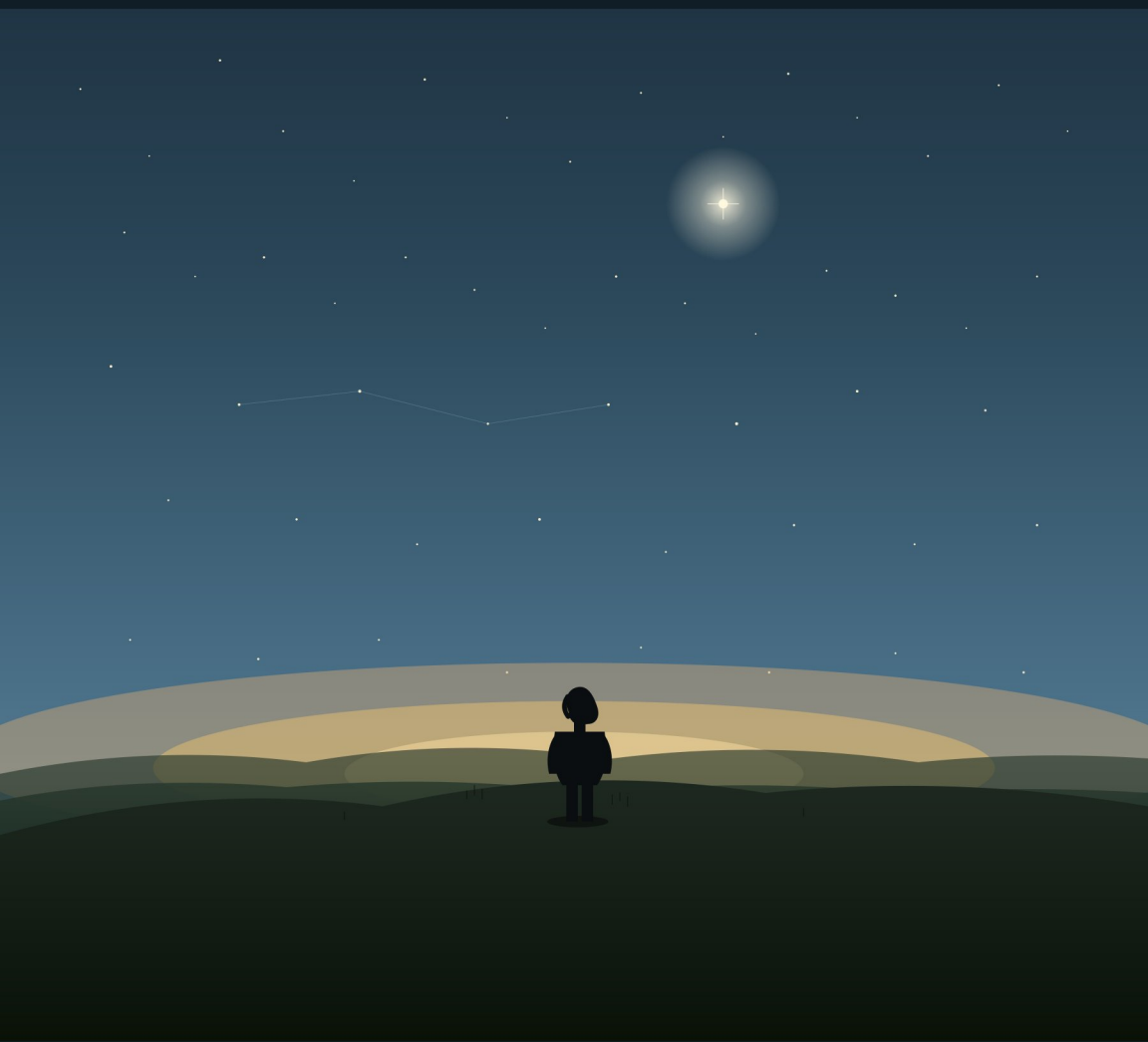


THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— *Book Four* —



ROOM 104

*The Year We
Looked Up*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

ROOM 104

The Year We Looked Up

BOOK FOUR OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

Architecture of Grace, LLC

Room 104 · The Year We Looked Up

Book Four of The Architecture of Grace

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A Note Before You Begin

The kids are fourteen.

You may have met them when they were six. Or eight. Or twelve. Or you may be meeting them for the first time in this book. Either way, here is what you need to know.

There are ten of them. Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Mia, Kezia. Mia lives in Pittsburgh now and has since they were nine — she is a pen pal, a voice on the phone, a face on a screen. The other nine live in the same town and have, until last June, been at the same middle school. This past September, they walked into the high school for the first time. A bigger building. Twelve hundred kids instead of three hundred. Older students who tower over them in the hallways. Their voices changing. Their faces changing. Their lives changing.

This is that year.

This book is freshman year of high school. One school year, August through June. Twenty-two chapters in four parts.

I am going to be more quiet in this book than I have been in the first three. I have been the narrator since first grade. My voice has been getting smaller with every book — louder when the kids were small and could not yet speak for themselves, quieter as they learned how to. In this book, the kids are fourteen, which is old enough to have full interior lives that they are entirely capable of telling you about themselves. I am going to step almost all the way out. Most of the chapters in this book are theirs. Some chapters will be a single kid telling you what they are thinking, in their own voice. Some chapters

will be a quieter narrator (still me, but very quiet) following the cohort through a day or a week. Almost no chapters will be me, J.A.R., turning to the camera and talking to you straight. I will do that at the start and the end of the book. In between, the kids carry it.

This is by design.

The high school years are when a kid starts running their own architecture. The grown-ups have built the foundation, the walls, the windows. The kid is now in the building. The kid is starting to make it their own. The kid is choosing — for the first time, in real ways — what they keep and what they put down. The kid is also being tested. The kid is being asked, by the world, *who are you, really*.

The cohort, in freshman year, gets that question for the first time. They have spent eight years building tools. They have been taught how to catch the Inner Critic, how to do a real apology, how to forgive, how to tell the truth about themselves. They have a Mistake Wall, which moved to the high school over the summer and is now in the freshman hallway near Room 104. They have each other.

What they did not have, before this year, was: 12-hour days, classes with kids they did not know, a building with three stories, lockers, real homework, the SAT looming, the college conversation starting earlier than they expected, social media in its high-school form (different and harsher than the middle-school version), drinking happening at parties they were not yet invited to but knew about, kids getting cars, kids getting jobs, kids developing reputations that would follow them for four years.

They are walking into all of this.

The toolkit is being tested.

The architecture is going to hold. I will tell you that up front. I want you reading this book knowing the architecture holds, because the book is not a thriller. The cohort is not in jeopardy of breaking. The cohort gets stretched. The cohort gets stressed. The cohort, at the end of the year, is more itself than it has ever been.

But the getting there is the story.

A few small notes.

There is a new room in this book. Room 104. It is the freshman English classroom at Lincoln Park High. The teacher is Ms. Calloway, who has, by Year 4 of being in their lives, moved through enough grade levels with this cohort that she has earned a faculty rotation. She does freshman English and senior English. She is going to be with this cohort for both bookend years of high school. The middle two years — sophomore and junior — she will be in their lives differently, as the SEL specialist who runs the Tuesday lunch block and who they can stop by and see, but not as their daily classroom teacher. Freshman year, however, she is in Room 104 every weekday at second period.

The Mistake Wall came with the cohort. The Wall, which was in the middle-school hallway last year, was moved over the summer by Ms. Calloway and the principal of the high school, who had been a former colleague of hers. The Wall is now in the freshman hallway outside Room 104. The first card on the Wall this year is by a kid who is not in the cohort — a freshman from a different middle school who walked in on the first day of school, saw the Wall, asked Ms. Calloway what it was, and wrote a card and pinned it up. Her card says *I forgot my brother's birthday last year*. Ms. Calloway has, since first grade with the original cohort, been the keeper of the Wall.

Mr. Patel is no longer in this book. He retired at the end of middle school. He had been the cohort's main teacher in Book 2, and a recurring presence in Book 3. He will be referenced in this book — the cohort writes to him, occasionally — but he is not, in the daily life of the kids, a presence anymore. Mr. Tate, the school counselor, is also at the middle school. He stays in their lives by occasional contact, but the daily counselor at the high school is somebody new, who I will introduce when she enters.

Mia is in Pittsburgh. She has been there since they were nine. She is in the book through phone calls and texts and one summer visit. She is a full character; she just lives somewhere else.

This is the façade book. The grown-ups have built foundation, walls, windows. The kids, in high school, are figuring out the face the building presents to the world. They are figuring out what they want the front of the building to look like — what they are going to show people about themselves. They are also figuring out, with some difficulty, that the front is not the whole building, and that living inside the building is different from deciding what the front looks like.

That is the work of freshman year.

That is the work of this book.

I am going to leave you with them now.

When you reach the last page, I will be back briefly. Until then, you are with Marcus and Amara and Sofia and Priya and Darius and Jordan and Maya and Theo and Mia and Kezia.

Walk with them.

Look up.

— J.A.R.

PART ONE



Knowing & Accepting Yourself

Who am I, when the building gets bigger?

August through October. Freshman year begins.

CHAPTER ONE

The First Day of High School

— Marcus —

The high school is the biggest building I have ever walked into. Three stories. Twelve hundred students. East and west wings. A cafeteria that seats four hundred. A gym with a track around the top.

I am fourteen. I am the smallest version of fourteen I think it is possible to be. I have not had my growth spurt. My voice has half-changed, which is worse than not having changed at all, because it cracks at random moments and is, several times a day, a thing I cannot control. I am wearing a clean shirt and pants my mom picked out with me last night. My backpack is new. The new backpack is, I now realize standing in this hallway, both a thing I wanted and a thing that announces *I am new* to every other kid in the building.

I walked to the corner with Sofia. We have been doing the walk to school together since first grade. The walk now ends at a bus stop instead of a sidewalk in front of the school. The bus takes ten minutes.

On the bus, I sit next to Sofia. Amara sits in front of us. Theo across the aisle. Priya three rows back. We are not the only freshmen, and we are not even most of the freshmen — there are sophomores and juniors and seniors, louder than us, who own the back of the bus.

