

THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— Book Two —



ROOM 18

*The Year of the
Inner Critic*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

ROOM 18

The Year of the Inner Critic

BOOK TWO OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

Architecture of Grace, LLC

Room 18 · The Year of the Inner Critic

Book Two of The Architecture of Grace

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A Note Before You Begin

Two years have passed.

The kids of Room 12 are not in Room 12 anymore. They are in Room 18 — a different room, on a different floor, in the same school, with different windows that look out on a different part of the playground. Sammy is not in Room 18. Sammy stays in K-2, where Sammy belongs. Sammy is sitting on a high shelf in a kindergarten classroom right now, waiting for another small child who will need him.

The kids who knew Sammy are eight and nine now. Some of them are almost ten. They have been growing without anyone watching them grow. That is one of the things kids do — they grow when nobody is looking, and then one day a grandparent says my goodness, when did you get so tall, and the kid has no idea what to say, because to the kid they have always been this tall.

If you read Book One, you remember them. Marcus, who threw a LEGO at his sister and learned how to do a real sorry. Amara, who said her own name with the soft a at the end. Sofia, with the worried stomach that turned out to be a friend. Priya, who wrote everything in lists. Darius, who loved a dog named Biscuit. Jordan, who could be very funny when he needed to hide. Maya, who learned to look up. Theo, who watched everybody and missed nothing. Mia, who was warm. Kezia, who learned that you can love somebody and still keep them out of your house.

If you did not read Book One — welcome. You will catch up. The kids will help you.

This book is for somebody a little older than the kid Book One was for. If you are eight, or nine, or ten, you are reading this yourself, probably, in a quiet corner where nobody is hovering. That is good. This is a book that wants to be read like that.

But if there is somebody who likes to read with you — a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a person on a bus who is, for some reason, very interested — let them read it too. There are parts in here for the grown-ups. Grown-ups, especially the grown-ups who feel like they should have figured all this out by now, need this book maybe more than the kids do.

Here is what this book is about.

Inside your head, there is a voice. The voice talks to you all day. The voice has been there for a long time. You did not pick it. Some of what the voice says is true. A lot of what the voice says is not. The voice has two settings, mostly — kind, and unkind. The kind setting is helpful. The unkind setting is what most of this book is about.

For a year, in Room 18, the kids you are about to spend time with are going to learn that the unkind voice has a name. The name is the Inner Critic. The kind voice also has a name. The name is the Inner Coach. They are going to learn to tell which voice is talking. They are going to learn how to interrupt the Critic. They are going to learn how to invite the Coach. These are not little skills. These are the skills.

The book is also about a few other things, which I will let you discover on your way through. There is a kid who lies to his parents and then can't sleep. There is a kid who can't think of a single thing she is good at. There is a kid whose family changes in the middle of the year. There is a kid who moves away. There is a bench outside a gym where nobody talks to

anybody who didn't make the team, and a girl who decides to do something about it.

There is a teacher you might recognize. There is a new teacher you will meet. There is a counselor who knows when to walk into a room. And there is a hallway, in this school, on which the original Mistake Wall from Room 12 has been moved — and where every grade in the school can see it now. The kids who started it as first-graders walk past it every day. They do not say anything to each other about it. But it is there, and they know what it is, and you can know too.

— J.A.R.

PART ONE



Knowing & Accepting Yourself

*Who am I, when I am eight years old and
starting to know?*

August through early November. Third grade begins.

CHAPTER ONE

Who Am I?

The first thing Marcus noticed about Room 18 was that there was no puppet.

He had not realized, until he stepped through the door on the first morning of third grade, that he had been expecting one. He had walked all the way down the third-grade hallway without once thinking about whether there would be a puppet on a shelf — and there wasn't.

Marcus stood in the doorway a second longer than he needed to. High windows. Round tables instead of rows of desks. Posters that were maps and a periodic table and a thing about the writing process, not the posters from Room 12. A teacher at the front who was not Ms. Calloway.

The teacher was a man.

He had a calm face and a beard going gray at the edges, sleeves rolled to the elbows. He turned from the whiteboard when he saw Marcus in the doorway.

"Marcus," the teacher said.

"How do you know my name?"

"I looked at the roster. And I matched your picture. You're the second one in this morning. Welcome to Room 18. I'm Mr. Patel."

Marcus said hello. He found his name card on a round table and sat down. He looked around the room one more time, just to make sure.

There was no puppet anywhere.

He felt a small sadness about that. He had not known he was going to feel a small sadness, but there it was.

While Mr. Patel was writing the morning schedule, Marcus was thinking about Sammy. He had not thought about Sammy in maybe a year. He realized he had been carrying, all summer, a small expectation that some part of Sammy would be in third grade with him too.

The expectation had been wrong. That was okay. But it was a feeling. He filed it.

Then the door opened again, and Amara walked in.

She saw Marcus and smiled. They had not been in the same class in second grade, and they had not seen much of each other over the summer. But the kids who had been in Ms. Calloway's class in first grade always recognized each other in the hallway. There was a small invisible thing that connected them.

"Hi," said Amara.

"Hi," said Marcus.

Amara found her name card two tables over. She sat down, arranged her pencils, looked around. She also noticed there was no puppet.

Across the room, just for a second, their eyes met, and something passed between them that meant *I see what you see*.

Over the next ten minutes, the rest of the class filtered in. Sofia with her hair in a complicated braid, already holding her stomach with one hand the way she always did when she was nervous — though she was much better at her stomach than she used to be. Priya with a small spiral notebook in addition to her regular supplies. Darius in a red shirt over a slightly different red shirt, which was a Darius thing. Jordan laughing

at something nobody had said yet. Maya very quietly, on her grandmother's hand, and her grandmother said *hello, sweet girl* and stood at the door for a moment looking in before she left. (Mr. Patel saw it. He filed it. Teachers who are good at their jobs file things.)

Theo came in last. He always came in last — not because he was late but because he liked to watch the room fill up before he chose where to sit. He sat down at the only table where his name card was already placed, having clearly planned, in his head, where he would have sat if he had a choice.

Marcus, who was watching, smiled to himself. Some things did not change.

But — and this was strange — some things had.

Mia was not there.

Marcus looked under the tables. He looked at the door. He waited. Mia did not come in.

Then the bell rang, and Mr. Patel said, "Welcome to Room 18," and Marcus realized that Mia was not in this class. He had been a little bit looking forward to Mia all summer.

(She was in another third-grade class down the hall — Marcus would find out at lunch. But for the first hour of the morning, he sat at his table and felt the small absence. It is funny how a person you have not seen in three months can leave a hole in a room you did not know you had been holding for them.)

Then Mr. Patel said, "Friends, before we do anything else, I want to introduce someone."

He nodded at the door.

The door opened, and a woman walked in, and Marcus's whole body, without his permission, sat up straight.

It was Ms. Calloway.

She was wearing the same green cardigan she had worn the very first day of first grade, holding a small clipboard. Her hair was a little shorter. She smiled at the room.

"Hi, friends," she said.

The kids who had been in her class made a small involuntary sound. Marcus made it. Even Theo made a small surprised face, which for Theo was the equivalent of jumping up and down.

Ms. Calloway said, "Mr. Patel is going to be your homeroom teacher this year, and he is wonderful. You are very lucky. But I have a new job at this school. My new job is that I work with the third, fourth, and fifth grades on the part of you that doesn't show up on a math test. Just like we did in first grade. Once a week, for about forty minutes, I am going to come to Room 18, and we are going to work on the inside of your life."

She looked around the room.

"Some of you were in my class. Hi. I missed you. I am very glad to see you again."

She did not point at them. She just looked at each of them — Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Kezia — for one beat, her eyes had something in them, and then she moved on. (Mia was down the hall.)

Marcus felt held.

"Some of you were not in my class. Hi. I am happy to meet you. Today I do not need anything from you except to be here. We are going to start small."

She picked up a stack of papers from Mr. Patel's desk. "Today we are doing the Identity Web."

A few of the kids who had been in her class smiled. Marcus remembered his first one, in first grade, with the words I HAVE A SISTER, AALIYAH, AGE 3 in big crooked letters along one of the branches.

But the Web she was handing out today had five branches, not the three he remembered:

Things I Love. Things I'm Good At. Things That Matter to Me. People Don't Know This About Me. Things I'm Still Figuring Out.

Marcus stared at the last branch.

"Friends," Ms. Calloway said, "you might notice this Web is a little different from the one some of you did in first grade. It has a new branch this year. Things I'm Still Figuring Out. That is on purpose. You are eight and nine years old now. You are starting to have questions about yourself that you did not have when you were six. That is good. That is exactly where you are supposed to be."

Marcus hovered over the new branch.

Things I'm Still Figuring Out.

The first thing that came into his head was: *whether I should still tell people I draw comics, or whether comics are babyish.*

He had, in fact, drawn a whole comic over the summer. Twelve pages. A kid who could turn into a bird whenever he was embarrassed. He had been very proud of it. His dad had said *Marcus, this is wonderful*, and his mom had stuck the first page on the fridge with a magnet. But last week, on the bus, a fifth-grader had asked him what he had done over the summer, and Marcus had said *I made a comic*, and the kid had said *uh, isn't that for like babies?*

Marcus had said nothing. The conversation had not lasted thirty seconds. He had been thinking about it for six days.

He wrote, in his careful third-grade handwriting:

Whether the things I like are still allowed to be the things I like, even if older kids say they aren't.

It looked very honest, sitting there on the paper.

He almost erased it. He did not.

He turned, very slightly, to look at Ms. Calloway, and she was looking at him from across the room, and she gave him a small private nod. She was too far to read what he had written. She was just acknowledging that he was writing something honest. That was enough.

Marcus filled in the other branches. *Things I Love*: my sister Aaliyah, drawing, my dog Cleo, soccer, books about dragons. *Things I'm Good At*: being a big brother, drawing, finding lost things. (He put drawing on two branches. Mr. Patel walked past, saw it, and gave him a small thumbs up. Marcus felt the thumbs up for the rest of the morning.) *Things That Matter to Me*: being honest, my family, being a good friend. *People Don't Know This About Me*: I cry sometimes at the end of movies even when they aren't sad ones.

He looked at *Things I'm Still Figuring Out* one more time. His honest sentence sat there.

He left it.

Then, on his desk, Mr. Patel set down a small index card. Marcus looked up at the board. Ms. Calloway had written in green marker:

On the index card: one true thing about you that often goes unseen.

Marcus held the card. He thought of several things. Some small, like *I sometimes count steps when I walk*. Some big, like *I am scared of getting in trouble more than anyone in my family thinks*. Then he thought of one true thing.

He picked up his pencil and wrote, in his neatest handwriting:

I am working on being a person who tells the truth even when it costs me something.

He almost — almost — crumpled it.

But Ms. Calloway came past at exactly that moment, in the way she had of always coming past at exactly that moment, and she said softly, "Whatever you wrote is good, Marcus. Post it."

He stood up. He walked, on legs that suddenly felt a little wobbly, to the wall at the back of the room. He put his card in the middle. He walked back to his seat and sat down.

He was, in some small private way, terrified. The card was the most honest thing he had ever put on a wall.

He did not know yet that this was exactly what Ms. Calloway and Mr. Patel had been hoping for — not for Marcus specifically, but for somebody. Somebody had to be the first one. The rest of the class would follow that lead.

By the end of the lesson, all twenty-six cards were on the wall. Some silly. Some brave. Marcus's was both. Ms. Calloway stood in front of the wall and read them quietly, to herself, without saying anything aloud.

Then she turned to the class.

"This is who we are. Look at it for a second."

The kids looked.

"This is Room 18. Twenty-six different kinds of person on this wall. Twenty-six different ways of being a third-grader. There is no one right way. There is just — every one of yours. We are going to spend the year getting to know what each of these cards means."

Then she said, "Welcome to the year."

She nodded at Mr. Patel.

Mr. Patel said, "Math books out."

The rest of the morning was math.

But the wall stayed there, with the cards on it, and Marcus, every time he walked past it that day, looked at the middle, where his card was, and felt a small private flutter in his chest.

This is how the year begins. In a new room, with a new teacher and an old teacher, a wall of small honest cards, a question on an Identity Web that did not exist two years ago, and a boy who chose, on the first day, to write down a thing he was still figuring out.

The whole year will be in the figuring.

CHAPTER TWO

Emotions Are Information

In the second week of school, Sofia's stomach hurt during a math test. This was not new. Sofia's stomach had hurt during math tests since kindergarten. What was new, this year, was that Sofia knew what to do about it.

She was in the middle of a problem about how many apples Henry had if he gave four away to his sister and three to his cousin and started with twelve, and she felt the small tight feeling start in her belly, the one that meant *I am scared I am going to mess up*. In first grade, she had not had a name for the feeling. By third grade, on a Tuesday morning two weeks into the school year, she knew exactly what it was.

She put her pencil down. She put her hand on her stomach. She took a slow breath.

In her head, she said: *Hi, stomach. I see you. What are you telling me?*

The stomach said, in its own small stomach voice: *I am scared I won't get the right answer. I am scared everyone will know I got it wrong.*

Sofia said back: *Okay. Thank you for telling me. I hear you. I am going to do the problem the way I know how, and if I get it wrong I will still be okay. Worst case is wrong, not catastrophe. We are okay.*

She picked her pencil back up.

She solved the problem. She got it right. (Henry had five apples.) By the time the test was over, she had solved nineteen of the twenty problems. She had no idea if any of them were right except the apple one, but she also did not feel like she was going to throw up, which was a much better situation than she would have been in two years ago.

This is the thing about Sofia. She had been quietly building, since first grade, a tiny instruction manual in her head for how to deal with her stomach. She had not told anyone. It was just hers. By third grade, she had pages and pages of it.

She did not know that what she had been building had a name.

On Friday morning, Ms. Calloway came in for the second SEL lesson of the year, and the name showed up.

"Friends," said Ms. Calloway, "today we are going to talk about emotions. About all of them. The good ones and the hard ones."

The kids settled in. Some of them — the ones who had not been in her class — looked a little wary. Talking about emotions, for some of them, was a thing that had only ever been done at a doctor's office, or in trouble, or never.

But Marcus and Amara and Sofia and Priya and Darius and Jordan and Maya and Theo and Kezia — they leaned in. They knew this lesson. They knew the shape of it.

"There is an old way of thinking about emotions," said Ms. Calloway. "The old way is that some emotions are good — happy, excited, proud — and some are bad — sad, angry, scared. The old way thinks bad emotions are something to make go away."

She wrote on the board:

OLD WAY: *Some emotions are bad. Get rid of them.*

She drew a line through it.

"That is not how it actually works. Here is the new way. Emotions are not good or bad. Emotions are information. Every emotion is telling you something true about your situation. Your job is not to make the emotion go away. Your job is to listen to what it is telling you."

She wrote on the board:

NEW WAY: Emotions are information. Listen to what they are telling you.

Sofia, in her seat, felt something click. She had been doing the new way for two years without knowing there was a name for it. Now there was a name for it. The name felt like being seen.

"Let's go through a few," said Ms. Calloway.

She made a chart on the board.

Sadness – tells you something or someone you love is gone, hurt, or far away. Lets you know what matters.

Anger – tells you a boundary has been crossed, or something is unfair. Lets you know what you are willing to defend.

Fear – tells you there might be danger. Lets you know what you want to keep safe.

Anxiety – tells you that you care about something coming up, and you don't know how it will turn out. Lets you know what is at stake.

Shame – this one is trickier. Sometimes shame is information – sometimes it is telling you that you did something that doesn't fit with your values, and you can repair it. But sometimes shame is lying. Sometimes shame says you are bad as a person, not that you did something bad. We are going to spend a whole lesson on this one later in the year.

Joy – tells you what is working, what to do more of, what is alive.

Loneliness – tells you that you need connection, and need to reach for it.

Marcus stared at the chart.

He thought about being mad at the bus kid for asking if comics were babyish. He had been mad. He had also been a little scared. He had also been, he realized now, ashamed — a feeling he had not given a name to before. He had walked home from the bus with all three feelings sitting in his chest and he had thought *what is wrong with me*, and now Ms. Calloway was telling him that nothing was wrong with him. The feelings were giving him information about what mattered.

The information was: *I care about my comic. I do not want to give it up. I do not want to feel small for liking it.*

That was useful information. He had not known that useful information was something a feeling could give him.

Ms. Calloway said, "Emotions are not your enemies. They are not even your friends. They are messengers. They have a job — to tell you what is happening in your inner world. You can argue with the messenger, or you can listen to the message. The kids who learn to listen have an advantage that lasts their whole life."

She paused.

"Some of you have already been listening. You have been doing this for a while. You taught yourselves. To those kids — well done. You are ahead of most adults."

Sofia did not look up, but she could feel that Ms. Calloway might be looking at her. She did not need to check. The being-known feeling was the whole gift.

"Some of you are just starting. That is also good. You are starting young. By the time you are forty, you will be very good at this. Adults who didn't learn it until they were forty will look

at you and wonder how you got so wise. The answer is — you started when you were eight."

She handed out a worksheet with three columns.

A FEELING I HAVE BEEN HAVING THIS WEEK.

WHAT THE FEELING MIGHT BE TELLING ME.

WHAT I AM GOING TO DO WITH THAT INFORMATION.

The kids worked on it quietly for fifteen minutes.

Marcus wrote, in column one: *Embarrassment about my comic.* In column two: *I care about my comic. I don't want to lose the parts of me I love just because somebody older said they were babyish.* In column three: *Keep drawing the comic. Maybe show it to someone I trust. Not show it to the kid on the bus.*

He felt about thirty percent better than he had felt in the morning, and he hadn't even done anything yet. The act of naming what he was feeling, and turning the feeling into information, and then turning the information into a plan, had taken some weight off his chest.

This is what the lesson was for.

Sofia, across the room, wrote:

A feeling I have been having: worry about math tests.

What it is telling me: I want to do well. I care.

What I am going to do with it: Tell my stomach thank you. Do the test the way I know how. Remember that wrong is okay, not the end of the world.

She looked at her three columns. Then she did something nobody else in the room did.

She wrote, at the bottom, in tiny handwriting:

I have been doing this for a while. I am proud of me.

She underlined it. She put the worksheet in her folder.

At the very end of the lesson, Ms. Calloway said one more thing. "Friends. Some emotions are easy to listen to. Some are very hard. Sometimes the message is something you do not

want to hear. Loneliness might be telling you that you need to reach for someone, and you are scared to. Shame might be telling you that you did something you need to repair, and you are scared to. Anger might be telling you about a person in your life you have been pretending is okay, and they are not."

"When the message is hard, please remember — you do not have to listen alone. You can tell a trusted adult what the emotion is telling you, and ask them to help you figure out what to do. The Support Web is real. The Support Web is for hard messages. We are going to talk a lot more about this later in the year."

The class was quiet.

Then the bell rang, and the lesson was over, and Mr. Patel pulled out the math books, and the day went on.

But on the wall, at the back of the room, the index cards from Chapter One were still up. And under them, now, Ms. Calloway had taped up a new chart, in green marker, with the seven emotions on it.

The chart was going to stay there all year. So would the cards. So would Sofia's small private knowledge that she had been doing the right thing all along, and now had a name for it.

CHAPTER THREE

Everyone Makes Mistakes

This is the chapter about the lie Marcus told his parents about his homework.

It is a small chapter about a small lie. We will get to the bigger lie later in the book. The small lie is what teaches him, in October, how the bigger lie is supposed to come out. So we have to do the small one first.

What happened was this. On a Wednesday night, Marcus had spelling homework. Twenty words. He was supposed to write each one three times and use each in a sentence — thirty-five minutes if you did it carefully, seventeen if you rushed.

Marcus rushed.

He wrote each word two times instead of three, used five of them in sentences instead of twenty, closed the notebook, and went to play with Aaliyah, who was five now, and who wanted him to help her build a tower out of cushions on the couch.

When his mom asked at dinner if he had finished his homework, Marcus said yes.

He said it without thinking very much about it. The yes came out of his mouth the way yes often comes out of an eight-year-old's mouth when he is being asked a question about something he has half-done — it is a smaller, easier word than the truth, and it pauses the conversation in a useful way.

But Marcus had two new problems. The first was that he had not actually finished the homework. The second was that he had said something that was not true to his mom, which he did not usually do.

He went to bed thinking about it. He could not sleep.

He kept thinking: *I should just go tell her. And then: but if I tell her now, she will be mad that I lied even more than she would have been mad about the homework. And then: but if I do not tell her, the lie is just sitting there. And then: I am being weird about this. It is just homework. Why am I making it big.*

He fell asleep at almost midnight, which is very late for an eight-year-old.

He came to school the next morning tired and a little ashy-looking. He turned in the half-finished homework. Mr. Patel said nothing about it at the time.

Marcus thought he had gotten away with it.

But at lunch recess, Mr. Patel came up to him on the basketball court. "Marcus, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Marcus's stomach dropped.

They walked over to the bench by the side of the court. Mr. Patel sat down. Marcus sat down. Mr. Patel did not say anything for a second. He was looking at the court, not at Marcus, which Marcus noticed was a kind thing — he was giving him a second to gather himself.

"I looked at your spelling homework this morning," said Mr. Patel.

"Okay."

"You did about half of it."

"Yeah."

"Did you mean to do all of it?"

Marcus thought about saying *I forgot*. He thought about saying *I had a lot going on*. He thought about saying *the dog ate*

part of it. He looked at Mr. Patel. Mr. Patel was looking at him now, not in a mean way, in a calm way.

"No," said Marcus. "I just — I rushed it. I wanted to go play with my sister."

"Okay. That happens. One more thing. Last night, did anybody at home ask you if you had finished?"

Marcus's stomach did the thing again.

"Yes," he said quietly. "My mom."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her yes."

Mr. Patel nodded. He did not say *Marcus, that was wrong* or *Marcus, you lied to your mother*. He let Marcus sit with the answer he had just given.

Then he said, "Marcus, I want to tell you something. Are you ready?"

Marcus nodded.

"There are two kinds of mistakes. The first kind is *I did something I didn't mean to do*. That's the kind where you forgot, or you got tired, or you didn't realize what you were doing. The second kind is *I did something I knew was wrong, and I did it anyway because something else was easier*. That's the kind where you choose."

"The first kind, we fix together. The second kind, we still fix together — but we also talk about why we chose it. Because the why matters. The why is the thing that tells us if it might happen again."

Marcus was quiet.

"What kind of mistake do you think the spelling homework was?"

"The first one."

"And what kind of mistake do you think saying yes to your mom was?"

Marcus did not answer for a long time.

"The second one," he said finally.

"Okay. That is a really brave thing to say out loud. I appreciate that."

Marcus looked at his sneakers.

"Here is what we are going to do. About the spelling homework — you are going to finish it during quiet work time this afternoon, and turn it in to me by the end of the day. No big deal. We just want it done."

"About the thing with your mom — that is your work, not mine. But I want to say something that might help. You can think about it or not."

"Okay."

"When we lie to somebody we love, the lie does not just sit in the air between us. The lie sits inside us. And it gets heavier the longer we carry it. The fastest way to make it stop being heavy is to walk up to that person and say *yesterday, I told you something that wasn't true*, and tell them the true thing. They will probably be a little upset for a minute. But the minute is short. The carrying-it-around feeling is long."

Marcus nodded.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. But that is what I would tell you, as somebody who has lied to his own mom a few times in his life, when he was your age. The carrying-around is worse than the talking."

"Okay."

"Go play. Recess is half over."

Marcus went and stood near the basketball hoop. He did not play. He was thinking.

At the end of the day, he turned in his finished spelling homework. Mr. Patel said thank you and put a small green checkmark on it, the way he did with everybody's homework.

Marcus walked home from the bus stop.

When he got home, his mom was in the kitchen making dinner. Aaliyah was at the table coloring. Their dog Cleo was lying on the kitchen floor in the way that meant *I am not in your way except actually I am*.

Marcus put his backpack down. He stood in the kitchen doorway for a second.

"Mom?"

"Hey, sweetheart."

"I need to tell you something."

His mom turned around. She was holding a wooden spoon. She must have seen something in his face, because she put the spoon down. "Okay. I'm listening."

"Last night, when you asked if I finished my spelling homework — I said yes. But I had only done half. I lied to you. Mr. Patel saw at school today and made me finish it and I turned it in. But I want to tell you that I lied. I am sorry."

His mom stood very still for a second.

Then she came over and crouched down so she was at his eye level. She did not look mad. She looked — Marcus thought about this later — she looked moved.

"Marcus. Thank you for telling me. That took a lot."

"I am sorry I lied."

"I know. I appreciate the apology. It is much better that you told me. Are you going to do that again?"

"No."

"Even when it is easier to say yes?"

"I am going to try."

"Okay. That is what I want. I want the try."

Then she hugged him. She held him for a long time. Marcus could feel that she was glad — she was actually a little glad —

that he had told her. That was confusing to him. He had expected her to be mad. He had not expected her to be glad.

But here she was — glad. Glad that her kid was, at eight years old, the kind of kid who walked into the kitchen and said *I lied to you*. Glad that he was starting to be the kind of person who could not stand to carry a lie around in his chest for very long.

She did not say any of that out loud. But Marcus felt it, in the way she hugged him, and he filed it.

Aaliyah looked up from her coloring.

"What did you lie about?"

"My homework, Aaliyah."

"That's dumb."

"I know."

"Don't do that anymore."

"I know, Aaliyah. I won't."

Aaliyah went back to her coloring. Their mom laughed, just a small laugh, into Marcus's shoulder.

That night, Marcus fell asleep at his regular bedtime, and he slept hard, and when he woke up in the morning he felt — it took him a minute to name it — he felt light.

He had not realized he had been heavy.

This is one of the lessons of being eight. You start to be able to feel, in your own body, the difference between carrying a lie and not carrying one. When you are six, the difference is too small to feel. When you are eight, you start to feel it. By the time you are eleven, the difference is the size of a refrigerator, and you can hardly imagine how you ever didn't notice.

But for this Wednesday, Marcus, at eight, had felt the difference for the first time.

It was a good thing to feel. He would feel it again. Many times. Across many years.

The bigger lie, the one we have not gotten to yet, would test how much he had learned today. But that is a later chapter.

For now: he slept.

CHAPTER FOUR

My Inner Critic vs. My Inner Coach

A week later, Ms. Calloway came in and said the most important word of Book Two.

She wrote it on the board, very carefully. Two words, actually.

INNER CRITIC.

INNER COACH.

"Friends," she said, "today we are going to learn the names of the two voices inside your head."

A few of the kids who had been in Room 12 sat up. They knew this lesson. They knew the shape of this lesson. But they had not heard the words *Inner Critic* and *Inner Coach* before. In first grade, they had been called Grumpy Gus and Kind Coach. In third grade, the names had grown up a little.

That made sense to Marcus. *Grumpy Gus* was a third-grader name for a six-year-old's voice. *Inner Critic* was a grown-up name. He felt, looking at the board, that he had been promoted.

