's. Ten small smooth stones, in ten small hands.

"Today," she said, "we are going to do a thing. We are going to think of something we are carrying. Something heavy. Something we have been holding on to, maybe for a long time, that we are ready to put down." "You do not have to tell me what it is. You do not have to tell anybody. The stone is just for you and the thing. You are going to hold the stone and you are going to think about the thing. You are going to feel how heavy the thing is, in your hand, as the stone. And then — when you are ready — we are going to put the stones in a basket

together. And we are going to leave the basket on the windowsill. And we are going to walk away."

The kids looked at their stones.

Some of them already knew what their stone was. Marcus's stone was a thing from a long time ago that he had not yet told anyone, that we will not tell you about either, because Marcus has not decided to tell. Sofia's stone was the apples — but it was also other apples, all the small accidents that had felt big to her. Priya's stone was a worry that she was not going to be smart enough. Maya's stone was a question about her mom.

Some of them had to think for a few minutes. Jordan held his stone in his hand and stared at it. He has trouble with this lesson. Jordan does not like to look directly at things that hurt. Jordan likes to make jokes about things that hurt. So Jordan's stone was a little heavier than the others, because Jordan was also having to figure out, for the first time, what was inside it.

Then Ms. Calloway said: "When you are ready, come up. One at a time. Put your stone in the basket. You do not have to say anything. You just put it in."

Marcus went first.

He walked up. He looked at the basket. He put his stone in.

He walked back to his seat.

Sofia went next. Then Priya. Then Amara. Then Theo. Then Darius. Then Kezia. Then Mia.

Maya went second-to-last, very slowly. When she put her stone in, she stood there for a moment. She did not look at the basket. She looked out the window. Then she walked back to her seat.

Jordan was last. He stood up. He walked to the basket. He hesitated. Then — and Ms. Calloway noticed this, and remembered it, and never told anyone — Jordan whispered something to the stone before he put it in. Nobody heard what

he said. Ms. Calloway did not ask. But Jordan put the stone in the basket, and then he walked back to his seat, and his face was different than it had been five minutes ago. Just a little. "Friends," said Ms. Calloway, "the basket is going to stay on the windowsill. The stones are not gone. The things you put down are not gone either. But they are out of your hand. They are not in your backpack. They are out there, in the basket, where you can see them, and where you can come back to them if you need to — but where you do not have to carry them every single day."

She paused.

"This is called letting go. It does not mean the thing did not happen. It does not mean you forget. It means you are choosing — for today — to not carry it."

The kids sat with that.

"And — friends — sometimes the heavy thing comes back. You think you put it down and then in February it shows up again. That is normal. That is not failure. When it comes back, you do this again. You hold it. You feel it. You put it down. As many times as you need to." She looked at the basket on the windowsill.

"This is the practice. This is the whole practice. You will do it for the rest of your life. Putting things down. Picking them up. Putting them down again."

She did not say the next thing out loud, but she thought it: some of you will be doing this when you are forty. Some of you, when you are seventy. The practice is the practice. There is no graduating from it. Then she said: "Okay. The basket stays. Let's read a book."

She read them a book about a bear who was sad, and then happy, and then sad again, and then a friend showed up, and they were sad and happy together. The kids listened. The

basket sat on the windowsill behind her, ten small stones in it, glinting in the winter afternoon light. That night, Maya's grandmother asked her how school was.

"Good," said Maya.

"What did you learn?"

Maya thought about it.

"I learned," said Maya, very slowly, "that I do not have to carry everything all the time."

Her grandmother put her tea down.

"Baby," she said, "I learned that when I was fifty."

Maya did not understand, exactly, why her grandmother got a little teary. But she leaned in and let her grandmother hug her for a long time, and that night Maya slept the deepest sleep she had slept since she came to live with her grandmother in the spring.

The basket of stones is going to stay on the windowsill until June. Some of the kids will come up and look at it. None of them will take their stone back. But sometimes a kid will walk past the windowsill on the way out to recess and pause for a second and look at the basket, and then keep walking.

That is the practice. That is what the practice looks like.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When It's Hard to Forgive Yourself

This is a hard chapter.

Some chapters are easier than others. This one is hard. The teacher in Room 12 knows it is hard. The puppet knows it is hard. The kids in Room 12 will, by the end of the lesson, know it is hard. I know it is hard. You — whoever is reading this — should know it is hard, and you should slow down a little, and read carefully.

Sometimes a heavy thing comes back.

You put it down in the basket on the windowsill. You walk away. You feel a little lighter. For a day, or a week, or a month, it is gone. And then — for no reason you can name — it comes back. You wake up in the middle of the night and there it is, sitting in your backpack again. You did not put it back in. Nobody else put it in. But it is there. This happens to grown-ups. It happens to children. It happened to almost every kid in Room 12 at some point in January, when the holiday break was over and everybody was a little sad and a little tired and the basket on the windowsill seemed very far away.

It happened, particularly, to Marcus.

Marcus had been thinking, in the days right after the winter break, about a thing that he had not told anybody. Not his

mom. Not his dad. Not Sammy. Not the Mistake Wall. Not his journal.

The thing was something Marcus had said to Aaliyah — not in November, when he threw the LEGO; that one he had repaired. A different thing. A worse thing. He had said it on the day before kindergarten started for Aaliyah, when Aaliyah had been nervous about going to school, and Marcus, who was annoyed about something else entirely, had said:

Mom and Dad love me more anyway. They are probably glad you are going to be gone all day.

Aaliyah had been three years old. She had not really understood the words. But she had understood the tone. She had cried for a long time. Their mother had been very upset with Marcus. Marcus had said sorry. The household had moved on.

But Marcus had been carrying that sentence around for almost four months.

When the class did the Letting Go lesson in December, Marcus's stone — the one he had put in the basket — was that sentence. The sentence about how their parents loved him more. The sentence he had said to a three-year-old who looked up to him.

Marcus had put the stone in the basket. He had felt lighter for a few days.

Then, on a Monday morning in January, sitting at the breakfast table, Marcus had heard Aaliyah laughing at something on the TV, and he had felt — out of nowhere — the heavy thing come back. He had thought: what if she remembers what I said? What if she remembers it forever? What if I told her something that is going to make her feel small for the rest of her life?

And the thought had not left him all morning. It was still in his backpack when he sat down on the carpet of Room 12 with the other nine kids, and Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box, and a person Marcus had not seen before came in and sat down quietly in the back of the room. The person was Mr. Tate. Mr. Tate was the school counselor. Mr. Tate did not say anything. He just sat in the back. The kids knew him a little — they had seen him in the hallway, and he had visited the classroom one time in October to say hi. They did not yet know why he was here today. "Friends," said Sammy. "Today we are going to talk about when the heavy thing comes back."

The kids leaned in.

"Sometimes," said Sammy, "you do everything right. You say sorry. You name what you did. You name how it hurt. You name what will change. You put the stone in the basket. You walk away. And then — three weeks later, or three months later — the heavy thing shows up AGAIN. Just sitting there. In your backpack. Waiting."

"When that happens," said Sammy, "you do not have to be afraid. You have not failed. You did not do the practice wrong. The heavy thing is just visiting again. Sometimes heavy things do that. Sometimes they need to be put down more than once."

Sammy paused.

"But sometimes," said Sammy, "the heavy thing keeps coming back. And keeps coming back. And it feels like you cannot put it down by yourself anymore. It is too big. It is too tired. You have tried, and it has not stayed put."

"When that happens — and friends, listen to me right now — you do not carry it alone. You tell a trusted adult. You tell a grown-up who is on your team."

Sammy held up a piece of paper. On the paper, in a circle, was written: MY SUPPORT WEB.

"This," said Sammy, "is something we are going to make today. A Support Web. The Support Web is the list of trusted grown-ups in your life. The people you can go to when a heavy thing is too big to carry alone."

"Maybe one of them is your mom. Maybe one of them is your dad. Maybe one of them is your grandmother — Maya, Kezia. Maybe one of them is your aunt. Maybe one of them is Ms. Calloway. Maybe one of them is Mr. Tate, who is sitting right here, and who is the school counselor, which means his whole job is to help kids when something is too heavy."

Mr. Tate waved at the class.

"Hi, friends," he said, in a very calm voice. "I am here today to introduce myself and to help. If you ever want to talk to me — about anything — you can. You just tell Ms. Calloway, and we set up a time. That is all you have to do."

"Today," said Ms. Calloway, "I want each of you to fill out a Support Web. Three or four trusted grown-ups. The grown-ups who would help you if something was too heavy. We will keep these in a folder. They are private. I will not show them to anyone. But I want each of you to have one."

The kids filled out their Support Webs.

Most of them put their parents. Most of them put Ms. Calloway. A few of them put Mr. Tate. Several of them put a grandparent. Maya put her grandmother and Ms. Calloway. Kezia put her grandmother and her aunt and Ms. Calloway and Mr. Tate.

Marcus filled out his Support Web slowly. He put: Mom. Dad. Ms. Calloway. Mr. Tate.

Then he sat for a long time. Then he raised his hand.

"Ms. Calloway?"

She came over.

"Can I talk to Mr. Tate?" Marcus said, very quietly.