I am quiet. Sofia is quiet. Amara is quiet.

The bus pulls into the school's circle. We get off.

The hallway, when we walk in, is big. The hallway is loud. The hallway is full of kids I do not know. I can feel myself, in my body, doing a thing I did not know I was going to do — I am scanning the hallway for any kid I recognize. Any face from the cohort.

I find Amara, right next to me. Sofia, right next to me. Theo, walking with us. Maya, at her locker in the freshman hallway, in a soft gray sweater, looking weirdly like she has been here for years. Priya, walking up with Hannah. Jordan, at his locker three down from Maya's. Darius, last to come in because he takes a different bus. Kezia, behind Darius, in her green hoodie — small, like me, but carrying herself like she has been ready for high school for a long time.

Nine of us. We are in the freshman hallway. The tenth — Mia — is in Pittsburgh, and is going to be in Pittsburgh for the rest of high school. I have not, until this moment, felt the tenth missing in a long time. I feel it now. The cohort, in a building this big, is — for the first time in years — visibly nine. Not ten.

I push the thought down.

Amara opens her locker. She has, in twenty-four hours, already decorated it — a small photo of her grandmother, a small piece of yellow construction paper that says, in her handwriting, AMARA. The yellow paper is — and I notice it because I am Marcus, and I notice these things — the same shade of yellow as the bench-sign Amara designed in third grade.

I think: Amara is bringing the bench-sign yellow to high school. Amara is starting the architecture from day one.

I open my locker. The cohort is, by alphabetical accident, scattered across the freshman hallway. Sofia is in the next aisle over. Theo and I are next to each other. Maya is on the

other end. Jordan, Darius, Kezia, Priya, Hannah — all scattered. I put my backpack in. I take out my schedule.

First period: Algebra I, Mr. Owens, Room 218.

Second period: English I, **Ms. Calloway, Room 104.**

I had not let myself focus on this until now. Ms. Calloway is teaching freshman English. Ms. Calloway, somehow, has moved up to the high school. Eight years she has had us, and now a ninth. I do not know if all nine of us are in the same section. The school sometimes splits the cohort up.

I have to wait until second period to find out.

I close the locker.

I walk with Sofia to first period, and we split up at the stairs. Sofia is in Honors Bio, up. I am in Algebra I, down the first floor.

Mr. Owens's classroom is at the end of a long hallway. I get there four minutes before the bell. Mr. Owens is younger than I expected — maybe thirty. Tie. Stack of textbooks on the desk.

I sit in the third row.

Nobody in this room is from the cohort.

I scan. There is a girl in the front row I might have seen at a middle-school basketball game. A boy across from me in a Lincoln Park Track Team t-shirt — sophomore, probably. Other than that — twenty-six kids, none of whom I know.

This is, I now realize, the first classroom of my life in which I do not have a member of the cohort. The cohort has been in every classroom I have been in, one way or another, since first grade.

This room is twenty-six strangers and me.

I feel — and I notice that I am feeling it — the small adolescent panic of *who am I going to be in this room*. The room has never seen the version of me the cohort has seen for

eight years. The room is going to meet a new Marcus, and that Marcus is going to be — what? Quiet? Loud? Funny?

The Marcus the room is going to see is, I now realize, whatever Marcus I decide to be in the first three weeks. The room will form an opinion by mid-September and that opinion will be sticky.

I have been the kid who tells the truth, since I was eight. That is who I have been in the cohort. The cohort knows that about me. The cohort sees me through that lens.

Mr. Owens's room does not know that about me yet. They are going to see what I do. They are going to see whether I raise my hand. They are going to see whether I sit alone at lunch. They are going to see whether I am the kid who makes a small joke when Mr. Owens makes an error on the board, or the kid who sits silently.

I have, in my hand, the ability to show up to first period as whatever Marcus I want to be.

This is — and I do not have words for it exactly, sitting in third-row first-period algebra — this is a thing Ms. Calloway told us about, at our last meeting before summer. She said *kids, you are about to walk into a building where most of the people in your classrooms will not know you. The version of you that they see is the version you choose to show. I want to tell you something. Be the version the cohort knows. Do not invent a new one. The cohort version is the real one. Be that one in the new rooms.*

I am thinking about that as the bell rings.

Mr. Owens stands up. *Good morning. I am Mr. Owens. Welcome to Algebra I.*

The class settles.

Mr. Owens does the thing every first-day teacher does. He takes attendance. He goes around the room. He asks each of

us to say our name and one thing we are interested in. Lacey – *horseback riding*. Aaron – *video games*. Mary – *marine biology*.

It comes around to me.

I say, *I am Marcus*. *I am* – I pause. I am, in my head, choosing between several options. I could say *interested in basketball*. True. I love basketball. I could say *interested in drawing comics*. Also true. I have been drawing one since fifth grade. I have not, until now, said this out loud to a room of strangers.

I could say *interested in storytelling*. That would be – and I notice this as I am thinking – the grown-up version of the comic-drawing thing. It is the kind of answer that gets a teacher to nod and say *interesting*. It is not, exactly, a lie. It is just the polished version.

I think about Ms. Calloway. *Be the version the cohort knows*.

I say:

I am Marcus. I am interested in drawing comics. I have been drawing one for the last four years.

Mr. Owens nods. *Interesting. What is the comic about.*

I had not been prepared for the follow-up.

It is about – it is about a kid who has a sister and they have adventures and there are a lot of small embarrassing things that happen. It is not – it is not a superhero comic. It is mostly about being embarrassed.

The class laughs a little. I laugh a little.

Mr. Owens says, *Marcus, that sounds great. I would love to see it sometime.*

I say, *okay*.

The attendance keeps going.

I sit there for a minute, processing.

I have, in the first ten minutes of the first class of high school, told a room of strangers about the comic. I did not,

before this morning, plan to. The choice happened in the third-row chair in the moment Mr. Owens asked the question.

I am going to be the comic-drawing kid in Algebra I. That is, by the end of today, going to be the thing Lacey-the-horseback-rider and Aaron-the-video-gamer and Mary-the-marine-biologist remember about me. *Marcus draws comics.* That is okay. That is true. That is the cohort version.

I am going to do this in every classroom today.

I am going to do this in every classroom for the next four years.

The Marcus the high school is going to know is going to be the Marcus the cohort knows.

That is the first decision of high school.

That is — I am writing this in my journal that night, in my bedroom, after the first day — going to be the most important decision I make in the first month.

I am Marcus. I am fourteen. My voice cracks. I draw comics. I have eight other people in this building who have known me since first grade. I have one person in Pittsburgh I have been writing to for five years. I am in the freshman hallway. My locker is three down from Theo's. Ms. Calloway is going to be my English teacher tomorrow. The Mistake Wall is — Amara told me at lunch today — in the hallway right outside Room 104.

The building is big.

I am small.

But the cohort is in the building.

And the cohort version of me is the one I am going to be.

That is the day.

— Marcus

CHAPTER TWO

Room 104

The cohort walked into Room 104 at 9:02 the next morning.

Eight of them were in this section. Marcus, Sofia, Amara, Priya, Maya, Theo, Jordan, Kezia. Darius was in the other section — the school had split the cohort by alphabet, and Darius had ended up in second-period English with the other freshman teacher, Ms. Diaz. The cohort had figured out the split the previous night in the group chat. Darius had said *guys, I am with Ms. Diaz. I will be lonely. Send help.* The cohort had laughed in text. Sofia had said *D, you can come to lunch with us. Ms. Calloway will still be your SEL specialist on Tuesdays.* Darius had said *I know. I will survive.*

So when the cohort walked into Room 104, they were eight.

Ms. Calloway was at the front of the room.

Ms. Calloway had a green cardigan on. The green cardigan was the one she had worn in elementary school. Sofia, walking in, noticed it. Sofia had been with Ms. Calloway in fifth grade when Ms. Calloway had switched to navy. The navy had been her middle-grade cardigan. Now — back in green, for the freshman year.

Sofia did not know if this meant something or was just a wardrobe coincidence. She would, in October, ask. Ms. Calloway would say *Sofia. You noticed. I switch back to green when I am with a new group of kids in a new room. The green is the welcome cardigan. I will switch to navy in October.*

Sofia, in October, would tell the cohort. The cohort would smile.

But that conversation was in the future. On the first day of freshman English, Sofia just noticed the green and sat down.

The room had desks in a U-shape. The U-shape was new. The cohort had not, in their previous classrooms with Ms. Calloway, sat in a U. They had sat in a circle in first grade. At round tables in third grade. At regular desks in middle school. The U was different.

Ms. Calloway said, *good morning*.

Eight cohort kids and seventeen other freshmen they did not yet know all said, in varying volumes, *good morning*, Ms. Calloway.

She smiled.

For some of you, this is the first time you have met me. Hello. I am Ms. Calloway. I will be your English teacher this year. For some of you — she looked, briefly, at the cohort kids scattered through the U — for some of you, this is not the first time.

She paused.

I want to do something different today. I am not going to do the usual first-day thing of going around and asking your name and what you did this summer. We are going to do a different first-day thing.

She picked up a marker. She walked to the board. She wrote, in her familiar handwriting:

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE TRUE OF YOU BY THE END OF FRESHMAN YEAR?

She turned around.

I am going to ask you, in a minute, to take a piece of paper and write me one sentence. Just one sentence. I am going to read it tonight. I am going to keep your sentence in a folder. I am going to give it back to you in May. By May, when you read what

you wrote this morning, you will see whether the thing you wanted to be true of you actually became true. Sometimes it will have. Sometimes it will not have. Sometimes a different thing will have become true. All three are fine.

She paused.

But the question I want you to sit with right now is – what do you want to be true.

She handed out paper.

The room was quiet for a long minute.

Sofia, in the U on the right side, was thinking.

Sofia had, that morning, been thinking about freshman year on the bus. Sofia had spent middle school being the call-Sofia kid. Sofia had been everybody's listener since seventh grade. Sofia had not, much, been able to be the kid who needed somebody. She had been the giver. The giving had been her shape. Sofia had been thinking, on the bus, about whether high school could be different. Whether she could – somehow – let herself be a person who also took, sometimes. Whether the giving could be only part of who she was, not all of who she was.