"Inside your head," said Ms. Calloway, "there is a voice. It talks to you all day long. Many of you have noticed it. Some of you talk back to it. Some of you have never realized it is there because it has been there your whole life and just sounds like thinking."

"The voice has two settings. It can be the Inner Critic. The Inner Critic is the voice that says things like *you are stupid, you always mess up, nobody likes you, you should have known better, you are not good enough*. It shows up especially when you have made a mistake, or when you are nervous, or when you are tired."

She paused.

"It can also be the Inner Coach. The Inner Coach is the voice that says things like *you can do this, everyone has a hard day, that was a mistake but it doesn't define you, you are doing your best, I am proud of you*. The Inner Coach is the voice you would use on your best friend. The Inner Coach is the voice your favorite adult uses on you."

She drew the two columns on the board.

| INNER CRITIC | INNER COACH |

|---|---|

| You are bad at this. | You are still learning. |

| You always mess up. | This time was hard. Next time will be different. |

| Nobody likes you. | Some people don't, but plenty do. |

| You are stupid. | You did one thing wrong. That doesn't mean stupid. |

| You should have known. | You couldn't have known. Now you do. |

The kids looked at the columns.

"Here is the thing. Both voices exist in every single person. You did not pick the Inner Critic. The Inner Critic is not your fault. The Inner Critic is something your brain built when you were very small, partly from things you heard from other people, partly from your brain's own way of trying to keep you safe. The Inner Critic thinks it is helping you. It thinks if it is

mean to you first, the world will not be mean to you. That is wrong. But that is what it thinks."

"Your job, this year, is not to get rid of the Inner Critic. You can't get rid of it. Nobody can. Your job is to notice it. To learn its voice. To talk back to it. To call in the Inner Coach when the Inner Critic is getting too loud."

She paused.

"This is the most important skill you will learn this year. The kids in this room who learn to talk back to the Inner Critic have an advantage that lasts the rest of their life. Adults who never learn it spend their whole lives being told mean things by the voice in their own head, and they think those things are true, because the voice is so familiar. The voice is not true. The voice is just loud."

She handed out a worksheet. Left column: WHAT MY INNER CRITIC HAS SAID TO ME THIS WEEK. Right column: WHAT MY INNER COACH WOULD SAY INSTEAD.

The kids took their pencils and started.

Priya, in the front, wrote her Inner Critic column without looking up. She wrote fast. Almost angrily.

You are not as smart as you used to be.

You forgot the answer in math yesterday and everyone saw.

You have to be perfect at this group project or your friends will think you are dragging them down.

Your handwriting is uglier than Hannah's.

Your name does not sound right when the teacher says it. You should pretend not to mind.

She stopped.

She looked at her list. She had filled the entire left column in less than three minutes. She had not written a single thing in the right column.

She sat with the worksheet.

She did not know how to talk to herself the way she would talk to her best friend. She had — actually — no idea. She had been doing the Inner Critic for so long that her brain did not know which voice the Inner Coach was supposed to sound like.

She looked across the room. Sofia was writing in both columns. Sofia had been doing this work, quietly, for two years. Sofia was, in this moment, ahead of Priya by miles.

Priya did not let this make her feel worse, although the Inner Critic offered her the chance.

She turned her paper over. On the back, she wrote: *DEAR PRIYA. If you were Hannah, and Hannah said these things to me, I would say —*

And then she paused.

What would she say to Hannah?

Hannah was Priya's best friend. Hannah had a small lisp and a habit of getting words wrong sometimes, and the kids in fourth grade up the hall sometimes laughed at her about it, and Priya was Hannah's defender. If Hannah came home from school and said *I am dumb because I can't say the word 'specifically' right*, Priya would say — Priya would say: *Hannah, you are not dumb. Your mouth is just learning a hard word. Lots of grown-ups can't say specifically. Try it as 'speh-CIF-i-cly.' Want me to practice with you?*

Priya wrote that on the back of her worksheet.

Then, very slowly, she crossed out the Inner Critic column on the front and rewrote each line in the Inner Coach voice.

You are still smart. You forgot one answer one time.

The other kids forget answers too. You just notice yours more.

Your friends like you because of who you are, not because of how perfectly you do a group project. You are not a project.

Your handwriting is yours. Hannah's is hers. There is no contest.

Your name is your name. The teacher will learn how to say it. You can tell her how. That is allowed.

Priya looked at her new column.

It did not, exactly, feel true.

The Inner Critic was still in her head, in fact, telling her that the new column was a lie, telling her that she had made it up to feel better. But Ms. Calloway had warned her about this — she had said, just five minutes ago, *the Inner Critic is loud, not true.*

Priya wrote, at the bottom of her paper, in her smallest handwriting:

The Inner Critic is loud, not true.

She underlined it three times.

She would, by November, have written it on a Post-it and stuck it on the inside of her desk lid. She would, by May, have it memorized. She would, in the years to come — in fifth grade, in sixth grade, in eighth grade, in eleventh grade, in college, in her first job — say the sentence to herself, in her head, more times than she could ever count.

She did not know any of that yet.

But she was sitting at her desk in Room 18 in October of third grade, and she had just written the most important sentence she was ever going to learn.

That was a good Friday.

Across the room, Jordan was doing something else.

Jordan had filled in the Inner Critic column with one short sentence, in big letters:

You aren't actually that funny.

He had not filled in the Inner Coach column at all.

He had closed his worksheet and was now sitting at his table doing exaggerated stretches, like an Olympic athlete preparing for a race, which was making everybody at his table giggle.

Ms. Calloway walked past Jordan's table. She paused. She did not look at Jordan's worksheet. She just paused.

"Jordan. Whenever you're ready. There's no rush."

Jordan kept stretching.

But after Ms. Calloway moved on, he sat back down. He looked at his worksheet. He picked up his pencil. In the Inner Coach column, he wrote, in much smaller handwriting than the Inner Critic line:

The fact that some people don't think you're funny doesn't mean you're not funny. It also doesn't mean funny is the most important thing about you.

He stared at it.

Then he put his pencil down and went back to stretching.

But the second sentence was there now, on the paper. And it would be there when he opened his folder next week, and the week after, and the month after. And every time he saw it, the second sentence would do its slow quiet work.

Funny is not the most important thing about you.

For Jordan, this was a piece of information he had not let himself have before. He had let himself have *being funny*. He had not let himself have anything else. The second sentence — written in his own handwriting — was a permission slip. He did not know it was a permission slip yet. But it was.

By the end of the lesson, every kid in the room had a two-column worksheet with at least one entry on each side.

Ms. Calloway said, "Friends. I want you to put these worksheets somewhere you will see them. Tape them inside your desk. Put them in the back of your binder. Take them

home and put them on your wall. Wherever. The whole point is to catch the Inner Critic the next time it shows up. And it will show up. Probably today."

Then she said one more thing.

"And I want to leave you with one sentence. Memorize this one. Hold on to it. It will help you, for the rest of your life."

She wrote it on the board.

THE INNER CRITIC IS LOUD, NOT TRUE.

The kids looked at it.

A few of them said it under their breath, just to feel what it was like to say.

Priya, who had already written it on her paper before Ms. Calloway said it, looked up and met Ms. Calloway's eyes across the room, and Ms. Calloway gave her a small private nod that meant *I saw your paper. You're ahead. Well done.*

Priya felt her chest get a little warmer.

The bell rang. Mr. Patel pulled out the social studies books. The lesson ended.

But the chart stayed on the board for the rest of the day. And the worksheet was in every kid's folder. And the sentence was in every kid's head.

The Inner Critic is loud, not true.

That sentence — that exact one — was going to come back, in different forms and with different inflections, for the rest of the year. And for the rest of the series. Marcus would say it to himself in a hospital waiting room in tenth grade. Priya would say it to her boyfriend in college. Sofia would say it to her own daughter, twenty-six years from now, when the daughter was nine and crying about a math test.

But that is a long way off.

For now, it is October, in Room 18, and the kids have a sentence. That is enough for today.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Toolkit

(A Strand Chapter – read this one slowly.)

Hi, friend. This chapter is a little different. Step out of the story for a minute. I want to talk to you directly.

Most chapters in this book are about the kids. This chapter is about you.

You have, somewhere inside you, what I want to call a toolkit. The toolkit is the set of things you do, when something hard is happening, to make yourself feel less hard. Some of these things you have always done without thinking. You go to your room. You squeeze a pillow. You play a video game. You eat a snack. You cry. You ride your bike very fast around the block. You text your best friend.

Some of these things are good for you. Some of them are not. Most kids have a mix. Most adults also have a mix, which is one of the reasons adults sometimes look so tired.

The point of this chapter is — and I am going to say it once and you can think about it for as long as you want —

You can build the toolkit on purpose.

You do not have to just have whatever happens to have ended up in your toolkit. You can put things in. You can take things out. You can swap things out for better things.

Sofia, in our story, has been doing this for two years. She figured out, on her own, that her stomach hurts when she is scared. She figured out that if she puts her hand on her

stomach and breathes slowly, the hurt is smaller. She figured out that if she names what she is scared of, the scared-ness gets quieter. She figured out that if she writes the scared thing down on a piece of paper, sometimes the paper carries some of the weight for her.

Each of these things — the hand on the stomach, the slow breath, the naming, the writing — is a tool. Sofia has been collecting tools for two years. She did not know she was collecting them. She just kept doing what worked.

I want to give you, in this chapter, a list of tools that you can try. Not all of them will work for you. Some of them will. You will not know which ones until you try them. Some of them will work some days and not others. That is normal.

Read through them. Try a few. Build your own toolkit.

THE TOOLKIT — TEN TOOLS TO TRY

1. The Slow Breath. Breathe in for four counts. Hold for one. Breathe out for six counts. Do this five times. This is the oldest tool in the world. People have been using it for thousands of years. There is a reason.

2. The Hand-on-Heart. Put your hand on your chest, over your heart. Press a little. Say to yourself, *I am here. I am okay. This will pass.* You can say it in your head. The hand and the words go together.

3. The Five Senses Walk. Look around. Name five things you can see. Four things you can touch. Three things you can hear. Two things you can smell. One thing you can taste. This pulls your brain out of the worry-loop. Your brain cannot worry-loop and notice the world at the same time.

4. The Tell-Somebody. Tell a trusted person what is going on. Just naming it out loud to another person, who is on your side, makes it about thirty percent smaller. Sometimes more.

5. The Write-It-Down. Open a notebook. Write what you are feeling. You do not have to write neatly. You do not have to write in sentences. You can scribble. You can draw. The point is to get the feeling out of your head and onto the page, where it can sit and be looked at.

6. The Move-the-Body. Run around the block. Jump rope. Do twenty jumping jacks. Push against a wall as hard as you can for ten seconds. Big feelings live in the body. Sometimes the way out of them is through the body, not through the head.

7. The Three Other Reasons. This one is from Book One. When somebody does something that bothers you, before you decide why they did it, come up with three other reasons it could be. Pick the kindest reason. Move on. We are going to come back to this one a lot.

8. The Future-Me Letter. Write a quick letter to yourself a year from now. Tell future-you what is going on. Future-you will read it and be glad. Past-you will feel less alone, because you remembered that future-you exists.

9. The One-Question Pause. Before you react to anything that has just happened, ask yourself one question: *What do I actually need right now?* Then answer the question. Sometimes the answer is a snack. Sometimes the answer is a hug. Sometimes the answer is to go to my room for ten minutes. Whatever it is — name it.

10. The Trusted Adult. When the toolkit is not enough — and sometimes it is not enough — you tell a trusted adult. The trusted adult is part of the toolkit. The trusted adult is not a failure tool. The trusted adult is the biggest tool. The biggest tool is for the hardest things. That is what trusted adults are for.

You can copy this list. You can put it on the wall by your bed. You can fold it into your pencil case. You can ignore it. You can come back to it. But here is what I want you to remember.

The toolkit is real. It works. Adults use it. Therapists teach it. Athletes use it. Surgeons use it. Astronauts use it. There is nothing magic about it. There is nothing childish about it. Building your toolkit on purpose is one of the most grown-up things a person can do.

You are starting now. You are starting young. You are going to be very, very good at this by the time you are an adult.

The kids in our story are starting too. Some of them already have a few tools. Some of them are just beginning. You are right there with them.

Okay. End of the chapter. Step back into the story. We have a lot more to do.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER SIX

Guilt vs. Shame

In late October, the lesson was about two words that sound a lot alike but are not the same at all.

The two words were *guilt* and *shame*.

Ms. Calloway wrote them on the board.

"Friends," she said, "today we are going to learn the most important difference between two feelings that almost everybody mixes up. If you remember nothing else from this whole year, please remember this lesson. This one matters."

She paused. The class quieted.

"Guilt is the feeling that says *I did something bad*. Guilt is about what you did. Guilt is information. Guilt is your inner sense of *I have done something that doesn't fit with my values, and I need to fix it*. Guilt is your friend. Guilt is what makes you walk back into the kitchen and tell your mom about the lie."

She wrote, underneath the word *guilt*:

GUILT — *I did a bad thing. I can fix it.*

She underlined it. Then she wrote, next to it:

SHAME — *I am a bad person. I can't fix what I am.*

"Shame is the feeling that says *I am bad*. Not *I did something bad*. *I am bad*. As a person. As a whole. Shame is not about what you did. Shame is about who you are. Shame is what tells you that the mistake is not a mistake — the mistake is proof that there is something wrong with you, deep down, that cannot be fixed."

The class was quiet.

"Friends, here is what I want you to know. Guilt and shame are not the same feeling. They are very, very different feelings, even though they feel similar in your body. Guilt has a way out — you fix it, you apologize, you change. Shame has no way out, because shame is about who you are, and you cannot change who you are by trying harder."

She paused.

"And here is the secret. Shame is always lying. Always. There is no kid in this room, in this school, in this country, in this world, who is bad as a person. There is no human being who is bad as a person. There are people who do bad things. But there is no bad person. There is just human beings, all of whom are doing bad things and good things in different mixes."

She wrote, in big letters, under the chart:

SHAME IS ALWAYS LYING.

"When you feel shame, you can know — for sure — that it is lying to you. You can listen to it for a second, the way you would listen to a kid who is upset and being unfair. You can say *I hear you. I know you are scared. But you are not telling me the truth right now.* And then you can put shame down."

"This does not mean you don't take responsibility. Guilt is for that. If you did something wrong, you fix it. You apologize. You change. That is guilt's job. Shame says you can't change because you are bad. That is the lie. Don't listen to shame. Listen to guilt."

She drew a chart.

| GUILT — useful | SHAME — lying |

|---|---|

| I did something wrong. | I am wrong as a person. |

| I can apologize. | There's no apology big enough for me. |

I can change.	I can't change who I am.
I can repair.	I am unfixable.
Listen to it. Act on it.	Notice it. Don't believe it.

Marcus, in his seat, was staring at the chart.

He thought about the homework lie. He had felt guilt about that one — *I did a bad thing*, and he had gone home and fixed it. That had been guilt. Guilt was correct. Guilt had given him useful information.

Then he thought about the other lie. The one he had been carrying for almost two years. The one about Aaliyah and the bike. The lie he told his parents about how she got the scrape on her knee.

That one was different.

That one — when he thought about it now — was not *I did a bad thing*. That one had become, somewhere along the way, *I am a bad brother*. He had been carrying *I am a bad brother* in his chest for two years.

He had not known, until this moment, sitting in Room 18 in October of third grade, that *I am a bad brother* was shame. That it was, by Ms. Calloway's definition, lying. He had been believing it the whole time.

He sat very still in his chair.

Ms. Calloway was still talking. He heard her voice but the words were going past him.

He was thinking: *what would it mean to have guilt about Aaliyah, instead of shame?*

Guilt would mean: *I did something wrong. I lied. I can fix it. I can tell the truth now. I can apologize.*

Shame had been: *I am a bad brother. I can't ever undo what I did. The thing about me as a person is broken.*

If shame was lying — if shame was always lying — then *I am a bad brother* was a lie, and had been a lie this whole time, and

he had been believing the lie and carrying it for two years.

His chest got warm.

He was not crying. He was close to crying, but not crying, not yet, not in class. He blinked a few times. He looked at his pencil. He looked at the chart on the board.

SHAME IS ALWAYS LYING.

Then Ms. Calloway said, in her gentle voice that pulled Marcus back into the room:

"I want each of you to think — privately, not out loud — of one thing in your life right now where you are confusing guilt and shame. Where you are walking around with *I am bad* when really the truth is *I did something I can fix*. You do not have to share. This is just for you to think about."

Marcus thought.

He did not have to think for very long.

The Aaliyah lie. He had been carrying *I am bad* about it. The truth was *I did something I can fix*.

He could fix it. He could fix it.

He had not known, until this moment, that fixing it was a possibility. He had thought, for two years, that the lie was a thing about him — a thing he could not get out from under. He had thought, in some quiet permanent corner of his head, *I am not the brother I wish I was. I am the brother who lied to my parents to keep myself out of trouble while my sister had a bandage on her knee*.

But the bandage was healed. Aaliyah was fine. Aaliyah did not even remember the bike anymore — she had been three.

The only person still carrying the bandage was Marcus.

And he was carrying it as *who he was*, when really, all along, it had been a thing he had done. A thing he could fix.

He could tell his parents.

He could just — tell them.

Ms. Calloway, across the room, was still talking. The other kids were writing in their journals or looking at the chart.

Marcus did something he had not done in school in a long time. He raised his hand.

"Yes, Marcus?"

"Ms. Calloway? Can I — can I talk to you for a minute after class?"

She did not pause. She did not look surprised. She just said, "Of course, sweetheart. I'll be here."

Marcus put his hand down.

He spent the rest of the lesson half-listening, half-thinking. He was a little scared. He was also a little — he had not expected this feeling — excited. Like he was on the edge of putting down something he had not realized was so heavy.

When the lesson ended and the kids started gathering their things, Marcus stayed at his table. Ms. Calloway came over.

"Hi, sweetheart. What's on your mind?"

"There is a thing I did when I was six. I lied to my parents about it. I have been carrying it for a long time."

Ms. Calloway sat down across from him. She did not push for details. She just waited.

"I think it is shame, not guilt," Marcus said. "I think I have been thinking it was a thing about me. Like *I am a bad brother*. But I think it was a thing I did. And I think I could maybe fix it. By telling my parents."

Ms. Calloway nodded.

"Marcus, that is a very, very wise thing to have figured out. I am proud of you for the thinking you just did."

"It is about my sister."

"Okay."

"She got hurt and I told my parents it was her fault, but it was — it was my fault. I was supposed to be watching her. She

fell off her bike."

"Okay. How is she now?"

"She is fine. She does not remember."

"Okay. And the part you have been carrying — what is it?"

"That I am a bad brother. That I lied to my parents to keep myself out of trouble. That my parents would be different about me if they knew."

Ms. Calloway did not jump in. She let the words sit on the table between them.

Then she said, "Marcus. Do you want to talk about this with Mr. Tate? He helped you with the Aaliyah thing in first grade, and he knows the family. You can talk to him together with me, or alone. Or you can talk to me alone right now. Or you can take some time. Whatever you want."

Marcus thought about it.

"I think I want to talk to Mr. Tate. With you there."

"Okay. I will set it up. Tomorrow, during your quiet work block. Mr. Patel will know where you are."

Marcus stood up. He felt like he was a few inches taller than he had been when he sat down.

He picked up his backpack.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome, Marcus. You are doing the work. I am just here to point at the chart."

She smiled. He smiled back. He left the room.

That night, he did not tell his parents anything yet. He waited until after the meeting with Mr. Tate the next day. But for the first time in two years, he went to bed and did not think about Aaliyah and the bike. He thought, instead, about the chart on the board, and the sentence on it:

SHAME IS ALWAYS LYING.

He thought it as he fell asleep. It was, by then, halfway to becoming a sentence he had memorized.

We are going to come back to Marcus's lie in Chapter Twelve. The week between today and Chapter Twelve is the most important week of Marcus's whole third-grade year. We have to give him room to walk through it.

For now, we leave him at the end of a Friday in late October, falling asleep with a sentence in his head that was, in his particular life, going to change the way he carried himself for the next thirty years.

Shame is always lying.

You can hold on to that one too. It is yours now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I Am More Than My Worst Moment

The night before Marcus's meeting with Mr. Tate, Amara could not write a single thing on her strengths inventory.

This had nothing to do with Marcus. Or rather — it had nothing to do with Marcus in the way you would think. Marcus's story was happening on one side of Room 18. Amara's story was happening on the other side, at the same time, in a quiet way that the rest of the class was not noticing.

The strengths inventory was a worksheet Ms. Calloway had handed out the week before. It had a long list of character strengths — kindness, honesty, courage, curiosity, fairness, leadership, creativity, perseverance, gratitude, humor, humility, hope — and the kids were supposed to circle the three that felt most true about themselves, and then write one sentence about each.

Most of the kids had finished it quickly. Sofia had circled kindness, honesty, perseverance. Priya had circled leadership, fairness, perseverance. Jordan had circled humor and then crossed it out and then circled it again and then added honesty and curiosity. Theo had circled humility, fairness, curiosity. Maya had circled kindness, hope, perseverance.

Amara had not circled any.

She had taken the worksheet home. She had stared at it on her desk for forty minutes. She had picked up her pencil three times and put it back down.

She could not think of a single character strength that was truly about her.

The Inner Critic — and she knew the Inner Critic's name now, she had named it in October — was loud. The Inner Critic was saying *Amara, you are not actually good at anything. You think you are kind but you walked away from your best friend two years ago. You think you are honest but you have never told anybody about that. You think you have courage but you would not stand up for a friend now if you had to. You are nothing. The list is empty for a reason.*

Amara had — and this is important — Amara had, in fact, walked away from her best friend two years ago.

It had happened in second grade. Her best friend at the time was named Iris. Iris had been Amara's best friend since they were five — they had moved to this town in the same month, they had been in kindergarten together, they had had matching backpacks. Then, in second grade, a group of girls in their class had started being mean to Iris. Not in a big way. In a small constant grinding way. They moved when Iris sat down. They whispered when Iris walked past. They invited everybody to a birthday party except Iris and one other girl.

Amara had not been part of the meanness. But Amara had also not stood up for Iris. Amara had been very, very quiet about it. She had felt, at the time, like if she stood up for Iris, the mean group would come for her next, and she would lose everything — and she had only just moved to this town a few years before, and she did not feel like her place at the school was secure.

So she had stayed quiet.

She had still played with Iris. She had still sat with Iris at lunch sometimes. But she had not — even one time, not once — said to the mean girls *that is unkind, please stop*.

And then, in the middle of second grade, Iris's family had moved away. Not because of the mean girls — Iris's dad had gotten a job somewhere else. But Iris had moved away with the meanness still happening. Iris had moved away without ever knowing that Amara was on her side.

Amara had not told anybody about this. Not her mother. Not her grandmother. Not anyone.

She had been carrying it for almost two years.

And tonight, looking at the strengths inventory, she felt — for the first time in a long time — that the carrying had a weight, and the weight was making it impossible to write down a single nice thing about herself.

Her mother, who had been watching her without seeming to watch her, came into the room.

"Amara, sweetheart, you've been at this for a while. What's the worksheet?"

"Strengths. We're supposed to circle three things we're good at."

"That sounds nice."

"I can't think of any."

Her mother sat down on the edge of the bed. She did not lean in. She did not put a hand on Amara's shoulder. She just sat — close, but not close enough to crowd.

"Hmm. Can I see the list?"

Amara handed it over.

Her mother read it slowly.

"Amara. I can think of three about you right off the bat. But you have to do the worksheet, not me. Can I tell you mine, and then you decide?"

"Okay."

"I would circle honesty, even though I think you might not feel like it right now. I would circle kindness. And I would circle gratitude — you are the most thankful kid I have ever met. You say thank you to the bus driver. You say thank you to the lunch lady. You say thank you to me when I bring you a snack, even though you have been saying thank you to me for snacks for nine years and you do not have to anymore."

Amara almost smiled.

"But mom, the honesty one — I'm not honest about something."

Her mother looked at her.

"What aren't you honest about, sweetheart?"

Amara was quiet for a long time.

Then she said, in a small voice, "When Iris was in second grade and the girls were mean to her — I didn't stand up for her. I just stayed quiet. And then she moved away and I never told her I was sorry. I have been thinking about it for two years."

Her mother sat very still for a moment.

Then she did something Amara had not expected.

She did not say *oh sweetheart, that wasn't your fault*. She did not say *you were only seven, you can't blame yourself*. She did not minimize. She said: "Amara. Thank you for telling me. That is real. That is a real thing to be carrying. I am so glad you told me."

Amara felt her eyes get wet.

"What do I do?"

"Well. I think there are two parts. The first part is the regret you are carrying. The second part is what to do about it."

"What do I do about it?"

"Do you know where Iris lives now?"

"I think — Mom said her family moved to Ohio. To Cincinnati."

"Do you have her email or her family's address?"

"I think Mom has her mom's email."

"Okay. Here is an idea. You don't have to do it. But here is an idea. You could write Iris a letter. Just a letter. Tell her what you have been carrying. Tell her you are sorry you did not say anything. Tell her you have thought about her many times. Iris is nine, like you. She is in a third-grade class somewhere in Cincinnati. She is, probably, sometimes lonely, and sometimes she thinks about her old school, and sometimes she thinks about you. If she got a letter from you tomorrow, do you know how that would make her feel?"

Amara had not thought about this.

"How would it make her feel?"

"I think it would make her feel — seen. I think she might still be carrying that year too. I think she might be carrying it worse than you. Because she lived it. And nobody, at the time, told her she was not alone."

Amara was quiet.

Then she said, "What if she doesn't write back?"

"That is up to her. The letter is for you both — but it is more for her than for you. You write it because she deserves it. You write it because she has been waiting for it without knowing she was waiting. Whether she writes back is her decision. Your job is just to send what you have to send."

Amara nodded. She wiped her eyes.

She looked back at the strengths inventory on her desk.

"Mom, can I write the letter first, and do the worksheet later?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

Her mother stood up. She kissed the top of Amara's head. She left the room and closed the door behind her quietly.

Amara took out a piece of paper. She thought for a long time. Then, very slowly, she wrote.

Dear Iris,

I have been thinking about you. It has been almost two years since you moved away, but I think about you a lot. I am writing because I want to tell you something I have not told anybody else.

When the girls in our class were mean to you, in second grade, I did not stand up for you. I knew it was wrong. I saw it. I just did not say anything, because I was scared they would be mean to me next. I have been thinking about this for a long time. I am very, very sorry. You did not deserve what they did. You were a really good friend. You did not do anything wrong. They were just being mean for nothing. I should have said something. I am sorry it took me two years to write this. I do not need you to write back. I just wanted you to know.

I hope third grade in Cincinnati is good. I hope you have a best friend who is better than I was.

Love, Amara

She put the pencil down. She read it twice.

She folded it into thirds. She put it in an envelope. She wrote IRIS on the front.