"Yes, sweetheart," said Ms. Calloway. "You can. He is right here." Marcus and Mr. Tate went to a quiet corner of the room. Marcus told Mr. Tate, in halting little sentences, about the thing he had said to Aaliyah four months ago, and about how it had come back even though he had put the stone in the basket, and about how he was scared he had broken something he could not fix.

Mr. Tate listened.

When Marcus was done, Mr. Tate said three things, very slowly and very clearly.

First, he said: Marcus, you are not the only person who has done something like this. Big brothers and big sisters say things they regret to little brothers and little sisters all the time. You are not bad. You are not the worst brother. You are a person who said something unkind and is sorry.

Second, he said: Aaliyah is three. She probably does not remember the exact sentence. What she remembers is that her big brother loves her. The hundreds of times you have been kind to her are much louder, inside her, than that one sentence on a hard day.

Third, he said: But if you want to do something about it — because saying sorry once was a long time ago — you can do another sorry. A bigger one. Tonight. Tell Aaliyah, in your own words, that you love her more than anything. Tell her that you were wrong, on that day, to say what you said. Three-year-olds do not need fancy words. They need true ones.

Marcus nodded.

That night, Marcus went into Aaliyah's room before she fell asleep, and he sat on the floor next to her bed, and he said:

"Aaliyah, I am sorry I was mean to you before you started kindergarten. I love you so much. I love you a lot. Mom and Dad love both of us a lot. Forever. Okay?"

Aaliyah said, "Okay."

She rolled over. She was asleep in two minutes.

Marcus stood in the doorway of her room for a long time. The heavy thing, he could feel, was lighter than it had been all week. It was not gone. The heavy thing might come back. He knew that now. He knew that sometimes the heavy thing came back even when you did everything right.

But he also knew, now, what to do when it came back.

You told a trusted grown-up. You did the work again. You said the new sorry. You let it be lighter for a while.

That was the practice. That was the whole practice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Unit 2 Wrap-Up

At the end of January, Ms. Calloway gave each kid a piece of paper folded in half, with a stamp from the post office in the corner. "Friends," she said, "today you are going to write a letter." The kids looked excited.

"You are going to write a letter to yourself in June. The you that will exist in June, at the end of this school year. You will not see the letter again until then. I am going to seal each one, and I am going to keep them in a folder in my desk, and I am not going to read them. In June — on the very last day of school — I am going to give them back." The kids stared.

"What do I write?" said Priya.

"You can write anything you want," said Ms. Calloway. "But here are three questions to help you. What are you proud of about yourself right now? What are you working on? What do you want to tell future-you?" The kids wrote.

Some of them drew. Some of them wrote three sentences. Some of them wrote one. Maya wrote, in her best handwriting:

Dear June Maya. I am proud of you for looking up. I am working on talking more. I want to tell you that you are doing great. I think you are going to be okay. — November Maya. PS. Be nice to Grandma.

Then she put it in the envelope.

Marcus wrote a very long letter, with several crossed-out parts, in which he told future-Marcus about Aaliyah and the

LEGO and the sentence and Mr. Tate and the basket. At the end he wrote:

By the time you read this, you will know more than I do. So tell me — is it easier now? Did it get easier? — Marcus.

He sealed the envelope.

Priya wrote a list. The list had numbers. The numbers were the things she was proud of and the things she was working on, in order. (Priya is a child who likes lists. She will be a child who likes lists for the rest of her life. This is a feature, not a problem, although she will spend years thinking it is a problem before she figures out it is a feature.) The list ended: 9. I am going to try to be nicer to myself this year. — Priya.

Sofia wrote about her stomach.

Jordan wrote a joke. (He is still figuring out, the rest of the year, what is actually inside him to put in the letter. The joke is what he could manage in January. The book does not blame him for this. The book will come back to Jordan.)

Amara wrote — and this is important — To: Amara. Three syllables, the way Grandma says it. Stay that way. Love, Amara.

Theo wrote a careful, observant letter that was almost as long as Marcus's.

Mia wrote about her family.

Kezia wrote, in two short sentences: I love my grandma. I am going to remember that.

Darius wrote the entire letter in red marker. The whole thing. Then he put it in the envelope and sat back, satisfied.

Ms. Calloway collected the letters, and put them in a folder, and put the folder in the bottom drawer of her desk.

"On the last day of school," she said, "you will read these. You will see who you were. You will see how far you have come."

She did not say the next part out loud, but she thought it: some of you will not recognize yourselves. That will be the gift. That will be the proof. This is the end of Part Two.

Part Two was about being kind to yourself, even when you mess up. Part Three — which starts in February — is about the harder thing: forgiving someone else who hurt you. Not so that you can be friends with them again. Not so that you can pretend it did not happen. But so that you can put the weight down.

We will get there together.

For now: ten brown journals are in ten cubbies. Ten envelopes are in a folder in a drawer. A basket of stones is on the windowsill. The Mistake Wall is half full. Sammy is in the box. Ms. Calloway is at her desk, looking out at the gray January sky, thinking the thing she thinks at the end of every Unit Two: the second one is always the hardest. They got through. They got through.

The kids of Room 12 are halfway home.

PART THREE



Empathy & Forgiving Others

*How do I stop carrying what someone else
did?*

February. March. The middle gets colder before it gets

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Your Hurt Is Real

In February, somebody did something to Priya.

It was not a big somebody. It was not a big something. It was a small thing — the kind of thing that happens in a first-grade classroom every day, in every school, in every town, and that grown-ups usually miss, because grown-ups have stopped being able to see how big small things can be.

What happened was this. During morning meeting, the kids were playing a game where they had to find a partner. Ms. Calloway had said find a partner who has the same color sticker as you, and the kids had run around the carpet, looking for their match. Priya was a red sticker. The other red stickers were Jordan and a kid we have not really talked about yet named Theo.

Jordan got to Theo first. They high-fived.

Priya was left without a partner.

It was not on purpose. Jordan had not been mean to Priya. Jordan had simply seen Theo first and gotten there first, and there had only been three red stickers, and Priya had been the odd one out.

Ms. Calloway saw what had happened immediately. She paired Priya up with herself for the game, which Priya accepted, because what else are you supposed to do when you are six and your teacher says she will be your partner.

But for the rest of the day, Priya was a little quieter than usual. She did her work. She did not cry. She did not complain. She just got a little quieter.

When Ms. Calloway asked her at the end of the day if everything was okay, Priya said, "I am fine."

Ms. Calloway said, "Are you sure?"

Priya said, "It is okay. It was not that big a deal."

That night, when Priya was in bed, she thought about it.

She thought: It was not that big a deal.

She thought: I shouldn't be sad about it. Jordan didn't mean anything. She thought: I am being a baby.

These are exactly the wrong thoughts. They are the thoughts that small girls and small boys are trained to think when something happens that hurts a little but does not seem big enough to count. It was not that big a deal. I shouldn't be sad. I am being a baby.

The next morning, when Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box, Sammy said something that made Priya look up.

"Friends," said Sammy. "We are starting a new unit today. This unit is about other people. About when other people do things that hurt us. And the very first thing I want to say is —"

Sammy paused.

"— your hurt is real. Even if the other person did not mean it. Even if it was not on purpose. Even if it was a small thing. Even if everybody else has already forgotten about it. Your hurt is real. It counts. You are allowed to feel it."

Priya stared at Sammy.

"Some of you," said Sammy, "have been told, your whole short little lives, that you should not be sad about small things. It was not that big a deal. Get over it. It was just a joke. They did not mean it. I want to tell you, today, in this room, that those sentences are wrong."

"You are the one who knows if a thing hurt you. Nobody else. The size of the hurt is not measured by how the other person meant it. The size of the hurt is measured by how it landed inside you. If it landed big, it was big. If it landed small, it was small. Only you know."

"This is going to be a big idea for the rest of the year. So listen: the first step in forgiveness is naming the hurt. You cannot forgive what you have not named. You cannot put down what you do not admit you are carrying. You have to name it FIRST. And to name it, you have to give yourself permission to feel it."

Priya was sitting very still.

After the lesson, when the kids had gone off to do quiet work, Priya walked, very quietly, over to Ms. Calloway's desk.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Yesterday, when Jordan got to Theo first — I was sad. I told you I was fine but I was sad. I did not get a partner. I felt left out." Ms. Calloway put her pen down.

"Priya," she said. "Thank you for telling me. Your sadness about that is real. It is okay to have been sad. Even small things can land big. You are not being a baby for feeling it. You are being a person who is honest about her feelings."

Priya nodded.

"Do you want me to talk to Jordan?"

Priya thought about this for a second.

"No," she said. "I do not think he meant to. I think I just want to tell him I felt left out."

Ms. Calloway looked at her for a long moment.

"That is one of the most grown-up things I have ever heard a first-grader say."

Priya did, that day, at lunch, walk up to Jordan and say: "Jordan, when you got to Theo first yesterday and I did not have a partner, I felt left out. I do not think you did it on purpose. I just wanted to say." Jordan looked surprised. Jordan does not always understand emotional information in real time. He paused for a second and then said, "Oh. I am sorry, Priya. I did not see you. Next time we will find each other first, okay?"

"Okay," said Priya.