She wrote, on the paper:

By the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have asked at least one person, at least once, for help with something that mattered.

She read it. She thought – okay. That is honest. That is mine.

She folded the paper. She wrote her name on it.

She looked around.

The other kids were still writing. Maya was, at her desk, drawing in her sketchbook instead of writing. The drawing, Sofia could see from across the room, was a small drawing of a tree. Maya had chosen to answer the question by drawing.

Maya did this when the question was big. Ms. Calloway, when she walked over to collect Maya's paper, would see the drawing and would nod and not say anything and would put the drawing in the folder.

Marcus was writing carefully. Sofia could see his pen moving slowly. Marcus, she thought, was probably writing something about telling the truth in new rooms — he had told her on the bus this morning about the Algebra I moment, deciding in the third row to tell the room about the comic.

Amara was writing. Amara was probably writing something specific and ambitious. Amara always did.

Priya was on her second sheet of paper. Priya had — Sofia could see — written something, crossed it out, and started over. Priya was wrestling with how to phrase whatever the true thing was.

Hannah, who was Priya's best friend from outside the cohort, was sitting next to Priya. Hannah had been in the same section by accident. Hannah was writing, easily. Hannah did most things easily.

Theo was watching. Theo was, Sofia knew, also writing, but Theo was watching the room first. Theo always did the watching first, then the writing.

Jordan was writing, then stopping, then writing again. Jordan was — Sofia thought — probably trying to make whatever he was writing funny. Sofia hoped, watching Jordan, that the funny did not become a costume in this new room. Jordan had been getting closer, the past year, to being a kid who was funny and also other things. Sofia did not want freshman year to push him back into funny only.

Kezia was writing. Kezia was quiet. Kezia had been quiet on the bus this morning. Kezia had texted Sofia last week that things had been *complicated, but okay*, which was Kezia's code

for something happened that I am not yet ready to talk about, but I am okay. Sofia had not pushed. Sofia had texted back I am here when you want to talk. No rush. Kezia had said thanks Sof. I will.

The cohort, Sofia realized, watching them write, was at eight in this room.

The cohort was holding.

She felt — and she would not have named this in the moment — she felt a small particular kind of relief. The relief was about the cohort being intact. Two days into high school, the cohort was still recognizably itself. They had walked into a bigger building. They had been split slightly. They had been thrown in with seventeen other freshmen they did not know. And the cohort was still doing what the cohort did. They were sitting at their desks writing answers to a hard question. They were not panicking. They were not performing. They were just being themselves.

The eight of them, plus the seventeen others, plus Ms. Calloway in the green welcome cardigan at the front of the room.

This was the room. This was Room 104.

Ms. Calloway, ten minutes later, came around with a small basket and collected the papers. Maya put her sketchbook drawing in. Ms. Calloway noticed it. Ms. Calloway, holding the basket, gave Maya the smallest private nod. Maya nodded back.

When all twenty-five papers were in the basket, Ms. Calloway put the basket on her desk.

She did not read any of them.

Thank you. I will read these tonight. I will keep them safe. I will give them back to you in May.

She paused.

I want to tell you a few things today, and then we will start English I, which I promise will involve some actual literature and some actual writing. Today is mostly a welcome day. Tomorrow is when we start.

The class settled.

She said:

This room is Room 104. The Mistake Wall is in the hallway right outside this room. Some of you saw it on your way in this morning. Some of you walked past it without noticing. The Wall is a tradition that has been in this school district since the original cohort of kids – some of whom are sitting in this room right now – were in first grade. The Wall has moved with us. It is now here, in this building, for the next four years. The Wall has rules. The rules are short. I want to tell them to you because they are going to matter.

She listed them, on her fingers:

One. You can put a card on the Wall about a mistake you have made, big or small. You write the card. You sign your name or you do not sign your name. Both are okay.

Two. You cannot put a card on the Wall about somebody else's mistake. The Wall is a place to put your own mistakes, not other people's.

Three. Cards stay up unless the person who wrote them takes them down. Other people do not take down other people's cards. Ever.

Four. The Wall is a public space. By putting a card up, you are choosing to be seen. That is the point. We do not, in this school, hide our mistakes. We hold them gently and we put them in plain view so we and the people around us can stop being scared of them.

She paused.

The cohort kids in this room have been doing this with me since first grade. They know how to do it. The rest of you are going to learn. Some of you, looking at the Wall in the hallway, will think it is silly. That is fine. Some of you will think it is weird. That is fine. Some of you, by November, will quietly write a card and put it up because something will have happened to you that you needed to set down. That is what the Wall is for.

That is the Wall.

She moved on.

I am also going to tell you that the way I teach English I is going to feel different from what some of you are used to. We read books in this class. We write a lot. But the books and the writing are connected to what is going on inside you. We do not study literature like it is a museum object. We study it like it is a mirror. When you read *The House on Mango Street*, we are going to talk about your neighborhood. When you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we are going to talk about your version of small-town injustice. When you write essays, you are going to write about things you actually care about. The literature is not separate from your life. The literature is for your life.

She paused.

That is how we are going to do English I.

She paused again.

And one more thing.

The room waited.

I am going to be your teacher this year. I have been the teacher of some of you since you were six. I want to say to those of you who have not had me before – please do not feel like you are coming into a room where the other students have an advantage. You do not. The cohort kids have known me for a long time. We have a shorthand. The shorthand will not exclude you. The shorthand is just shorthand. By October, you will have

your own version of it. Some of you will become close to the cohort kids. Some of you will become close to other kids in this room. Some of you will become close to me. All of those are fine. The room is for everyone in it.

Welcome.

The bell rang ten minutes later.

The cohort walked out of Room 104. They walked past the Mistake Wall in the hallway. Sofia, walking past it, glanced at the first card — the one a freshman from a different middle school had written on the first day. The card said I forgot my brother's birthday last year. Sofia smiled.

Amara, next to her, said, Sof. The Wall is here. It actually came.

Sofia said, I know.

Amara said, we are going to do okay.

Sofia said, yes. We are.

They walked to third period.

This is what the start of high school looks like, for a cohort that has been built since first grade.

It looks like a welcome cardigan. A U-shaped room. A Mistake Wall in the hallway. A sentence on a piece of paper that the teacher will hold for nine months. A friend named Amara saying we are going to do okay. A friend named Sofia agreeing.

The cohort, in Room 104, was the cohort.

The building was big. The cohort was the cohort.

That is, in some way, the whole book in a sentence.

CHAPTER THREE

The Inner Critic Goes to High School

— Priya —

The Critic showed up on the third day of high school.

I had been waiting for her. I had, all summer, been telling myself she was going to show up at some point. She had been quiet for most of eighth grade — I had gotten good, by then, at catching her early. I had a Post-it on my mirror. I had Sofia. I had Hannah. I had a journal habit. I had practiced for years.

She showed up Wednesday morning, third period, in geometry.

The geometry teacher, Mr. Lin, had given us a worksheet. Ten problems. Not hard — the kind of review problems teachers give the first week to find out who knows what. I worked through them. I got nine of them quickly. The tenth one I could not figure out.

I sat with the tenth one for two minutes.

The Critic showed up.

She said, in my head: *you cannot do this problem. You are in a class of older kids — some of these kids are sophomores. They are better at math than you are. They have already done this problem. They are going to look over at you and see you stuck on the tenth one. They are going to notice. They are going to think*

that freshman is slower. That is the impression you are going to make in the first week.

I caught her.

I said, in my head: that is the Critic. That is loud, not true. The tenth problem is hard. The tenth problem is supposed to be hard. The teacher gave us the tenth problem so we would have something hard to think about. Other kids in this room are also stuck on the tenth problem. I am not the only one.

The Critic, in my head, said: *yes you are.*

I said: *no I am not.*

The Critic said: *look up. Look at the other kids. You will see they have all finished.*

I looked up.

The girl next to me had finished — her worksheet was face-down on her desk. But the boy in front of me was still working on his. So was the girl across the aisle. So was the boy behind me, who I could hear erasing things.

I had been right. The Critic had been wrong. I was not the only one stuck on the tenth.

I went back to the problem.

I worked on it for another two minutes. I figured out the trick — I had been trying to use a formula I did not need to use. I put down the formula. I drew the triangle. I solved the problem.

I finished.

I sat for a second.

The Critic, in my head, said: *you are going to be slower than the rest of the kids in this class for the whole year. Today was the warning sign. You should drop down to regular geometry. You should not be in honors. You are going to fall behind.*

I caught her again.

I said: *that is the Critic. That is loud, not true. I finished the worksheet. I solved the tenth problem. I am in honors geometry because I am supposed to be in honors geometry. The placement was based on my eighth-grade scores. The school knows what it is doing. I am where I belong.*

The Critic said: *but you almost did not get the tenth one.*

I said: *almost is not the same as did not. I got it.*

The Critic, in my head, was a little quieter.

I sat for another minute. The bell was going to ring in five minutes. I had nothing to do.

I thought — *okay. I have just caught the Critic twice in one class. That is not a thing I have had to do in a long time. The Critic has not been this loud in maybe six months.*

I thought — *why is she louder now.*

I thought about it for a minute.

I thought — *oh.*

The reason she is louder now is that the room is new. The room is strangers. I am not in the cohort right now. The cohort kids who could catch the Critic for me — Sofia, Hannah, Marcus when I am with him — they are not in this room. The catching, in this room, has to be entirely mine. Nobody else is going to catch her. Nobody else even knows she exists.

The Critic, who has been getting quieter across the cohort's middle-school years because the cohort had been catching her with me, is louder again in the new room because the cohort is not here to help.

I am going to have to catch her by myself, more than I have had to in years.

This is — and I am writing this in my journal that night, in my room, after dinner — this is going to be the work of high

school. Catching her in rooms where the cohort is not. Catching her, by myself, in classes with strangers.

I have practiced. I have practiced for years. The practice was for exactly this.

But I am noticing — and I want to write this down — I am noticing that the practice in the cohort room is different from the real thing in a new room. The cohort room was practice. It was good practice. It was real practice. But it was with help. The high school class is going to be without help, most of the time, for me.

I have to get better at being my own help.

That is the freshman year work.