Then she went back to the strengths inventory. She thought for a minute. Then she picked up her pencil, and she circled three things.

She circled honesty. Underneath, she wrote: *I am honest, even when it is hard. I just wrote the hardest letter I have ever written.*

She circled kindness. Underneath, she wrote: *I am kind to other people most of the time. I am still learning how to be kind*

to myself when I have made a mistake.

She circled *courage*. Underneath, she wrote: *I am scared a lot. I do hard things anyway. That is what courage is.*

She looked at her worksheet. She liked it. She put it in her folder for school.

The next day, when she handed it in to Mr. Patel during morning circle, he glanced at it as he took it. He did not say anything in front of the other kids, but at the end of the day, he handed it back to her with a small note on the bottom in his teacher handwriting.

The note said: *Amara – these three are exactly right. I am especially struck by the third one. Courage is doing the hard thing while being scared. You are getting it. – Mr. P*

Amara read the note. She felt warm.

That night, with her mother's help, she sent the letter – and an email – to Iris.

It would be three weeks before Iris wrote back. When Iris wrote back, the email would say: *Dear Amara. I have been thinking about you too. I forgive you. Thank you for writing. I love you. – Iris.*

But that is in Chapter Eleven.

For now – Amara is nine, sitting at her desk in her bedroom, with a folded letter in an envelope and a strengths inventory with three honest words on it, and her mother is somewhere down the hallway making dinner, and the Inner Critic has gotten – just for tonight – quieter than it has been in a long time.

This is what it looks like to be more than your worst moment. Your worst moment is real. It happened. You did the thing. You did not do the thing. You were the one who walked away. You were the one who lied. You were the one who did not call.

But it is not who you are. It is one thing you did.

You can carry it, look at it, repair what can be repaired, and put it down. The carrying does not have to be forever. The carrying ends when the work is done.

Amara, that night, had started the work. She would not finish it for three weeks. But she had started.

This is the lesson of Unit One. *I am more than my worst moment.* You are too.

If you have been carrying something — and you probably have, even if you are eight or nine or ten — please know that carrying is not the same as being. The carrying is what you are doing. The being is what you are. They are different things.

You are not the thing you did.

You are the kid who is now reading a book about kids who did things and figured out what to do with them.

Most adults never get this far. You are getting it.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unit Reflection

At the end of Unit One, Ms. Calloway did something she had not done in Room 12.

She gave each kid in Room 18 a small spiral notebook with a hard cardboard cover. Bigger than the brown journals from first grade — the kind a fourth-grader could use.

"Friends," she said, "this is your reflection journal. It is private. I do not read it. Mr. Patel does not read it. Your parents do not read it. This is just for you."

The kids took the notebooks.

"At the end of each unit, I am going to give you twenty minutes — quietly, in class — to write in the journal. You can write anything you want. But I am going to give you three questions to start with."

She wrote on the board.

1. What did I learn about myself this unit?
2. What did I learn about another person this unit?
3. What do I want to remember from this unit?

The kids opened their notebooks. For twenty minutes, Room 18 was the quietest it had been all year.

Marcus wrote, in his neat third-grade handwriting:

This unit I learned about guilt and shame. I have been carrying shame about something I did when I was six, but it was supposed to be guilt. I told Mr. Tate. I am going to tell my

parents next week. I am scared. I am also a little excited. I think the heavy thing might be about to be lighter.

I learned about Amara. I did not know she was carrying something. She is. Everybody is. I forget that.

I want to remember "Shame is always lying." That one is going in my head forever.

Amara wrote:

I am more than my worst moment. I had been thinking I was not. The Inner Coach has been very quiet inside me. I am going to practice making it louder. My mom helped me write a letter to Iris. I do not know if she will write back. That is okay. The letter is sent.

I learned about Marcus. He is more thoughtful than I remember him being in first grade. Maybe we all are.

Courage is doing the hard thing while being scared.

Sofia wrote:

The things I have been doing for two years have a name. They are called the Toolkit. I have been collecting it without knowing. Ms. Calloway is naming everything I already do. It feels weird and good. Mostly good.

Other kids do not all have toolkits. I thought everyone did. I am going to maybe — maybe — show Priya a thing I do, the next time she is upset.

Emotions are information. They have a job. Even the hard ones.

Priya wrote, in a list format because of course she did:

1. I have an Inner Critic. I knew there was a voice. I did not know it had a name. The name helps.

2. I do not talk to myself the way I would talk to my best friend. I am going to work on this.

3. The Inner Critic is loud, not true.

4. I am still smart even when I forget the answer.

5. P.S. I am still going to use lists. They are mine. Ms. Calloway said so.

Darius wrote:

I have been mad a lot since Biscuit died last year. I thought I was over it. I am not over it. The mad has been about Biscuit the whole time. Now I know. I told my dad. My dad said he is sad about Biscuit too. I did not know my dad was sad. We are going to get another dog maybe. Maybe in the spring. I am not ready yet.

Anger is information. It is telling me what hurts.

Jordan wrote, in his small careful handwriting that nobody usually saw:

Funny is not the most important thing about me. I have known that for a while but I have not let myself say it. I said it now.

The Inner Critic has been telling me that the funny is the only thing about me that anybody wants. The Inner Critic is loud not true. I am still working on the loud part.

Maya wrote:

I have a voice. I forget. Then I remember. This year I want to remember more often.

Marcus is brave.

Remember to write to my mom. Even if I don't send the letters.

Theo wrote:

I always learn a lot about other people. I am starting to learn about myself too. I have been watching everyone for a long time. I forget to watch me.

I want to remember to watch me.

Mia wrote a short entry, with a small picture drawn at the bottom:

Feelings are information. I have been a lot of feelings this fall. My dad got a new job and we might be moving. I have not told anybody. I do not know if I should tell anybody yet.

Wherever I am – I will still be me.

(Mia did not show this entry to anyone. She had not yet told her friends about the move. She would tell them in Chapter Fifteen.)

Kezia wrote:

Everyone has stuff going on, not just my family. Amara has a thing. Marcus has a thing. Even Jordan has a thing, I bet, even though he does not show it.

My grandma and I are doing okay. There was a hard week in September. We are okay now.

Everybody has a story.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the room, did not read any of the journals. She just watched the kids writing. She had learned, in fourteen years, that the act of writing was the lesson – the time spent thinking with a pencil in your hand was the gift.

When the twenty minutes were up, she said quietly, "Friends, close your journals. Keep them somewhere safe."

The kids closed the journals. Sofia put hers in her desk and patted it once, like it was a small animal.

This is the end of Part One. Part One was about *Who am I?* The kids spent eight weeks figuring out – slowly, in different ways – that the question does not have one answer. It has many. The answers are still being built.

Part Two starts in November. Part Two is about being kind to yourself when you have made a mistake – and Marcus, you should know, is going to have his Mr. Tate meeting at the start of Part Two, and then his parents will know about the bike,

and then the whole world of *I am a bad brother* is going to come apart.

We are going to be there with him.

The journals are in the desks. The chart is on the wall. The toolkit is being built. The kids of Room 18 have made it through their first unit.

We are exactly one-quarter of the way through the year.

PART TWO



Self-Compassion & Self-Forgiveness

*How do I be kind to myself, especially when
I have done something wrong?*

November through January. The cold months. The

CHAPTER NINE

What Is Forgiveness, Really?

On the first Tuesday of November, Marcus told his parents about the bike.

Mr. Tate had set up the meeting the way these things are usually set up — quietly, without making a big deal of it. He had called Marcus's mom on a Friday afternoon and said *Marcus has been working through something with us at school. He has decided he wants to talk to you and his dad about it together. Would Tuesday after dinner work? Marcus has asked that I be there as a support.* Ms. Calloway too, if she is available.

Marcus's mom had said yes immediately. She had told Marcus's dad. Marcus's dad had also said yes immediately. Neither of them had pressed Marcus all weekend about what it was. They had let him carry it the last few steps himself.

Marcus did not eat much at dinner on Tuesday. Aaliyah, who was five and oblivious, ate enough for two people and asked if she could be excused. Their parents said yes. Aaliyah ran off to her room to play with her stuffed elephant. The dining room got quiet.

The doorbell rang.

Mr. Tate and Ms. Calloway came in together. They were friendly. They sat at the table. Marcus's parents had made coffee. Everybody had a mug. Everybody was being a little too polite about the mugs.

Marcus sat at his usual seat. He felt his stomach. He thought, in his head, the sentence Sofia would have thought: *Hi, stomach. I see you. What are you telling me?*

His stomach said: *I am scared.*

He said back: *Okay. Thank you. We are going to do it anyway.*

He looked at Mr. Tate. Mr. Tate nodded at him. *Whenever you are ready. Take your time. You are not in trouble. I am here.*

Marcus took a breath.

"Mom. Dad. I want to tell you something I did when I was six. Two years ago. Aaliyah was three."

His parents waited.

"You remember when Aaliyah fell off her bike and got the cut on her knee? At Grandma's house?"

His mom nodded.

"I told you she fell on her own. Like, you were inside, and I came in and said *Aaliyah crashed, she's okay, she just scraped her knee.*"

"I remember," said his dad.

"That wasn't — that wasn't all the way true."

Marcus's parents were very still.

"I was supposed to be watching her. You guys had said *Marcus, keep an eye on your sister.* I said okay. But then I — I was looking at something on the path. I was looking at a rock that had a weird shape. I stopped watching her for like — a minute. I don't know. Maybe a minute. And while I wasn't watching, she got on the big bike. The bigger one. The one she was not supposed to be on. And she tried to ride it. And she fell."

His voice was getting small.

"I came running over. She was on the ground. She was crying. There was a scrape on her knee. I felt really, really

scared. I thought you were going to be so mad at me. I thought you were going to think I was a bad brother."

He stopped.

His mom did not say anything. She did not move. She was just listening.

"So when you came out and asked what happened — I said she fell off her own bike. The small one. I said she just lost her balance and went over. I didn't tell you about the big bike. I didn't tell you I wasn't watching."

He was almost crying.

"I have been thinking about it for two years. I thought I was a bad brother. I thought you would be different about me if you knew. I — I —"

He started to cry.

His mom got up from her chair and came over to him and put her arms around him. He cried for a while. Aaliyah, who had been playing with her stuffed elephant in the other room, did not hear, because she was singing to herself the way she did when she played.

After a few minutes, Marcus's mom let go of him. She crouched down so she was at his eye level.

"Marcus. Listen to me. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You are not a bad brother. You have never been a bad brother. You were six. You were a six-year-old watching a three-year-old. That is too young to be the entire fence between Aaliyah and the world. We should not have asked you to do that for that long without checking in. That part — that was us. That was an adult mistake. You being scared about it for two years — that is more than the mistake deserved. We are not different about you for telling us this. We love you exactly the same. We love you more, actually, for telling us.

You waited a long time and you walked in here and you told us anyway. That is brave."

Marcus's dad said, quietly, "Marcus. Look at me."

Marcus looked.

"I lied to my parents about something when I was nine. I never told them. I am forty-two and they are seventy-one and I still have not told them. You just did, at eight, what I have not figured out how to do in thirty-three years. You are not behind. You are ahead. Way ahead."

Marcus did not know what to say to this.

He looked at Mr. Tate. Mr. Tate was nodding.

He looked at Ms. Calloway. Ms. Calloway had — and Marcus would remember this for a long time — Ms. Calloway had tears in her eyes. She did not wipe them. She just let them be there.

"Marcus," said his mom. "Is there anything else?"

"No. That's the whole thing."

"Okay. Then can I tell you what I want?"

"Okay."

"I want you to put it down. I want you to know that we know now. I want you to know it does not change anything about how we feel about you. I want you to stop carrying *I am a bad brother* around in your chest. You are not that. You have never been that. You are a kid who got scared at six and made a small bad choice that you have already paid for, in worry, ten times more than the choice deserved. I would like for you to walk into your room tonight and put it down."

"Okay."

"Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Okay. And one more thing."

"Okay."

"You can come to your dad and me with anything. Any thing. Now. Tomorrow. Next year. In high school. In college. When you are an adult. There is no thing you can come to us with that we will not be on your team about. We will help you fix it. We will not punish you. We will not be different about you. That is a promise. That is the promise of a parent. Okay?"

"Okay."

She kissed the top of his head. His dad got up and hugged him too.

Mr. Tate and Ms. Calloway sat there with the family for another twenty minutes, sipping coffee, not talking much, just being there the way trained adults know how to be there at a moment like this — present but not central, witnessing but not directing.

Eventually they left.

When they were gone, Marcus's mom sat with him on the couch for a long time. Aaliyah came in and crawled into Marcus's lap and asked him to read her a book about a hippo, and Marcus did, and Aaliyah fell asleep in the middle of it.

Marcus carried her to her room. Then he went to his own room. He sat on his bed.

He felt — and this took him a minute to identify — he felt empty. Not in a bad way. In the good way. Like a glass that had been full of murky water for a long time, and somebody had finally tipped it over, and the water had run out, and now the glass was empty, and could be filled with something else.

This is what forgiveness, the real kind, feels like.

People talk about forgiveness as if it is a gift you give. Sometimes it is. But sometimes — for a long time — forgiveness is a putting down. You put down the carrying. You put down the *I am bad*. You put down the wondering whether

the people you love would still love you if they knew. You let the answer be the answer.

The answer, almost always, is yes. They still love you. They love you more.

But you cannot find out the answer until you ask the question.

Marcus had asked the question. The question had an answer.

He lay down on his bed. He looked at the ceiling. The ceiling had a glow-in-the-dark sticker of a star that he had put there when he was four. He had forgotten the star was there.

He looked at it. He smiled. He fell asleep.

This is the start of Part Two. Self-Compassion. Self-Forgiveness. We start with Marcus because Marcus is the one who started his work first. The other kids will do their version of this work, in their own time, throughout this part of the book. Each in their own way. Each on their own schedule.

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Forgiveness is putting the heavy thing down.

You can put a heavy thing down even if it really happened. Especially if it really happened.

That is the whole point.

CHAPTER TEN

The Weight of Self-Criticism

In the second week of November, Priya broke down crying.

This had not happened before. Priya did not cry at school. Priya did not cry in public. Priya, in nine and three-quarters years of being alive, had been to a funeral, had broken her arm, had lost a beloved pet hamster, and had not cried in public for any of these events. Priya cried in her room, with the door closed, with a pillow over her face, into a stuffed animal. Public crying was not a Priya thing.

But on a Wednesday morning in November, during a group project, Priya cried in front of her group, then in front of Mr. Patel, then in the hallway, then on the floor of the bathroom for about three minutes, and then, finally, in Ms. Calloway's office during the lunch hour, with the door closed and her hands shaking and her face splotchy.

Here is what happened.

The group project was a poster about an ecosystem. Priya's group had been assigned the rainforest. Priya, Hannah (her best friend), and a kid named Devon were supposed to make the poster together. Priya had — being Priya — done most of the planning over the weekend. She had brought in printed pictures of frogs and toucans and a small map of the Amazon. She had made an outline with categories: Animals, Plants, Climate, Threats, Why It Matters. She had been ready.

What Priya had not done, because she had been trying to be a good group-project person, was the actual drawings. She had decided to let Hannah and Devon do the drawings — she had reasoned that they should each have a role, that she shouldn't take over, that she was trying to be a better collaborator.

But Hannah's drawings were small and faint. And Devon's drawings were great but he had drawn the wrong animal — he had drawn a Bengal tiger, which is from Asia, not the rainforest. Priya had pointed this out, gently, and Devon had said, *oh, oops, well, it looks cool though, can we keep it*, and Priya had said no, the project is about the rainforest, we need to fix it, and Devon had said *fine, you fix it*, and that was when Priya had felt the bad thing in her chest.

The bad thing in her chest was a familiar thing. The bad thing was the Inner Critic saying very loud, all at once:

You are doing this wrong. You are being too controlling. Devon is mad at you. Hannah is silent because she is also mad at you. The poster is going to look terrible because you are not letting people do their parts. But if you do all the parts yourself, you are bad at group projects. You are always like this. You always ruin everything. You are exhausting. You are too much.

It was a long monologue. The Inner Critic had been working it up since the weekend.

Priya did not say anything. She picked up a marker. She erased Devon's tiger and drew a jaguar in its place, because that's what should have been there. She was careful. She drew well — Priya draws beautifully when she is upset, which is a thing many anxious children do.

Devon said, "Wow. That's actually really good."

Hannah said, "Pri, are you okay?"

Priya said, "I am fine."

She put the marker down. She stood up. She walked out of the classroom and into the hall and into the bathroom and locked herself in a stall, and she cried for three minutes, hard and silent and shaking.

Mr. Patel, who is the kind of teacher who notices when a student walks out of a classroom in the middle of a group project without saying anything, gave her three minutes alone and then sent a kind, well-trained third-grade aide to check on her in the bathroom. The aide was named Mrs. Yamashita. Mrs. Yamashita is in this story for one minute and then she goes back to her regular job, but I want you to know that she was kind and gentle and that she crouched down outside the stall and said, *Priya, sweetheart, I am Mrs. Yamashita, I am from the office, I am not going to come in, I am just going to sit out here, take your time.*

Priya stayed in the stall for two more minutes. Then she came out. Mrs. Yamashita gave her a tissue. She walked Priya to Ms. Calloway's office, which was down the hall.

Ms. Calloway saw them coming. She closed her laptop. She had been about to go to lunch.

"Hi, friends. Come on in. Priya, sweetheart, sit wherever you want."

Priya sat in the chair across from Ms. Calloway. Mrs. Yamashita said *I'll leave you two* and slipped out and closed the door quietly.

Priya looked at her hands. She did not look at Ms. Calloway.

"Take all the time you need, sweetheart."

For two minutes, Priya did not speak. She was breathing. Ms. Calloway did not push.

Then Priya said, in a small fast voice:

"I am too much. I am too much. I keep being too much. I have always been too much. I try to be smaller and I cannot. I

try to not care about the project and I cannot. I see Devon drawing the wrong tiger and I want to scream but I cannot scream so I just fix it and then I am the controlling kid and Devon thinks I am annoying and Hannah thinks I am annoying and I want to do one group project in my life where I am not the one who ruins it and I cannot do it. I cannot. I am always like this."

She started crying again.

Ms. Calloway did not interrupt.

When Priya was done, Ms. Calloway said, very softly:

"Priya. Can I ask you a question?"

"Okay."

"The voice that is saying all of those things to you right now — is that you? Or is that the Inner Critic?"

Priya stopped.

She thought.

She had not thought about it that way. She had — for years — thought of the voice in her head as *her*. As just Priya thinking. She had not yet learned, even after the October lesson, even after writing *the Inner Critic is loud, not true* on the back of her worksheet, to recognize the Inner Critic in real time. She knew about it. She had named it. She had not yet caught it in the act.

This was the act.

Ms. Calloway waited.

After a long minute, Priya said, "It's — the Inner Critic. It's the Inner Critic."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's saying *always* and *cannot* and *too much*. And I know — I know the Inner Critic is loud, not true. And it is being very loud right now."

Ms. Calloway nodded slowly.

"Priya. I want to tell you something. Are you ready?"

"Okay."

"You are not too much. You are a child with high standards, high care, high follow-through, and a brain that runs faster than most third-graders' brains. That is not a problem. That is not too much. That is a gift, which we are going to have to learn — together, slowly — to carry well. Because right now, the gift is carrying you. And the gift is too heavy for a nine-year-old to carry alone."

Priya was very still.

"What I want you to know is that being the careful kid in a group project does not make you the problem. It makes you a kid who notices. Most third-graders don't notice when somebody draws a Bengal tiger in a rainforest project. You notice. Noticing is a strength. It is going to be a strength your whole life."

"The thing we are going to work on — together — is not making the noticing smaller. The thing we are going to work on is helping you not punish yourself for noticing. There is a difference between *I noticed something and corrected it kindly* and *I am annoying for noticing*. The first one is being a careful person. The second one is the Inner Critic."

Priya wiped her nose.

"How do I — how do I make the punishing part stop?"

"You catch it. Every time. As many times a day as it shows up. You say, in your head, *that's the Inner Critic. The Inner Critic is loud, not true. I am going to listen to my Inner Coach instead*. And then you ask the Inner Coach what is really true. The Inner Coach will say something like *you noticed the tiger was wrong. You corrected it. That is what good group members do. You are okay*."

"And every single time you do this — every time — you are training your brain to do it faster. Right now it takes you fifteen minutes and a bathroom stall to catch the Inner Critic. In a year, it will take you two minutes. In five years, it will take you ten seconds. In ten years, you will catch the Inner Critic as it starts to speak, and you will turn it off before it finishes its first sentence."

"This is a practice. You are at the beginning of the practice. The fact that you are crying right now is not failure. The fact that you are crying right now is the practice working. You noticed the voice. You named it. You came in here. You let yourself feel it. You are doing the work."

Priya did not say anything for a minute.

Then she said, in a much smaller, calmer voice:

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. I will try."

"That is all I am asking. The try."

Priya took a long breath. She wiped her face.

Ms. Calloway said, "There is also one more thing I want to mention. Are you ready?"

"Okay."

"The friends. Hannah and Devon."

"Yes."

"They are not going to remember the Bengal tiger thing tomorrow. They are not mad at you. They are nine. They have already forgotten. The Inner Critic has been telling you they are mad. The Inner Critic does this — it makes up what other people are thinking. The Inner Critic is wrong about other people about ninety percent of the time. Real Hannah and real Devon are eating their lunch right now and worrying about

completely different things than what you were worrying about."

Priya considered this.

"Probably true."

"Probably true."

"Okay. I am going to go back to lunch."

"Okay. One last thing. Take this."

Ms. Calloway handed her a small index card. On the card, in Ms. Calloway's careful handwriting, were three sentences:

The Inner Critic is loud, not true.

Noticing is a strength.

I do not have to be small to be loved.

"Carry this. In your pocket. In your binder. Look at it when the Critic shows up. The Critic will show up many times. You can carry this card for as many times as you need to."

Priya took the card. She held it in her hand. She stood up.

"Thank you, Ms. Calloway."

"You are welcome, Priya. You are doing this work. I am just here to point at the chart."

Priya almost smiled.

She walked back to the cafeteria. She found Hannah at their usual table. Hannah looked up with her big worried best-friend face and said, *Pri, are you okay, what happened.*

Priya said, "I was upset about the tiger. I went and talked to Ms. Calloway. I am better now."

Hannah said, "Do you want me to be more careful about my drawings? Are mine bad?"

Priya said — and this took her a second to say, because the old Priya would have said *no no your drawings are great* immediately — Priya said, "Hannah, your drawings are good. Sometimes they are a little faint. We could maybe go over the

lines together at the end so they are bolder. Would that be okay?"

Hannah said, "Yes. That would actually help. I always think I'm pressing hard and then I look and I haven't been pressing hard at all."

Priya laughed. A small real laugh.

They sat together for the rest of lunch and ate.

The poster, by the end of the week, was beautiful. Priya did most of the planning. Devon did the labels and the climate section. Hannah's drawings — gone over at the end in marker so they were bolder — were lovely. The teacher gave them an A. Devon high-fived Priya. Hannah hugged her.

That afternoon, Priya went home and put the index card from Ms. Calloway on her wall, next to her bed, where she would see it every night before she went to sleep and every morning when she woke up.

The Inner Critic is loud, not true.

Noticing is a strength.

I do not have to be small to be loved.

The third one was the one that did the most work, in the long run. Priya had been making herself small to be loved for a long time. She did not know she had been doing it until somebody named it.

This is what it means to start being kind to yourself. You name what you have been doing. You see it. Then, slowly, over many months — over many years — you start to choose differently.

Priya was at the beginning.

But she had a card in her pocket now.

That is how you start.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Accountability Without Self-Punishment

Three weeks after Amara sent her letter to Iris, the email came back.

Amara had been checking her mother's email every day for those three weeks. Sometimes twice a day. Sometimes — when she was being honest with herself — five times a day. Her mother had told her, gently, that there might not be a reply. Iris's family might have moved again. Iris might not want to write back. Iris might be too busy with her new school. Iris might be carrying something Amara could not see.

The letter was for you both. But the writing was for you. You sent what you had to send. The rest is up to her.

Amara had said okay. Amara had checked the email anyway.

On a Thursday afternoon in mid-November, when Amara came home from school, her mother was waiting at the door. Her mother had that look on her face. The *I have news* look.

"Amara. Iris wrote back."

Amara did not say anything. She just held out her hand.

Her mother had printed the email. She handed it over.

Amara took the printed page. She walked, slowly, to the couch. She sat down. She put the page on her lap. She read it.

Dear Amara,

I have been thinking about you too. I forgive you. Thank you for writing. I love you.

— Iris

P.S. I have to tell you something. After we moved to Cincinnati, I felt really bad about myself for a long time. I thought I had done something to make those girls mean to me. I thought maybe I was just not a nice enough person. My new school is okay. I have a friend named Madeleine. She is okay. But I have been thinking about our old school a lot. When your letter came, I cried. My mom asked me if I was sad. I said I was happy and sad at the same time. I think you have been carrying this for a long time. So have I. I am glad you wrote. I love you.

— Iris, again

Amara read it.

Then she read it again.

Then she read it a third time.

By the third time, she was crying. Not loud crying. Quiet crying. The kind of crying where the tears just go down your face and you do not really feel them coming.

Her mother sat down on the couch next to her. She put a hand on Amara's back. She did not say anything.

After a long time, Amara said, "She thought it was her fault."

"Sweetheart, she did."

"It wasn't her fault."

"No. It wasn't."

"It wasn't my fault either, was it. I mean — I should have stood up for her. But I didn't make the girls be mean. I was seven."

Her mother thought about this.

"Amara. You did one thing that was not your best — you stayed quiet. That is a real thing to apologize for. You apologized. Iris forgave you. That part is done. You are not

responsible for what the other girls did. You did not make them mean. You did not even know how to make them stop. You were seven. The grown-ups in that school should have noticed and stopped it. They did not. That is on them. Some of the responsibility belongs to other people. Not all of it is yours."

Amara nodded slowly.

"I have been carrying it all," she said.

"I know, sweetheart. You have. You can put down the part that was not yours. The part you should have done differently — you can hold that piece, learn from it, and put it down too. Iris already forgave you for it."

Amara put the email on the coffee table. She wiped her face.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Can I write Iris back?"

"Of course you can."

"Now?"

"Now."

Amara went to her room. She took out a fresh piece of paper. She wrote:

Dear Iris,

Thank you for writing me back. I cried too when I read your letter. I want to tell you something. The girls who were mean to you — that was their fault, not yours. They were mean. You did not make them mean. You were not the problem. You were a good friend. I know this because I was your friend, and I knew you better than they did.

I am sorry it has taken us both two years to figure this out. I am glad we are figuring it out now.

Can we be friends again? Even from far away? I can write to you. We could be — pen pal friends. Or pen pal best friends. Or

just whatever you want.

I love you too.