She walked back to her seat. She picked up her sandwich. Her chest felt a little lighter than it had felt at breakfast.

This is the beginning of forgiveness. Not forgiving someone in the big-dramatic-movie sense. Just naming the hurt out loud, to the person who caused it, in a clear and not-mean way, with the assumption that they did not mean to hurt you.

This is how grown-ups should also be doing this. Most grown-ups never learn. The lucky few who learn it, learn it from a first-grade teacher who happened to put a frog puppet on her hand on a Tuesday morning in February.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Why Do People Hurt People?

In late February, Darius came in mad.

He had been mad since the bus. He had been mad since before the bus. He had been mad since he woke up. He sat at his desk with his arms crossed and his eyebrows together and he did not say good morning to anybody.

Ms. Calloway, who had been teaching long enough to know that a six-year-old this mad is a six-year-old carrying something, did not ask him about it. She let him sit. She let him be mad.

At circle time, when Sammy came out, the lesson was about why people hurt people.

"Friends," said Sammy, "today we are going to ask one of the hardest questions in the whole world. Are you ready?"

The kids nodded. Most of them. Darius did not move.

"The question is — why do people hurt people? When somebody is mean to you, why are they being mean? Is it because they are bad? Is it because they hate you?"

The kids looked at Sammy.

"Here is the answer," said Sammy. "And it is a hard one to learn. Most of the time, when somebody hurts you, it is NOT because they hate you. It is NOT because they are bad. It is because they are carrying something heavy themselves."

"Remember the backpack? Everybody has a backpack. Everybody has stones. When somebody comes at you with

mean words, or unkind behavior, or a hurt — usually it is because their own backpack is so heavy that they are about to fall over. And when people are about to fall over, sometimes they push other people. Not because the other people did anything. Because they are trying not to fall."

Sammy paused.

"This is called understanding the why. It does not make what they did okay. What they did is still what they did. Naming the why is not the same as saying it is okay. But understanding the why is the second step in forgiveness — after naming your hurt. Because when you understand the why, you stop carrying their heavy thing on top of your heavy thing. They are still responsible for their own backpack. But you stop having to feel like you did something wrong."

Darius's arms were still crossed. But his eyebrows had unfurrowed a little.

Sammy looked, gently, in Darius's direction.

"Sometimes," said Sammy, "you are the one who is mad. Sometimes you come into a room with a heavy backpack and you do not even know why. You just know you want to be left alone. You just know you are mad at the world. That is also okay. That is also human. The thing to know — when YOU are the mad one — is that you are also carrying something. And maybe today is a day to figure out what it is."

Darius did not say anything during the lesson. He did not put his hand up. He did not participate.

But at the end of the day, when the other kids were getting their backpacks, Darius walked very quietly up to Ms. Calloway's desk. "Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes, Darius?"

"My dog died yesterday."

Ms. Calloway sat down in her chair so that she was at Darius's eye level. She did not say oh I am so sorry in a rush. She did not say that is terrible. She did not say anything at first. She just looked at him. "Darius," she said, "I am very sorry. That is a big thing. That is a really big thing."

"His name was Biscuit," said Darius. "He was thirteen."

"That is a long life for a dog. He had a lot of years with you."
"I had him my whole life."

"Yes you did."

Darius's eyes filled with tears.

"I was so mad today," he said. "I did not know why I was mad. I was just mad. I was mad at everybody. I almost yelled at Sofia at lunch and she did not do anything."

"Darius," said Ms. Calloway, "that was your heavy thing. The mad was the heavy thing trying to come out sideways. Now that you know what it is — what it really is — you can tell people. You can say my dog died. You can let them be sad with you. You do not have to be mad alone." "Okay," said Darius. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Can I go now? My mom is waiting."

"Yes. I will see you tomorrow."

Darius left.

The next morning, Darius came in and walked straight up to Sofia. "Sofia," he said. "I was mad yesterday. Not at you. My dog died. I am sorry I was almost mean."

Sofia, who had not actually noticed Darius being almost-mean, because Sofia is six, said, "I am sorry about your dog. Was he a nice dog?" "He was the best dog."

"I am sorry."

They sat down together at the carpet.

This is what understanding the why does. It lets you walk up to somebody you almost hurt and tell them what you were

carrying. It lets the other person sit down with you. It turns I am mad at the world into I am sad about a real thing. And once you know the real thing, the mad part starts to lift, a little.

Darius's dog Biscuit is going to come back later. Biscuit's name is going to be on a small wooden cross in Darius's backyard for the rest of Darius's childhood. Biscuit is going to be the first thing Darius ever loved that died. It is going to matter to him for years.

But the night his dog died, Darius did not know what to do with the heavy thing. And the morning after, he came to school mad. And by the afternoon, somebody in a frog puppet had given him a name for the heavy thing, and a way to tell somebody else about it, and Darius — who is six years old and who has just lost his lifelong friend — is going to remember that for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Forgiving Is Not the Same as Trusting

This chapter is going to be careful. Read it slowly.

There is a kid in this story we have not talked about much. Her name is Kezia, and she lives with her grandmother, which we know because Kezia told everyone on the first day of school. What we have not told you yet is why Kezia lives with her grandmother.

We are not going to tell you in detail. That is Kezia's story, and she will tell it when she is ready, in some later book, or in some private conversation as a grown-up that nobody else will hear. What we will tell you is this: there is a grown-up in Kezia's life who used to be a regular part of her family, and who is not a regular part of her family anymore, because the grown-up did some things that hurt Kezia and her grandmother, and the grown-up has not been allowed in their house for almost two years.

The grown-up keeps wanting to come back.

The grown-up sends cards on birthdays. The grown-up calls sometimes on the phone. The grown-up has said sorry, in many different ways, across two years.

Kezia's grandmother has said no every time.

Kezia, who is six and loves both her grandmother and the grown-up, has been confused about this for a long time. Her

grandmother has tried to explain, in age-appropriate words: I forgive them. But that does not mean they can come back. Forgiveness and trust are not the same. Kezia has not understood. She has understood the words, but not the shape of the words.

Today, in February, the lesson in Room 12 is going to give Kezia the shape of the words.

Mr. Tate is in the back of the room again. He has been in the back of the room for two lessons now. The kids know, by this point, that when Mr. Tate is in the back of the room, the lesson is going to be a big one. "Friends," said Sammy. "Today we are going to talk about two words that get used together, but that are NOT the same. Forgiveness. And trust."

Sammy held up the anchor chart.

FORGIVENESS TRUST

Inside you Between people For YOUR peace For SAFETY
You can give it alone The other person has to earn it A gift you
give yourself Never owed "Forgiveness," said Sammy, "is
INSIDE you. It is something you do for your own peace. You do
not need the other person's permission. You do not need them
to ask for it. You can just decide, in your own heart, to put the
weight down."

"Trust," said Sammy, "is BETWEEN people. It is about safety.
About whether you are going to let somebody close again.
Trust is not the same as forgiveness. Trust is earned. Trust
takes time. Trust has to be PROVED, over and over, by
changed behavior."

Sammy paused. Then Sammy said the most important
sentence of the lesson, and Ms. Calloway said it at the same
time, both of them, so that the kids would hear it in two
voices:

You can forgive someone — AND still choose not to be close to them. That is not mean. That is wise.

Kezia was sitting very still on the carpet.

"AND," said Sammy, "here is the part that grown-ups sometimes forget to tell kids. You are NEVER required to forgive someone who is STILL hurting you. If somebody is still being mean to you. If somebody is still doing the thing. Forgiveness is not for that situation. Forgiveness is for AFTER. For when the thing is over. For when you are SAFE. If you are not safe — you do not need to forgive. You need to be safe first. Safe comes first. Always. Always."

Ms. Calloway repeated it: Safe comes first. Always.

Mr. Tate, from the back of the room, nodded once.

Kezia raised her hand.

"Yes, Kezia?"

"Ms. Calloway? My grandma says we can forgive somebody and still not let them come over. Is that — that?"

"Yes, sweetheart. That is exactly that. Your grandma is doing the wise thing. She is choosing forgiveness for herself — for her own peace — but she is not giving back trust, because trust has to be earned, and the person has not done what it would take to earn it back. Your grandma is keeping you safe AND keeping her own peace. Those are two different jobs."

Kezia thought about this for a long time.

Then she said, very quietly: "I love them. And I do not want them to come over."

The room was quiet.

Ms. Calloway came over. She did not crouch this time. She sat down on the carpet next to Kezia.

"Kezia, my love. You can love somebody. And you can keep them out of your house. Those are not the same. Loving somebody is what is inside YOU. Whether they come over is a

different decision. Your grandma knows what is best for your safety. Loving them does not mean you have to be close to them. Loving them does not mean you have to be in danger. You can love them from a long way away, your whole life, and never be unsafe again."

Kezia put her head on Ms. Calloway's shoulder.

She did not cry. Kezia almost never cries. But she put her head on Ms. Calloway's shoulder for a long minute, and Ms. Calloway sat there with her, and Mr. Tate from the back of the room did not move, and Sammy went back into the box very quietly, and the rest of the kids did their quiet work without looking up.

When Kezia raised her head, she said: "I get it now. I get what Grandma was saying."