I have to become — and this is a thing I think Ms. Calloway has been preparing us for without quite naming it — I have to become my own call-somebody. The Inner Coach has been a thing I have known about since fourth grade. The Inner Coach has been, until now, backed up by the cohort. The Inner Coach in high school is going to be — most of the time, in most rooms — the only Coach in the room.

I can do it.

I have been doing it, in pieces, for five years.

I am going to get faster.

By May, when Ms. Calloway gives me back the sentence I wrote on the first day, I want it to have come true. The sentence I wrote was: *By the end of freshman year, I want to be true of me that the Inner Critic and I have a freshman-year relationship that is a step better than our eighth-grade relationship. Quieter. Faster catching. Less time wasted listening to her.*

I have nine months.

I am going to work on it every day, in every new class, with every new kid I meet, in every moment when she shows up.

The Critic is going to come along for the ride. She has been with me since I was nine. She will be with me for the rest of my life. The point is not to get rid of her. The point is to catch her faster.

This morning I caught her in geometry in under two minutes.

By May, I want to be catching her in thirty seconds. By the time I am thirty, I want to catch her before she finishes her first sentence.

That is the practice.

I am Priya. I am fourteen. The Critic is still here. The Critic is going to be loud in new rooms. The cohort is going to be in some of my rooms and not others. The catching is going to be mine.

I can do this. I am going to do this.

I just caught her again — five minutes ago, while writing this paragraph. She showed up at the part where I wrote *I can do this*. She said *you cannot, actually*. I said *that is the Critic*. *Loud, not true*. She got quiet.

The catching is happening, in real time, in my journal.

The journal is — I think — part of the toolkit too. Ms. Calloway told us, in seventh grade, that journals are not just diaries. Journals are practice space. The journal is where you practice catching things and putting them down. The catching practice can happen anywhere, but the journal is one of the easier places.

I am going to keep journaling. Every night. Or — well — every night I can. Most nights.

That is the freshman-year plan.

— Priya

(P.S. — *the cohort is not in every room. But the cohort is in this notebook. I can write to them in here, even when they are*

not next to me. That is also a thing.)

CHAPTER FOUR

Amara at the Locker

In the second week of school, Amara saw a girl crying at a locker.

Amara was on her way to fourth period. She was alone, because the cohort had scattered for fourth period — Marcus had history, Sofia had bio, Priya was at geometry, Theo was in the art elective, Jordan was in the same English section but had stayed back to ask Ms. Calloway something, Maya was already gone. Amara was walking by herself. She was in the freshman hallway, near the corner where the lockers turned.

The girl was at a locker near the corner. The girl was alone. The girl had her face against the locker. The girl was crying, quietly, in the way kids cry when they do not want anyone to see them crying.

Amara did not know the girl.

Amara had been in school for nine days. There were two hundred and seventy-two kids in the freshman class. Amara, like everyone else, did not yet know most of them by name.

The girl was small. The girl was wearing a black hoodie with the hood up. The girl had a backpack on the floor next to her.

Amara had a choice.

She could keep walking. She could go to fourth period. That would, by every traditional teenage social rule, be the right thing to do. The girl was crying. The girl had her hood up. The

girl was, in some unspoken way, signaling *do not approach me*. Amara could respect that signal and walk by.

She could keep walking and tell Sofia at lunch. Sofia could find the girl later.

She could keep walking and tell Ms. Calloway.

Or — and this was the choice Amara stood at, in the hallway, for maybe four seconds — she could stop.

She thought about the bench-sign.

She thought about it specifically. She thought about herself at nine, looking at the bench in the back corner of the playground, having the small idea to put a sign on it. The sign had not been a heroic gesture. The sign had been small. The sign had been just doing the small specific thing in front of you.

The girl crying at the locker was the small specific thing in front of Amara.

She stopped.

She did not, at first, say anything. She just stood, maybe four feet away, against the lockers on the other side of the hallway.

The girl, after a few seconds, noticed.

The girl looked up. The girl's eyes were red.

The girl said, *I am fine*.

Amara said, *okay*.

Amara did not move.

The girl said, after a long second, *you do not have to stand there. I am fine*.

Amara said, *I know. I am just — I am just here*.

The girl looked at her.

Do I know you.

No. I do not think so. I am Amara. I am a freshman. I just saw you over here and I — I just stopped. You do not have to talk to

me. *I just did not want to walk by.*

The girl wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie.

I am Olivia.

Olivia. *Hi.*

I am — I just — I cannot get my locker open. I have been trying for ten minutes. I am going to be late to fourth period. I do not know what to do.

She started crying again. The crying, Amara realized, was about the locker. Or, the locker was the thing that had broken her open. There were probably other things underneath — there always were — but the immediate thing was the locker.

Amara said, *can I look at it.*

Olivia stepped back.

Amara looked at the combination Olivia had been doing.

Olivia said, *the combination is three-fifteen-twenty-eight. I have been doing it. It is not working.*

Amara said, *the locks here — I have noticed — the locks here need you to do the third number going past it once before you come back to it. So you go right past the twenty-eight, and then you come back to it. It is weird. It is not how the middle-school locks worked.*

Amara had figured this out by accident on the second day, when she had been trying to do her own locker and Theo had been showing her.

Olivia said, *oh.*

Amara said, *can I try.*

Olivia said, *yes.*

Amara did it. She turned right to three. She turned left past zero to fifteen. She turned right past twenty-eight to forty-two, then back to twenty-eight. The lock clicked open.

Olivia stared at it.

Olivia said, *thank you.*

Amara said, no problem. The lock is the worst thing in this school. Once you get the trick, it is fine.

Olivia opened the locker. Olivia took out her books. Olivia turned to Amara.

I do not — I do not normally cry at lockers. I am — I just —
She stopped.

Amara said, Olivia. You do not have to explain it. It is the second week of high school. I cried at home last week. Sofia, who is my friend, cried in her room on Friday. The first two weeks are hard. The crying is normal. The locker is part of it.

Olivia laughed a little.

Sofia your friend cried in her room. That makes me feel better.

Yes. Even Sofia.

Who is Sofia.

Sofia is — Sofia is in my friend group. There are ten of us. We have been together since first grade.

Oh wow.

Yes.

I do not — I am from a different middle school. I do not really know anyone. My best friend went to a different high school. We are still friends but we are not in the same building.

Amara said, Olivia. Can I ask you something.

Yes.

Do you want to sit with us at lunch. Today. With the cohort. The ten — well, nine, here in the building — the nine of us.

Oh.

I do not want to — I do not want to crash a friend group.

Amara said, Olivia. The cohort has been adding people for years. Hannah, who is Priya's best friend from a different middle school, joined when we were eight. The cohort is not a closed

group. It is just — it is a group that started early and has stayed. Anyone who shows up is welcome at lunch.

Olivia thought about it.

Okay.

Amara said, we sit at the table near the windows in the cafeteria. Third row, fourth table. Mine is the yellow chair — I sit in the yellow chair.

Olivia laughed. Why yellow.

Yellow is my color. Long story.

I will find you.

Good.

Amara looked at her phone. It was — she realized — six minutes after the bell. She was very late.

I am very late.

Oh — I am sorry, I made you late.

No. The locker was important. Late is fine. I will tell my teacher.

Thank you.

I will see you at lunch.

Yes.

They walked in different directions.

Amara walked to fourth period — English, with Ms. Calloway. She was, by then, twelve minutes late. She walked in quietly. The class was already going. Ms. Calloway was at the board. The cohort kids were in their seats.

*Ms. Calloway looked at Amara when she walked in. Ms. Calloway did not say anything. Ms. Calloway just gave Amara a small look that meant *I notice you are late. I assume you have a reason. Tell me later.**

Amara sat down.

At lunch, Olivia found the table.

The cohort was already there. Marcus and Theo and Sofia and Priya and Hannah and Maya and Jordan and Kezia. Eight of them, plus Amara's yellow chair, which was empty because Amara had been getting her lunch.

Olivia stood at the edge of the table looking nervous. Amara walked up with her tray.

Amara said, *guys. This is Olivia. She is sitting with us today.*

The cohort, without any rehearsal, did what the cohort did. Sofia smiled and said *Olivia. Hi. I am Sofia. Sit here.* Marcus moved over to make room. Theo said *hi Olivia.* Priya said *hi.* Hannah said *hi.* Maya nodded. Jordan said *hi.* Kezia said *hi.*

Olivia sat down.

She looked, for a second, like she might cry again. She did not. She ate her lunch.

She listened to the cohort talk for a while. The cohort, that lunch, was talking about the geometry test that some of them had and some of them did not have. The cohort was not, at lunch, performing for Olivia. The cohort was just being the cohort. The being-the-cohort, in front of a new person, was the welcome.

After about fifteen minutes, Olivia said, quietly, to Sofia, who was sitting next to her, *thank you.*

Sofia said, *for what.*

Olivia said, *for letting me sit here. I do not – I have not had a place to sit at lunch. I have been sitting in the library.*

Sofia said, *Olivia. You have a place to sit. Here. Every day. This is your seat now.*

Olivia did, in fact, eat lunch with the cohort every day for the rest of high school.

Olivia would, in junior year, become close enough to the cohort that Sofia would consider her one of them – not quite cohort-from-first-grade, but cohort-from-the-second-week-

of-freshman-year. The cohort would, in some real way, have eleven members in high school. Olivia would, in the cohort's senior-year cohort dinners that some of them have not yet had, be present. Olivia would not be at the August 14 dinner of their freshman-college year, because Olivia would be at a different college and would not be able to make it, but Olivia would be at the second one. And the third. And many more.

But on the day Amara found her at the locker, none of that was decided. None of it was visible. Olivia was just a girl who had not been able to get her locker open and who had been about to spend the year sitting in the library at lunch.

Amara, in her notebook that night, wrote:

The bench-sign was small. Today's thing was small. The architecture is built out of small things. The yellow chair, the cohort table, the lock trick, the come sit with us. Small. The smallness is the point. The smallness is what makes it doable. The smallness is what makes it the kind of thing a fourteen-year-old can actually do. The bigger gestures – the founding-a-club gestures, the running-for-student-council gestures – those will come later. The small things are what you do today, at the locker, on the way to fourth period.