Love, Amara

She read it. She gave it to her mom. Her mom typed it up and sent it.

Two days later, Iris wrote back: *YES. Pen pal best friends. Forever.*

Amara, when she read this, did something she had not done in months. She laughed — a big real laugh — and her mother heard her from down the hall and came in and asked what was funny, and Amara held up the email and her mother read it and laughed too.

They both laughed for a while.

This is what accountability without self-punishment looks like.

Accountability is: *I see what I did. I am taking responsibility for the part that was mine. I am making it right.*

Self-punishment is: *I am the worst person. I will carry this forever. I do not deserve to feel better.*

The two look similar from the outside. They are very different on the inside.

Amara had been doing self-punishment for two years. The letter to Iris turned it into accountability. *I see what I did. I am sorry. I am making it right.* The accountability had a beginning and an end. The self-punishment had no end.

When the accountability ended — when the work was done — Amara was allowed to put it down.

She put it down.

This took the rest of November. By Thanksgiving, the weight had lifted enough that Amara could feel the difference. She slept better. She laughed more easily. She wrote a list of things she was good at on the back of an old worksheet, and

the list had nine things on it, not three, and she did not erase any of them.

This is what self-forgiveness, the real kind, makes possible. It is not about pretending you did not do the thing. It is about doing the work, putting the weight down, and walking forward without dragging the weight behind you.

Amara, that November, started walking forward.

She had a friend named Iris in Cincinnati who would write to her, by hand, with stickers on the envelopes, for the next nine years. That is not in this book. But you should know it is what happens.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Recovering After Mistakes

(A Strand Chapter – read this one slowly.)

Hi, friend. It's me again. The narrator. The grandfather voice. J.A.R.

This is the second strand chapter. The strand chapters are where I step out of the story for a minute and talk to you directly, because some things are best said straight, without a character in the way.

This chapter is about what to do *after* you have made a mistake. We have spent a lot of time, in this book, on the *during* of a mistake – the lying, the bumping, the staying quiet, the not standing up. But what about the after?

The after is where most adults get stuck.

Here is the secret. Most adults you know have made a mistake – sometimes a small one, sometimes a big one – that they have not figured out how to put down. They are still carrying it. They have been carrying it for a year, or five years, or twenty years, or forty. They do not always know they are carrying it. But they are.

I want you to learn, now, while you are eight and nine and ten, what to do after. So you do not have to carry these things into your thirties and forties and beyond.

Here is the toolkit for recovering after a mistake.

1. NAME THE MISTAKE.

Say it out loud, or write it down, in plain words. Not *I did kind of a not-great thing*. Not *something happened*. The plain language. *I lied to my mom about my homework*. *I said something unkind to my friend*. *I broke a thing on purpose*. *I did not stand up for someone who needed me to*.

Naming the mistake takes away its power. The mistake gets smaller the moment you name it. Try this. The next time you have done something you are not proud of, say it out loud, alone in your room, in plain words. Notice what happens in your chest.

2. NAME THE IMPACT.

What did the mistake do to the other person? What did it do to you? Be honest. Do not minimize. Do not catastrophize. Just describe. *My mom was disappointed*. *I felt bad for two days*. *My friend was sad*. *They had to walk to school alone*.

The impact is what tells you what the apology needs to address.

3. APOLOGIZE — IF YOU CAN.

You learned this in first grade. The three-part apology. *I name what I did*. *I name how it hurt*. *I name what will change*. You can review the three parts now if you have forgotten. They have not changed.

If you can — because sometimes the person you need to apologize to is far away, or gone, or not safe to be in contact with. In those cases, you can write an apology you do not send. You can apologize in your journal. You can apologize at a grave, or to a memory, or to your reflection in a window. The apology still does work, even if the person does not hear it. You hear it. Your inside hears it. That is some of the work.

4. REPAIR — IF YOU CAN.

Repair means doing something to fix the thing you broke. If you took someone's pencil, you give it back. If you said

something unkind, you take it back and you also say something kind. If you let someone down, you show up for them next time. If you lied, you tell the truth.

Repair is not always possible. Some things cannot be fixed. (You cannot un-say a mean thing. You can only do the next thing.) The repair is sometimes not the original thing. The repair is sometimes the changed behavior going forward. Both count.

5. LEARN.

What did this mistake teach you? What will you do differently next time? Write it down. Tell somebody.

The learning is what turns the mistake into something useful. A mistake without learning is just damage. A mistake with learning is — and I am going to say this carefully because it is important — a mistake with learning is worth something. The mistake is paying you back, in the currency of wisdom. That is the deal.

6. PUT IT DOWN.

This is the part most adults can't do. They name, they apologize, they repair, they learn — and they still keep carrying.

You do not have to keep carrying.

When the work is done, you put it down. You walk away. You let it be a thing that happened, not a thing that is.

How do you know the work is done? Here are some signs.

The other person has forgiven you, or you have made the best repair you can. You have changed your behavior in a real way. You can say the mistake out loud without your chest getting tight. You can think about it without feeling small.

When those signs are there — you can put it down. The mistake is allowed to be in the past. You are allowed to move forward.

If the chest-tight feeling comes back later — that is okay. Pick it up. Look at it. Put it back down. The practice of putting things down is the whole practice. Some things you put down once and they stay down. Some things you put down a hundred times. The picking-up-and-putting-down is not failure. It is just how it works.

7. TELL A TRUSTED ADULT IF YOU ARE STUCK.

If the mistake is too big, or too old, or too heavy, or if it involves something that scares you, or someone who is not safe — you tell a trusted adult. You do not work on it alone. The trusted adult is part of the recovery.

When you tell a trusted adult, you are not asking them to fix it. You are asking them to help you carry it for a minute, so you can figure out what to do.

That is what trusted adults are for. They are not in your life to judge you. They are in your life to carry with you the things that are too heavy for one nine-year-old to carry alone.

This is how recovery from a mistake works.

I want you to know — and this is the most important thing in this chapter — every single adult you respect has been through this process many times. The wise grown-ups in your life are wise because they have made mistakes, recovered, and learned. The wisdom is not separate from the mistakes. The wisdom is what the mistakes made.

You are going to make many mistakes in your life. Some of them will be small. Some of them will be enormous. None of them will be more than you can recover from.

You are going to be okay. You are going to be more than okay.

You are going to be the kind of grown-up that other kids look up to one day, because of how well you can recover from

a mistake. That starts now. With these seven steps. With this small piece of practice.

Read this chapter again the next time you make a mistake. The chapter is not going anywhere.

Okay. End of strand chapter. Back to the story.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Talking to Yourself Kindly

In December, Jordan started seeing a counselor.

Not Mr. Tate. A different counselor. A grown-up his mother had found, after a long conversation Jordan did not know about, with Jordan's pediatrician.

His mother had told him about it the night before the first appointment.

"Jordan. I want to tell you something. Tomorrow after school, you and I are going to go see a person. Her name is Dr. Mendel. She is somebody who talks to kids. She is going to ask you questions and listen to you. That is what she does."

Jordan had been on the floor of his room building a Lego pirate ship. He had stopped. He had said, in a small voice, *am I in trouble?*

"No, sweetheart. You are not in trouble. You are not. I just — I have been noticing some things this fall. I have been noticing you have been quieter than usual when you think nobody is watching. I have been noticing you laughing very loudly when you think people are watching. I have been noticing you go to bed and not sleep. I have been thinking maybe you would like somebody to talk to who is not me. Somebody who is trained for this. Just to see."

Jordan had looked at the Lego pirate ship.

"You noticed?"

"I noticed, sweetheart. I have been noticing for a while. I am sorry it took me so long to ask."

Jordan, on the floor of his room, had started to cry.

He had cried for almost ten minutes. He had cried in a way he had not cried in maybe two years. His mother had sat down next to him on the floor and put her arm around him and not said anything, just held him, the way mothers are supposed to know how to hold sons who have been carrying things they have not told anybody about.

After he was done crying, Jordan had said, "I have not told anybody."

"What have you not told anybody, sweetheart?"

"That I am sad sometimes. That I do not always want to be funny. That I am tired of being the funny one. That I do not know who I am if I am not the funny one. That sometimes when I am being funny I am — I am not actually inside the funny anymore. I am just watching myself be funny. And I do not feel anything."

His mother had not interrupted.

"I do not know what is wrong with me," Jordan had said. "I am scared something is wrong with me."

His mother had said, "Sweetheart. Nothing is wrong with you. What is happening to you is real. It is not made up. It is also not who you are. It is something that is happening that we are going to figure out together. That is what Dr. Mendel is for. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You do not have to keep being funny if you do not want to. You can put down the funny. The funny is not a job. The funny is one of your gifts. You can use it when you want to and put it away when you do not."

"Okay."

"I love you exactly the same when you are being funny and when you are not. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

They had hugged for a long time.

The next day, after school, Jordan and his mother went to Dr. Mendel's office. It was a small office in a building near the highway. There were three chairs in the room. Dr. Mendel was a woman with curly gray hair and a yellow cardigan. She looked, Jordan thought, like a grandmother. He had not expected that. He had been picturing somebody in a suit.

Dr. Mendel said, "Hi, Jordan. I'm Pam. You can call me Pam. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"Your mom told me a little about you. Do you want to tell me anything?"

Jordan looked at his mom. His mom nodded.

"I am a funny kid," said Jordan. "I am — I think I am tired of being the funny kid."

Dr. Pam Mendel said, "Tell me what that means."

Jordan told her.

He told her, in third-grade language, what he had told his mom the night before. He told her about being in his head, watching himself be funny. He told her about going to sleep and not sleeping. He told her about being in third grade and people expecting jokes. He told her about not knowing who he was without the jokes.

Dr. Pam listened.

When he was done, she said, "Jordan. I have a question for you. Are you ready?"

"Okay."

"What does the voice in your head — the unkind voice — say to you?"

Jordan thought. He thought for a long time.

Then he said, "It says — *you are not actually funny. It says — when people laugh at your jokes, they are being nice. It says — you are only the funny kid because if you were not the funny kid you would be nothing. It says — there is nothing else inside you. It says — if you stopped being funny, nobody would have any reason to keep you around.*"

His mother, in the chair next to him, made a small sound. He had not told her this part.

Dr. Pam Mendel did not flinch. She had been doing this for a long time.

"Jordan. Thank you for telling me. That is a hard voice to have inside your head. I want to ask you another question."

"Okay."

"If your best friend told you that voice was in their head — about them — what would you say to them?"

Jordan thought.

"I would say — *that's not true. I would say — you are way more than funny. I would say — even if you weren't funny we would still want you around. I would say — your funny is one part of you, not the whole part.*"

Dr. Pam Mendel nodded.

"Jordan. The voice in your head is not telling you the truth. The voice is telling you a story that helped you, once, when you were small — maybe — but is hurting you now. The voice is not who you are. We are going to spend some time, together, helping you learn to talk back to it."

"How do I talk back to it?"

"You start with the sentence you just said. The thing you would say to your best friend. You say it to yourself. Out loud,

or in your head. You practice. Every day. As many times a day as the unkind voice shows up. You do not try to make the unkind voice go away. You just give it a second voice — the kind voice — that says the true thing."

"That is what we are going to work on. It is going to take some time. It is not a one-day fix. You will come see me once a week for a while, and we will practice. Sometimes here. Sometimes you will practice at home. Sometimes you will practice in the middle of class. Whenever the unkind voice shows up — you practice."

"Okay," said Jordan.

He felt — and he did not have words for this in the moment — he felt believed. Dr. Pam Mendel had heard him say *the voice tells me there is nothing else inside me*, and she had not laughed, and she had not said *oh that is silly*, and she had not said *of course there is a lot inside you, you funny boy*. She had just — taken it seriously. The way she would have taken it seriously if a grown-up had said the same thing.

Jordan had not had anybody take him seriously like that in a long time. He had been a funny kid. Funny kids do not always get taken seriously, because the funny gets in the way.

Dr. Pam had moved the funny out of the way and looked at him.

He thought he might like her.

By the end of the appointment, Jordan and his mom had a plan. Jordan would come back next week. He would come back every week for a few months. They would see how things went. There were a few small things he would do at home in the meantime. One of the small things — Dr. Pam wrote it down on a piece of paper for him — was:

EVERY NIGHT BEFORE BED, JORDAN WILL WRITE DOWN ONE TRUE THING ABOUT HIMSELF THAT IS NOT ABOUT

BEING FUNNY.

That was the homework.

Jordan took the piece of paper. He folded it carefully. He put it in his pocket.

He and his mom got in the car and drove home.

That night, in his room, before bed, Jordan opened his journal — the school one, the one Ms. Calloway had given him at the end of Unit One — and he wrote, on a fresh page:

ONE TRUE THING ABOUT ME THAT IS NOT ABOUT BEING FUNNY:

I am loyal to my friends. When somebody is mean to one of my friends I notice and I want to defend them, even if I do not always know how.

He stared at the sentence. He read it twice. It felt true.

He closed the journal. He slept. For the first time in a long time, he slept the whole night.

At school the next day, he was quieter than usual. He did not crack his usual lunch joke. Theo, across the table, noticed. Theo notices everything. Theo did not say anything — but he caught Jordan's eye for a second, and gave him a small look that meant *I see that you are different today. You do not have to perform. I am not going to make you.*

Jordan caught the look. He nodded back.

A week later, Jordan added another sentence to his journal.

I am a good observer. I notice when people are sad. I do not always know how to help, but I notice.

Two weeks after that:

I love drawing maps. I never told anybody this because it is not funny and it is not cool. I love it anyway.

Three weeks after that:

I cried when our neighbor's old cat died last year. I told my mom I was fine. I was not fine. I had really loved that cat.

By February, Jordan had written nineteen true things about himself that were not about being funny.

He did not show the journal to anyone. He did not have to. The journal was for him.

But by February, something had changed. Jordan was, in class, sometimes quiet. Sometimes funny. Sometimes neither. Sometimes both. The funny had become — instead of his whole identity — one of the things he did. It was, for the first time, a tool and not a cage.

This is what talking to yourself kindly makes possible.

It does not make the Inner Critic disappear. It just gives the Inner Critic a second voice to argue with. And the second voice, given practice, gets stronger.

By the time Jordan was in fifth grade, the Inner Critic was no longer the loudest voice in his head. The Inner Coach was. And the Inner Coach knew his name. The Inner Coach knew that Jordan was loyal, and a good observer, and a map-drawer, and a kid who had loved a neighbor's cat.

But that is two years from now.

For December of third grade — what matters is that Jordan, in a small office near the highway, had been seen.

That was the beginning.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Letting Go — A Practice

It had been almost two months since Marcus had told his parents about the bike.

In that time, several things had happened. He had slept better. He had finished his homework on the nights he was supposed to. He had played with Aaliyah for an hour every day after school, sometimes longer, because — and this was funny — he had started to actually enjoy it more, not because he was making up for the lie but because the *I am a bad brother* voice was no longer in his head telling him that every time Aaliyah laughed she was secretly mad at him. He had drawn three new comic strips, none of which had a kid turning into a bird, because the kid-who-turns-into-a-bird had been a kind of *I am embarrassed and want to disappear* fantasy, and Marcus did not feel as much like he wanted to disappear anymore.

But there was one thing he had not been able to do.

He had not been able to forgive himself.

He had walked into the kitchen. He had told his parents. They had forgiven him. They had told him it was not his fault to begin with. He had told Mr. Tate. He had told Ms. Calloway. He had told his journal. He had even — at his mom's suggestion — written a letter to his six-year-old self, and read it out loud in his room, and put it in a drawer.

He had done all of these things.

He still, sometimes, late at night, lay in bed and thought I *should have told them sooner*. He still, sometimes, in the middle of an ordinary day, felt the small tight thing in his chest that meant *the heavy thing has come back*.

He had not known what to do with this. He had thought, after telling his parents, that the heavy thing would be gone. It was mostly gone. But it kept coming back, in small doses, when he did not expect it.

In mid-December, he asked Ms. Calloway about it.

She had finished the lesson. The other kids were getting ready for lunch. Marcus stayed at his table. Ms. Calloway came over.

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

"I thought it was supposed to be done."

"What was supposed to be done?"

"The Aaliyah thing. I told them. They forgave me. I thought it was supposed to be — like — over. But sometimes it still comes back. I am still thinking about it."

Ms. Calloway sat down across from him.

"Marcus. I want to teach you something. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Letting go is not a moment. Letting go is a practice."

She let that sit.

"When you forgive yourself for something — really forgive yourself — you do not push a button that erases the memory of the thing. The thing still happened. The thing is still in your brain, in your body, somewhere. What changes is how much it weighs. When you have done the work — when you have apologized, repaired, learned — the thing gets lighter. But it does not get gone. Nothing fully goes."

"That is okay. The thing being there is not failure. The thing coming back sometimes, in small visits, is normal. What you

do when it comes back is what matters."

"What do I do?"

"You do the same thing you did the first time. You notice. Hi. *The Aaliyah thing is back. I see you.* You ask yourself: *is there work to do? Did I miss a step?* If there is work, you do it. If there isn't — if the work is already done, and the thing is just visiting — you say *thank you for the visit. I see you. I forgive myself again.* And you put it down."

"Again?"

"Again. As many times as it visits."

Marcus thought about this.

"That sounds like a lot."

"It is a lot, at first. The first year, you might do it once a week. Or once a day. As you get better — as the work has been done and stays done — the visits get less frequent. By the time you are an adult, you might only have a visit a few times a year. Some visits you might not even notice — they will come, and you will say *I forgive myself, I am okay*, and you will keep walking. The visit was thirty seconds."

"What if it never goes all the way away?"

"It probably won't, Marcus. Most things don't. The bigger the thing, the longer it visits. The work is not in making it never come. The work is in how you treat it when it comes."

She drew, on a small piece of paper, a chart.

WHEN THE HEAVY THING VISITS:

1. NOTICE IT. Hi. *I see you.*
2. ASK. *Is there more work to do?*
3. IF YES — DO THE WORK.
4. IF NO — *Thank you for visiting. I forgive myself again. I am okay.*
5. PUT IT DOWN.

She handed Marcus the paper.

"Keep this. Fold it. Put it in your folder. When the thing visits — pull it out. Walk through the steps. The walking-through-the-steps is the practice. The practice is the whole point."

Marcus took the paper. He looked at it.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes."

"What if — what if I have other things? Other heavy things? Not just Aaliyah?"

She smiled, very gently.

"Marcus. Of course you do. Everybody does. The Aaliyah thing was a big one. But everybody has many heavy things, of different sizes. The same practice works for all of them. You can use the chart for any heavy thing. Big or small. You can come tell me about another one if you want to. Or you can just practice on it yourself. Whatever feels right."

"Okay."

"Marcus?"

"Yes?"

"You have done some big work this fall. Really big. I am very proud of you."

He almost teared up. He had not been expecting it.

"Thank you," he said.

"You are welcome."

He folded the paper. He put it in his pocket. He went to lunch.

That night, in his journal, he wrote:

Letting go is not a moment. Letting go is a practice. Things come back. When they come back you do the work or you put them down again. You can put a thing down a hundred times. That is not failure. That is just how it works.

He underlined the sentence. He closed the journal. He fell asleep.

The Aaliyah thing visited him, that week, two more times. Each time, he pulled out the paper from his pocket, and walked through the steps. Each time, the visit was shorter than the one before.

By Christmas break, the visits were almost gone. By spring, the visits would come once a month. By the time Marcus was in fifth grade, the Aaliyah thing would come only twice a year — once on Aaliyah's birthday, when he would look at her and think *I love you so much*, and once on the anniversary of the bike, which would land in early August, and which he would mark, every year, by buying Aaliyah ice cream after dinner without telling her why.

That is how letting go really works.

You build a small private ritual around the thing. The thing stops being a heavy stone. The thing becomes — over many years — a part of you. Something you carry, but lightly. Something that helps you remember to be a certain kind of person.

The Aaliyah thing was going to make Marcus, for the rest of his life, the kind of person who could be honest about his own mistakes — because he had done it once, at eight, in third grade, with a counselor in the room and a chart in his pocket and a sister in the next room asleep with her stuffed elephant.

That was the deal.

He did not know it yet. But the practice was the deal.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Self-Forgiveness Feels Impossible

This is a hard chapter. There is a counselor in the room. I will go slow.

This is the chapter about Mia.

Mia, who had been quiet for most of the year so far — not unhappy, but quiet — Mia had a thing she had not told anybody. Her family was moving in February.

Her dad had gotten a new job in another city. The move was happening. The house was being sold. The boxes were going to start showing up in January. Mia had known since October.

She had not told anyone.

She had not told her best friends — Lily, who was in another third-grade class, and Sofia, who was here in Room 18. She had not told Mr. Patel. She had not told her teacher last year. She had not told her grandparents on the phone. She had not even, fully, told herself — she had been pretending, in a careful organized way, that the move was not really going to happen, even though her mother had been showing her boxes in the garage for weeks.

But that was not the heavy thing.

The heavy thing — and this is the part I am going to ask you to listen to gently, because it is real and many kids have a

version of it — the heavy thing was that Mia thought it was her fault.

She did not think it was her fault in the *I broke a vase* way. She thought it was her fault in a deeper way. She had — months ago, in the summer, when her parents had first started having long quiet conversations at the kitchen table about her dad's job — she had thought, in a small private corner of her head: *I do not like this town. I want a fresh start. I want to go somewhere new where I am not just the girl who is too quiet at lunch.*

She had thought it once. Maybe twice. Then it had gone away. Then, two weeks later, her dad had come home and announced the job offer.

And Mia, who is nine years old and a careful kid, had connected the two events.

She had thought: *I wished for this. I wished us into moving. I am the reason we are moving. The job is happening because I wanted it to happen.*

She knew, sort of, that this was not how the world worked. She was nine, not three. She knew her wishes did not, in fact, summon jobs out of the air for her father.

But the thought had gotten in. And it had stayed. And it had gotten heavier through the fall.

And then, in November, her mom had said, *Mia, sweetheart, we are going to be moving in February. We need to start telling people. Your friends, your teachers. We want to give everybody time to say goodbye properly.*

And Mia had said, in her smallest voice, *not yet. Please. Not yet.*

Her mom had said, *Mia, why?*

Mia had said, *I don't know.*

That had been the end of the conversation, because her mom is a kind woman who knows when to let a nine-year-old keep a piece of privacy. But the heavy thing in Mia's chest had been getting bigger every day since.

This is the chapter where the heavy thing finally comes out.

The lesson, that morning, was the HIGHEST RISK lesson of Unit Two. Ms. Calloway had been preparing for it for weeks. Mr. Tate was in the back of the room — physically there, not just available. He had a small clipboard. He was not going to participate; he was going to witness. He had been part of this lesson before, many times, across many years.

The lesson was titled *When Self-Forgiveness Feels Impossible*.

Ms. Calloway opened it like this:

"Friends, today we are going to talk about something hard. We are going to talk about what happens when you cannot — for whatever reason — forgive yourself for something. When the thing feels too big. When you have done the work and the heavy feeling does not lift. When you start to wonder if maybe you do not deserve to feel better."

She paused.

"I want to say a few things at the start of this lesson, and I want everybody to hear them. Okay?"

The kids nodded.

"First. You are not alone. Every single person in this room has carried something they thought they could not put down. The grown-ups in your life have, too. The fact that some thing feels too big to forgive yourself for is not proof that you are uniquely bad. It is proof that you are human. Humans carry heavy things sometimes."

"Second. Mr. Tate is here today. He is in the back. He is here on purpose. If at any point during today's lesson, you want to

talk to him — about anything, big or small — you raise your hand. He will walk over. You do not have to explain why. You just raise your hand. Okay?"

She looked around the room.

"Third — and this is the most important. Some heavy things are too big to put down alone. They need help. You tell a trusted adult. You tell your parents. You tell me. You tell Mr. Patel. You tell Mr. Tate. You tell whoever your trusted adult is. You do not carry the very heavy thing alone. That is the whole rule. That is the only rule. *You do not carry the very heavy thing alone.*"

She wrote on the board:

YOU DO NOT CARRY THE VERY HEAVY THING ALONE.

She underlined it three times.

The class sat very still.

"Okay. Now. Here is what I want to teach you today."

She began the lesson. She talked about how some mistakes seem impossible to forgive yourself for — because they were big, because they were old, because they hurt somebody you love, because you do not feel you have made enough repair. She talked about how, sometimes, the real problem is not the mistake — the real problem is a story you are telling yourself about the mistake. *I do not deserve to feel better. I am bad as a person. Letting this go would mean it didn't matter.*

She said, very carefully, that letting a thing go does not mean it did not matter. Letting it go means *I am no longer punishing myself for it past the point where the punishment helps.*

The kids listened.

Mia, in her seat, was crying.

She had not realized she was crying. She had not made a sound. She had been listening to Ms. Calloway's voice, and the

lesson had been about her, exactly — *some mistakes seem impossible to forgive yourself for, because you think they hurt somebody you love* — and Mia had been hearing her own private heavy thing being described, out loud, in a third-grade classroom, by Ms. Calloway in a green cardigan.

She had started crying without knowing.

Sofia, next to her, noticed. Sofia did not say anything. Sofia just put her hand, very quietly, on Mia's hand on the desk.

Mia did not pull away.

Mr. Tate, in the back, saw. He filed it. He did not move.

Ms. Calloway, who is trained to scan a room while she is teaching, also saw. She did not stop the lesson. She kept going. But she watched, every twenty seconds, where Mia was at.

When the lesson reached the *what to do* part, Ms. Calloway said:

"If you are carrying something right now that feels too heavy — and you might be, even if you have not told anyone — I want you to do one of three things today. You can pick. You do not have to do all three. You can do one."

"Option one. You raise your hand right now, and Mr. Tate will come over, and you talk to him, here, in this room. The other kids will keep doing their worksheets and not look. We do this here all the time. It is not a big deal."

"Option two. You ask Mr. Patel or me, at the end of class, for a time to talk to Mr. Tate. He has time today. He has time tomorrow. He has time all week."

"Option three. You go home and tell a trusted adult at home. Tonight. Not next week. Tonight. You go to your parent or your grandparent or your aunt or your uncle and you say, *I have been carrying something. Can I tell you?* And you tell them. That is what they are there for."

She paused.

"Friends. Any of those three options is a very brave thing to do. There is no wrong choice. The only wrong choice is to keep carrying the very heavy thing alone."

She wrote on the board:

YOU HAVE THREE OPTIONS. CHOOSE ONE TODAY.

The class was very quiet.

Then — and this is the moment of the chapter, the moment many of the kids will remember for the rest of their lives — Mia, in her seat, raised her hand.

Her hand was shaking. She did not look up. She just raised her hand and kept her eyes on the desk.

Mr. Tate, in the back, stood up. He walked over, slowly, without making it a thing. He crouched down next to Mia's chair.

"Hi, Mia," he said softly. "I'm right here. Would you like to come to my office, or would you like to talk here?"