"Yes you do," said Ms. Calloway.

"Thank you, Ms. Calloway."

"Thank you, Kezia. For asking. That was a brave question."

Kezia went back to her seat.

After school, Ms. Calloway and Mr. Tate stood in the hallway for a few minutes, talking quietly. Mr. Tate said, "I am going to do a check-in with the grandmother this week, just to let her know how Kezia did today." Ms. Calloway said, "Yes. Please."

That night, Kezia's grandmother asked Kezia how school was.

"Good," said Kezia. "I understood something."

"What did you understand, baby?"

"I understood the thing about forgiving people but not letting them come over."

Kezia's grandmother put her tea down. Her eyes got a little shiny. "And what did you understand, baby?"

"That we can love them. And not let them come over. Both can be true."

Kezia's grandmother — who is a woman who has been carrying things in her own backpack for a very long time, and who has had to make some of the hardest decisions a grandmother can make to protect her grandchild — said, "Yes, baby. Both can be true. Both have to be true. That is the whole thing."

She hugged Kezia for a long time.

When Kezia went to bed that night, she felt a kind of quiet she had not felt in two years. She did not have words for it. But the feeling was: I am allowed to love them. AND I am allowed to be safe. I do not have to pick. She was six years old.

She fell asleep with that feeling.

Some lessons are not lessons. Some lessons are permissions.

This one was a permission.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Forgiveness Takes Time

In March, Mia got mad at her best friend Lily.

Lily is not in Room 12. Lily is in the other first-grade class, the one down the hall. But Lily and Mia have been best friends since they were three, because their moms are best friends, and they have known each other their whole lives.

What happened was that Lily, at a birthday party for another kid, told a different kid that Mia was kind of annoying sometimes. The different kid told Mia. Mia was crushed.

Mia spent two days not talking to Lily.

Lily, on the third day, came up to Mia at recess and said, "Mia. I am sorry. I should not have said that. You are not annoying. I was trying to look cool in front of Devon and I picked the wrong thing to say. I am sorry."

It was a full sorry. It had all three parts. I named what I did. I named how it hurt. I named what will change. (The change was: I will not say mean things about you to people to look cool. I will use other things to be cool.)

Mia said, "I forgive you."

The girls hugged.

But that night, Mia was lying in bed, and she found herself thinking about what Lily had said. Kind of annoying sometimes. And the more she thought about it, the more her chest hurt. She had said I forgive you at recess. She had

MEANT it. But here she was, eight hours later, with her chest still hurting.

She thought: I must have not really forgiven her. I must be a bad friend. I must not be a forgiving person.

She fell asleep with all of those thoughts in her head, and she came to school the next morning a little bit sad.

When Ms. Calloway took Sammy out of the box that morning, the lesson was about timing.

"Friends," said Sammy, "today I am going to tell you a thing about forgiveness that nobody tells children. Are you ready?"

The kids waited.

"Forgiveness is not a finish line," said Sammy. "Forgiveness is a path. You can say I forgive you with your whole heart, and mean it, and still be feeling sad the next morning. The sadness does not mean the forgiveness was fake. The sadness is just — the rest of the feelings, still arriving. Feelings come in waves. You do not control when they come."

Sammy held up a chart.

THE FORGIVENESS PATH

Still hurting → Starting to understand → Some days are better → Putting it down today → The hurt is getting smaller → I am okay.

Going BACK and FORTH is normal. Wherever you are on the path is okay. "You can be on Step 4 one day," said Sammy, "and Step 2 the next day. That does not mean you went backwards. That means feelings are tricky. Feelings do not march in a straight line. You are walking on a path that loops a little. You will end up at the end. You will. But the walk is the walk."

Mia was staring at the chart.

"The most important thing," said Sammy, "is this. Where you are on the path TODAY is where you are. That is okay. Tomorrow you might be somewhere else. That is also okay."

There is no should be on the path. There is just where you are."

Mia raised her hand.

"So if I said I forgive somebody yesterday, but today I still feel sad — that does not mean I lied?"

"That does not mean you lied," said Sammy. "That means you are on the path. Some days will be Step 4. Some days will be Step 2. Both are forgiveness. Both are real."

Mia let her breath out. She did not know she had been holding it. After class, Mia and Lily met up at the water fountain and Lily said, "You okay?"

Mia said, "I am still a little sad. From the thing. But I am okay. I am still your friend."

Lily said, "I am still your friend too. I am still sorry. I am going to be sorry for a while."

The two girls walked back to their classrooms holding hands. This is how forgiveness goes. It is not a moment. It is not a sentence. It is a path. You walk it slowly. Some days are better. Some days you are tired. The walk is the walk. And the walk is shorter when you walk it with somebody who is also doing their part — who is also being sorry, who is also changing the thing.

Lily, in this story, is doing her part. She said the full sorry. She is being patient with Mia's path. She is on her own path of making the change and she is walking it.

That is what forgiveness between friends actually looks like, in real life, when both people are doing it right. Not a single moment of I forgive you. A long, slow, sometimes-bumpy walk back to the place where you are friends again. The walk is the work. The walk is the point.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

My Story Is Not the Whole Me

In March, the class did something a little different.

Ms. Calloway gave each kid three blank pieces of paper, folded together to make a little book. She had labeled each page already, in her teacher handwriting.

PAGE ONE: SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME.

PAGE TWO: THE STORY I TOLD MYSELF ABOUT IT.

PAGE THREE: THE STORY I AM CHOOSING NOW.

"Friends," said Ms. Calloway, "today we are going to do a quiet, private project. Nobody else is going to see your three pages. Not me. Not your friends. Not your parents, unless you decide to show them. This is just for you."

She held up Sammy.

"Here is the thing about life," said Sammy. "Things happen to you that you did not choose. Somebody says something unkind. Somebody moves away. Somebody breaks something. A pet dies. A parent has to leave. A friend changes schools. None of those things are your fault. They are things that happened to you."

"But after the thing happens, your brain does a thing. Your brain tells a story about what the thing means. Sometimes the story is fair. Sometimes the story is not. Sometimes the story is something like that happened to me because there is something wrong with me. Or that happened to me because nobody loves me. Or that happened to me because I am bad.

Those stories — friends — those stories are almost always wrong."

"The thing that happened is not the same as the story your brain tells about it. The thing is the thing. The story is something you can choose." Ms. Calloway walked the room slowly while the kids worked. She did not look at any of the pages. She just made sure everyone had what they needed.

Maya, in the corner, opened her little book. She thought about Page One for a long time. Then she wrote, in her best first-grade handwriting: Page One: My mom could not take care of me when I was little. So I had to live with my grandma.

She turned to Page Two. She thought for a long time. Then she wrote: Page Two: I told myself that my mom did not want me.

She sat with that for a minute.

Then she turned to Page Three. She thought for the longest time of all.

She wrote:

Page Three: I am choosing to think that my mom is not okay yet, and that my grandma loves me very much, and that my mom did not leave because of me. My mom left because of her own stuff. I did not do anything wrong. I am loved. I am not extra. I belong with my grandma. I am okay.

She read Page Three. She read it three times.

She put her hand on it. The paper was a little smudgy from her pencil eraser. The handwriting was small and careful.

She closed the little book.

That afternoon, when she got home, she did not show her grandmother the book. She put it in the very back of her drawer. But she carried Page Three with her, in her head, for the rest of the year, and into the next year, and into the year after that. Page Three is going to come back, in different

versions, every single time Maya questions whether her mom not being there means something about Maya.

Page Three is going to be the story Maya chooses every time. Not because Page One was not real. Page One is real. Page One is what happened. But Page Three is what Maya is choosing it to mean. And nobody, anywhere, in this whole world, gets to take Page Three away from her. Page Three is hers.

Marcus did the three pages too. So did Sofia. So did Priya. So did Theo. So did Mia. So did Kezia. So did Darius. So did Amara. Even Jordan — who tried to make Page One a joke at first, and then crossed it out, and tried again, and wrote, in his own careful handwriting, a real Page One that he had never told anybody.

None of the pages got read by Ms. Calloway. They never will. Some of them got stuck in journals. Some of them got folded up small and put in pockets. Some of them ended up in dresser drawers next to Maya's. But all ten kids did the work. All ten kids learned, that day, that the story you tell about what happened to you is not the same as what happened to you. Both are real. But only one of them — the story — is yours to choose.

That is one of the most important lessons in this entire book. If you remember nothing else, remember that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Forgiveness Stories

In late March, Ms. Calloway brought in some books.

The books were picture books. Some of them were brand new. Some of them were old and well-loved, with bent corners. Some of them were books the kids had read before, in other classes. The books had different topics. But they all had one thing in common.

Every one of them was about forgiveness.

Ms. Calloway sat on the floor with the kids and read three of the books aloud. The first one was about a bear who said something mean to a rabbit, and what the bear did afterward. The second one was about two friends who got into a fight over a toy, and how they figured out, slowly, how to be friends again. The third one was about a kid whose grandfather died, and how the kid had been angry at the grandfather for not being there to say goodbye, and how the kid eventually understood that the grandfather had not wanted to leave, and how forgiveness was something you could give somebody even after they were gone.

When Ms. Calloway closed the third book, the kids were quiet for a minute.