Olivia is – Olivia is, I think, going to be a friend.

The cohort, in the bigger building, is going to keep being the cohort. It is also going to add. The architecture is being added to. We are building things into our group that were not there in middle school.

That is the freshman thing.

She put the notebook away. She went to sleep.

In the morning, on the bus, she told Sofia the whole story.

Sofia said, Amara. The bench-sign kid is in high school.

Amara said, the bench-sign kid is in high school.

They laughed.

The bus took them to the building. The day went on.

CHAPTER FIVE

The First Game

— Darius —

I went out for the freshman basketball team in October.

I had been playing since fourth grade. I had been on the school team in middle school. I had — until October of freshman year — never tried out for a team where I might not make it. The middle-school team had taken everyone who tried out. The high school team did cuts.

The cuts were on a Friday afternoon. Tryouts were Monday through Thursday. They took fifteen freshmen out of about forty who tried out. I was a small fourteen-year-old. I had not had my growth spurt. The kids trying out were, some of them, six feet tall. I am, at fourteen, five foot four. I was going to be either the kind of kid who got cut for being small, or the kind of kid who made the team because of being scrappy and fast.

I had to be scrappy and fast.

I was, by Thursday, both. I had played hard every day. I had — and I am writing this in my journal that Friday night — I had also, every day, talked to myself in the locker room before practice. I had said, in my head, the thing my mom taught me to say when I was nine and I was scared of basketball games. *Darius. You are here. You belong on this floor. Go play your game. Do not play their game. Play yours.*

I had played mine. I had passed when I should have passed. I had cut when I should have cut. I had dove for the ball twice

on Tuesday and three times on Wednesday. I had — and this was the most important thing — I had not panicked. The Critic-equivalent in my head (I do not have a Critic the way Priya does, but I have, sometimes, a voice that tells me I am about to fail) had been quiet most of the week.

The list went up Friday after practice.

I read it.

Darius Williams was on the list. Number fourteen out of fifteen. The last spot was for a different kid — a sophomore who had been cut from the JV team and reassigned to freshman.

I had made it.

I walked to my car. (My mom was picking me up. I do not have a car. I do not have a license. I am fourteen.) I sat on the curb outside the school waiting for her.

I called my dad.

My dad was at work. He picked up. I said, *Dad. I made the team.*

My dad said, *Son. I knew you would.*

I said, *Dad. I did not know I would.*

My dad said, *I know. That is why I had to say it for both of us. Congratulations. I am proud of you.*

I said, *Dad. Thanks.*

We were both quiet for a second.

Then my dad said, *Pepper is going to be excited.*

I said, *yes she is.*

We both laughed.

Pepper was — at this point, freshman year — a five-year-old dog. Pepper was healthy. Pepper was my dog. Pepper would, four years from now, be nine and slowing down. Pepper would, four years from now, die. But at the moment of this phone call, Pepper was middle-aged, healthy, and going to be

at the door wagging her tail when I got home. I did not know about the future Pepper. I was just calling my dad about the basketball team.

My mom pulled up.

I got in the car. I told her. She drove me home.

When we got home, Pepper was at the door. Pepper wagged her tail. Pepper jumped on me. I got down on the floor and let her lick my face for a minute.

I said, *Pepper. I made the team.*

Pepper did not understand. Pepper wagged her tail more.

I sat on the floor with her for ten minutes.

I want to tell you, even though this chapter is about basketball, a thing I have been thinking about regarding Pepper.

I have been thinking, since school started, that Pepper is — in my life — the steadiest thing. School is new. The building is new. The classes are new. The kids in the classes are new. The schedule is new. The bus is new. Everything about school is, in some sense, a thing that I am — and the cohort is — adjusting to.

Pepper is not new. Pepper is the same dog who has been at my house since I was nine. Pepper greets me the same way every day. Pepper sleeps in the same spot every night. Pepper eats the same food. Pepper is, in some way that I have not before put into words, the constant.

I have been thinking, watching the cohort settle into high school, that everybody has a constant. For Amara, it is her grandmother, who lives four blocks away and who Amara sees on Sundays. For Sofia, it is her mother, who is in the kitchen when Sofia gets home. For Marcus, it is the cohort itself, in some real way — Marcus has been the cohort kid more deeply than the rest of us. For Priya, it is Hannah. For Theo, it is — I

think — his mother. For Maya, it is her grandmother. For Jordan, it is his therapist Dr. Pam Mendel, who I now know about because Jordan told me about her in seventh grade. For Mia, all the way in Pittsburgh, it is — I think — her parents and her own little brother.

For me, it is Pepper.

I have been wondering whether having a constant is part of what made the cohort possible. Whether each of us, with our own constants in our own homes, was made into a kid who could be in a cohort because we had something safe somewhere else. Whether the cohort would not have worked if some of us did not have constants.

I do not know.

I do know that I am glad Pepper is at home when I get home from basketball tryouts.

The first freshman team game is in three weeks. I have to get a uniform. I have to learn the plays. I have to show up. I am going to show up. I am going to play hard.

I am also going to keep being Darius. Not basketball-Darius. Not cohort-Darius. Just Darius. The one who loves his dog and is making the team and is fourteen and has a long way to go.

I am going to be okay. Pepper is going to be okay. The cohort is going to be okay.

That is — for tonight — enough.

— Darius

(P.S. I told the cohort about the team in the group chat. The cohort cheered. Marcus said Darius. You are going to be a star. I told Marcus Marcus. I am number fourteen on the freshman team. I am not going to be a star. I am going to be a kid on the bench. Marcus said Darius. The bench-kid is also part of the team. You are still going to be a star to us. I am writing this down because I want to remember it. Marcus is a sap.)

(P.P.S. *He is right though.*)

CHAPTER SIX

The Funny Mask in a New Room

— Jordan —

The funny mask got bigger in high school.

I am writing this in October. School has been going for two months. I have, in those two months, made — at a rough count — about three hundred jokes. Some to the cohort. Most to strangers. Some in class, to teachers. Some in the hallway, to kids I do not really know who happened to be standing near me when something funny occurred to me.

The jokes have been, mostly, good jokes. People have laughed. The funny mask is — in some sense — working.

It is also, I have been noticing in the last two weeks, getting heavier.

Here is what I mean.

When I was in middle school, the funny was a thing I did sometimes. It was a tool. It was — as Dr. Pam Mendel and I have talked about for years — a thing I had built in third grade and had been slowly taking off across the middle-school years. By eighth grade, the funny had become one thing I did, not the only thing. The cohort knew this. The cohort had let me be funny and other things. The cohort had, in some real way, invited the other things.

In high school, with all the new kids, the funny has become — and this is the word I keep coming back to in my journal —

load-bearing again. The funny is doing more work than it should be doing.

The funny is what I am leading with in every new conversation. The funny is what I am introducing myself with. The funny is what gets the laugh that makes the new kid in the room decide I am okay. The funny is the cover charge. Once people have laughed at one of my jokes, I am, in their mind, the funny kid. I have a place. I have a category. I am not just a fourteen-year-old freshman they do not know — I am the freshman who is funny.

That sounds like a good thing.

I am noticing, though, that the funny kid is — in some way — a category I have to keep performing.

The kid in third period who laughed at my joke about the chemistry textbook is now expecting me to make another joke. Tomorrow. The day after. Every time I see those kids, I am — in the back of my head — searching for the next joke. The next joke has to be at least as good as the last. The next joke has to come quickly. The next joke has to not be too dark, not be too obscure, not be self-pitying.

The next joke is a performance.

The next joke is a small piece of labor.

I had forgotten what this labor felt like.

I had not done this kind of labor since maybe seventh grade. Eighth grade, with the cohort, had been a year in which the labor was very low. The cohort had — and this is the cohort being the cohort — the cohort had let me not be funny. The cohort had laughed when I was funny. The cohort had also asked me questions when I was not. The cohort had treated me as — and this is the only way I can say it — the cohort had treated me as Jordan, not as funny-Jordan.

The high school strangers, two months in, are treating me as funny-Jordan.

The funny-Jordan is, every day, getting more tired.

I told Dr. Pam Mendel about this on Wednesday.

Dr. Pam was, originally, my mom's idea. My mom found her when I was nine. My mom thought I needed somebody to talk to about — *whatever was going on inside*, my mom said at the time, which was a more accurate description of my inner state at nine than I would have been able to give. I have, on and off, been seeing Dr. Pam ever since. Sometimes every other week. Sometimes once a month. Sometimes — like all of seventh grade — we did not meet at all because I was, by my own report, fine. We are, this fall, meeting every two weeks because the high-school transition is — I told my mom and Dr. Pam in August — probably going to be one of the harder transitions. I had been right.

On Wednesday I told Dr. Pam about the load-bearing funny.

She listened. She did her Dr. Pam thing where she sits very still and lets me talk for a long time without interrupting. She is, I have learned over six years, one of the best listeners I have ever known.

When I was done, she said:

Jordan. The funny is back to being load-bearing. You named it. That is half the work.

I said, *Dr. Pam. What is the other half.*

She said, *the other half is figuring out what to do about it.*

I said, *what should I do about it.*

She said, *Jordan. I am not going to tell you what to do. I am going to ask you a question. Are you ready.*

I said, *yes.*

She said, *what would happen if, in your new conversations with strangers at high school, you made the funny the third*

thing you did, not the first thing.

I said, *what do you mean.*

She said, *what if, when you meet a new kid, instead of leading with a joke, you led with a question. And then you said one or two things about yourself that were not jokes. And only then, after the conversation had been established as a conversation between two real people, did you make a joke. What would happen?*

I sat with that.

I said, *I do not know. I think — I think the conversation would be harder.*

She said, *harder how.*

I said, *because the joke is a shortcut. The joke gets us, very quickly, to a place where we both know how to be with each other. The question and the not-jokes — they are — they are slower. They require more from me. They require me to be, for a few minutes at the beginning, more visible.*

She said, *yes.*

She said, *Jordan. You just identified what the funny mask is doing. It is letting you skip the being visible part. It is letting you go straight to the part of the conversation where the other person has accepted you on the terms of your jokes. The visibility before the joke is the part the mask is helping you skip.*

I sat with that.