Mia could not get a word out. She just shook her head. She did not know which one she wanted. She was crying too hard.

Mr. Tate said, very quietly, "Okay. Let's go to my office. It will be a little quieter. We can come back here whenever you want."

He helped her up. He did not hold her hand — that would have been too much. He just walked next to her. They walked to the back of the room, opened the door, and went into the hall.

The class watched.

Ms. Calloway turned to the rest of them. She did not make a big deal of what had just happened.

"Friends. Sometimes a kid does the brave thing in the middle of class. That is okay. We give them the privacy of not making it a thing. When Mia comes back, we say *hi, glad you are back*, and we do not ask questions. That is the deal.

Anybody who has ever needed a moment knows how this works."

She picked up her chalk and continued the lesson.

In Mr. Tate's office, Mia cried for almost ten minutes before she could speak. Mr. Tate did not push. He had a box of tissues on the corner of his desk. He pushed it gently toward her. He waited.

When Mia finally spoke, the first thing she said was:

"It is my fault."

"What is your fault, sweetheart?"

"We are moving. To Pittsburgh. In February. It is my fault."

Mr. Tate did not jump to reassure. He let her say more.

"In the summer — before my dad got the job — I thought I *want to go somewhere new. I do not like this town. I want a fresh start.* I thought it. Then he got the job. So we are going. It is because I wanted it. I made it happen."

Mr. Tate listened.

When Mia was done, he said, very gently:

"Mia. I am going to tell you something. Are you ready?"

"Okay."

"Your wish did not get your dad his job. Your dad got his job because a company offered it to him. Companies offer jobs to people because of the people's work history and skills, not because nine-year-olds in another house are wishing. That is not how the world works."

"But —"

"I know. I know it feels like it might be. But it isn't. You did not make this happen. Your dad's job happened because of his work."

Mia was quiet for a long time.

Then she said, "But what if part of me did want to leave? Does that make me a bad person?"

"Sweetheart. No. Wanting a fresh start sometimes is one of the most normal, human, kid feelings there is. Wanting it does not make you bad. Wanting it does not make it happen. Wanting it does not mean you do not love your friends. People can want a fresh start and also be sad to leave. Both things are true."

She nodded.

"Mia, I want to ask you something. Have you told anybody about the move yet?"

"No."

"Are your friends going to find out before you move?"

"My mom says we have to tell them soon."

"Okay. Here is what I would like to suggest. You and your mom and I will set up a time to talk together — maybe with your dad too — so they know you have been carrying this. And then your mom and I can help you figure out how to tell your friends. You do not have to do this part alone. We will help."

"Okay."

"Mia. The heavy thing — *I made us move because I wished it* — that is not yours to carry. Let me hold that one for you. You can put it down. You did not do this. Your dad did. That is okay. That is normal. Move is happening because grown-ups made grown-up decisions. You can be sad about it, or excited about it, or both. But the causing of it is not yours."

She nodded again. Slowly.

"Okay," she said.

"Do you want to go back to class?"

"In a few minutes."

"Take all the time you need."

They sat together quietly for about five more minutes. Mr. Tate did not push. He had been in this seat for many years. He knew that the silence after the disclosure was sometimes the

most important part. The kid needed to feel the weight come off. That took quiet.

When Mia was ready, they walked back to Room 18. The class was working on a worksheet. Sofia looked up when Mia came in. Sofia did not say anything. She just slid the worksheet a little closer to her side of the table so Mia could have her own space, and pushed Mia's pencil to where it had been before she left.

Mia sat down. She picked up the pencil. She finished the worksheet.

At the end of the day, Mia's mom got a phone call from Mr. Tate. The phone call was about thirty minutes long. By the end of it, Mia's mom was crying a little. She had not known what Mia had been carrying. She came home and walked into Mia's room and sat on the bed and said, *Mia, sweetheart, I had no idea. Can we talk?*

They talked for an hour.

Mia told her mom everything she had told Mr. Tate. Her mom held her. Her mom said, exactly the way Mr. Tate had said, *Mia, you did not cause this. Wanting a fresh start does not summon jobs. Dad got the job because of dad. The move is happening because of grown-ups. You can be sad about it. You can be excited about it. You can be both. But it is not your fault.*

Mia said, *I know. Mr. Tate told me. I just needed to hear it from you too.*

Her mom hugged her for a long time.

That night, Mia slept better than she had slept in two months.

The next day, in Room 18, Mia did something she had been afraid to do.

At lunch, she sat down across from Sofia, and she said, in a small but steady voice:

"Sofia. I have to tell you something. My family is moving. To Pittsburgh. In February."

Sofia's eyes filled up.

But Sofia did not cry — Sofia, who has been working on her toolkit since she was six years old, did not cry at the lunch table. Instead, Sofia took a slow breath, the way she had been practicing. She put her hand on her own stomach for half a second. Then she put it down. Then she said:

"Mia. Okay. Thank you for telling me. I am very sad. I am going to be very sad. But I am glad you told me. We are going to figure out how to be friends from Pittsburgh."

Mia almost laughed.

"You are being very calm."

"I am using my toolkit. I am — I am holding it together until lunch is over and then I am going to cry in the bathroom for a minute."

Mia did laugh, then. A small real laugh.

"I love you," said Mia.

"I love you," said Sofia.

They ate their lunches.

This is what the lesson does, when it works. It does not make moving away painless. It does not make the heavy things light. It just makes them bearable. It puts somebody in the room to take the weight when the weight is too much. It gives the kids the words and the tools and the trusted adults they need to put the very heavy things down — not alone, but with help.

Mia put down *I caused the move* that week.

She did not put down *I am sad about leaving*. That one she would carry for months. That one she was supposed to carry. Sadness about leaving people you love is not something to put down. Sadness about leaving people you love is information —

it is telling you what mattered. Mia let the sadness sit. She let it tell her what it had to tell her.

It told her: *You loved Room 18. You loved Sofia and Lily. You loved Ms. Calloway. You loved Mr. Patel. You loved this fall. You will carry it with you. The carrying is okay. The carrying is what love does.*

That was good information.

She kept it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Unit Two Reflection — Bridge to Unit Three

At the end of January, Ms. Calloway gave the kids their second twenty-minute reflection block.

They opened their journals. The same three questions were on the board.

1. What did I learn about myself this unit?
2. What did I learn about another person this unit?
3. What do I want to remember from this unit?

The room was quiet.

Marcus wrote:

Letting go is a practice. Not a moment. The Aaliyah thing visits sometimes still and I just do the steps. Notice. Ask. Work or put down. Walk on.

I did not know Mia was carrying something. She is one of the strongest kids in our class.

The heaviest things are not meant to be carried alone. You tell a trusted adult.

Amara wrote:

Accountability has a beginning and an end. Self-punishment has no end. I picked accountability.

Iris had been carrying it too. Maybe everybody who is part of a hard thing is carrying it. We just don't know about each other.

Mr. Tate's line that Marcus told us about: "I will hold this one for you. You can put it down."

Sofia wrote:

My toolkit is bigger than I thought. I can teach pieces of it to other people. I taught Priya about the slow breath. She said it helped.

Mia is moving. I am very sad. I am using the toolkit on the sadness. It is helping a little. The sadness is also okay. The sadness is information about how much I love Mia.

I am good at this. I have been doing it for a long time. I am proud of me.

Priya wrote, in her list format:

1. I cried in front of Hannah and Devon and the world did not end.

2. I do not have to be small to be loved.

3. The Inner Critic is wrong about other people most of the time.

4. The index card. The three sentences. They are in my pocket every day.

5. Hannah is okay. We are okay. We are still best friends. The Inner Critic lied about that.

Darius wrote:

My dad has been sad about Biscuit for a year, like me. We did not know about each other being sad. We have been sad in separate rooms. Now we are sad together sometimes. It is better. We are going to get another dog. Maybe in March.

Anger is sometimes sadness wearing a costume.

Jordan wrote:

There is a difference between being funny and being a person who is sometimes funny. I have been the first one. I am starting to be the second one.

I am loyal. I am a good observer. I love drawing maps. I cried when our neighbor's cat died.

Nineteen true things about me that are not about being funny. I have nineteen. I am going to keep adding.

Maya wrote:

I can speak when I need to. I asked Mr. Patel a question in front of the class. The first time I have ever done this. I do not even remember what the question was. I remember that everyone listened and nothing bad happened.

Marcus did a brave thing. Mia did a brave thing. I am surrounded by brave kids.

I am one of the brave kids too.

Theo wrote:

I am sometimes the kid who sees the moment before anyone else and does not say anything. That is mostly a strength. Sometimes I should say something. Like with Jordan, the funny thing. I noticed but I did not say anything. I am going to try saying things sometimes.

The watching is good but the watching is not always enough.

Mia wrote:

The heaviest thing I have been carrying was a thing that was not even mine. I had been carrying it for months. Mr. Tate took it. My mom took some of it. Ms. Calloway helped.

I told my friends I was moving. They cried. They are sad. They are not mad. They are still my friends. They will still be my friends from Pittsburgh.

I want to remember Sofia using her toolkit at lunch. The slow breath. The hand on the stomach. The "I love you. I love you." She is the bravest of us.

Kezia wrote:

My grandma also carries heavy things. I always knew. But I knew it differently this unit. We talked about a hard thing one

night in December. She is okay. We are okay.

Everyone in our class has stuff. Even kids who look like they do not. Especially kids who look like they do not.

We are all carrying things. The ones who hide it best are sometimes carrying the most.

When the twenty minutes were up, Ms. Calloway said, "Friends. Close your journals."

The kids closed them.

"This was a hard unit. Some of you did really big work this unit. Some of you helped other kids do their work. I am very proud of all of you."

Then she said the thing that bridged into Unit Three.

"Next unit, we are going to do something different. We are going to stop looking at ourselves for a few weeks, and we are going to look at other people. Specifically — the people in our lives who have hurt us. Sometimes a little. Sometimes a lot. We are going to learn how to forgive them — when we choose to. Forgiveness of other people is always a choice. It is never a rule."

"This is a big unit. We are going to take it slowly. There is going to be a hard lesson in February that some of you will need support during. We are going to be ready."

The kids nodded.

The bell rang.

Mr. Patel pulled out the social studies books.

Unit Three would begin in February.

But before Unit Three, there was a Friday — a Friday in late January — when Mia and her family loaded the last boxes into a truck and drove to Pittsburgh.

The day before, the kids of Room 18 — all of them, even the ones who had not been very close with Mia — made her a book. Twenty-six small pages, each one written by a different

kid, stapled together with construction paper covers. Mr. Patel had organized it without making a big deal of it.

Mia's page from Sofia said: *Mia. You are my friend. I love you. I will write you every week. I am going to use the toolkit on missing you.* — Sofia.

Mia's page from Marcus said: *Mia. You came to my house once for a birthday party in first grade. I remember you brought me a card you had drawn yourself. I still have it. Thank you for being a kind person to me when I was a kid. I will not forget.* — Marcus.

Mia's page from Theo said: *Mia. I noticed you before you noticed me, because that is what I do. You are one of the people I have liked most in school. I am glad we got to be in third grade together. Pittsburgh is lucky.* — Theo.

Mia's page from Jordan said: *Mia. You laughed at my jokes when I needed somebody to laugh, and you didn't laugh at them when I didn't need it, and you somehow always knew the difference. I am going to miss you a lot.* — Jordan.

Mia took the book.

She read it during the car ride to Pittsburgh.

She read it many times in the months and years afterward.

She still has it. She is in her twenties now. The book sits on her bookshelf. Sometimes, on hard days, she takes it down and reads it. It still works.

This is what books do. The good ones.

This is what classrooms can do too.

Mia's chapter is over. She is in Pittsburgh now. We do not see her again in this book, except sometimes in letters that Sofia reads aloud at lunch. She will come back in Book Five, when the cohort is in high school and Sofia finds a way to invite her to a reunion.

But the goodbye chapter is here. It is in late January. The truck is loaded. Sofia and Mia hug for a long time on the porch. Sofia uses her toolkit. Sofia does the slow breath. Sofia does the hand on the heart. Sofia says *I love you. I will write you. You are my friend forever. Pittsburgh is okay. I am okay. Go.*

Mia goes.

The truck pulls away.

Sofia stands on the porch for a long time.

Her mother, behind her, says quietly, *Sofia, sweetheart, do you want to come inside?*

Sofia says, *Not yet, Mom. Give me five more minutes.*

She uses the five minutes.

She is, by the end of the five minutes, more or less okay.

That is what the toolkit does.

That is the end of Part Two.

PART THREE



Empathy & Forgiving Others

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

February through April. The hard middle.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Your Hurt Is Real and It Matters

The first lesson of Unit Three was about a question Priya had been asked her whole life.

"Were you really that hurt?"

She had heard the question from her mother (*are you sure you're not overreacting?*), from her grandmother (*it's not a big deal, sweetheart, get over it*), from teachers (*let's not make it bigger than it needs to be*), and most recently from her aunt at Thanksgiving, who had said, when Priya mentioned that her cousins had teased her about her glasses, *Priya, they were just joking. You're so sensitive.*

Priya had been *sensitive* her whole life. Or — that was the word people used. The word *sensitive* always sounded, when adults said it, like a polite way of saying *too much*.

Ms. Calloway, on the first Friday of February, said something Priya had never heard an adult say before.

"Friends. Today we are going to start Unit Three. Unit Three is about forgiving other people. Before we get to the forgiving — and we will, in a few weeks — we have to do the first step. The first step in forgiving other people is naming the hurt."

She wrote it on the board.

STEP ONE — NAME THE HURT.

"Here is what I want you to know. You cannot forgive somebody for a thing you have not named. You cannot put down a weight you are pretending is not there. The first step

of forgiveness is not the forgiveness. The first step is admitting you were hurt."

She paused.

"Some of you have been told, your whole lives, that the hurts you have felt did not matter. Or were exaggerated. Or were imagined. *Don't be so sensitive. It's not a big deal. They didn't mean it. You're too much.* I want to say, today, in this classroom, that those sentences are wrong. They have always been wrong. They are not how feelings work."

"You are the only person who can know how something landed inside you. Nobody else gets to tell you. Not your mom. Not your dad. Not your teacher. Not even me. The only person who knows how much a thing hurt is you. Other people can guess. They can be wrong. The size of the hurt is not measured by what the other person intended. The size of the hurt is only measured by how it landed in you."

Priya was sitting very still.

"This is going to be a big idea for the rest of the unit. So listen carefully. Your hurt is real. Even if the other person did not mean it. Even if it was small. Even if everybody else has already moved on. Your hurt is real. Your hurt matters. Your hurt is yours."

She wrote it on the board:

YOUR HURT IS REAL. EVEN IF NOBODY ELSE BELIEVES IT.

The class was quiet.

"Now. I am going to give you a worksheet. I want you to write down — privately — three things that have hurt you in the last year that you have not fully named to yourself. Three. They can be big. They can be small. They can be from family. They can be from school. They can be from a year ago. They can be from yesterday."

"I do not want you to share these. They are for you only. The purpose of the worksheet is for you to see, in your own handwriting, that the hurts you have not been allowed to talk about are real."

She handed out the worksheets. The kids took them. The room was very quiet for fifteen minutes.

Priya wrote, very slowly:

1. *When my aunt said I was too sensitive at Thanksgiving for not laughing at the cousins teasing me. That hurt. I cried in the bathroom. I told my mom I had a stomachache. I did not say it was about the teasing.*

2. *When my mom said "they're probably not doing it on purpose" about the girls at lunch who move their chairs so I have to squeeze in. I needed her to say it was on purpose. She told me to ignore it. I felt invisible.*

3. *When my dad laughed at my poem in October. He thought it was funny. It was not supposed to be funny. He did not know. I never told him. The poem was about something I was sad about.*

She read her three lines.

She felt — and this was strange — she felt believed. Not by anyone in the room. By the piece of paper. By the act of writing the three things down without anyone telling her they were not real.

The piece of paper believed her. That, by itself, was a piece of forgiveness work.

She put the paper in her folder.

Sofia, across the room, wrote her own three. Sofia's three were about her own father, who sometimes — when Sofia's stomach was hurting — would say *Sofia, you are too anxious, that is not healthy, you need to toughen up*. Sofia had been working with her toolkit for years, but her dad did not always understand the toolkit, and sometimes the *toughen up*

sentence had left a small splinter that Sofia had never fully named. Sofia named it on the worksheet.

Then she sat back.

She felt, for the first time, that her own work — her own years of building a toolkit — was valid, even though somebody she loved had been telling her, accidentally, that it wasn't.

She would, in the spring, talk to her dad about this. She would not do it angrily. She would do it carefully. She would say, *Dad, I love you, and when you tell me I am too anxious, it makes me feel like the work I am doing on myself is wrong. The work is not wrong. I am doing it right. Please trust me on this.* Her dad would say, *oh sweetheart. I did not know I was doing that. I am sorry. I will try.*

But that is in March.

For today, in February, Sofia had done step one. She had named the hurt.

That was the lesson. That was enough for one Friday morning.

Maya wrote her three. They were all about her mom. They were small and old and quiet. She did not show them to anyone. She just wrote them. Then she put the paper in her folder, in the back, behind the other papers.

She felt — and this took her a minute to name — she felt less heavy. She had not realized how heavy the three small old quiet things had been.

This is what step one does.

It puts down some of the weight just by naming. The name is the lift.

You can try this at home. Tonight. Write down three hurts you have not fully named. They can be very small. They can be from years ago. They can be from yesterday.

Write them down. Notice how your chest feels after.

That is the lesson.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Why People Hurt People

In the second week of February, Darius came in with a question.

Darius had been quieter than usual all week. He had been thinking. Thinking, for Darius, was usually a wearing-red activity, and this week he had been wearing red shirts and red pants and even, on Wednesday, red socks. By Friday morning he looked like a small thoughtful tomato.

When Ms. Calloway came in for the lesson, Darius raised his hand before she had even said hi.

"Yes, Darius?"

"Ms. Calloway. I have a question. Can I ask it before you start?"

"Of course you can. What is your question?"

"Why are some people just mean?"

The class was quiet.

Ms. Calloway thought about this for a moment.

"Darius, can I ask you why you are asking?"

Darius hesitated.

"My uncle came over for dinner last weekend. He always says things to my dad that — that make my dad sad. About my dad's job. About my dad's hair. Just — small mean things. All night. My dad does not say anything back. My dad just gets quiet."

"And after he left, I asked my dad — *why does Uncle James always say things like that?* And my dad said *it's complicated, buddy. Some people are just like that.* And I asked him *is he mean?* And my dad said *I don't know if mean is the right word.*"

"So I have been thinking. Is Uncle James mean? And — are some people just mean? Like, are they just born that way? Is that a thing?"

The class was very still.

Ms. Calloway sat down on the small stool she sometimes used during lessons. She did not stand at the front. She sat in front of the carpet, the way she had in first grade.

"Darius. What a thoughtful question. Today's lesson is exactly about this. I am going to answer your question and then I am going to teach the lesson, and they are going to be the same thing. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Here is what I think — and many adults think this, but not all of them. Almost nobody is just mean. When somebody is being mean, it is almost always because they are carrying something heavy. They are in pain. They are tired. They have been hurt. They have been carrying a thing they have not figured out how to put down, and the carrying makes them push other people."

"They are not pushing because they hate the other person. They are pushing 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 on purpose. Just to keep their balance."

"Your Uncle James is probably carrying something. Maybe a lot of somethings. He is probably tired. He is probably scared of something. He is probably — and this is interesting — he is probably jealous of something about your dad, even though

you might not be able to see it. People are mean to people they are jealous of. The meanness is information about the meaner, not about the person being mean'd to."

Darius was listening hard.

"Wait. So Uncle James is — Uncle James is being mean because of himself, not because of my dad?"

"Almost always, yes. The meanness is about the meaner. Not about the person on the receiving end. Your dad has not done anything wrong. Your dad is fine. Uncle James is the one with the heavy thing."

"What is his heavy thing?"

"I don't know, Darius. You might never know. Sometimes people do not tell us their heavy things. Sometimes they do not even know themselves. We just see the behavior. The behavior is the thing on the outside. The heavy thing is on the inside. We are seeing one but not the other."

Darius thought about this.

Then he said, "So when somebody is mean to me — at school — that's because they have a heavy thing? Not because I deserve it?"

"Almost always, Darius. There are very, very, very few times when somebody is mean to a kid because of the kid. Almost every time, the meanness is about the meaner."

"Huh," said Darius.

"And here is the important part," said Ms. Calloway. "Knowing that the meanness is about the meaner — does that excuse it? Does it make it okay?"

"No," said Darius.

"Right. It does not make it okay. The behavior is still the behavior. Your Uncle James should still try to do better. The kids at school who are mean should still try to do better. Understanding the why does not erase the impact. But

understanding the why means you do not have to carry their stuff on top of your own stuff. They are responsible for their own backpack. You do not have to wear it for them."

Darius nodded.

"That makes me feel — better. A little."

"How?"

"Because when somebody is mean to me, I sometimes think — *am I bad?* And now I am realizing that probably they are just sad about their own stuff."

"Yes, sweetheart. Exactly. That is the lesson."

She stood up. She walked to the board.

She wrote, in large green letters:

MOST MEANNESS IS ABOUT THE MEANER, NOT YOU.

She underlined it twice. She turned around.

"Friends. This sentence is for every single one of you. Memorize it. Carry it. When somebody is unkind to you — a sibling, a parent, a classmate, an adult you do not know — your first hypothesis should be *they are carrying something heavy*. Not *I am bad*. Not *I did something wrong*. *They are carrying something heavy*."

"Sometimes you are right. Sometimes you might be wrong — there are a few mean people who really are just mean, and we will talk about how to spot them in Chapter Twenty-Three. But your default should be the hypothesis. The default protects you. The default lets you walk through the world without taking on other people's pain as your own evidence that you are bad."

Priya, in the back, raised her hand.

"Ms. Calloway? What about when the meanness is from somebody who is supposed to be on your team? Like — your mom? Or your aunt? It feels different when it is from somebody who is supposed to love you."

Ms. Calloway was quiet for a long moment.

"Priya. That is a beautiful question. And the answer is — yes, it does feel different. It is also harder. Because the people who are supposed to love you have a bigger effect on you when they hurt you. Their words go in deeper."

"The same principle still applies, though. If your aunt called you *too sensitive* at Thanksgiving — and I am being general here, this could be anyone's aunt — it is still about her. Your aunt is probably uncomfortable with sensitivity. She probably learned, when she was a child, that sensitivity was dangerous and had to be hidden. Now, when she sees a sensitive niece, she is not seeing you. She is seeing the part of herself she had to hide. And the hiding is leaking out as a comment about you."

"It still hurts. It hurts maybe more than the school meanness. Because the love is real, and the hurt is real, and they are sitting in the same room together."

"What you do, with family who hurts you, is two things. One — you remember that it is about them. You do not take it as evidence about you. Two — you can, eventually, when you are old enough to have these conversations, tell them. *Aunt Beth, when you said I was too sensitive at Thanksgiving, that hurt. I want you to know.* You do not say it angrily. You say it as information. Some adults will hear it and apologize. Some adults will say *oh stop, you are being too sensitive again*, which is just proof of the original point. You cannot fix them. You can only tell them how it landed."

"Some adults you love, you will have to love from a small distance. That is part of growing up. We will talk about it more in Chapter Twenty-Three."

Priya nodded slowly.

"Friends. Let me leave you with one more thing for today."

She wrote on the board:

THEIR PAIN IS NOT YOUR EVIDENCE.

"Other people's pain — including the pain that comes out as meanness — is not evidence about you. It is evidence about them. Their pain is their data. Not yours. Do not take their data and pretend it is yours."

The bell rang.

The kids gathered their things. Darius went up to Ms. Calloway's desk.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes, Darius?"

"I am going to tell my dad what you said. About Uncle James probably carrying something. I think my dad will like it."

"That is a beautiful thing to tell your dad, sweetheart. Go."

Darius went.

That night, at dinner, he told his dad what Ms. Calloway had said. His dad was quiet for a long time. Then his dad said, *buddy. I have been carrying — I have been carrying the thing your uncle says about my job. I have been carrying it for thirty years. And you just — you just took some of it off of me. By saying it out loud. Thank you.*

Darius hugged his dad. His dad, who is not a crying kind of dad, cried a little. Just a small amount. Then he wiped his face and said, *okay, buddy. Let's eat.*

They ate.

This is what Unit Three is going to do, all the way through. It is going to teach you to see other people's pain — not as evidence about you, but as evidence about them. It is going to teach you to forgive them, when you choose to. And it is going to teach you, importantly, that you do not have to keep them close just because you have forgiven them. That is Chapter Twenty.

We are going to get there.

For now: Darius told his dad. The dinner went better than usual. The dad was, that night, a few pounds lighter than he had been at breakfast. Ms. Calloway's chart on the wall said MOST MEANNESS IS ABOUT THE MEANER, NOT YOU.

The chart would stay up for the rest of the year.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Repair That Actually Works

(A Strand Chapter – listen carefully.)

Hi, friend. J.A.R. again.

This chapter is about how to make a repair that actually repairs. Most kids – and most adults – have been taught an idea of how to apologize that does not actually work. The idea is: you say sorry. You hug. You move on.

That is not a repair. That is a gesture.

A real repair has steps. The steps are real. They take a little longer than the gesture. They also work in a way the gesture does not.

I want to give you the steps now, in plain language, because you are going to need them. Most kids will need to repair something this month. Some of you will need to repair something today. Real life is full of small repairs. The skill of repairing well – the skill of being a good repairer – is one of the most valuable skills a person can have. Adults who can repair well have better marriages, better friendships, better jobs, and better kids. Adults who cannot repair are stuck in the same fights for decades.

You are going to learn this now. While you are nine.

Here are the steps.

STEP ONE – NAME WHAT YOU DID.

In plain language. Out loud. To the person you hurt.

Not I'm sorry if you were upset. Not I'm sorry you took it that way. Not I'm sorry but – (do not start an apology with I'm sorry but. The but erases the apology.)

You say: *I am sorry that I – and then the verb. I am sorry that I lied to you. I am sorry that I said an unkind thing. I am sorry that I broke your toy. I am sorry that I did not stand up for you.*

The naming is the taking responsibility. If you cannot name it, you have not taken responsibility yet.

STEP TWO — NAME THE IMPACT.

What did your action do to the other person? You do not get to decide this. You ask them, or you guess carefully.

That must have been embarrassing in front of everyone. That probably made you feel like you couldn't trust me. That probably hurt your feelings. I imagine you felt left out.

Naming the impact tells the person *I see what I did. I understand how it landed. I am not minimizing.*

STEP THREE — DO NOT MAKE EXCUSES.

Even if you have a reason — and you probably do — do not, in the same sentence as the apology, explain why you did it. The explanation, in the middle of the apology, sounds like an excuse, even if it isn't. Save the explanation for later, when the apology has done its work. If the person wants to hear why, they will ask. Then you tell them.