Then Theo said, "All three of them are the same shape."

Ms. Calloway smiled.

"Yes, Theo. They are. Tell us."

Theo, who is the kid in Room 12 who notices things, said: "Somebody got hurt. Somebody felt heavy. And then somebody figured out how to put the heavy thing down. Each one was a different way of putting it down. But they were all about putting it down."

The class nodded.

"Yes," said Ms. Calloway. "That is what forgiveness stories all are. They are stories about putting things down. Different things. Different ways. Different people. Different timings. Some of them you put down fast. Some of them take a long time. Some of them you put down after the person is gone. Some of them you put down with the person still in your life. But all of them — all forgiveness stories — are stories of putting it down."

Then she said: "I want each of you to write a forgiveness story this week. It does not have to be a true story. You can make it up. The story can be about anything. But by the end of the story, somebody has to put something down."

The kids wrote.

Marcus wrote a story about a boy named Marco who knocked over his sister's tower of cups, and how he made it right. (Marcus has, by this point in March, written four different versions of the apology-to-Aaliyah story. It keeps showing up in his work. Marcus does not realize, yet, that this is because his brain is still processing the LEGO event from November. He will realize it later. We do not need him to realize it now.) Sofia wrote a story about a girl who bumped into a kindergartener at an apple orchard.

Priya wrote a careful, structured, well-paragraphed story about a girl who got three words wrong on a spelling test and learned to be kind to herself about it. The story was very Priya. The story was perfect, the way Priya tries to make most things

perfect. Even her forgiveness story was a little too neat. (Ms. Calloway, reading it later, smiled a small private smile. Priya, baby, even the forgiveness story doesn't have to be perfect. We will work on this for the next twelve years.)

Amara wrote a story about a girl who moved to a new school and pretended to be somebody she was not, and how she figured out how to be herself again.

Darius wrote a story about a boy whose dog died and who learned to be sad about the right thing instead of mad at the wrong thing. Jordan wrote — and this is important, this is the moment we have been waiting for — Jordan wrote a story that was not a joke. Jordan wrote a story about a boy who was funny all the time and who had never told anybody that he sometimes felt sad, and how the boy finally told his mom one night, and his mom did not laugh, and how the boy cried for the first time in a long time, and how afterward he felt lighter. Jordan did not say the story was about himself. He did not need to. Ms. Calloway, reading it, did not say anything to Jordan about it. She just put one small star in the corner of the page in pencil, which was her code to herself for I have read this and I have seen what you wrote and I will be watching to make sure you are okay.

Maya wrote a story about a girl who lived with her grandmother and was sometimes confused about why, and how the girl figured out, eventually, that the why was not her fault.

Mia wrote a story about two best friends who had a fight and made up.

Kezia wrote a story about a grown-up who could not come over anymore, and how the family was sad sometimes, but how the family was also safe, and how both could be true.

Theo, who notices things, wrote a story that watched a fight happen between two other kids and did not try to fix it, but just understood it, and helped them, very gently, on the side, see each other.

Ten forgiveness stories.

Ms. Calloway read them all over the weekend. She kept them in a folder. She did not show them to anyone. But she would, years from now, when these kids were grown, sometimes take out the folder when she was missing them, and re-read what they had written when they were six, and remember.

She knew, by the time she got to the end of the folder, that she had a very particular class this year. Not better than other classes. Not smarter. But a class that had — for whatever reason, the alchemy you cannot predict — all leaned in. All ten of them. Even Jordan. Even Darius. Especially Maya, who had walked in in September not speaking, and who had now written a whole story about why her mom was not there. The kids would not remember writing the stories, not really, when they were older. But the writing of them was, by itself, the work. The stories did not have to be remembered to have been useful. The act of writing them changed the brain a little. Each story, written, was a small piece of the architecture going up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Unit 3 Wrap-Up — I Choose

At the end of March, Ms. Calloway made a chart.

The chart had two columns at the top.

I CHOOSE TO FORGIVE. I CHOOSE NOT TO YET.

"Friends," she said. "We have spent eight weeks on forgiving other people. Today is the last day of Unit Three. I want to be very clear with you about one thing. Listen."

The kids leaned in.

"Forgiveness is always a choice. It is never something you HAVE TO DO. There is no rule that says you have to forgive everybody. There is no rule that says you have to forgive on a schedule. There is no rule that says, if you are still hurting, you should be done by now."

"Today, in your journal, I want you to write — privately — about one thing. There is a person somewhere in your life — at school, at home, in your family, from your past — who hurt you in some way, big or small. I want you to think about that person. You do NOT have to share. You do NOT have to tell me. This is just for you."

"And then I want you to ask yourself: am I choosing to forgive them today? Or am I choosing not to yet?"

"Both answers are good answers. Both answers are okay. I choose to forgive is an answer. I choose not to yet is also an answer. Yet is a very important word. Yet means I might. Someday. But not right now. Not today."

"Some of you might choose to forgive somebody today. Some of you might choose not to yet. Some of you might still be deciding. All of those are okay. Write what is true for you. Be honest with yourself. That is the whole assignment."

The kids opened their journals.

Marcus wrote: I choose to forgive myself for the LEGO. I have already said sorry. I have already changed. I am putting it down today. (He did not yet write about the bigger sentence to Aaliyah. He is working up to that one. He will get there.)

Sofia wrote: I choose to forgive the kindergartener for crying about the apples. It was not her fault. I should not have been mad at her for crying. I forgive her. Also I forgive myself for bumping her. Priya wrote a list. Of course Priya wrote a list. The list went: 1. I forgive Jordan for the partner thing. 2. I forgive Mrs. Patterson at the library for being grumpy that one time. 3. I am not yet forgiving the girl at the playground who said my mom's accent was weird. I am not ready yet. Maybe in May.

(Priya is so good at this work. She does not even know how good.) Amara wrote: I choose not to forgive yet the people at my old school who never asked me how to say my name. It is okay to be a little mad about that for a little longer.

Darius wrote: I forgive my dog Biscuit for dying. I know that is silly. I know he did not mean to. But I was a little mad at him for dying and now I am not. I miss him. I love him.

Jordan wrote — and this was important again — I am not yet forgiving the part of me that pretends to be okay when I am not. I am still mad at that part. But I think I will forgive it. Just not today.

Maya wrote: I choose to forgive my mom for not being able to take care of me. I think she did her best. I think she is still trying. I am okay where I am.

Theo wrote: I forgive my brother for breaking my LEGO Star Wars. He did not really break it on purpose.

Mia wrote: I forgive Lily. I love Lily.

Kezia wrote: I forgive the grown-up who is not allowed in our house. I forgive them in my heart. I do not invite them over. Both are true. Ten journals. Ten different answers. Ten correct answers.

Ms. Calloway did not collect the journals. She did not read them. She just walked the room and made sure everyone was writing.

When the kids closed their journals, she said one last thing. "You can change your answer. Tomorrow. In June. In tenth grade. When you are forty. Every day, you get to choose again. Yet is always available. Not yet is always available. Forgiveness is not a one-time thing. It is a choice you make and re-make for as long as you live." She closed the lesson.

This is the end of Part Three.

Part Three was the hardest part, in some ways. It asked the kids to do work that adults often refuse to do — to name their own hurts, to understand other people's stories, to forgive without trusting, to take their time, to choose. Some of them are further along the work than others. That is okay. Forgiveness is a path. There is no race. The basket on the windowsill has been there since December. Some of the stones are still in it. Some of them — well, nobody has counted, but Ms. Calloway thinks two or three of them might be missing, taken back by kids who needed to hold them again for a while. That is also okay. The basket is a place. The stones can come and go.

Part Four — which starts after spring break, in April — is about Grace. The biggest word. The last word. The one we have been building toward all year.

We are almost there.

PART FOUR



Grace & Generosity

*What is the kindest thing I can choose to
be?*

April. May. June. The year ends.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

What Does Grace Look Like?

The first week back from spring break, Ms. Calloway introduced the word.

"Friends," she said, "this week we are starting our last unit. The biggest word. The word the whole year has been building up to." She wrote it on the board, very carefully, in big letters.

GRACE

The kids stared at it.

"Grace," said Ms. Calloway, "is one of those words that grown-ups use in church, and grown-ups use in books, and grown-ups use when they are talking about how somebody danced. But the kind of grace we are going to learn about is none of those things. The kind of grace we are going to learn about is a CHOICE. Grace is a choice you make about how to treat somebody — usually somebody who has not earned it."

She let that sit.

"Grace," said Sammy, "is when you are kind to somebody who is not being kind to you. Grace is when you give somebody another chance, even when they have not asked for one. Grace is when you understand that everybody is having a hard day sometimes, and you decide to be soft anyway."

"Grace is not weakness," said Sammy. "Grace is chosen kindness. Anybody can be kind to a kind person. That is easy. That is not grace. That is just being polite. Grace is when

somebody has been hard, or rude, or mean — and you decide, on purpose, to give them something they did not earn."

Sammy paused.

"Why would anybody do that?"

The kids looked at each other.

"Because," said Sammy, "the world is hard. Because everybody is carrying things you cannot see. Because if everybody only got the kindness they earned, nobody would ever get any extra. Because the world gets less hard, by a little, every single time somebody gives away kindness for free."