I said, *Dr. Pam. That is — that is really specific.*

She said, *I know.*

I said, *I am going to try it. I am going to try leading with a question and not with a joke. In some new conversation. This week.*

She said, *try it once. Tell me about it next session. We do not have to fix this all at once.*

I said, *okay.*

That was Wednesday.

It is now Friday night. I have, in the two days since, had three new conversations with kids I did not really know. I led with a question in all three of them.

The first one was clumsy — I asked a girl in chemistry what she had thought of the homework, which is the kind of question fourteen-year-olds make fun of, but she answered, and we had a small conversation about chemistry homework that turned into a conversation about her older brother who is in the navy, which was — actually — interesting. I made one small joke at the end, when we said goodbye. She laughed. The joke was small. The conversation had been mostly other things.

The second conversation was with a guy in study hall. I asked him what he was reading. He showed me the book. The book was, surprisingly, a book I had also read — *Mockingjay*, which is not a cool book to be reading at fourteen, since the Hunger Games is a thing the previous wave of kids read. But he was reading it, and I had read it, and we talked about the ending for ten minutes. I did not make a single joke in the conversation. He did not seem to mind. He went back to reading. The next day in study hall he sat near me again. He asked me what I had liked about the ending. We talked again.

The third conversation was with Olivia — who is now sitting at our lunch table — and who I had not, until Friday, really talked to one-on-one. I asked her where she had gone to middle school. She told me. We talked about the middle school for a while. I did not make a single joke for maybe ten minutes. Then, eventually, I made a small joke about her old middle school's lunchroom, and she laughed, and the conversation kept going.

The experiment, in two days, was — and I am writing this down because Dr. Pam asked me to — the experiment was a success. Sort of. The conversations were harder than the joke-first conversations. They required more attention. They were also — and this is the surprising part — they were deeper. I came out of each of them knowing more about the other person than I had been knowing about people I had been joke-firsting for two months.

I had been getting people to laugh, in joke-first conversations, but I had not been getting to know them.

The question-first conversations let me get to know them.

I want to write this down because it is — and Dr. Pam said this — it is part of figuring out who I am in the new building.

The cohort version of me, which I learned to be in middle school, is Jordan-who-is-funny-and-other-things. The other things, in middle school, were stuff like kid-who-writes, kid-who-pays-attention, kid-who-can-be-serious-when-the-cohort-needs-him-serious. The cohort knew about the other things because we grew up together.

The high school version of me — at least with strangers — has been threatening to become Jordan-who-is-only-funny. The other things have been waiting in the wings, not coming out, because the funny has been doing all the work in the first thirty seconds of every conversation.

I am going to keep practicing the question-first thing.

I am going to bring the other things into the new conversations. The kids in high school deserve to know that there are other things about me besides the funny. The way the cohort knows. The way Dr. Pam knows. The way my parents know.

The funny is still going to be there. The funny is part of me. The funny is real. I am not, in any way, going to stop being

funny.

I am just going to — and this is the line I am going to remember — I am going to make the funny the third thing, not the first.

That is the experiment.

I am — I think — going to be okay.

— Jordan

(P.S. I told Marcus about all this at lunch yesterday. Marcus said Jordan. You are doing the work. I said Marcus. The work is harder than I thought it would be. Marcus said the work is always harder than you think it is going to be. That is why most people do not do it. I told Marcus Marcus. Are you secretly a hundred years old. Marcus said no. I am fourteen. I just listen to Ms. Calloway. We laughed.)

(That conversation was not joke-first. That conversation was Marcus saying a serious thing and me responding with a joke, and Marcus letting it be a joke without minding. That is — I think — the cohort version of the funny working.)

(The funny works when there are other things around it.)

(That is the lesson.)

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Art Room

Maya signed up for Art I as her freshman elective.

She had wanted to sign up for Art II, which was the sophomore-level class, but the school did not let freshmen take Art II. Maya had — and this was unusual for her — argued. Maya had brought her sketchbook into the registrar's office in August and had asked the registrar if she could show her work to the art teacher. The registrar had said yes. The art teacher had come down. Maya had shown him her sketchbook.

The art teacher's name was Mr. Ortiz. Mr. Ortiz was, Maya was about to discover, the kind of teacher who could change a person's life.

Mr. Ortiz had looked at the sketchbook for maybe ten minutes. The sketchbook had pages and pages of pencil portraits, watercolor studies, and small ink drawings Maya had made over the summer. Some of the pages were three years old. Some of the pages were three weeks old. Mr. Ortiz had — Maya remembered later — turned them slowly, in order, the way you turn the pages of a book you are reading carefully.

He had said, at the end, *Maya. How old are you.*

Maya had said, *I am fourteen.*

Mr. Ortiz had said, *Maya. Who has been teaching you.*

Maya had said, *nobody. I have just been making them.*

Mr. Ortiz had said, *Maya. The middle-school art teacher.*

Maya had said, Mrs. Yates. *She taught us color theory in sixth grade. She let me use the art room after school in seventh and eighth. She did not, really, teach me. She just let me work.*

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. *I am going to let you into Art II. The rules say I cannot. I am going to let you in anyway. I want you to know — you are at a different level than most of the other freshmen who would be in Art I. You would be bored. You would not learn what you need to learn. I would rather take the heat from the registrar than let you be bored for a year.*

Maya had said, *thank you.*

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. *Welcome to Art II. We start September fifth.*

That had been August.

It was now October. Maya had been in Art II for six weeks.

Art II was — for Maya — the first room in her life that did not feel like she had to contain herself. Every other room, every other class, every other group, Maya had been the kid who was paying attention but was — in some unspoken way — more inside her head than outside. The world had to come at Maya through several layers. The layers were necessary. The layers protected her. The layers also, sometimes, slowed her down.

In Art II, the layers were not there.

In Art II, the assignment was *make*. The assignment was *try things*. The assignment was *put what is in your head onto paper*. The assignment was — for the first time in Maya's life — *be more outside your head than inside*.

Maya could do this. Maya could do this with her eyes closed.

By the second week of Art II, Mr. Ortiz had asked her, after class, Maya. *Can I show your work to the other freshmen in Art I. I want them to see what is possible.*

Maya had said, Mr. Ortiz. I would rather not.

She had said it quickly. She had said it before she even thought about it.

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. Why not.

Maya had said, because — because if the freshmen in Art I see my work, they will think — they will think I am the kid who is good at art. They will see me in the hallway and they will see me as that. I am not — I am not ready to be the kid in the hallway who is good at art. I am ready to be the kid in the art room who is good at art. The hallway is different.

Mr. Ortiz had thought about it.

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. Okay. I will not show your work. I will keep it in here. The hallway can wait.

Maya had said, thank you.

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. Can I ask you one more thing.

Maya had said, yes.

Maya. Are you keeping your work somewhere safe at home.

Yes. In the basement. My grandmother has shelves my grandfather built before he died. The shelves are full.

Maya. How many pieces.

I have not counted in a while. Maybe a hundred. Maybe more.

Mr. Ortiz had said, Maya. You have an archive.

Maya had said, I have a what.

An archive. An artist's archive. Most artists do not have one at fourteen. You have one. I want you to know what that is, in case nobody has told you.

Maya had said, nobody has told me.

Mr. Ortiz had said, I am telling you. You have an archive. The archive is going to matter later. Keep adding to it. Take care of it.

Maya had said, okay.

Maya had walked home that day thinking about the word *archive*. The word *archive* did something to her that no word had done before. It made the basement, suddenly, into a thing it had not been an hour earlier. The basement had been her hiding place. The basement had been the place where she kept the work she did not show anyone. The basement had been, in some real sense, secret.

The basement was now an archive.

An archive was a different kind of thing than a hiding place. An archive was a thing you kept for the future. An archive was a thing that would be looked at, eventually. An archive presupposed an audience, even if the audience was just a future version of herself.

The archive was — and Maya did not articulate this in words at fourteen, but she felt it — the archive was a thing that meant Maya had been, all along, building toward something.

She had not known she was building toward anything. She had just been making.

But the making had — without her knowing — become an archive. The archive was visible to Mr. Ortiz, who had seen what it was, even from the small handful of pieces she had shown him in her sketchbook. The archive was, in some real sense, a career in slow form.

Maya was fourteen. Maya did not know that she was going to be an artist for the rest of her life. Maya, at fourteen, was not yet capable of looking that far ahead. Maya, at fourteen, was just trying to get through freshman year.

But on the walk home from school that day, with the word *archive* still in her head, Maya — for the first time in her life — had a feeling that she would later, years later, recognize as direction.

The direction was: art. The direction was: keep making. The direction was: the basement, the shelves, the paintbrushes, the small dark hours after dinner when she went down and worked.

The direction had been there since fifth grade. She had not had a word for it.

Mr. Ortiz had given her the word.

Mr. Ortiz, in the next two years, would become — quietly, without making a thing of it — one of the most important adults in Maya's life. Mr. Ortiz would write her recommendation for the summer art program she would attend the summer between freshman and sophomore year. Mr. Ortiz would, in sophomore year, gently begin telling Maya about art schools — colleges that specialized in fine arts, programs that funded MFA-track students, the names of places she could, someday, apply to. Mr. Ortiz would not push her. Mr. Ortiz would just open doors and let Maya walk through them.

Mr. Ortiz would, by the time Maya was a senior, have been the bridge that took her from the kid who made things in a basement to the kid who went to a real art school on a scholarship.

But that was in the future.

For now, in October of freshman year, Maya was just a kid in Art II. She was the youngest kid in the class. She was the smallest. She was, in some real way, the best.

She did not — and this was the thing Maya understood without anyone telling her — she did not let the *being the best* become a thing she carried around outside the art room. She did not, at lunch with the cohort, mention what Mr. Ortiz had said. She did not, in the hallway, walk around with any kind of

Maya-the-artist energy. The art room was the art room. The rest of the school was the rest of the school.

She had — for the first time in her life — a room in the school that was for her.

The art room was that room.

She would, every year of high school, have a version of this. The art room would change — by junior year, she would be in Art IV, which was an independent-study class Mr. Ortiz designed for her — but the *having a room that is for her* would continue.