STEP FOUR — NAME WHAT WILL CHANGE.

This is the most important step. An apology without a next time is just words. An apology with a next time is a promise.

Next time, when I am frustrated, I am going to take a breath instead of yelling. Next time, when I do not know an answer, I am going to ask, not make something up. Next time, when somebody is mean to a friend in front of me, I am going to say something.

The change is what makes the apology trustworthy. Without the change, the same thing will happen again, and the apology was just air.

STEP FIVE — ASK IF THERE IS ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO MAKE IT BETTER.

Sometimes there is. *Can I help you fix the toy? Can I tell the other kids you didn't actually say what they thought you said? Can I write a note to your teacher?*

Sometimes there isn't. *Is there anything I can do? — No, I just needed you to hear me.*

Either way, asking is part of the repair. It tells the person *you matter to me. I want this to be okay between us.*

STEP SIX — GIVE THEM TIME.

After the repair, the person you hurt might still be sad. They might still be a little distant. They might need some time before things feel normal again.

That is okay. The repair is not magic. The repair starts the healing. The healing takes time.

You do not get to demand they forgive you on a schedule. You let them have their feelings on their own time. You show up consistently. You change your behavior. You let the new behavior speak louder than the apology.

This is, in fact, the most important part of repair. Words tell people what you mean. Behavior tells people who you are. If your apology is followed by the same behavior again, the apology becomes meaningless. If your apology is followed by changed behavior — over months, over years — the apology grows. It becomes more believable over time, not less.

That is what real repair looks like.

It is slower than the gesture-apology. It is also realer.

You are going to need this skill many times in your life. Practice it now. The first time you really do it — the first time

you sit a friend down and name what you did and name the impact and name what will change — you will feel, in your chest, the difference between a gesture-apology and a real one.

A real one cleans something. The gesture-apology does not.

You will know the feeling. After you feel it once, you will not want to do the gesture-apology again.

That is what this strand chapter is for. To teach you the steps once, in a quiet voice, so you can use them for the rest of your life.

Okay. End of strand chapter. Back to the kids.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Forgiveness Is Not the Same as Trust

This is the second HIGHEST RISK lesson. Mr. Tate is in the room.

This is Kezia's chapter.

We have not talked about Kezia much in this book yet. We have mentioned her. We know, from Book One, that Kezia lives with her grandmother, and that there is a grown-up in Kezia's life who used to be a regular part of her family and who is not anymore. We know that, in first grade, Kezia learned the line that her grandmother had been trying to teach her: *I forgive them. But that does not mean they can come back. Forgiveness and trust are not the same.*

It has been two years since Kezia learned that line.

A lot has happened in two years.

The grown-up — the one who is not allowed in their house — has, in the last six months, started writing letters to Kezia again. Not just birthday cards. Real letters. Saying *I am sorry. I have changed. I am doing the work. I want to see you. Please can I come back.*

The letters have been intense. Kezia has been reading them. Her grandmother has been reading them. They have been talking about them at the kitchen table.

Kezia, who is nine now, has been carrying a question.

The question is: *What do I do if somebody who hurt us seems to really be different now? Do I let them back in? Is forgiveness supposed to lead to letting them back in eventually? Or are forgiveness and trust really separate forever?*

She has not been able to figure it out.

This is the chapter where the lesson gives her the answer — or rather, the lesson gives her the framework, and the answer is hers to write.

Ms. Calloway began the lesson on a Tuesday morning. Mr. Tate was already in the back of the room with his clipboard. He had been there before she came in.

"Friends. Today's lesson is one of the most important lessons we will do all year. I want you to listen carefully."

She wrote on the board:

FORGIVENESS | TRUST

"Forgiveness and trust are two different things. They look similar from the outside. They are not the same on the inside. Almost every adult you know mixes them up — sometimes for their whole lives. We are going to learn the difference today."

She built the chart.

| FORGIVENESS | TRUST |

|---|---|

| Inside you | Between people |

| For YOUR peace | For SAFETY |

| You can give it alone | The other person earns it |

| It is a gift to yourself | It is never owed |

| Always available | Has to be earned, sometimes over years |

| You decide | You decide AND they decide |

"Forgiveness is inside you. It is something you do for your own peace. You can give it without ever telling the other person. You can give it after they are gone. You can give it

after they have died. You can give it from across the country. You can give it without ever seeing them again."

"Trust is different. Trust is between people. It is about safety. It is about whether you are going to let somebody back into your life. Trust is earned. It is earned through changed behavior — not changed words, not changed apologies, changed behavior over time. Trust takes weeks, months, sometimes years to rebuild. Sometimes it does not rebuild at all. And that is okay."

She paused.

She said the most important sentence of the lesson next, the same sentence she had said two years ago in Room 12.

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

Mr. Tate, in the back of the room, nodded.

"And here is the part that some adults forget to tell kids. You are NEVER required to forgive someone who is still hurting you. If somebody is still being mean. If somebody is still doing the thing. Forgiveness is for AFTER. For when the thing is over. For when you are SAFE. Safe always comes first. Always."

She wrote it again:

SAFE COMES FIRST. ALWAYS.

The room was quiet.

Kezia raised her hand.

"Yes, Kezia?"

"Ms. Calloway. What if the person — what if the person seems like they really have changed? Like, they have done the work? They keep telling you they have. What do you do then?"

Ms. Calloway, who had been waiting for this question — she had been waiting for it for three years, in different forms — took a breath.

"Kezia. That is a really important question. I am going to answer it carefully."

"Okay."

"Forgiveness, you can give right away — if you want to. Forgiveness is yours. You can decide to give it whenever the time is right for you, regardless of what the other person is doing."

"Trust is different. Trust comes back slowly, if it comes back. And trust comes back not from the person saying they have changed. Trust comes back from time and evidence. It comes back from the person doing the right thing, over and over, in many situations, over a long stretch — when no one is watching, when it costs them something, when there is no reward for doing right. The behavior has to prove the change. The words are not enough. The words are never enough."

"And here is the most important part. Even when somebody really has changed — even when they really, really have — you are still not required to let them back into your life. Their change is theirs. Whether they get to be close to you is yours. Those are two different decisions."

"Some people change and earn their way back into the lives of people they hurt. Some people change and are still kept at a distance, because the people they hurt have decided — for their own reasons, which do not have to be explained — that the closeness is not safe to attempt. Both choices are valid. The choice belongs to the person who was hurt. Always."

She paused.

"Kezia. If you ever — and I am being general, this could be anyone's question — if you ever have a grown-up who is asking to come back into your life, after they have hurt you, here is what I would tell you."

"One. You decide. Not them. Not anybody else. You."

"Two. You ask: *do I feel safe?* Not *do I think they are different.* Not *do I want them to be different.* Do I, in my body, feel safe with them? If the answer is anything less than a clear yes — the answer is no, for now."

"Three. You can let them in gradually, in tiny pieces, if you want to try. A short letter first. A short phone call later. A short visit, with another trusted adult present, a long time after. You do not have to do it all at once. You can take five years to decide. They have to wait."

"Four. You can change your mind. If you let them in a little, and it does not feel safe — you pull back. You do not owe them an explanation. You owe yourself your safety. You owe yourself your peace."

"And five — most importantly — you talk to a trusted adult through every step. This is not a decision a nine-year-old makes alone. This is not a decision a fifteen-year-old makes alone. This is not a decision a forty-year-old makes alone. You bring help. You bring your grandmother, or your other parent, or your counselor, or your therapist. You bring the people who know your story and who will tell you the truth about what they see."

Kezia listened.

She did not say anything for a minute. Then she said, in a quiet steady voice:

"My grandma and I have been getting letters from the person we are not close to anymore. They say they have changed. They want to come back. We have not decided yet."

Ms. Calloway did not flinch. The class did not look at Kezia. Mr. Tate, in the back, had been ready for this. He had been ready for this for years.

"Kezia. Thank you for telling us. Can I ask if you want to talk about it with Mr. Tate and me after class? Just the three of us?"

Not in front of the room."

"Yes, please."

"Okay. We will. After class."

She moved the lesson along. The other kids did the worksheet. The room got quiet. Kezia did her own worksheet, although she did not really see the words on the paper.

At the end of class, the other kids gathered their things and went to lunch. Kezia stayed at her table. Ms. Calloway and Mr. Tate came over. Mr. Tate pulled up a chair, the way he did, slowly, without crowding.

"Kezia. Hi."

"Hi."

"Tell us about the letters."

Kezia took a long breath.

"They started in the summer. The first one was just a card. Birthday card. But it had a letter folded inside. A long one. They said they have been getting help. They said they have been going to a group for two years. They said they wanted to start by writing — not by visiting, just writing — and see if Grandma and I would write back."

"Did you write back?"

"Grandma did. Just one short letter. Saying *we got your letter. We are reading. We are not ready to see you. We will keep reading.*"

"Okay."

"Then more letters came. About one every month. They are about — about the work the person is doing. About the things they have figured out. About apologies for specific things. Some of the specific things, Grandma did not know they remembered. The letters have been — they have been real."

Mr. Tate nodded.

"How are you feeling about them?"

Kezia thought about this for a long time.

"I think — part of me is glad. The letters are softer than the person ever was. I think the person really is doing the work. I do not think the letters are fake. I have read enough of them now. They sound like a different person."

"But?"

"But — when I imagine them coming over, I do not feel safe. My body does not feel safe. I do not know why exactly. But I do not feel safe."

Mr. Tate did not jump in.

"And — and I feel guilty about that. Because if they really did change, and I keep saying no, am I being mean? Am I being unforgiving?"

Ms. Calloway leaned forward.

"Kezia. Listen carefully. You are not being mean. You are not being unforgiving. Your body is telling you something real. Your body has not forgotten. Your body remembers what your brain has worked very hard, with your grandmother's help, to put into some kind of order. The body knows."

"You can forgive somebody — in your heart, in your mind, in your prayers if you pray — and still not feel safe with them. That feeling-not-safe is information. It is not a failure of forgiveness. It is your nervous system protecting you. It is good information."

Mr. Tate added, gently, "Kezia. Some adults will tell you, at some point in your life, that if you have really forgiven someone, you would be ready to let them close again. Those adults are wrong. They are confusing forgiveness with trust. Forgiveness is in your heart. Trust is in your body and in your life. The body gets to vote."

Kezia nodded.

"What do we do? About the letters?"

Ms. Calloway said, "What does your grandmother think?"

"She is — she is glad they are getting help. She is glad they are writing. She has been writing back, short notes, every couple of months. She has not invited them over. She says she does not know yet if she ever will. She says she does not have to decide everything right now."

"That sounds like exactly the right approach, Kezia. Your grandmother is doing what wise grandmothers do — taking it slow. There is no rush. There is no schedule. The person waited a long time before doing the work. They can wait a long time while you and your grandmother decide what comes next."

"And Kezia — if the answer ends up being *we are never going to be close again, but we wish you well from a long way away* — that is a complete answer. That is a whole answer. The person can be loved and not invited in. The person can be forgiven and not trusted. The two are not the same thing."

Kezia said, in a very small voice, "What if I just — never feel safe? What if my body never says yes?"

Mr. Tate said, "Then your body never says yes. And you live your life without that person being close. And you are okay. Many, many people live their lives without certain family members being close. They are not broken. They are not failures at forgiveness. They are just people who decided, for very real reasons, that closeness was not safe. You will be okay. Your grandmother will be okay. The person you are not close to will be okay too — they will keep doing their work, and the work is good for them regardless of whether you are close. They do not get to need closeness with you in order to keep doing the work. The work is its own reward."

Kezia let out a long breath.

She felt — and this surprised her — she felt *permitted*. Like an adult had walked into her brain and given her a permission slip she had been waiting for without knowing.

The permission slip said: *You do not have to invite them back. You do not have to feel guilty about not inviting them back. The not-inviting-back is not unforgiveness. The not-inviting-back is wisdom.*

She breathed in. She breathed out.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"Okay. I am going to tell Grandma what you said. Tonight. We can keep doing what we are doing. Reading the letters. Not deciding yet."

"That sounds perfect, Kezia."

"Can I — can I come talk to you again? If I need to?"

"Anytime. You raise your hand. Or you ask Mr. Patel. Or you come find me. Anytime."

She nodded. She stood up.

"Thank you, Ms. Calloway. Thank you, Mr. Tate."

"You are welcome, Kezia. You did really hard work today."

She went to lunch.

That night, at dinner, she told her grandmother everything. Her grandmother put her fork down. Her grandmother listened. When Kezia was done, her grandmother said, *baby. You said it better than I ever could have. We are not deciding everything tonight. We are not deciding everything this year. We are reading the letters. We are not closing the door. And we are not opening it. We are just — listening, slowly, with our eyes open. That is the right way.*

Kezia hugged her grandmother for a long time.

That is the chapter.

Forgiveness and trust are different. Safety always comes first. The body gets to vote. The not-inviting-back is wisdom.

These are the four sentences. If you carry them with you, you are ahead of most adults.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Forgiveness Takes Time

In March, the lesson was about something nobody had prepared the kids for: how long forgiveness actually takes.

Most kids — most adults, too — think forgiveness happens in a single moment. The person apologizes. You say *I forgive you*. The end. Everyone shakes hands and moves on. That is the version in books. That is the version on TV. That is the version in the songs about it.

That is not the version in real life.

Ms. Calloway, on the first Tuesday in March, drew a long winding line on the board. She labeled one end *The Hurt*. She labeled the other end *Peace*.

In between, she drew loops. The line went forward, looped backward, forward, looped backward, forward again. It looked, when she was done, like a piece of yarn that had been dropped on the floor.

"Friends. This is forgiveness."

The kids looked at the drawing.

"Forgiveness is not a straight line. Forgiveness is a path, and the path loops. You can be twenty steps along the path, feel mostly okay about something, and then wake up one morning and be back at the beginning of the path, feeling like the hurt happened yesterday. That is normal. That is how this works."

She wrote on the board:

THE FORGIVENESS PATH IS LOOPY. THAT IS NORMAL.

"There are some things that help the path get less loopy over time. Time itself. Doing the toolkit. Telling a trusted adult. Repair, when it is possible. But even with all of those — the path stays loopy for a long time. Sometimes for the rest of your life. Some big hurts get small but never get all the way gone. That is okay. The smallness is the win."

Sofia, who had spent the last six weeks missing Mia, raised her hand.

"Ms. Calloway? Is missing somebody the same as a hurt?"

"Sofia — what a beautiful question. Missing somebody is not the same as a hurt. But missing somebody can feel similar. The forgiveness path applies to it in a way. Missing somebody is its own kind of loopy path. You feel okay for a week. Then a song comes on and you cry. Then you feel okay for two weeks. Then you find their old jacket in the closet and you cry. Then you feel okay for a month. The missing gets smaller. But the missing also keeps coming back. That is what missing somebody you love is. The coming back is not failure. The coming back is love still being there."

Sofia nodded slowly.

She had been doing exactly this with Mia. Some days were fine. Some days were not. She had been worried, secretly, that the not-fine days meant she was not using her toolkit right.

Now she understood: the not-fine days were the love. The love had nowhere to go. The love came up, loud, on the days that it came up.

She wrote in her journal that night:

The missing is the love with no place to go. When it comes up, I let it come. Then it goes back down. Then it comes up again. That is the path. The path is loopy. That is okay.

She underlined it. She went to sleep.

The next morning, she wrote Mia a letter.

In the letter, she told Mia about Kezia's brave thing in class. She told Mia about Jordan being quieter at lunch (in a good way). She told Mia about Priya almost dropping her tray at lunch and Devon catching it before it hit the floor and how everyone laughed for a long time. She told Mia about the snow that had fallen on a Wednesday and how Mr. Patel had let them all go to the window for two minutes to watch.

She did not tell Mia how much she missed her, exactly, because they had been writing back and forth for two months now and the missing had become — a kind of normal background, like the way you do not notice your own breathing until you think about it.

Mia wrote back, a week later. Mia told Sofia about her new school. About her new teacher, who was nice but not as good as Ms. Calloway. About a kid in her class named Helen who had asked her at lunch if she wanted to come over and play. About her new bedroom in Pittsburgh, which had different light than her old room.

The letters went back and forth.

This was the path. Not the original-best-friends path. A different path. But a path.

The loopiness was the love still finding shape.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Holding Your Story Without Being Held by It

In mid-March, the lesson was the one that would, twenty years later, be the lesson many of the kids in Room 18 would tell their own kids about.

It was about story.

Ms. Calloway came in. She did not write anything on the board for the first five minutes. She just sat down on her stool at the front of the carpet.

"Friends. Today is one of the most important lessons we will do all year. I want you to listen with your whole self."

The kids leaned in.

"You have a story. Each one of you. The story is what has happened to you so far. The story is the things you have been through. The story is the things that happened to you that you did not choose. Some of the story is wonderful. Some of the story is hard."

"Here is the thing about your story. You cannot change what has already happened. The story is the story. The mom who moved away. The dog who died. The friend who was mean. The kid who teased you about your name. The grandma who took you in. The dad who was tired. The brother who said the thing. These all happened. They are part of your story."

"But — and this is the important part, the part adults often forget — you are not the same thing as your story. You are the person who carries the story. The story is something you have. The story is not who you are."

She wrote on the board, in big letters:

I HAVE A STORY. I AM NOT MY STORY.

She underlined it three times.

"The difference between *I have a story* and *I am my story* is huge. If you say *I am my story*, you are saying whatever happened to me is who I am, and I cannot be anything else. That is a trap. That is a cage. You spend the rest of your life being the kid whose mom left, or the kid who got teased, or the kid whose dog died. Forever. As if the worst thing that happened to you is the whole truth about you."

"If you say *I have a story* — the story is something you can hold. You can look at it. You can put it down. You can pick it back up. You can tell it different ways. You can let it teach you. You can let it be sad, and let other parts of you be other things. You are bigger than the story. The story does not get to be all of you."

The kids were very quiet.

She handed out a worksheet. The worksheet had three sections.

SECTION ONE: *Write down a hard thing that has happened to you. One thing. Just the facts. What happened.*

SECTION TWO: *Write down the story you have been telling yourself about what it means. What does the hard thing say about you? About the world? About your future?*

SECTION THREE: *Now — write a NEW story. A truer story. A story that includes the hard thing AND who you are choosing to be in spite of it. Or because of it.*

The kids took the worksheets.

Maya, in her usual quiet corner, wrote her three sections more slowly than she had ever written anything.

She wrote in Section One: *My mom could not take care of me. I live with my grandma. I do not know when, or if, my mom will be able to take care of me.*

In Section Two: *The story I have been telling myself is – my mom did not want me. I am not enough for someone to come back for. There is something about me that is unloveable, or my mom would be here.*

She stopped. She looked at the second section. She had not, before this moment, ever written that sentence down. The sentence had been in her for years. But it had never been on paper. Seeing it in her own handwriting – *there is something about me that is unloveable* – made her feel both terrible and clearer at the same time. The sentence was small and ugly on the page. It looked, written out, like the lie it was.

She went to Section Three. She thought for a long time. Then she wrote:

The new story is – my mom is somebody who has her own struggles, that I did not cause and cannot fix. My grandma chose me. My grandma chose me every single day for the last five years. I am loveable. I am chosen. I am safe. My mom not being here is about her, not about me. Whatever happens with my mom, I am okay. I am Maya. I look up. I am here.

She read what she had written. She read it three times.

Then she did something she had never done in school before. She raised her hand.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes, Maya?"

"I just wrote something that I would like to read. Out loud. To the class. If that is okay."

Ms. Calloway, who had been about to move on, stopped. She did not look surprised. She just said, "Of course, Maya. Whenever you are ready."

The class went very still.

Maya stood up. She held her worksheet. Her voice was quiet but it did not shake.

"This is the story I am choosing now," she said. "My mom is somebody who has her own struggles, that I did not cause and cannot fix. My grandma chose me. My grandma chose me every single day for the last five years. I am loveable. I am chosen. I am safe. My mom not being here is about her, not about me. Whatever happens with my mom, I am okay. I am Maya. I look up. I am here."

She sat back down.

The class was silent.

Then Marcus, of all people, started to clap. Not a celebration clap. A slow, gentle, this-deserves-a-clap clap. Amara joined. Sofia. Priya. Theo. All of them. Ten seconds of slow gentle clapping for Maya, who had just done — at nine years old — the work many adults never figure out how to do.

Ms. Calloway, at the front, had tears in her eyes. She did not wipe them.

"Maya. That is one of the bravest things I have ever heard a student say in this room. Thank you."

Maya did not say anything. She just nodded.

She had, in that moment, separated herself from her story.

She had a story. The story was real. The story was hard. But Maya was not the story. Maya was the person who carried the story. Maya was Maya. Maya looked up. Maya was here.

This is what holding your story means.

You do not deny what happened. You do not pretend the hard things were not hard. You hold them. You look at them.

You decide what they mean to you — not what they tell you about yourself, but what you have chosen to make them mean.

That is the chapter.

That is one of the most powerful things a nine-year-old can ever do. Maya had done it.

She had been doing it, in pieces, for years. But today, on a Friday afternoon in March, in Room 18, she had done it out loud, in front of nine other kids.

The other kids would not forget. They had been given, in real time, a demonstration of what it looks like to choose your own story.

They would each, in their own way, in the weeks and months that followed, do their own version of what Maya had done.

Some of them in their journals. Some of them in conversations with parents. Some of them, years later, in therapy. Some of them, decades later, in the middle of a hard night, sitting up in bed.

But the demonstration was here. The demonstration was Maya, in March of third grade, in Room 18, holding a piece of paper with a new story on it.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Stories of Forgiveness in Practice

In late March, Ms. Calloway brought in books.

The books were chapter books — small ones, with pictures on the covers. She put them in a stack on the carpet.

"Friends. For the next week we are going to read forgiveness stories. Not all at once. A piece a day. Each one is going to show us a different shape of forgiveness. Because forgiveness — like we have been learning — does not have one shape. It has many."

She read them a story about a girl whose grandfather died and who was angry at him for years because he had promised to teach her chess and had not, and who finally, at fifteen, forgave him by going to his grave with a chessboard and saying *let me teach myself in your name*.

She read them a story about two brothers who had a fight that lasted twenty years and who, by accident, ran into each other at an airport, and stood for a moment, and the older one said *I have missed you*, and the younger one said *I have missed you too*, and they hugged for a long time. The story did not say that everything was suddenly fixed. The story said that they started writing to each other after that, and slowly, over the next few years, they became brothers again.

She read them a story about a girl who was bullied and who, ten years later, ran into her bully at a coffee shop, and the bully said *I am so sorry for what I did to you, I have thought*

about it for years, and the girl said I forgive you. I do not want to be friends. But I forgive you. I am okay. I hope you are okay. And then she left.

She read them a story about a kid whose father was in prison, and how the kid did not forgive his father for many years, and then, in his twenties, did. The story was careful with this one. The forgiveness was not a hug. The forgiveness was the kid writing in his journal, alone, in his apartment, that he was going to stop carrying the rage he had carried for a long time. He did not visit his father. He did not write his father. He just put the rage down. The rage had been his own private weight. He was tired of carrying it. So he put it down.

She read them each story carefully. After each one, she did not ask questions right away. She let the story sit.

Then she asked: *What kind of forgiveness was this? Did the forgiver and the person they forgave become close again? Or did the forgiveness happen far away?*

The kids talked about each story.

By the end of the week, they had read seven stories.

The seven shapes of forgiveness, as the kids of Room 18 came to call them, were:

1. *Forgiveness with reunion. The two people forgive and become close again, slowly.*

2. *Forgiveness with distance. The forgiver chooses peace and stays away.*

3. *Forgiveness after death. The forgiver makes peace with someone who is no longer alive.*

4. *Forgiveness in writing. The forgiver writes a letter, sometimes sends it, sometimes does not.*

5. *Forgiveness in silence. The forgiver does the work in their own heart and never tells the other person at all.*

6. *Mutual forgiveness. Both people have hurt each other and both are doing the work.*

7. *Self-forgiveness. The forgiver is forgiving themselves.*

Ms. Calloway said, on the last day of the week, "Friends. None of these is more real than another. None of these is more grown up than another. All of them count. All of them work. The kind of forgiveness you choose depends on what you need, and on what is safe, and on what the other person is doing."

Then she handed out a worksheet.

The worksheet said:

SAY IT STRAIGHT — A PRACTICE PAGE.

Sometimes, after you forgive somebody, you need to tell them what they did. Not to hurt them back. Not to start a fight. Just to name what happened, so it is clear between you.

Today we are going to practice "saying it straight" — telling someone, in clear and kind words, how something they did made you feel. The formula is simple:

WHEN YOU ____, I FELT ____, BECAUSE _____. NEXT TIME, I WOULD LIKE _____.

This is not an attack. This is information. The other person can do with it whatever they want. But you have said your piece. The said piece does not have to stay inside you anymore.

The kids practiced. They did role-plays at their tables. Marcus practiced with Theo. Priya practiced with Hannah, who had come to Room 18 for the lesson because the third-grade SEL classes were combined that day.

Priya's practice line — which she said out loud, to Hannah, who was playing her mother — was:

Mom. When you told me to "ignore" the girls at lunch who move their chairs, I felt invisible, because it felt like you were

saying my hurt did not matter. Next time, I would like for you to take it seriously, even if you do not know what to do about it.

Hannah, playing the mom, said, in a deep mom-voice, *Oh, sweetheart. I am sorry. I did not realize. I will take it seriously next time. Tell me more.*

Priya almost cried, even though it was a practice.

She knew, even practicing, that the real conversation would not go exactly that way. Her real mom would probably say *Priya, I was just trying to help, you don't need to make a big deal.* That was, in fact, what her real mom often said.

But the practice was the practice. The practice put the words in Priya's mouth. The practice meant that, the next time her mom did the thing, Priya would have the language ready. The language did not guarantee the response. The language just made sure Priya could say her piece.

That is what saying it straight is for. The piece does not have to stay inside.

Marcus, at his table, practiced a different one. He practiced telling the kid on the bus, the fifth-grader who had said comics were babyish, the sentence:

When you said comics were babyish, I felt embarrassed about something I love. Next time, please do not call something somebody else likes babyish. It is not your job to tell people what they should outgrow.

He practiced it three times.

He did not, in fact, ever say it to the kid on the bus. The kid was a fifth-grader and lived three blocks away and Marcus mostly avoided him after that morning. But Marcus had the sentence in his head now. The sentence was his.

The next time some kid called something Marcus loved babyish, he would say it. Maybe not the exact sentence. But

the spirit of the sentence. The sentence had given him a script he could improvise on.

By the time he was twelve, he would use the sentence — in a slightly different form — on a kid who made fun of his friend's hat at the bus stop. The friend would look at Marcus, surprised. Marcus would shrug. He didn't need to do that. It wasn't his hat.

This is what practicing the sentence at nine does. It puts the sentence in your throat. The sentence comes out, ready, when you need it.

The kids practiced for an hour.