Sammy held up the anchor chart.

GRACE

Kindness you CHOOSE to give To somebody who did not EARN it Because the world is hard for everybody And softness, freely given, makes it less hard The class was quiet.

Then Marcus put his hand up.

"Like — when the new kid sits alone at lunch, and somebody just goes and sits with them?"

"Yes, Marcus. Exactly. That is one of the simplest, clearest examples of grace there is."

"Like when Jaylen rebuilt the tower with me, after I knocked it down?" "Yes, Marcus. Yes. That is grace. Jaylen did not have to rebuild that tower with you. He could have been mad. He could have walked away. He chose to rebuild it with you. That was grace."

Marcus thought about this. He had never, until this moment, recognized what Jaylen had done as anything other than the way kindergarten worked. Now — now he saw it.

"That was really nice of him," he said quietly.

"Yes it was, Marcus. It was grace."

Then Mia raised her hand.

"Is it grace when my dog jumps on the couch even though he is not supposed to, and I let him, because he is so happy?"

The class laughed.

"That is almost grace, Mia. That is grace with limits. Grace is a choice. But grace is not the same as letting people — or dogs — do whatever they want with no boundary. Grace has a kind of strength inside it. We are going to talk about grace with limits later in this unit."

Then Sofia raised her hand.

"Can you give grace to yourself?"

Ms. Calloway stopped.

"Sofia," she said, "what a beautiful, beautiful question. Yes. Yes. The first person you give grace to should be yourself. Self-grace is when you say to yourself, on a hard day, you are doing your best. You did not have to be perfect today. You are allowed to be tired. You are allowed to mess up. You are loved anyway. That is grace, given to yourself, for free. That is one of the most important kinds of grace there is."

Sofia smiled.

This is the start of Unit Four.

The whole year, all of it — Unit One, Unit Two, Unit Three — has been building to this moment. Knowing yourself. Being kind to yourself. Forgiving others. All of it was the foundation. Grace is the roof. You cannot have a roof without walls. You cannot have walls without a floor. You cannot have a floor without a foundation. The reason Ms. Calloway is teaching grace last is not because grace is the hardest. It is because grace is the highest. You build up to it. Brick by brick. Across an entire year. And then, in April, you teach the kids the word. The ten kids of Room 12 are ready for the word.

That is more than most six-year-olds in the world have. That is more than most thirty-year-olds, honestly. Most

thirty-year-olds are still building their foundation.

But the kids of Room 12 — eight months in, with Sammy in the box and the basket on the windowsill and ten brown journals in ten cubbies — the kids of Room 12 have the foundation.

Now we put the roof on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Giving the Benefit of the Doubt

In the second week of April, the playground was crowded, and somebody bumped into Sofia.

The somebody was a kid named Wyatt, from one of the second-grade classes. Wyatt did not look back. Wyatt kept running. Wyatt did not apologize.

Sofia stood for a moment, holding her elbow where Wyatt had hit it, and her first thought — the thought her brain handed her — was: Wyatt did that on purpose. Wyatt does not like me. Wyatt is mean.

She walked back to her class, mad.

That afternoon, when Ms. Calloway said the lesson was about the Pause Practice, Sofia paid extra attention.

"Friends," said Sammy. "Today we are going to talk about a thing your brain does in about one second, that you have to learn to slow down. Are you ready?"

The kids nodded.

"When somebody does something to you — bumps into you, doesn't text back, doesn't say hi, looks at you funny, leaves you out — your brain is very, very fast. Your brain takes about one second to give you a STORY about what just happened. And the story your brain gives you is almost always — they did it on purpose. They do not like me. They are mean." "That is the FAST story. The fast story is your brain trying to protect you. Your brain thinks, I have to figure out who is the enemy, fast,

so I can stay safe. That is your brain's job. Your brain is not bad." "BUT — and this is the important but — the fast story is almost always WRONG. The fast story is almost never the actual reason. Most of the time, the actual reason is something boring. They didn't see you. They were thinking about something else. They were having a hard day. They thought you were mad at them. Their phone was off. They forgot." "Today we are going to learn the Pause Practice. Before you decide what the story is, you pause. You ask yourself: what is the kindest possible reason this happened? You imagine three different reasons. Then you pick the kindest one. You pick the kindest one because most of the time the kindest one is also the most true."

Sammy held up the chart.

THE PAUSE PRACTICE

Something happens. → I notice my fast story. → I pause. → I think of THREE OTHER reasons. → I pick the kindest one. → I move on.

Sofia raised her hand.

"What if the kindest one is wrong?"

"Then you find out it is wrong. And then you adjust. But most of the time the kindest one is right. So you waste a lot less energy being mad, if you pick the kindest one first."

Sofia thought about Wyatt.

What was her fast story? Wyatt did that on purpose. Wyatt is mean. What were three other reasons?

1. Wyatt did not see me.
2. Wyatt was running fast and could not stop.
3. Wyatt was already in trouble for something and was trying not to get in more trouble.

Which was the kindest?

Probably number 1. Wyatt did not see her.

She felt her shoulders un-tense.

After school, she happened to pass Wyatt in the hallway. Wyatt looked up.

"Hi, Sofia," he said. "Sorry I bumped into you at recess. I did not see you. Are you okay?"

Sofia looked at him.

"I am fine," she said. "Thank you."

She walked the rest of the way to the bus thinking about how she had been mad at Wyatt all afternoon for nothing. Wyatt had not seen her. Wyatt was sorry. The whole story she had been telling herself — Wyatt is mean to me, Wyatt does not like me — had been wrong, the entire time. This is the Pause Practice. It saves you, on average, about eight unnecessary mad feelings per day. Multiply that by 365. Multiply that by a lifetime. The amount of unnecessary mad-feelings you save yourself, across a lifetime, by doing the Pause Practice — is more energy than you can imagine. That energy gets to go to other things. Better things. Sofia is going to do the Pause Practice for the rest of her life, in different forms, sometimes well and sometimes not. But the idea — the muscle — she got it in first grade, in April, on the day after Wyatt bumped into her on the playground.

Worth the whole year, just for that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Small Acts, Big Difference

In late April, Ms. Calloway started the Grace Challenge.

"Friends," she said, "for the next two weeks, I have an assignment for you. The assignment is simple. Every day, you do ONE small act of grace. ONE. It does not have to be big. It does not have to be impressive. It just has to be — a choice — to give somebody kindness they did not ask for and did not earn."

"It can be anything. Letting somebody go ahead of you. Saying hi to a kid who eats lunch alone. Telling somebody you like their shoes. Helping a teacher carry something without being asked. Smiling at the bus driver. Just — one small thing. Every day. For two weeks."

"And every night, I want you to write down — in your journal — what your grace act was. Just one sentence. So we can see, at the end of two weeks, what you did."

The kids took notes in their heads.

The next morning, Marcus came in and sat down at his table. He turned to Maya, who sat across from him, and he said:

"Good morning, Maya. I am glad you are here today."

Maya looked up.

"Good morning, Marcus."

She sat up a little straighter for the rest of the day.

That was Marcus's grace act for day one.

Sofia, for her grace act, drew a small picture and put it in Priya's cubby without telling her. The picture was just a small smiling face with two stars over it. There was no name on the picture. Priya found it after lunch and stared at it. Priya wondered, for the rest of the day, who had put it there. (She would find out, weeks later, in June, by accident. By then it had become precious to her in a way she could not explain.) Priya, for her grace act, did something extremely Priya. She wrote a careful, kind, anonymous note to Ms. Calloway thanking her for being a good teacher. She put it in Ms. Calloway's mailbox. Ms. Calloway found it that afternoon and stood at her desk for a long time, holding it, before she put it in a folder where she kept things like this.

Theo, for his grace act, watched a kid on the playground who had been sitting alone for two days. On day three, Theo sat down next to him. Theo did not say anything for the first five minutes. Then Theo said, "I'm Theo. What are you drawing?" The kid showed him. They drew together for the rest of recess. Theo did not even mention it to Ms. Calloway. Theo does not need to be seen doing kindness. Theo just does it. (Theo is going to grow up to be a very particular kind of adult. We will get to see who, in a later book.)

Mia, for her grace act, brought Lily an extra cookie from her lunch. They split it.

Jordan, for his grace act, did something that took everybody by surprise. He stopped making fun of Vincent — a kid in Room 12 who we have not talked about, because Vincent is one of the quieter kids — for the way Vincent ate his sandwich (Vincent ate the crust first, then the middle, in a way Jordan had found hilarious for months). Jordan just — stopped. He did not say anything to Vincent about stopping. He just stopped. Vincent, who had been embarrassed for months, noticed by

Friday that nothing had been said about his sandwich all week. Vincent did not understand why. Vincent just ate his sandwich, the way he liked to eat it, in a way that nobody made fun of anymore.

That was Jordan's grace act. He did not write it in his journal. (Jordan does not always write his real ones down. He is private about the real ones. He puts a joke in the journal so it looks like he did the assignment. But the real grace acts — those, he keeps to himself.)

(This is also why Ms. Calloway loves Jordan particularly. She knows what he is doing. She does not say.)