The cohort knew, after a few weeks, that Maya was doing well in Art II. Marcus had asked her about it at lunch. Maya had said, simply, *it is good. I am happy*. The cohort had not pressed. The cohort had let her tell them more when she was ready.

In November, Maya brought, to the cohort lunch table, a small drawing she had made of the cohort itself. The drawing was the back of the lunch table — nine of them, plus Olivia, plus Hannah, sitting and eating. The drawing was small. The drawing was in pencil. The drawing was — when the cohort looked at it, passing it around — the kind of drawing that would have, in a different context, been in a museum.

Sofia said, *Maya. This is — this is so good*.

Maya said, *thanks*.

Marcus said, *Maya. Can you make me a copy*.

Maya said, *yes*.

Maya made everybody a copy. She did this on her own time, in the art room, over the next week. Each copy was, technically, the same drawing — but each one was, also, slightly different, because Maya could not make exact copies. Each version had small variations. Each one was its own thing.

The cohort kept their copies for years.

Olivia, who got a copy as the eleventh person at the table, would frame hers when she got to college. The drawing would, in some sense, become the visual signature of what the cohort had been when they were freshmen.

But this was all in the future too.

For now, in October, Maya was a fourteen-year-old in Art II, with an archive in her basement that she had not, until two weeks ago, known was an archive.

She was — in her own small, quiet way — beginning.

She did not, that fall, know what she was beginning.

She was beginning anyway.

This is what the freshman year looks like, for Maya. This is what beginning looks like, for an artist.

It looks like a teacher saying *you have an archive*. It looks like a small kid walking home thinking about a word. It looks like the basement being, in some real way, a different basement than the one she had walked down into the day before.

The basement is the same. The basement is different. Both are true.

Maya is starting.

The rest of the cohort is also starting, in their own ways, in their own rooms.

The book has fifteen chapters left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Theo Notices

The thing Theo noticed in late October was that one of his classmates was not okay.

The classmate was not in the cohort. The classmate was a girl named Rachel who sat two rows ahead of him in fifth period, which was world history. Rachel had been, in early September, a kid Theo did not think about much. Rachel had answered questions in class. Rachel had laughed at things Mr. Salinas, the world history teacher, said. Rachel had been — by Theo's read — a normal freshman.

In early October, something had changed.

Theo had been watching the room, the way Theo always watched rooms, and the watching had picked up a small shift. Rachel had stopped answering questions. Rachel had started, around the second week of October, putting her head down on the desk for parts of class. Rachel had stopped sitting with the friends she had been sitting with at lunch — Theo knew this because he had seen her, twice, sitting alone in the corner of the cafeteria.

Rachel was not okay.

Theo, at fourteen, had been watching kids be not okay for as long as he could remember. He had been, since first grade, the kid who noticed first. He had noticed when Kezia was crying in third grade. He had noticed when Maya was carrying something hard in fifth. He had noticed when Marcus had

been holding the Aaliyah-lie thing in second grade — Theo had not known what the thing was, but Theo had known there was a thing, and Theo had been right.

The cohort knew Theo was the noticing kid.

The high school did not yet know.

Theo had been thinking, for two weeks, about what to do about Rachel.

The default — the *do nothing* default — was not really an option for Theo. Theo had been raised, by his mother and by Ms. Calloway and by the cohort, in a culture where noticing something was the beginning of doing something. Noticing without acting was, for Theo, the beginning of carrying. He did not want to carry Rachel-not-being-okay all year. He wanted to do something about it.

The hard part was: he did not know Rachel.

He had said hi to her, maybe, three times in two months. He had never had a one-on-one conversation with her. He had no entry point. He had no friendship to fall back on. He had no shared activity. He was, in some real sense, a stranger who had noticed.

He thought about it for two weeks.

In the end, he did three things.

The first thing he did was talk to Sofia about it.

He did this at lunch. He pulled Sofia aside as they were getting up from the table. He said, *Sof. Can I tell you about something I have been noticing.*

Sofia said, yes.

Theo described Rachel.

Sofia listened.

When Theo was done, Sofia said:

Theo. Two questions. One. Is there an adult at the school you trust about this. Two. What is your gut.

Theo said, *Ms. Calloway is the adult I trust. My gut is – my gut is that Rachel is going through something hard at home. The not-doing-classwork, the head-down, the not-sitting-with-friends – that is the pattern I have seen from kids in the cohort when something is hard at home.*

Sofia said, *Theo. Tell Ms. Calloway. Tell her exactly what you just told me. She will know what to do.*

Theo said, *yes.*

That was the first thing.

The second thing was: Theo, the next day, asked Rachel a question.

This was the harder thing. This was the thing Dr. Pam had once told Jordan about – leading with a question, not a joke, in a new conversation. Theo had been thinking about Jordan's experiment for weeks. Theo had not, until now, had a specific reason to do his own version of it.

Theo, after fifth period on a Tuesday, caught up to Rachel in the hallway.

He said, *Rachel. Hey.*

She looked at him.

Yes?

I am Theo. I sit two rows behind you in world history.

I know.

I am going to ask you a weird question. You can ignore it. I will not be offended.

Okay.

I have been – I have been noticing that you seem like you are having a hard time the last couple weeks. I am not trying to be weird. I just wanted to say – I noticed. And I wanted to say that I noticed, in case you wanted somebody to know.

She looked at him for a long second.

She said, Theo. That is weird.

He said, *I know. I am sorry.*

She said, *but — thank you. I think.*

He said, *you do not have to tell me anything. I just — I wanted you to know that somebody noticed. That is all.*

She said, *okay.*

She walked away.

That was the second thing.

Theo, that afternoon, did the third thing. He went to Ms. Calloway's office during eighth-period free block.

He told her about Rachel. He told her about the noticing. He told her about asking Sofia. He told her about asking Rachel directly in the hallway.

Ms. Calloway listened.

When he was done, she said:

Theo. Three things.

He said, *yes.*

One. You did exactly the right things in the right order. You noticed. You checked with a trusted friend. You said something kind to the person. You came to me. That is the pattern. That is how we do this. That is how we have been doing this since first grade. You did it well.

Theo said, *thank you.*

Two. I am going to look into Rachel. I will not tell her you told me. I will, instead, find a reason to check on her — I have a way of doing this that does not make kids feel watched. She will be okay. I am the SEL specialist for ninth grade. This is part of what I am here for.

Theo said, *okay.*

She said, *Three. Theo. I want to say something to you specifically. Are you ready.*

Theo said, *yes.*

Ms. Calloway said:

You are a noticing kid. You have been since you were six. You are going to spend the rest of your life noticing things other people do not notice. That is a gift. It is also — and this is the part I want you to know now — it is also a weight. You are going to carry, your whole life, information about people that they have not told you. You will know, before they do, that they are not okay. You will know, before their parents do, that they are upset. You will know, sometimes, things that — strictly speaking — you are not entitled to know, because they are private to them and you have just observed them.

The weight is real. The weight is going to be with you forever. The only way to manage the weight is to do what you did today — you take the weight and you spread it out. You tell a friend. You tell a teacher. You let the person know, gently, that you noticed. You do not carry the weight alone.

The carrying-alone is the part that breaks the noticing kids. The kids who notice and do not tell anyone — those are the kids who end up burned out at twenty-six. The kids who notice and route the weight to the right place — those are the kids who become the kind of adult I am, or the kind of adult Sofia is going to be, or the kind of adult Mr. Patel was. The routing is the skill.

You just did it. Today. For the first time, in a real way, in a new building. You routed the Rachel weight to me. The Rachel weight is now mine. You can put it down.

Theo said, Ms. Calloway. I — I had not thought of it that way.

She said, I know. I am telling you now so you can start thinking of it that way. For the rest of your life. Notice. Route. Put down. Notice. Route. Put down. That is the rhythm.

Theo said, I will remember.

She said, good. Now go to seventh period. You are going to be late.

Theo said, one more thing.

Yes.

Ms. Calloway. Is Rachel — is she going to be okay.

She said, Theo. I do not know yet. I will know more in a few days. I will tell you, in general terms, when I know. I will not tell you private details. I will let you know the outline of how she is doing. Because you noticed her and that means you are owed an outline update. That is how we honor the noticing.

Theo said, okay.

He went to seventh period.

That night he wrote about the conversation with Ms. Calloway in his journal.

He wrote:

The weight is real. The routing is the skill. I have been doing the noticing my whole life. I have not, until today, fully understood that the noticing is supposed to be routed somewhere. I have, in the past, sometimes carried the weight by myself without telling anyone. I see now that the cohort, my whole life, has been one of the places I have routed the weight. I did not call it routing. I just called it telling Marcus or Sofia about it. But that is what it was.

High school is going to be the place where I learn to do the routing in bigger and more formal ways. Ms. Calloway is, now, the high-school version of the routing destination. There will be other adults too, over the next four years. And — eventually — other adults beyond Ms. Calloway, when I am in my twenties and thirties, in jobs and friendships and communities.

The routing skill is, I now realize, a life skill. It is the thing that lets a noticing kid grow up without burning out.

I want to be a noticing adult. I do not want to burn out. Therefore I have to get good at routing.

That is the freshman year work, for me.

He put the journal away.

In two weeks, Ms. Calloway would tell Theo — in general terms — that Rachel was doing better and was getting support. Theo would not press for details. Theo would, in the hallway, see Rachel two weeks later and notice that Rachel was, in fact, looking a little better. Rachel would, at one point in November, sit down at the cohort lunch table — Amara had invited her, after Theo had told Amara about it. Rachel did not become a regular at the table the way Olivia did. But Rachel sat there once, and the cohort welcomed her, and Rachel — Theo could tell from the watching — was okay.

The noticing had been the first thing. The routing had been the work. The work had — quietly, in pieces — done what it was supposed to do.

Part One of freshman year was, by mid-November, drawing to a close. The cohort had settled into the bigger building. The cohort had each, in their own ways, started to figure out who they were going to be in the new rooms. Marcus had been telling the truth in algebra. Priya had been catching the Inner Critic alone. Amara had been finding kids at lockers. Darius had made the basketball team. Jordan had been experimenting with question-first conversations. Maya had been in the art room. Theo had been routing weight.