By the end of the lesson, every kid in Room 18 had at least one practiced sentence in their pocket.

The sentences would, in the months and years that followed, come out. Some of them would go well. Some of them would not. But all of them would be said, and that was the lesson.

The piece does not have to stay inside. The piece can come out.

That is saying it straight. That is what you do, after forgiveness, when you need the other person to know what happened.

You say it. Then you let go of what they do with it. Their response is their business. Your saying it is yours.

This is the lesson of Chapter Twenty-Three.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Unit Three Wrap-Up — I Choose

At the end of March, Ms. Calloway gave the kids their third twenty-minute reflection block.

The three questions on the board were the same. But under them, she had added one more.

4. Is there anybody in my life I am choosing to forgive — or choosing not to forgive yet?

The kids opened their journals. The room was very quiet.

Marcus wrote:

The difference between forgiving and trusting. I have been thinking about the kid on the bus. I forgive him for the comics thing. I do not need to be his friend. He is fine. I am fine. Done.

Maya did something brave in March. I am going to think about Maya's brave thing for a long time.

I have a story, I am not my story.

Choosing to forgive: the kid on the bus.

Amara wrote:

Saying it straight. The sentence is simple but it is hard. I practiced one with my mom in my head. I have not said it to her yet. I will. Maybe in April.

Maya is the bravest kid in this room and I did not know.

Holding the story without being held by it.

Choosing to forgive: the girls in my second grade class who were mean to Iris. I forgive them. I do not need to ever see them again. Both can be true.

Sofia wrote:

Missing somebody is its own kind of forgiveness path. The path is loopy. The loopiness is the love.

My dad has been telling me to "toughen up" for years and it has been hurting me. I am going to say it straight to him in April. I am scared. I am also ready.

The love has nowhere to go on the not-fine days, so it comes up. That is okay. I let it come up. Then it goes back down.

Choosing to forgive: my dad. He did not know. I am going to tell him.

Priya wrote, in her list:

1. The formula for saying it straight. When you ____, I felt ____, because ____.

2. My mom probably will not respond the way Hannah did when we practiced. That is okay. I am going to say it anyway. The piece does not have to stay inside.

3. The meanness is about the meaner. Not me.

4. Choosing to forgive: my aunt for the Thanksgiving thing. I forgive her. I am also going to spend less time near her at family parties for a while. Both.

5. Choosing to forgive: the girls who moved the chairs at lunch. They have actually started saving me a seat lately, which is interesting.

6. (Maybe they were going through their own thing. Maybe the meanness was about them. I am trying.)

Darius wrote:

My Uncle James is carrying things. My dad is carrying things. I am carrying things about Biscuit. Everybody is carrying.

The new dog might come in May. Her name is going to be Pepper. Mom said.

Their pain is not my evidence.

Choosing to forgive: Uncle James. I forgive him for being mean to my dad. I also told my dad it was about Uncle James and not him. My dad cried. We are doing okay.

Jordan wrote — and this entry would, in years to come, be one of the entries Jordan would look back at as the one where he turned a corner:

I have been the funny kid because I was scared of being any other kind of kid. The funny was a costume I put on so people would let me in the room. I am taking the costume off, slowly, with Dr. Pam's help.

I have not told the class about Dr. Pam. I will, maybe, someday. For now it is mine.

Funny is not the most important thing about me. Loyal is. Observant is. Mapping-things is. Loving-our-neighbor's-cat is.

Choosing to forgive: the kids in fourth grade who excluded me last year. I forgive them. I am in third grade so I do not see them every day. I do not have to like them. I forgive them anyway. The forgiveness is for me, not for them.

Maya wrote, in her smallest steadiest handwriting:

My story is my story. But I am not my story. I read my new story out loud to the class. I do not really remember doing it. I remember the feeling after. The feeling was light. My grandma cried when I told her about it. She said she has been waiting nine years for me to figure that out. She said I was ahead.

I want to remember the day I stood up.

Choosing to forgive: my mom. I forgive her. I do not know when I will see her again. I love her. I am okay.

Theo wrote:

I do not always have to be the watcher. I can sometimes be the sayer. I said something to Jordan at lunch one day in March that I think helped. He has not asked me about it. I am not going to

bring it up. But I said it. The watching was good. The saying was also good.

The watching is good but sometimes the watching is not enough.

Choosing to forgive: a kid in second grade who was mean to me. I have been carrying it. I am putting it down. The kid does not even know. He is in a different school now. I am putting it down anyway.

Kezia wrote:

This unit was about me. Or about my family. The lesson on forgiveness and trust was the one I needed. Mr. Tate and Ms. Calloway helped me. My grandma helped me. We are not deciding everything yet. We are listening. With our eyes open.

The body gets to vote.

Choosing to forgive: the grown-up who writes us letters. I forgive them. I do not invite them in. The forgiveness is mine. The inviting is mine too. Both are my decisions.

When the twenty minutes were up, the kids closed their journals. Ms. Calloway stood at the front of the room.

"Friends," she said. "This was a beautiful unit. You did big work. Some of you did really, really big work. I am proud of every single one of you."

She paused.

"The forgiveness work has been about you. Your peace. Your healing. Your hurts. We have been turned inward. That is right. That is necessary. The inward work is the work."

"But starting next week, we turn outward. We are going to spend the rest of the year on something different. Something the world needs from you, and that you can choose to offer it."

She wrote on the board, in big letters:

GRACE.

She let the word sit.

"That is Unit Four. We start Monday. We have ten weeks. We are going to do something together as a class, in the world outside this room. We are going to be ready for it."

The bell rang. Mr. Patel pulled out the social studies books. The kids put their journals away.

But the word *grace* was still on the board.

It would stay there for the next ten weeks. It would, by the end of the year, be the word that defined them as a class.

This is the end of Part Three. We are three-quarters of the way through the year. We are about to put on the roof.

PART FOUR



Grace & Generosity

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

April, May, June. The year ends. The roof goes on.

What Does Grace Look Like?

On the first Friday in April, Ms. Calloway began the last unit. She wrote one word on the board.

GRACE.

"Friends. Two years ago, some of you learned this word in first grade. You learned a simple version of it. *Grace is being kind to somebody who has not earned it.* That is true. That is still true. But we are going to make the word bigger this year."

"Grace is kindness given freely. Not in exchange for anything. Not because somebody asked. Not because somebody deserved it. Just — given. Because the world is hard, and softness given for free makes it less hard."

She paused.

"Grace, in third grade, has four sizes."

She wrote them on the board.

1. *Grace to yourself. Treating yourself the way you would treat a beloved friend. Forgiving your own mistakes. Letting yourself rest.*

2. *Grace to a friend. Showing up for somebody who is having a hard day. Asking. Listening. Not making it about you.*

3. *Grace to a stranger. Holding a door. Saying hi to the kid eating alone. Picking up something somebody dropped. Smiling at the bus driver.*

4. *Grace to somebody who has hurt you. Wishing them well from a distance. Hoping they are okay. Not letting their pain*

become your evidence about yourself.

"All four are real. All four are forms of grace. We are going to spend the next ten weeks practicing them. Some of them in this room. Some of them out in the world."

"Today, I want to introduce a special word — a word that goes with grace but is not the same as grace."

She wrote next to GRACE, in a slightly different color:

MERCY.

"Mercy is a particular kind of grace. Mercy is when you have power over somebody — power to punish, power to humiliate, power to make them feel small — and you choose, on purpose, to not use that power. Mercy is grace given by the stronger to the weaker. Mercy is what a teacher gives when a student forgot the homework and the teacher decides not to make a big deal. Mercy is what a parent gives when a kid spills milk and the parent does not yell. Mercy is what you give a friend when they apologize and you decide not to punish them with silence for a week."

"Mercy is not weakness. Mercy is strength used kindly. The strong person could have been hard. The strong person chose to be soft. That is mercy."

The kids leaned in.

"Sometimes mercy is the most powerful kind of grace there is. Because the person receiving it knows you could have hurt them, and you didn't. That changes a person. That changes the world, a little, every time it happens."

She wrote one more thing on the board:

MERCY = STRENGTH USED KINDLY.

She turned around.

"Friends. We are going to practice grace and mercy for the rest of the year. We are going to give it to ourselves. We are going to give it to each other. We are going to give it to people

we do not even know. We are going to give it to people who have hurt us. We are going to find the gaps in our school — the places where grace is missing — and we are going to fill some of those gaps. Together. As a class. On purpose."

Amara, in the back, raised her hand.

"Yes, Amara?"

"How do we find the gaps?"

"That, Amara, is the question we are going to spend the next two weeks on. The whole class is going to go on a *Grace Audit*. We are going to walk around our school, and our neighborhood, and we are going to look — really look — for the places where somebody is being left out. Where somebody is sitting alone. Where somebody is being missed. Where a little grace would go a long way."

"And then we are going to fill the gap. Each of you is going to pick one gap. And you are going to design one small thing — a *micro-moment* — that you will do, every day, to fill that gap. The micro-moment can be tiny. The micro-moment can be a single look. A single sentence. A single seat saved. The micro-moment is small on purpose, because grace is built out of small things repeated. Not one big thing once. Many small things, every day."

Amara nodded slowly. Something in her chest had shifted.

She was already thinking about the bench outside the gym.

She did not know how, yet, but she was thinking about it.

This is Chapter Twenty-Five. The word is *grace*. The other word is *mercy*. The plan is the *Grace Audit* and the *micro-moment*.

This is what Unit Four is going to do. It is going to take everything the kids have learned, all year, about their own inside lives — and turn it outward, into something the world can feel.

The roof is going on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

What Does Mercy Look Like?

In the second week of April, Priya did something nobody at school noticed.

She did it because of the lesson on mercy. She did it because Ms. Calloway had said *mercy is strength used kindly*. She did it because she had been thinking about the substitute teacher.

The substitute teacher was a woman named Mrs. Berman. Mrs. Berman had come in to teach Mr. Patel's class for one day in March, when Mr. Patel had been out for a family thing. Mrs. Berman was older — maybe in her sixties. She had a slow careful voice. She had been a teacher for many years. But she had been retired for a while, and she did substitute work now, and she was, the kids could tell, a little out of practice.

The class had not been mean to her, exactly. But the class had not been kind to her either. There had been some giggling at the back when she got somebody's name wrong. There had been some eye-rolling when she said the same instruction twice. There had been, at lunch, some imitations of her slow careful voice that had made other kids laugh.

Priya had been part of some of this. Not the loud part. But she had giggled when somebody else had imitated Mrs. Berman. She had eye-rolled when a kid at her table had eye-rolled. She had been a small part of the wave of unkindness

that the class had directed at Mrs. Berman over the course of the day.

In the moment, Priya had not thought much about it. Mrs. Berman was a substitute. Everybody was a little mean to substitutes. It was almost a rule.

But after the mercy lesson, Priya could not stop thinking about it. Mrs. Berman had been trying. Mrs. Berman had been at the front of the room, doing her best, with twenty-six third-graders who had been laughing behind her back. Mrs. Berman had probably gone home that day exhausted. Mrs. Berman, who was older and had been doing this for years, had had a hard day at work, and the hard day had been partly because of Priya and her classmates.

Priya thought about her grandmother.

Priya's grandmother was around Mrs. Berman's age. Priya's grandmother sometimes had hard days. Priya's grandmother sometimes came over for dinner and seemed tired. Priya would have killed anybody who was rude to her grandmother in public.

But Priya had been rude to Mrs. Berman. Mrs. Berman, who was somebody's grandmother. Probably.

Priya decided to do something.

She did not tell anybody she was doing it. She did not announce it in class. She did not put it on a list.

She found out, by asking Mr. Patel, that Mrs. Berman would be subbing for a sixth-grade class in two weeks.

On the morning Mrs. Berman was going to be there, Priya brought in a folded piece of paper. The paper had nothing on the outside. On the inside, in Priya's careful third-grade handwriting, was a short note:

Dear Mrs. Berman,

I was in the class you taught in March. I was not as kind as I should have been. I am sorry. I wanted to say thank you for coming in to teach us. I know it is hard to be a substitute. You did a good job. I hope today goes well.

— *A third-grader in Mr. Patel's class.*

She did not sign her name. She did not need to.

At the beginning of the day, before the first bell, Priya went down the sixth-grade hallway. She found the room where Mrs. Berman was going to be. The room was still empty — the sixth-graders had not come in yet. Mrs. Berman was at the front, setting up her materials.

Priya walked in. She held the folded note out.

"This is for you. I am a third-grader. I just wanted to say hi."

Mrs. Berman, who had not been expecting a third-grader to walk into her sixth-grade classroom, smiled.

"Hi, sweetheart. Thank you."

Priya nodded. She left.

She did not say her name. She did not stay to see Mrs. Berman read the note. She just walked back down the hallway to her own classroom.

That afternoon, when Priya was in line for lunch, she heard one of the lunch ladies talking to another teacher. The lunch lady was saying *Eleanor Berman was in tears in the staff room at lunch. Somebody had left her a thank-you note. Anonymous. From a third-grader. She said it was the kindest thing that had happened to her in years.*

Priya did not say anything. She kept walking. She got her tray. She sat down at the table with Hannah.

But inside her chest, there was a small warm feeling. A specific kind of warm feeling. The kind of warm feeling you get when you have done something quietly and the doing of it is the whole reward.

This is mercy.

Mercy is strength used kindly.

Priya had had power, in a small way. The power to be mean. The power to imitate. The power to roll her eyes. She had used some of that power, the first time. The second time — when she had a chance to repair, even without Mrs. Berman knowing it was a repair — she had used the power the other way.

She had used her strength kindly.

Mrs. Berman, who was probably home that night drinking tea and reading the note again, would never know who Priya was.

That was fine. The point was not that Mrs. Berman would know. The point was that Priya had done the thing.

This is what mercy practice looks like, when it is real. You do not get a public thank-you. You do not get a sticker. You do not get a high-five from a teacher. You do the thing, and the thing does its work in the world, and you go to your table and eat your lunch.

That night, Priya wrote in her journal:

Today I did a mercy thing. Mrs. Berman cried in the staff room. I did not tell her my name. She does not know who I am. I am glad I did it. I am going to do more.

She underlined *I am glad I did it*.

She closed the journal. She went to sleep.

This is one of the things the kids of Room 18 will learn this spring. Mercy is almost invisible when it is done well. Mercy does its work in quiet. Mercy does not need to be applauded.

Adults who understand this are some of the kindest people in the world.

Priya was, in April of third grade, beginning to be one of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Boundaries from Strength

(A Strand Chapter — this one is for you.)

Hi, friend. J.A.R. again.

This is the last strand chapter in this book. I have one more thing I want to tell you, and it is important, and it might seem like the opposite of what I have been telling you for the last twenty-six chapters, but it isn't.

I have been telling you, all book long, to be kind to yourself. To be kind to others. To forgive. To give grace. To extend mercy. To assume the kindest reason. To listen carefully to feelings. To say it straight when you need to.

Now I want to tell you something that goes alongside all of that.

You are allowed to have boundaries.

A boundary is a line. The line says: *this is what I am okay with, and this is what I am not okay with.* The boundary is not mean. The boundary is not selfish. The boundary is information, given to other people, about how you need to be treated.

Some kids are taught — sometimes by their parents, sometimes by their teachers, sometimes just by the way the world works — that having boundaries is rude. That a good kid is one who lets everybody do whatever they want with them. That a kind kid never says no.

This is wrong.

Kindness without boundaries is not kindness. Kindness without boundaries is being a doormat. Doormats are walked on. Doormats wear out fast. Doormats end up tired and resentful and quiet and sad. Doormats are not actually being kind. Doormats are just being afraid to say no.

Real kindness has boundaries. Real kindness comes from a person who has chosen, freely, to give what they are giving — because they wanted to, not because they were too scared to say no.

A boundary is what makes your kindness real.

Here are some boundaries you can have, even as a kid:

1. I do not have to hug people I do not want to hug. Even if they are family. Even if it is Christmas. You can shake their hand. You can wave. You can say hi. You can give them a real warm smile. You do not have to put your body next to a body you do not want your body next to. Your body is yours.

2. I do not have to tell people things I do not want to tell them. Even adults. Even grandparents. Adults who push for personal information you do not want to share are not, in that moment, respecting you. You can say *I would rather not talk about that right now*. You can say *that's private*. You can change the subject. You can be polite about it. But you do not have to share what you do not want to share.

3. I do not have to laugh at jokes that are not funny. Especially if the jokes are mean. Especially if the jokes are about somebody who is not there. Laughing at the joke is, in a small way, joining the joke. You can not laugh. You can say *that's not funny*. You can change the subject. You can walk away.

4. I do not have to be friends with everybody. You can be polite to everybody. You can be kind to everybody. But you do not have to be close to everybody. Friendship is a choice. You

are allowed to choose your friends. You are allowed to decide, for your own reasons, who you spend time with.

5. I do not have to forgive on a schedule. Even if somebody is mad at you for not forgiving them yet. Even if they keep apologizing. You are allowed to take your time. You are allowed to need a while. You are allowed to never forgive — although, as we have learned, that is usually heavier for you than for them.

6. I do not have to share toys, snacks, or favorite things on demand. Even with siblings. Even with friends. Sharing is good. Sharing is something we practice. But being forced to share — every time, of everything, with everybody — is not sharing. That is just losing things. You can share most things. You can have some things that are just yours.

7. I do not have to be in places that feel unsafe. Even if I am told I should be. Even if other kids are there. Even if it would be embarrassing to leave. If a place feels unsafe to your body — you can leave. You can ask a trusted adult to help you leave. You can call your parents.

8. I do not have to say yes to things that drain me. Especially when I am tired. Especially when I have already given a lot. Especially when somebody is asking too much of me. You can say *no*, *thank you*. You can say *not today*. You can say *I need to rest*.

9. I do not have to keep secrets that scare me. This is the most important one on this list, so please listen carefully. If an adult — any adult — tells you to keep a secret from your parents, from your trusted adult, from a teacher, that makes you feel scared or weird in your body — that secret is not safe to keep. You tell. You tell a trusted adult. You tell as soon as you can. Real adults who care about you do not ask you to keep scary secrets. Adults who ask kids to keep scary secrets

are doing something wrong. The telling is not a betrayal. The telling is what good kids do.

10. I am allowed to change my mind. About sharing. About friends. About foods. About hobbies. About what I am willing to do. About what I am willing to put up with. Changing your mind is not failure. Changing your mind is information. You are allowed.

These are your boundaries. They are not the only ones. You can have more. You can write your own. You can talk to a trusted adult about which boundaries are right for you.

The boundaries are a kind of strength, and the strength makes your kindness real.

When you say no to the things that drain you, you have more energy for the things that fill you. When you keep some toys just for yourself, you can share other toys more generously. When you take your time forgiving, your forgiveness, when it comes, is real. When you tell the scary secret, the scary thing has a chance of stopping.

The boundaries do not make you a worse person. The boundaries make you a clearer person. People who love you will respect your boundaries. People who do not respect your boundaries are showing you something important about themselves.

The kids in this book have been learning boundaries all year. They have been doing it in pieces.

Kezia, with the grown-up who is not allowed to come over — that is a boundary.

Maya, with her story — that is a boundary on what the world gets to make her be.

Marcus, with the kid on the bus — that is a boundary on whose words he lets in.

Priya, with her aunt — that is a boundary in formation. She is not all the way there yet. She will be.

Jordan, with the funny — that is a boundary against being only one thing.

Amara, with the letter — that was a boundary against carrying somebody else's job. She handed back the part that was not hers.

Sofia, with her dad — coming up. Boundary in formation.

Theo, with his role as the watcher — he is, in March, learning when watching is not enough, and stepping over the line into action. That is a boundary, too — a boundary against being only one kind of helper.

Darius, with his uncle — coming. He is going to figure something out about how he wants to be around his uncle in the future, and it will not be the same as how his father has been.

All ten of them are building boundaries.

You are building yours, too. You have been building them since you were born. You are going to keep building them for the rest of your life.

The boundaries are not the opposite of kindness. The boundaries are what makes the kindness real.

Carry that.

Okay. End of the last strand chapter. Back to the story.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Giving the Benefit of the Doubt

In late April, Amara found her Grace Gap.

It happened on a Tuesday morning, when she was walking from the gym to the cafeteria. She was taking the long way, because she had remembered halfway through gym that she had left her water bottle by the lockers, and she had run back for it, and now she was walking past the gym for a second time.

She saw the bench.

The bench was outside the gym. It was a long wooden bench, painted dark green, that had been there forever — since before any of the kids in Room 18 had even started school. The bench was where kids sat to wait when they had to leave class for something. It was also — and this was the thing — where kids who didn't make a team sat after tryouts. The basketball tryouts. The soccer tryouts. The cross country tryouts. The chorus tryouts. The school had a lot of tryouts, and not every kid made every team, and the kids who did not make it sat on the bench afterward, sometimes for a while, waiting for somebody to come pick them up.

Amara had been one of those kids in second grade. She had tried out for the school chorus, in the very last week of second grade, and had not made it. She had sat on the bench for almost forty minutes, waiting for her mother. Other kids had walked past. Some kids who had made the chorus had walked

past, laughing, on their way to a celebration. Nobody had stopped. Nobody had said hi. Nobody had said *I am sorry you didn't make it.*

She had sat there alone. She had cried a little. She had wiped her face before her mother got there.

She had never told anybody about that afternoon.

Today, walking past the bench, she saw a fifth-grader sitting on it. The fifth-grader was a boy she did not know by name. He had clearly just come from something — basketball tryouts, maybe. He had a duffel bag at his feet. He was sitting very still. He was not looking at his phone. He was just looking at the ground.

Amara knew that posture.

She thought about walking past. She thought, for a half-second, that maybe the boy wanted to be alone. Maybe stopping would be weird.

Then she remembered the lesson on the kindest possible reason. *What is the kindest possible reason for the way he is sitting?* The kindest reason: *he is having a hard day, and a small piece of kindness would help.*

Then she remembered her own bench afternoon.

She walked over. She did not sit down — she did not want to crowd him. She stopped a few feet away.

"Hi. I am Amara. I am in third grade."

He looked up.

"Hi," he said.

"Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Did not make the team."

"Oh. I am sorry."

"Yeah."

"It happened to me last year. With chorus."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I sat on this exact bench. For a long time."

The boy almost smiled.

"It is not great," he said.

"No. It is not."

She stood there for a moment. She did not know what else to say. She was not going to give him a hug. She was not going to give him a speech. She was just — there.

Then she did one more thing.

"My name is Amara, and I am in Mr. Patel's class. If you ever want somebody to say hi to in the hallway who knows about not making chorus, I am that person. Just so you know."

The boy looked at her.

"Okay. Thanks."

She nodded. She walked to the cafeteria.

That was it. That was the whole thing.

Forty seconds, maybe. One sentence about chorus. One offer to say hi in the hallway.

But the boy, that night, would go home and tell his mother that a third-grader he did not know had stopped at the bench and said hi. His mother would say *that is so kind, sweetheart*. The boy would say, *yeah. It helped*.

That is the size of a Grace Gap fill.

Sometimes it is forty seconds long.

The next day, in Room 18, Amara raised her hand at the beginning of the SEL lesson.

"Yes, Amara?"

"Ms. Calloway. I think I found my Grace Gap."

"Tell me."

"The bench. Outside the gym. The bench where kids sit after tryouts when they didn't make it. Nobody ever talks to those kids. They just sit there."

Ms. Calloway did something she did not often do. She put her hand on her heart.

"Amara. That is exactly the kind of gap I was hoping somebody would find. Tell me what you want to do."

"I want to walk past the bench, every day, on the way to lunch, and just see whoever is sitting there. If somebody is on the bench, I will stop and say hi. Just hi. If they want to talk, we can talk. If they don't, I just go. The point is they are not invisible."

"Amara. That is your micro-moment. That is perfect."

Amara nodded.

"I have one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I want to make a sign. To put on the bench. The sign would say — I do not know exactly what it would say. Something like *if you are sitting here because you did not make a team, you are not invisible. You matter. Somebody made this bench warm for you. But shorter. And nicer.*"

Ms. Calloway smiled.

"Amara. The sign is a beautiful idea. Why don't you write a draft of the sign tonight. Bring it in. We can make it together. Or you can make it with your mom. Whatever you want."

Amara wrote the sign that night.

She wrote three drafts. The first one was too long. The second one was too short. The third one was right.

It said:

HEY YOU,

Sitting on this bench? Did you just try out for something and not make it?

That's hard. We know.

You are not invisible. Somebody noticed you.

If you want to talk to somebody – find a third-grader named Amara in Mr. Patel's class.

If you want to be alone – that is okay too.

Either way: you are not nothing for not making the team. You are everything you were yesterday. You are still you.

– The kids of Room 18

She brought it in the next day. The class read it together. Some kids suggested small changes. Theo suggested they put a small smiley face on the bottom, but small, not too cheesy. The kids agreed.

Mr. Patel got permission from the principal for the sign to be posted near the bench. He laminated it. He helped Amara hang it up that Friday afternoon.

It was a small laminated sign. It was on the wall near the bench. It was, in the larger world of the school, a tiny thing.

But it would, over the rest of the spring, be read by approximately eighty-two kids who sat on that bench after a tryout they did not make. Some of them would cry while reading it.

A few of them would find Amara in the hallway. One of them, a sixth-grader, would write Amara an anonymous thank-you note that she would keep in her journal for the rest of her life.

This is the size of one nine-year-old's grace, when it is given the chance to be small and consistent and named.

This is a Grace Gap, filled.

The bench is still there. The sign is still there. (It has been replaced twice, when the lamination got worn. The new versions are written in different kids' handwriting now. The bench has become a tradition of the school.)

Amara started it.

A bench outside a gym, in a school in a town in a country, became a place where kids who didn't make the team got to feel — for a minute, sometimes for a while — that somebody had seen them.

That is what grace looks like, in practice. That is what it looks like to fill a gap.

Small Acts, Big Difference — The Grace Gap Assignment

Launch

In the first week of May, Ms. Calloway launched the rest of the Grace Gap project for the whole class.

"Friends. Amara showed us how this works. She found a gap. She designed a small thing. She did it. Now it is each of your turns."

She handed out a sheet titled GRACE GAP DESIGN — MY MICRO-MOMENT. The sheet had four sections.

1. THE GAP. *Where, in my school or my neighborhood, is somebody being missed? Who is sitting alone? Who is being left out? Who is doing something hard without being acknowledged?*

2. THE MICRO-MOMENT. *What is the small thing I can do, every day or every week, to fill that gap? Be specific. Small is good.*

3. THE PLAN. *When will I do it? How often? For how long?*

4. THE CHECK-IN. *How will I know if it is working? What will I notice?*

The kids took the sheets. They worked on them quietly for the rest of the lesson.

Marcus picked: *the school custodian, Mr. Reggie, who comes in to clean the cafeteria after lunch and who I have never said hi*

to. Marcus's micro-moment was: say good afternoon to Mr. Reggie every day after lunch. Ask him how his day is. Listen.