Darius, for his grace act, started saying hi to the bus driver every morning. The bus driver, who was a woman named Patricia who had been driving the bus for sixteen years and who was not used to being said hi to, looked startled the first day. By day four she said hi back. By day eight she said good morning, Mr. Darius in a way that made Darius's whole day.

Kezia, for her grace act, did something that surprised even her. She told her grandmother, every single day for two weeks, one thing she loved about her grandmother. Just one. Out loud. At dinner. Grandma, I love that you sing in the kitchen. Grandma, I love how you say my name. Grandma, I love that you let me put extra sprinkles on my ice cream. Kezia's grandmother — who was a tough, strong, sometimes-tired woman who had been holding their family together — by day seven was tearing up at dinner. She did not say anything. She just listened. Kezia kept saying her one thing, every day.

Amara, for her grace act, said her name three times each day to whoever happened to be near her, just to keep saying it out loud the way her grandmother said it. Hi, I am Amara. Amara. Amara. It was a small grace, but it was a grace toward

herself. She was no longer hiding the soft a. She was practicing being seen.

Maya, for her grace act, raised her hand in class four times in one week. That had never happened before. Each time, it was a small grace act toward herself — a permission to be heard. By the end of the second week, Ms. Calloway had to consciously not call on Maya every time her hand went up, because Maya had so many things to say, finally, and Ms. Calloway did not want the other kids to feel ignored.

Ten kids. Ten different grace acts. Across two weeks, that is one hundred and forty small acts of grace, in just one first-grade class, in one school, in one town.

The Grace Challenge does not change the world.

The Grace Challenge changes the kids who do the Grace Challenge. It teaches their brains that grace is a thing they can give away, every day, for free, and that the world does not, in fact, run out of it. This is a thing those kids will carry, in different forms, for the rest of their lives.

That is what one teacher and one frog puppet can do in a single year of first grade.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Grace With Hard People

In May, the class had to talk about the hard ones.

"Friends," said Ms. Calloway, "we have done two weeks of the Grace Challenge. You have all been amazing. But I want to talk about something else now."

"What about hard people? What about the people who keep being mean? What about the people who do not change? Do you have to give THEM grace?"

The kids were quiet.

"Here is what I think," said Ms. Calloway. "Grace with hard people is real. But grace with hard people has limits. Grace is not the same as letting somebody hurt you over and over. Grace is not the same as pretending somebody is okay when they are not. Grace is not the same as letting somebody walk all over you."

She held up a chart.

GRACE WITH LIMITS

You CAN: wish them well. Hope they have a good day. Not be mad at them. Be polite when you see them.

You DO NOT HAVE TO: play with them. Be best friends with them. Trust them. Let them hurt you again.

"Grace," said Ms. Calloway, "is internal kindness. It is what is happening inside YOU. Trust, friendship, closeness — those are different things. Those are external. Those are about what

you do with the person. Grace is what you carry in your heart. The two are not the same." Sammy nodded.

"Some people in your life," said Sammy, "are going to be hard. Some people in your family. Some people in your school. Some people you will meet later. You do not have to like everybody. You do not have to be best friends with everybody. You do not have to invite everybody over for your birthday."

"But you can — if you want to, and only if you want to — choose grace in your own heart. You can decide, privately, I wish them well, even though I am not going to play with them. You can decide, I hope they have a good day, even though I am not their friend. That is grace with limits."

"And friends — listen — you NEVER have to choose grace. Grace is always a choice. It is not a rule. If somebody is hurting you, you protect yourself FIRST. You tell a trusted adult FIRST. You stay safe FIRST. Grace comes much later, if it comes at all. Safety always comes first." Kezia, in the back, was nodding.

The class did a quiet activity. Each kid wrote down — privately, in their journal — the name of a person who was hard for them. (Some kids wrote a family member. Some wrote a kid in another class. Some wrote a kid in their own class. Theo, who was watching everybody, wrote a name we never see, because Theo's journal stays Theo's.)

Then they wrote one sentence next to the name.

The sentence was a grace with limits sentence. It went like this: I do not have to _____. But I can wish them _____.

Marcus wrote: I do not have to play with Vincent every day. (Marcus had not stopped finding Vincent's sandwich habits weird, even though Jordan had stopped making fun.) But I can wish him well.

Kezia wrote: I do not have to let the grown-up come over. But I can wish them peace.

Priya wrote a list, because of course she did. I do not have to invite Mrs. Patterson to my birthday party (she is not invited, no offense, Mrs. Patterson). But I can wish her a quiet day at the library.

Amara wrote: I do not have to be friends with the kids at my old school who never asked how to say my name. But I can wish them — actually I do not wish them anything yet. That is okay too.

(That is also okay. Amara is not yet ready. That is fine. The teacher knows.)

Maya wrote: I do not have to talk to my mom every week. But I can wish that she is okay, wherever she is.

Each kid wrote one sentence. Ten sentences of grace with limits. None of them got read aloud. None of them got read by anybody. They just got written, and put in journals, and closed.

That night, ten kids went home with a thought in their head they had not had two months ago: I do not have to like everybody. I can wish them well anyway. Both can be true.

Most adults never get this thought. Most adults think they have to either love a person or hate a person — be friends or enemies — invite them over or freeze them out. The middle ground — the I wish you well from a long way away place — is a place most adults never find. The kids of Room 12 found it in May. Of first grade. With Sammy on a hand.

That is what this whole book has been for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Grace in Community

In late May, the whole class did one project together.

The project was simple. They made a card.

It was a huge card — a piece of poster paper that took up most of the back wall of Room 12. At the top, in Ms. Calloway's careful teacher handwriting, it said:

A LETTER TO ROOM 12 FROM ROOM 12 And then, underneath, every kid wrote one thing. One sentence. One thing they wanted to thank the class for. One thing they had learned because of these specific nine other kids.

The sentences were not collected at the end. They were just — written on the poster. So that anybody could read them. So that they were, in a way, a public class memory of the year they had spent together. Marcus wrote: Thank you for letting me be the one who knocks things over and then helps fix them. I love you all.

Amara wrote: Thank you for hearing my name the way my grandma says it. I needed that.

Sofia wrote: Thank you for not laughing when my stomach hurts. I do not have to hide it here.

Priya wrote: Thank you for showing me that lists are okay even when they are not perfect.

Darius wrote, in red marker: Thank you for being sad with me about Biscuit.

Jordan wrote: Thank you for laughing at my jokes — AND for noticing when the joke was hiding something. Both kinds of laugh matter. Maya wrote: Thank you for hearing me, even on the days I was quiet. Theo wrote: Thank you for letting me watch and be myself.

Mia wrote: Thank you for being my second family.

Kezia wrote, very carefully: Thank you for understanding that I love my grandma, and that is enough.

Ten sentences. One poster. The poster stayed on the back wall of Room 12 for the rest of the year, and after the year ended, Ms. Calloway took it down, very carefully, rolled it up, and put it in the closet where she kept the rolled-up posters from each of her classes.

The poster from this class — Marcus's class, Amara's class, Maya's class — would, eventually, be the poster Ms. Calloway pulled out and looked at on the night, eleven years from now, when she retired. But that is a long way off. We are still in May.

After the poster was finished, Ms. Calloway stood at the front of the room.

"Friends," she said, "this is what a class is. A class is a community. A community is what happens when people who did not choose each other choose, on purpose, to be kind to each other anyway. You did that this year. All ten of you. You did the thing."

"Grace in community," she said, "is grace that you give to each other. Day after day. Small. Quiet. Not loud. Just — I see you. I am glad you are here. Let me make this a little easier for you today."

"That is what Room 12 is. That is what a class can be. That is what a workplace can be, someday, when you are grown. That is what a family can be. That is what a town can be. That is what a country can be. Wherever you go, for the rest of your

lives, you carry the question with you: can this place be Room 12? Can I help it become Room 12?" The kids were very quiet.

"Most places will not be Room 12," she said. "Most places will not even try. But every once in a while, you will be in a place where you can help make it Room 12 — and when that happens, friends, you do the work. You build the community. You sit with the kid eating alone. You learn somebody's real name. You give somebody grace they did not earn. You put your stones in the basket. You take your stones back out when you need to. You let other people see you. You let yourself be seen. You keep going."

"That is the architecture. Of grace. Of a life. You started it this year. You will keep building it for the rest of your lives."

The class was silent.

Then Marcus, of all people, started to clap. Just one small clap. And then Amara joined. And then Sofia. And then all of them. Not a celebration clap. A quiet, slow, ten-kid clap that meant thank you, Ms. Calloway. Thank you for this year.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the room, did not say anything. She just bowed her head, once.

And Sammy, on her hand, very gently, bowed too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Year-End Celebration

On the last Friday of school, Ms. Calloway opened the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a folder.

In the folder were ten envelopes.

She had not looked at the envelopes since January. She had not been tempted to. The envelopes were not for her. The envelopes were for the kids.

"Friends," she said, "do you remember, in January, when you wrote letters to your future selves?"

The kids gasped. They had forgotten.

"Today," said Ms. Calloway, "you read them."

She handed each kid their envelope. The kids took them. They sat down at their desks. They opened the envelopes.

The room got very quiet.

Maya opened hers, and read what November-Maya had written.

Dear June Maya. I am proud of you for looking up. I am working on talking more. I want to tell you that you are doing great. I think you are going to be okay. — November Maya. PS. Be nice to Grandma.

Maya read it. Then she read it again. And then she did something nobody at her table noticed except Sofia, who was sitting next to her: Maya put one hand on the letter, and one hand on her own chest, and she breathed in, and she breathed

out, and a tiny, almost-invisible tear ran down her face. Not a sad one. A different kind.

She wrote, in pencil, at the bottom of November-Maya's letter: Dear November Maya. I did look up. I did talk more. I am okay. I am better than okay. I love Grandma. We are good.
— June Maya.

She folded it. She put it back in the envelope. She would keep it. (She still has it. She is forty-three now, and she still has it. We will talk about it more in Book Five.)

Marcus opened his. He read his long letter — with the crossed-out parts, with the question about Aaliyah, with the question is it easier now? He wrote on it, in his June handwriting: Yes. It is easier. Aaliyah and I are friends. I learned a lot. I love you. — June Marcus.

Priya read her list, and laughed at how very Priya the list was. She wrote, at the bottom: Still working on item 9. — Priya.

Sofia read hers and squeezed her stomach gently and smiled.

Amara read hers — the three-syllable Amara across the top — and said her own name out loud at her desk, the soft a at the end, the way her grandmother said it.

Jordan read his — the joke he had written — and was quiet for a long moment. Then he wrote, in small handwriting at the bottom: You are funnier than the joke. — Jordan.

Darius read his red letter and pulled out the red marker from his pencil box and wrote underneath in the same red: Biscuit was the best dog. I am still sad sometimes. That is okay.
— June Darius.

Theo read his. He nodded.

Mia read hers, and folded it up small, and put it in her shoe, which is a very Mia thing to do.

Kezia read hers — I love my grandma. I am going to remember that. — and she did remember. She had remembered every single day.

The kids put their letters back in their envelopes. Some of them put their envelopes in their backpacks. Some of them held them in their hands for the rest of the day.

Then Ms. Calloway stood up.

"Friends," she said. "I have one more thing."

She had a stack of index cards in her hand.

On each card, in her handwriting, she had written something about each kid. One thing. One true thing. Something specific she had watched them grow into, this year.

"I am going to read these out loud," she said. "One for each of you. I want you to hear what I have seen this year. Hearing it is part of the lesson."

She read them.

To Marcus: Marcus. I have watched you, all year, learn that an Oops is a thing you DID, not who you ARE. You came in throwing LEGOs and you are leaving as a brother who knows how to say a real sorry. Your sister Aaliyah is lucky.

To Amara: Amara. Three syllables, the way your grandmother says it. You came in deciding whether to be small. You are leaving deciding to be visible. Stay that way.

To Sofia: Sofia. Your stomach is your friend. It tells you when something matters. Listen to it. Trust it. It is not your enemy. It is part of you.

To Priya: Priya. Lists are okay. Perfect is not the goal. You are the goal. Be kind to yourself the way you are kind to your friends. You deserve that grace.

To Darius: Darius. You loved Biscuit. Biscuit was the luckiest dog. Loving big means hurting big when you lose it. The loving big is still worth it. Always.

To Jordan: Jordan. The funny is yours. So is what's underneath it. You do not have to pick one. The world needs both. Keep the funny. AND keep the rest.

To Maya: Maya. You looked up. You looked up. You looked up.

To Theo: Theo. You see everybody. You see what nobody else sees. Use it. The world needs people like you, who watch quietly and act precisely.

To Mia: Mia. You are loved. You love. You are a small, kind engine of love. Do not lose that.

To Kezia: Kezia. You learned that you can love somebody and not let them in. That is one of the hardest, wisest lessons in this whole book. You learned it at six. You will use it your whole life. I am so proud of you. She read every one. She did not hurry. She looked each kid in the eyes when she read theirs. Some of the kids cried a little. Most of them did not. All of them listened.

When she was finished, she said:

"This was a wonderful year. You were a wonderful class. I will remember every one of you. Forever."

Then the bell rang.

The kids gathered their things.

Maya, on her way out, stopped at Ms. Calloway's desk. She did not say anything. She just hugged Ms. Calloway, very fast, and ran out before Ms. Calloway could hug her back properly.

Ms. Calloway watched her go.

She sat down at her desk. She looked at the empty room. The Mistake Wall on the back wall, full of small handwritten Oopses from a whole year. The basket of stones on the windowsill, mostly still full. The poster — A Letter to Room 12 from Room 12. Sammy on the high shelf in his box.

She cried, then, a small amount, in the empty classroom. Not sad tears. The other kind.

Then she got up. She closed Sammy's box very gently. She put it on the shelf for the summer. She turned off the lights.

She walked out.

The room sat empty for the summer, the way classrooms do. The Mistake Wall stayed up. The basket of stones stayed on the windowsill. The poster stayed on the back wall. The bean plants — somebody else's job to water now — sat green and patient in the science corner. Room 12 would be a different class next year. New kids. Different stones. Different journals. Different stories.

But the architecture would be the same.

Because the architecture is the architecture.

Closing Words

This is the last chapter.

If you are six years old, you have done a brave thing by getting all the way to here. The person reading to you has probably done a brave thing too. You are at the end of a book about ten kids you have never met, and a teacher named Ms. Calloway, and a puppet named Sammy. You spent a year with them. You probably noticed, somewhere around the middle, that they are a lot like you. That was on purpose. That is how books work. I want to tell you, before we close, what the book was for.

The book was not for you to remember every word. The book was for one thing: so that, somewhere far away from now — in fourth grade, or in seventh grade, or in tenth grade, or in college, or in a job you do when you are forty — something hard is going to happen to you. Somebody is going to be mean. Or you are going to make a mistake. Or somebody you love is going to do something that hurts you. Or you will lose a dog like Biscuit. Or you will say a thing you wish, very much, you had not said. When that happens — and friend, it will happen, because that is what being a person is — I want a small voice in your head to come back. A voice that sounds, a little bit, like Sammy. A voice that says one of the things from this book.

Maybe it will be: the Oops is not who I am. The Oops is just a thing I did.

Maybe it will be: I can put this down. The work is done. The carrying is extra.

Maybe it will be: the kindest possible reason is probably the real reason. Let me try that one first.

Maybe it will be: I can forgive them. AND I do not have to let them come over.

Maybe it will be: I am a work in progress. I am not done yet. Maybe it will be just one sentence: Sammy already knows you are here.

The voice does not need to be loud. It does not need to fix the whole thing. It just needs to be in your head, when you need it. And it will be. Because you read this book. Because the sentences are in there now. They went in while you were not noticing. They are part of you, the way Aaliyah is part of Marcus, and the way the soft a at the end of Amara is part of Amara, and the way Biscuit is part of Darius even after Biscuit is gone.

This is what books do, when they are done well. They put small voices inside you. The voices wait, quietly, until they are needed. Then they speak.

We are not teaching you to feel better.

We are teaching you how to build a life that cannot be broken by shame — a structure with a strong floor of who you are, warm walls of I am kind to myself, clear windows of I see other people, and a roof made of grace.

You have the floor now. The walls are starting. The windows are going in. The roof you will work on for a long time. Most adults are still working on the roof when they are eighty.

The architecture is yours. Carry it.

There are more books coming, by the way.

In the next book, the kids of Room 12 will be in third grade. They will have grown a little. They will have new things to figure out. Some of them you will see again. Some new kids

will join. Marcus will still be Marcus. Amara will still be Amara. Maya will still be looking up.

Sammy stays in his box in this room. Sammy is not coming to third grade. But the things Sammy said — those go with you. Those go with the kids. Those go with everybody who read this book.

You will see them all again. They will be a little bigger. So will you. That is the whole point.

The architecture of grace you have been building is yours now. Every brick is yours. Every lesson is yours.

Carry it.

— J.A.R.



This is Book One of The Architecture of Grace.

Books Two through Five are forthcoming.

Architecture of Grace, LLC James Anthony Ramsden,
Founder



a beginning, told slowly

*The opening volume of an unusual series — a year inside
a first-grade classroom, told as if it matters, because
it does.*

There is a classroom. There is a teacher named Ms. Calloway, who crouches the way grown-ups do when they have been around children for a long time. There is a small green frog puppet named Sammy, who lives on a high shelf in a wooden box. And there are ten six-year-olds, all of them new, all of them figuring out who they are about to be.

Across one school year, the children of Room 12 learn the four things this series is built on. *Knowing yourself. Forgiving yourself. Forgiving others. And giving grace.*

There is a Mistake Wall, where kids pin a card about something they got wrong. There is a basket of small heavy stones, for the things you carry that are too heavy. There is a girl named Maya who almost cries but does not. A boy named Marcus who throws a LEGO at his sister, and learns how to do a real sorry. A girl named Amara, who teaches the class how to say her name with the soft *a* at the end.

A child who hears this book will not remember all of it. They will remember Sammy, and the Mistake Wall, and the day Marcus cried. Years later, a sentence will come back to them when they need it. That is what this book is for.



BOOK ONE OF FIVE