Sofia picked: the new kid who arrived in February, named Andre, who has not made friends yet. Sofia's micro-moment was: invite Andre to sit at our lunch table on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Priya picked: the lunch ladies, who serve hot food for an hour every day and who almost nobody ever thanks. Priya's micro-moment was: say "thank you for my lunch" to whichever lunch lady serves me, every day, with eye contact. Learn their names.

Darius picked: Mrs. Chen, the librarian, who is so quiet that nobody ever talks to her. Darius's micro-moment was: return books in person to Mrs. Chen instead of dropping them in the slot, and tell her one thing I liked about each book.

Jordan picked: kids on the bus who get sat next to by nobody. Jordan's micro-moment was: sit next to one of them, at least once a week. Just sit. Do not need to talk. Just be the person sitting next to them.

Maya picked: the third-grader in the class down the hall who I see crying in the bathroom sometimes. Maya's micro-moment was: when I see her, I will not look away. I will say hi. I will ask if she is okay. I will not push. I will just see her.

Theo picked: Mrs. Yamashita, the aide who walked Priya to Ms. Calloway's office in November, who works at the school but who almost no kid knows by name. Theo's micro-moment was: learn what Mrs. Yamashita actually does at the school. Say good morning to her. Ask her how her day is. Notice her.

Kezia picked: the kindergartener who walks past Room 18 every morning by herself because she gets dropped off early. Kezia's micro-moment was: every morning, when I see her, I will give her a small wave. She will see somebody every day.

Hannah, who was visiting from another classroom for the lesson, picked: *the third-grader who reads alone at recess every day under the big tree*. Hannah's micro-moment was: *sit near the tree, with my own book, two days a week. Not bother him. Just sit nearby. So he is not the only one reading*.

These were the micro-moments.

Each one was small. Each one was specific. Each one was doable.

The kids would do them for the rest of the school year — six weeks.

Some of the micro-moments would, by the end of June, have produced visible changes. Andre would have friends. Mr. Reggie would know Marcus's name and would high-five him every day after lunch. Mrs. Chen the librarian would have started saving books for Darius that she thought he would like, with a small note on each one. The kindergartener would have started waving back at Kezia. Mrs. Yamashita would have, by mid-June, asked Theo to walk to the office with her one morning because she needed somebody to help carry boxes, and the two of them would have had a long conversation about what her job actually was.

Some of the micro-moments would not produce visible changes. Jordan would sit next to twelve different kids on the bus across six weeks, and most of them would not say much, and Jordan would feel, sometimes, like he was not doing anything that mattered. He would do it anyway. Maya would only see the crying kid three times, total, in six weeks. The third time, the crying kid would actually talk to her. Just for a minute. About a small thing. But the third time would be the one that, in the years to come, Maya would think about. The other two times had been the waiting for the third time.

This is how it works. Some of grace is visible. Some of it is invisible. Some of it changes things in ways you can see. Some of it changes things in ways you cannot see. You do it anyway. You do not need to see the change to know the change is happening.

The kids of Room 18 — all of them — would, six weeks later, do a debrief in class about what they had learned.

That is Chapter Thirty.

For now: the micro-moments are designed. The plans are in place. The grace is going out into the school, in tiny doses, every day, with somebody's name attached to it.

The school does not yet know it is being changed.

But it is being changed.

Small acts, big difference. Not big acts, small difference. Small acts, big difference.

That is the principle. It is one of the only principles that, when applied across a whole life, actually changes a person and the world around them.

The kids of Room 18 have started.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Grace with Hard People

In mid-May, the lesson was the hardest grace lesson of the year. It was about people who were hard.

"Friends," said Ms. Calloway. "We have been talking about grace for five weeks. Most of the grace we have been practicing has been with people who are easy. The new kid. The lunch lady. The kindergartener. The librarian. These are people who will take your grace, and either be grateful or be surprised, and the giving feels good."

"Today we are going to talk about grace with hard people."

She let that sit.

"Some people in your life are hard. They are mean, or critical, or cold, or distant, or impossible to please. They have not changed. They have not apologized. They have not done the work. They are still being hard."

"Can you give them grace?"

She paused.

"My answer — and you can choose your own answer — is sometimes, yes, but always with limits. Let me explain what I mean."

She wrote on the board:

GRACE WITH HARD PEOPLE — THE RULES

She listed:

1. *You do not have to give grace to somebody who is still hurting you. Safety always comes first. Grace is for AFTER,*

when you are safe.

2. The grace can be internal, not external. You can wish somebody well, in your heart, without ever being close to them. Internal grace is real grace.

3. The grace can be in small doses. You can give somebody five percent of the grace you might give a friend. You can be polite to them at family dinner without inviting them on a road trip.

4. The grace does not require closeness. Wishing somebody well does not mean playing with them. Saying hi in a hallway does not mean being their friend. Forgiving them in your heart does not mean letting them in.

5. The grace does not require explanation. You do not owe them an explanation of why you are staying at a distance. You do not owe anybody a justification of your boundaries.

6. The grace can change. If they change, you can let them closer. If they get worse, you can pull farther away. The amount of grace you give can be revisited any time.

She turned around.

"Friends. Grace with hard people is strength used kindly, exactly like mercy. It is a choice. You can choose it. You can also choose not to. There are some hard people in your life that you might never feel ready to give grace to. That is okay. You are not behind. You are not a worse person. You are just — a person, with a history, making a decision about what you can carry and what you cannot."

"The freedom is in knowing it is your choice. Nobody else gets to tell you. Not your parents. Not me. Not a book. Not a prayer. Not a movie. The choice is yours. The choice can change. The choice does not need to be defended."

She paused.

"Today, I want you to think of one hard person in your life. You do not have to share. Just think. And then I want you to

think — what level of grace, if any, am I giving them right now? What level of grace, if any, am I willing to give them in the future?"

The kids thought.

Some of them wrote in their journals. Some of them just sat with it.

Darius thought about his Uncle James. He decided: *I am going to give Uncle James five percent grace. I will say hi at family dinners. I will be polite. I will not laugh at his mean jokes about Dad. I will not eat at the corner of the table where he sits. That is my level.*

Kezia thought about the grown-up who writes the letters. She decided: *I am giving them internal grace. I wish them well in my heart. I am not inviting them in. That is staying the same for now. Maybe forever. We will see.*

Marcus thought about the fifth-grader on the bus. He decided: *I am giving him sixty percent grace. I will say hi if he says hi. I will not start a conversation. He is not a bad kid. He is not a great kid. I do not need him in my life. That is my level.*

Priya thought about her aunt. She decided: *I am going to give her thirty percent grace. I will be polite at family gatherings. I will not stay in conversations with her for very long. I will not be available for one-on-one time with her. I will not try to fix her. That is my level. The level can change if she changes. I am not waiting for her to change. I am just — being clear about what I can offer right now.*

Each kid made their decision. Each one was different. None of them was wrong.

This is what grace with hard people looks like in real life. It is not a one-size-fits-all answer. It is not *forgive everybody completely* or *cut everybody off*. It is a dial. A dial with many

settings. You set the dial where it needs to be. You change the dial when it needs changing.

The dial is yours.

This is one of the most adult lessons in this book. The kids of Room 18 are getting it at nine.

Most adults do not get it.

Most adults spend their whole lives being either too generous with hard people (so they keep getting hurt) or too closed with hard people (so they cut off relationships they did not actually need to cut off). The kids of Room 18 are learning the dial.

They will use the dial for the rest of their lives.

That is the lesson.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Grace Gap Field Assignment — Class Debrief

In the second week of June, the kids did their debrief.

Mr. Patel cleared an hour. The kids sat in a circle on the carpet, the way they had been sitting on the carpet all year. The Grace Gap project had been running for six weeks. Each kid had done their micro-moment, more or less, for the whole stretch. Now they were going to tell each other what had happened.

Ms. Calloway opened.

"Friends. You have been doing your micro-moments for six weeks. I want each of you to tell us — briefly — three things. What did you do? What did you notice? What did you learn?"

She looked around.

"Who wants to start?"

Marcus raised his hand.

"I'll start. I did Mr. Reggie. The custodian. I said good afternoon to him every day after lunch. The first week, he just nodded. The second week, he said good afternoon back. The third week, he said *Marcus, how was your lunch*. The fourth week — Tuesday of the fourth week — he asked me about my sister, because I had told him about Aaliyah, and he remembered. By now he knows my name and my sister's name and my dog's name. He told me his daughter is in middle

school here and her name is Tasha. We talk for two minutes every day."

He paused.

"What I learned: most adults at school have not been asked about themselves in a long time. They like being asked. Mr. Reggie is one of my favorite people now. He is — he is a really nice man. I think he is going to come to graduation next year because he said he likes seeing the third graders move on to fourth grade. I did not know custodians cared about graduation. But he does."

The class smiled.

Sofia went next.

"I did Andre. The new kid. I invited him to sit with us on Mondays and Wednesdays. The first Monday he said no — he was kind of shy. The first Wednesday, he came. Hannah and I made room. He sat with us. He did not say much. By the third week, he was talking. By now, he eats with us every day. Not just Mondays and Wednesdays. We are friends. He is — he is funny. He is from a town in Texas. He is going to be in our class next year, probably."

"What I learned: shy kids are not unfriendly. They are just waiting to be invited. If you invite them, sometimes they come. Sometimes they need to be invited twice or three times. That is okay. You keep inviting."

Priya:

"I did the lunch ladies. I learned their names. They are Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Singh, and Miss Donna. I say thank you to them by name every day. Mrs. Carter started saving me an extra cookie on Fridays. I told her she did not have to. She said I *know*, I *want* to. Miss Donna told me once that I was the only third-grader who said her name. I am going to tell other kids how to do it. I think more kids should."

"What I learned: people who are not seen know they are not being seen. When you start seeing them, they notice fast. The change is not even slow. It is fast. Like one week."

Darius:

"I did Mrs. Chen. The librarian. I returned books in person and told her one thing I liked. She started saving books for me. She left them at the front desk with little post-it notes. Like *Darius* — *I think you would like this one, it has a dog in it, signed Mrs. C.* I have read every book she has set aside for me. Some I did not love but I told her thank you anyway. She told me last week that I am her favorite third-grader. I told her I am her favorite third-grader because I am the only third-grader who actually returns books in person. She laughed. She has a really good laugh."

He paused.

"What I learned: there are adults in our school whose whole day is not seen by us. The librarian is one of them. There are probably others. I would like to do another one of these projects next year, with a different adult."

Jordan:

"I did the bus kids. The ones who got sat next to by nobody. I sat next to twelve different kids in six weeks. Most of them did not talk. A few of them did. One kid — a fifth-grader named Brendan — talked to me a lot once we got going. He likes the same kind of comic books that Marcus likes, actually. I told Marcus. They are going to maybe trade some next year."

"What I learned: sometimes you do not see the change. The kid does not become your friend. The kid does not even say much. You think — *was this worth doing?* Then you remember that the kid was alone for the whole bus ride before, and now somebody is sitting next to them. The alone was the change."

The sitting next to was the change. You did not need to be friends. You just needed to be there."

He stopped.

"And I learned that sitting in silence next to somebody is its own kind of conversation. I did not know that. I was always — I was always making jokes to fill silences. Sitting next to a kid who was quiet, I had to learn to just sit. It was hard at first. Then it was easier. Then it was — nice. I have a kind of quietness in me now that I did not have at the beginning of the year. Sitting on the bus helped me find it."

The class was very still after Jordan said this.

Maya, next:

"I did the crying kid. The one I had been seeing in the bathroom. I only saw her three times in six weeks. The first two times I just said hi, are you okay? She did not really answer. She kind of nodded. I went to my own stall. I did not push."

"The third time was last Friday. She was at the sink. She had stopped crying but her face was still red. I said hi. She said hi. I said *do you want me to wait with you?* She said no. Then she said *thank you for asking again. I am okay. I have been having a hard week.* I said okay, I am sorry. *If you ever want to find me, I am in Mr. Patel's class. I am Maya.* She said her name was Bea. She is a second-grader."

"What I learned: sometimes the work is just showing up the third time. The first two times do not count by themselves. The first two times are the practice for the third time. The third time is when it works. You cannot get to the third time without doing the first two."

She paused.

"I am going to keep doing this next year. Bea is going to be a third-grader. She is going to be in this school. I am going to

find her in the hallway and say hi. I will keep doing it. The third time was the start, not the end."

Theo:

"I did Mrs. Yamashita. I learned that she is an instructional aide. She works with kids who need extra help. She has been here for nineteen years. She is from a town in Hawaii. Her grandkids live in San Diego and she visits them three times a year. I learned all of this over the course of six weeks, by saying good morning to her in the office once a week and asking how she was. The day she asked me to help her carry boxes, we talked for almost twenty minutes."

"What I learned: every adult at our school has a whole life. The whole life is full of kids and grandkids and places they are from and things they love. We see them at school and we forget. The micro-moment was: do not forget. Notice the whole life behind the work."

He stopped.

"Also — I think I might want to be a teacher when I grow up. I had not thought about it before."

The class made a small sound.

Kezia:

"I did the kindergartener. I waved to her every morning. She did not wave back for the first ten days. Then she did. By the second week, she was waving back before I waved. By the third week, she was running over to me to give me a high-five. She is named Lila. She is the youngest kid in her family. She has three older brothers. She wanted somebody to notice she had been dropped off. I noticed her. That was all."

"What I learned: waving is small. Small is enough. Some kids need somebody to wave at them every morning. That is the whole thing."

Hannah, who was visiting:

"I did the kid under the big tree. He never knew I was nearby. I just sat near him with my own book two days a week. I read for the whole recess. I never bothered him. I do not even know if he noticed me. But somebody told me — Theo, actually — that the kid under the tree had told his friend that he liked recess better lately because there was always somebody else reading nearby. He had not known it was me. He did not need to know. The change was: he was not the only kid reading at recess. He was one of two."

"What I learned: sometimes grace is invisible. The person does not even know you are doing it. The grace works anyway. The grace was for him, but also for the space — for the way the playground felt. The space got softer because two people were reading instead of one. The space changes when you change."

Amara, last, who had started all of this with the bench:

"I have been walking past the bench every day on the way to lunch. I have stopped at the bench, in total, eleven times this spring. I have talked to eleven different kids. Some of them just wanted to say hi. Some of them needed to talk for a few minutes. One kid — a sixth-grader, a girl named Camille — was sitting on the bench after a chorus tryout, like I had been. She had not made the school musical. She cried. I sat down. We talked for a long time. She had been counting on the musical for a lot of reasons that I did not totally understand but that were real to her. I told her about my chorus thing. I told her about the bench. I told her that I had cried on the bench too. She said *I had seen the sign. I read it three times before you came over. I think it is why I did not leave yet.* She said the sign had told her she did not need to walk away ashamed."

Amara paused.

"What I learned: a sign can keep a kid in a place long enough for somebody to come over. A sign is not nothing. A sign is the thing that holds the door open until a person can walk through it."

She paused again.

"And I learned that I was not the only kid who had a bench afternoon. I thought I was the only one. There have been at least eleven other kids in two months. There are probably hundreds, across the whole school year. The bench is busy. Nobody had noticed. Now somebody does."

The room was very still.

Ms. Calloway, at the front, took a long breath.

"Friends. I have been teaching SEL in this school for fourteen years. I have done this project — the Grace Gap project — for ten of those years. I have heard hundreds of debriefs. I want to tell you, honestly, that this is one of the most powerful sessions I have ever sat through. You did the work. All of you. You did it well. You did it consistently. You learned things I cannot teach. You learned them by doing."

She paused.

"And I want to tell you one more thing. The kids you helped this spring — Andre, Mr. Reggie, the lunch ladies, Mrs. Chen, Brendan, Bea, Mrs. Yamashita, Lila, the kid under the tree, Camille, all the others — they will remember this year. Some of them will remember you, specifically, when they are forty years old. They will not remember every detail. They will remember the feeling of being seen. The feeling will stay with them. The feeling will, in many cases, change how they treat other people, for the rest of their lives."

"You did not just give grace this spring. You passed grace forward. Every kid you helped is now slightly more likely to do something similar for somebody else, someday. The grace

multiplies. It does not stay the size you gave it. It gets bigger. It echoes."

The class was quiet.

Then Marcus, sitting in the circle, raised his hand.

"Yes, Marcus?"

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes."

"Are we — are we supposed to keep doing this? Even when the class is over?"

Ms. Calloway smiled.

"Marcus. Yes. Yes you are. You do not get to stop. The Grace Gap is not a school assignment. The Grace Gap is a way of seeing the world. You see the gaps. You fill them. You do not need permission. You do not need a worksheet. You do not need a teacher to assign it. You just — keep doing it. For the rest of your life."

Marcus nodded. The class was still. The bell rang.

The kids did not move for a moment. Then they got up, slowly, and gathered their things, and went to lunch.

The Grace Gap, the actual program, was over.

The Grace Gap, the way of being, had just begun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Community Charter & Year-End Celebration

On the last Friday of the school year, the kids of Room 18 did one final thing together.

Ms. Calloway came in with a roll of butcher paper. She unrolled it across the front of the room. It was about eight feet long. She taped it up.

"Friends. Today we are going to write our class charter. Together. One big sheet. The charter is — it is the list of agreements that this class lived by, this year. The things we figured out, together, about how to be a good community. We are going to write them down so future-us can remember. And so future Room 18s — the kids who come next year — can see what one Room 18 figured out, before them."

The kids gathered around the paper.

She handed each of them a different color marker.

"Each of you is going to write one thing. Something you believe is true about how this class worked. Something you have learned. Something you want to leave behind. Sign it with your name."

The kids took the markers.

For about thirty minutes, the kids of Room 18 wrote on the butcher paper.

Some of what they wrote was small. Some of it was big. Some of it was funny. Some of it was serious. All of it was theirs.

The wall, by the end of the thirty minutes, looked like this:

ROOM 18 CHARTER — JUNE

Things we figured out this year. Signed by us.

- *The Inner Critic is loud, not true.* — Priya
- *Shame is always lying. Guilt is information.* — Marcus
- *Most meanness is about the meaner, not you.* — Darius
- *Emotions are messengers. Listen to what they came to say.*
- Sofia
 - *I am more than my worst moment.* — Amara
 - *Funny is not the most important thing about me.* — Jordan
 - *I look up.* — Maya
 - *Watching is good. Saying things is also good.* — Theo
 - *Wave at the kindergarteners. They notice.* — Kezia
 - *The very heavy thing is not meant to be carried alone.* —

Marcus

- *You do not have to be small to be loved.* — Priya
- *Forgiveness is for me. Trust is between people.* — Kezia
- *Safe always comes first.* — Kezia
- *The forgiveness path is loopy. That is normal.* — Sofia
- *I have a story. I am not my story.* — Maya
- *Boundaries are what make kindness real.* — Theo
- *Small acts, big difference. Not big acts, small difference.* —

Amara

- *Sign the sign. Sometimes the sign is what holds the door open.* — Amara
- *Most adults at school have not been asked about themselves in a long time. Ask them.* — Marcus
- *Sitting in silence is also a conversation.* — Jordan
- *The third time is the start. Not the end.* — Maya

- *Grace can be invisible and still real.* — Hannah (visiting)
- *Every adult at our school has a whole life behind the work.*

Notice it. — Theo

- *Anger is sometimes sadness wearing a costume.* — Darius
- *Their pain is not my evidence.* — Darius
- *The Inner Coach is loud too. Just quieter at first. Make her louder.* — Jordan
- *Mercy is strength used kindly.* — Priya
- *You can put a heavy thing down a hundred times. That is not failure.* — Marcus
- *Pen pal best friends. Pittsburgh counts.* — Sofia
- *We are all carrying things. The ones who hide it best are sometimes carrying the most.* — Kezia

When they were done, they stepped back. They looked at the wall. Ms. Calloway looked too.

She said, "Friends. This is what we built this year. This is our roof. This is what we put on top of the foundation we have been laying for two years."

She paused.

"This wall is going to stay in this school. Mr. Patel is going to keep it. Other classes will see it. Other kids will see it. The kids who come next year — the new Room 18 — they will see it. They will know that some kids, the year before, figured a few things out, and left them here as a gift."

She paused again.

"And I want to tell you the most important thing. The charter is for future you. Each one of you. The fourth-grade version. The middle-school version. The high-school version. The grown-up version. The forty-year-old version. Each of you, in the future, is going to forget some of these. Each of you, in the future, is going to need to come back and remember."

"The wall will not be here forever. But the sentences are in you now. You wrote them. You learned them. They are part of how your brain is built. When you need them, they will come back. Sometimes you will not even know where they came from. They will just be there."

"That is the gift. The sentences are the gift. The class was the place where the sentences happened. But the sentences are yours. They go with you."

The kids were quiet.

Then Ms. Calloway said one more thing.

"I have one announcement. I will be your SEL teacher next year. And the year after. And the year after that. I will be with you, in different rooms, for the rest of your time at this school. Some years I will see you a lot. Some years I will only come in for short visits. But I will be here. We will keep doing this work. Together."

The class cheered, a little. A surprised happy cheer. They had not known.

Mr. Patel, at the back of the room, smiled.

Then it was lunch. Then it was the last hour of class. Then it was the year-end party, with cupcakes from Mr. Patel and a song that Mrs. Chen the librarian came down to sing with them. Then it was the last bell.

The kids hugged.

Marcus hugged Amara, which he had never done in his life.

Sofia hugged everybody.

Maya, who had not hugged anybody all year that the class had seen, hugged Ms. Calloway twice. The second time was longer than the first.

Then they left.

Room 18 was empty.

The charter was on the wall.

The Mistake Wall, in the hallway, had — over the course of the year — accumulated almost two hundred new Oopses, some from kids in Room 18, some from kids from other classes who had started using it. The sign on the bench was still there.

The kindergartener named Lila, who would not be a kindergartener next year, would walk past Room 18 on her way to first grade and would, for years, wave at the door, even when there was no kid named Kezia in it.

Mr. Reggie the custodian would, in years to come, ask Mr. Patel about Marcus, every fall, until Marcus graduated from the school.

Mrs. Chen would save books for Darius until he was in fifth grade.

Mrs. Yamashita, the instructional aide, would, on her own time, write a thank-you note to Theo that she would put in his cubby on the last day of school, saying *Theo. You are going to be a wonderful teacher one day. I saw it this year. I am sure of it.*
— Mrs. Y.

These are the small invisible things.

These are what happen when a class of kids gives grace, in tiny doses, every day, for a whole year.

These are what a roof looks like.

This is the end of the year.

This is the end of the book.

Closing Words

This is the last chapter.

If you have made it all the way here — to the last page of the second book of *The Architecture of Grace* — you have spent two years with these kids. You met them in first grade. You watched them learn how to do a real sorry, and how to listen to a feeling, and how to put a small stone in a basket on a windowsill, and how to look up. Then you came back to them in third grade. You watched them name the voice inside their heads. You watched them tell their parents about lies they had been carrying for two years. You watched them write letters to friends who had moved away. You watched them sit on benches outside gyms with kids they did not know. You watched them learn the difference between guilt and shame. You watched them figure out what to do with stories that had been telling them what they were.

You watched them, in other words, grow up a little.

You did not just watch them. You grew up a little too. Even if you are eight, or nine, or ten. Even if you are forty. Reading a book is a kind of growing up. The sentences in the book go in. They sit. They wait. They come out when they are needed.

The whole point of these books, I want to tell you now, is this: somewhere far away from today — in fifth grade, or in eighth grade, or in high school, or in college, or in the middle of an ordinary Tuesday when you are thirty-six — something hard is going to happen to you. Or to someone you love. And in that moment, a sentence from this book — or from the first one — is going to come back to you. It might be a small

sentence. It might be a big one. You might not even remember where you read it. But it will be in your head, and it will help.

Maybe it will be *the Inner Critic is loud, not true.*

Maybe it will be *shame is always lying.*

Maybe it will be *I am more than my worst moment.*

Maybe it will be *most meanness is about the meaner.*

Maybe it will be *boundaries are what make kindness real.*

Maybe it will be *small acts, big difference.*

Maybe it will be *the third time is the start, not the end.*

Maybe it will be a sentence the kids of Room 18 wrote on their charter that I did not even mention here.

The sentence does not need to be loud. The sentence does not need to fix the whole thing. The sentence just needs to be in your head when you need it. And it will be. Because you read the books. Because the sentences went in while you were thinking they were just stories. They are part of you now. They are part of how your brain is built.

That is what good books do, when they are written well. They build sentences inside you. The sentences sit. The sentences wait. The sentences speak when they are needed.

The kids you have been reading about — Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Mia (in Pittsburgh now, sending letters), Kezia, and the rest — they are not done. They are nine years old. They have a lot more to figure out. They will be eleven and twelve in the next book. They will be fourteen and fifteen in the one after that. They will be seventeen and eighteen in the last one. We are going to follow them all the way.

Each book is going to put more sentences inside you. The sentences are going to scale up with the kids. They are going to grow up with you. By the time you finish Book Five, you will

have a whole quiet library of sentences inside you, ready to speak.

We are building something, the kids and I. We are building a room inside you, one piece at a time.

The foundation is who you are.

The walls are being kind to yourself.

The windows are seeing other people.

The roof is grace.

In Book One, we put in the foundation. In Book Two, we built most of the walls, and started on the windows. In the books to come, we will finish the windows. We will put the roof on. We will furnish the room. We will make it yours.

By the end of all five books, you will have — in your own head — a small private room. A room you can go to. A room that nobody can take from you. A room where the sentences live.

That is the architecture of grace.

That is what we are doing here.

Carry the room with you.

Use it.

Add to it.

Pass it on, when you get older, to people who need it.

This is the end of the second book.

I will see you in Book Three.

— J.A.R.



This is Book Two of *The Architecture of Grace*.

Books Three, Four, and Five are forthcoming.



a quiet, observant book

A tender, clear-eyed continuation of the series that began in Room 12 — and a stand-alone book that knows exactly what an eight-year-old is up against.

Two years have passed. The children of Room 12 are nine years old now, in a different room on a different floor, with a teacher named Mr. Patel and a new branch on the Identity Web: *Things I'm Still Figuring Out*.

In Room 18, Ms. Calloway returns — no longer their homeroom teacher, but the one who comes in once a week to work on *the part of you that doesn't show up on a math test*. This year, she has a name for the voice inside their heads. Two names, actually.

The Inner Critic. The Inner Coach. They will learn to tell which one is talking. They will learn to interrupt the first and invite the second. These are not little skills.

There is a boy who lies to his parents and then can't sleep. A girl who can't think of one thing she is good at. A family that changes in the middle of the year. An empty bench outside a gym, and a girl who decides to do something about it. And a Mistake Wall, moved out of Room 12 and into a hallway where every grade in the school can see it.

Room 18 is a book for the third-grader reading it in a quiet corner, and for the grown-up reading over their shoulder who is still figuring some of this out too.



BOOK TWO OF FIVE