Sofia and Kezia, the two cohort members whose Part-One stories I have not yet told you, had also been doing their work. Sofia had been, quietly, asking — for the first time in her life — for help. Kezia had been holding something at home that she was not yet ready to talk about. Part Two will get to them.

PART TWO



Self-Compassion & Self-Forgiveness

*How do I be kind to myself when the
building gets bigger and the work gets
harder?*

November through January. The hard months.

CHAPTER NINE

Kezia Carries Something

In late November, Kezia stopped sleeping.

She had been having trouble for a few weeks. The trouble had started in October. The trouble had gotten worse in November. By the third week of November, Kezia was, on most nights, lying awake until two or three in the morning. She would, finally, fall asleep. She would wake up at six-thirty for the bus. She would go to school. She would, by fifth period, be exhausted.

The cohort had not noticed. Or, the cohort had noticed but had not said anything. Kezia had been off in a way that everybody had attributed to the freshman-year adjustment. Everybody was a little off. Kezia was — by all surface measures — within the normal range.

She was not within the normal range.

She was carrying something.

Here is what she was carrying. The person Kezia did not live with — the person whose name had not been spoken in Kezia's grandmother's house for many years — had, in late October, surfaced. Not in Kezia's daily life. In her grandmother's mail. The person had written to Kezia's grandmother. The letter had not asked for anything. The letter had — Kezia's grandmother had told Kezia in their kitchen one Sunday afternoon — the letter had been a long apology. The letter had been the kind of apology that, in Kezia's grandmother's words, *might have*

meant the person is doing the work, or might mean the person wants something. We will see.

Kezia had not read the letter.

Kezia's grandmother had, gently, asked her if she wanted to. Kezia's grandmother had said, *baby, you do not have to. It is up to you. The letter is here on the kitchen counter. You can read it. You can ignore it. Either is fine.*

Kezia had said, *grandma. I will think about it.*

She had been thinking about it for a month.

The thinking-about-it was the thing that was keeping her awake.

She had been, every night, in her bed, replaying versions of the letter she had not read. She had been picturing what it might say. She had been picturing different responses. She had been thinking about who she was and who she had been and who she would be if she read it, and who she would be if she did not.

She had not, in those four weeks, told anyone in the cohort. She had not told Sofia. She had not told Marcus. She had not told Ms. Calloway. She had not even told her therapist, Dr. Ramirez, who she had been seeing since middle school. The next session with Dr. Ramirez was in two weeks. She had been planning to bring it up then.

In the meantime, she was carrying it alone.

The carrying-alone was, by the third week of November, eating her. She had been doing badly in classes. She had failed a quiz in biology. She had not turned in a paper for English. Ms. Calloway had noticed the missing paper and had emailed Kezia about it. Kezia had responded *Ms. Calloway, I am sorry. I will get it in by Friday.* Ms. Calloway had responded *Kezia. Okay. Is everything else okay.* Kezia had responded *yes, everything else is fine.*

That had been a lie.

Ms. Calloway, who had been reading kid emails for thirty years, had not believed her.

Ms. Calloway had, the next day, found Kezia in the hallway during second-period passing.

Ms. Calloway had said, *Kezia. Come see me during eighth-period free block.*

Kezia had said, *okay.*

Kezia had gone.

She had walked into Ms. Calloway's office at 1:55 that afternoon. Ms. Calloway had been at her desk. The desk had two chairs in front of it. Ms. Calloway had said, *Kezia. Sit down.*

Kezia had sat.

Ms. Calloway had said, *Kezia. I am going to ask you a question. You can answer it or not answer it. What is going on.*

Kezia had not, when she sat down, planned to tell Ms. Calloway. Kezia had planned to say *everything is fine* again. Kezia had planned to sit in the chair for ten minutes and walk out and continue not telling anyone.

But Ms. Calloway had said the question in a particular way.

The way Ms. Calloway said the question — *what is going on* — was, Kezia had realized in the moment, the same way Ms. Calloway had said it to her in third grade. When something had been hard at home and Kezia, at nine, had finally told her.

The question, asked that way, in this office, was a question Kezia could not, this time either, refuse to answer.

She had started crying.

She had cried for a long time.

Ms. Calloway had sat across from her and had handed her a tissue and had not, for the whole crying, said anything.

When Kezia could talk, she had told Ms. Calloway about the letter. She had told Ms. Calloway that the person had written

to her grandmother. She had told Ms. Calloway that the letter was on the kitchen counter. She had told Ms. Calloway that she had not read it. She had told Ms. Calloway that she had not told Dr. Ramirez yet. She had told Ms. Calloway that she had not been sleeping. She had told Ms. Calloway that she had failed a quiz and had been late on a paper.

Ms. Calloway had listened.

When Kezia was done, Ms. Calloway had said:

Kezia. Thank you for telling me. I am going to say a few things now. Take them or leave them. Are you ready.

Kezia had said, yes.

Ms. Calloway had said:

One. You are nine years old, in some part of you, again right now. The third-grade you is awake in your body. That is normal. When old hard things come back, the old version of us who carried them comes back too. You are not just fourteen right now. You are also nine. You can let both of you exist at the same time. The nine-year-old version of you needs to be allowed to be scared. The fourteen-year-old version of you needs to be allowed to be tired. Both of those are real. Both deserve compassion.

Two. You do not have to read the letter. You also do not have to not read it. The letter is going to sit on the counter for as long as you need it to. The letter is not a deadline. The letter is information. You can take the information in when you are ready. If you are never ready, that is also okay. The letter does not — and I want to be very clear about this — the letter does not demand anything of you. The letter is the person's responsibility. The letter is not your homework.

Three. You have not slept in three weeks. That is — that is a problem we have to address right now, separately from the letter. Sleeping is not optional. I am going to walk you, after this conversation, to Ms. Wong. Ms. Wong is the school counselor for

ninth grade. Ms. Wong is going to help you with a sleep plan. She might suggest — and this is between you and Dr. Ramirez and your grandma — she might suggest a short-term sleep aid. Or she might not. Either way, we have to address the sleep before we can address anything else. The sleep is the first thing.

Four. You are going to call Dr. Ramirez tonight. Not in two weeks. Tonight. You are going to call her and tell her what you just told me. You do not have to wait for the next session. Dr. Ramirez is your therapist. Her job is to be on the phone when you need her. Tonight is a need her night. You will call. Your grandmother will know to support you in calling. I will, with your permission, call your grandmother today to let her know what we talked about, so she is in the loop and can be the steady presence at home.

Five. You are going to tell at least one of the cohort kids about this. Not all of them. One. The one you trust most for this kind of thing. My nominee is Sofia, but you choose. The cohort cannot help you carry this if they do not know you are carrying it. The carrying-alone has been the thing that has been hurting you. The carrying-together is the thing that will help. Pick one cohort kid. Tell them.

Kezia had said, Ms. Calloway. That is — that is a lot.

Ms. Calloway had said, I know. That is the plan. We are going to do it one step at a time. Right now, we are going to do step three. We are going to walk to Ms. Wong's office. Are you ready.

Kezia had said, yes.

They had walked. Ms. Wong had been at her desk. Ms. Calloway had introduced Kezia to Ms. Wong. Ms. Wong had sat with Kezia for forty minutes. They had made a sleep plan. The sleep plan was simple. Phone off at nine, journal for ten minutes, in bed by ten, lights off by ten-fifteen, breathing exercise, sleep. If sleep did not come by eleven, get out of bed,

do not look at the phone, read for twenty minutes, get back in bed. Repeat as needed. If not sleeping by midnight three nights in a row, come back to Ms. Wong, who would discuss with Kezia's mother (grandmother, in this case) about a short-term sleep aid.

Ms. Wong had also, at the end of the conversation, said:

Kezia. The thing your brain is doing – replaying the letter you have not read, picturing scenarios, predicting – that thing has a name. It is called rumination. Rumination is not the same as thinking. Thinking helps you. Rumination does not. Rumination is your brain spinning on a loop with no exit. The way to stop rumination is to give your brain a new task – the journal, the breathing, the reading. The new task replaces the loop. The new task is what gets you to sleep.

You are going to have rumination for the rest of your life. Most thoughtful people do. The trick is to recognize when you are in it, and to give your brain the new task.

Kezia had said, *Ms. Wong. I have not heard that word before.*

Ms. Wong had said, *most kids your age have not. Some adults still do not have it. You are getting it at fourteen. That is a head start.*

Kezia had said, *thank you.*

Kezia had walked out of Ms. Wong's office at 3:05. She had walked out into the hallway.

Sofia had been at her locker, two corridors down. Kezia had walked to Sofia.

Kezia had said, *Sofia. Can we talk.*

Sofia had said, *yes. Now?*

Kezia had said, *yes. Walking home?*

Sofia had said, *yes.*

They had walked together – to the bus stop, on the bus, off the bus, the half-mile from the bus stop to Kezia's

grandmother's house, which was a longer route than Sofia's house but which Sofia had walked many times before.

Kezia had told Sofia.

Sofia had listened.

When Kezia was done, Sofia had said:

Kezia. Two things.

One. I am sorry I did not notice. I should have. I have been busy with my own freshman-year stuff. I should have noticed you were struggling.

Two. I am here now. I am going to be here for the rest of this. You are going to text me, every night, until you sleep again. Even if it is just a one-word text. Slept or not yet. I will know what it means. I will text back. You will not be doing this by yourself anymore.

Kezia had said, *Sofia. Thank you.*

Sofia had said, *Kezia. I love you.*

Kezia had said, *I love you, Sof.*

They had hugged on the porch of Kezia's grandmother's house. Kezia's grandmother had been at the door — Ms. Calloway had called her, as promised, that afternoon, and Kezia's grandmother had been waiting.

Kezia had walked inside. Her grandmother had made tea. Kezia had cried, again, in the kitchen with her grandmother. She had called Dr. Ramirez that night. Dr. Ramirez had picked up. They had talked for thirty-five minutes. Dr. Ramirez had moved their next session up to the following day. Dr. Ramirez had said the things Dr. Ramirez always said — kind, specific, careful.

Kezia had, that night, gone through the sleep plan.

She had slept by ten-thirty.

She had slept all night.

It had been three weeks.

In the morning, she texted Sofia: *Slept.*

Sofia texted back: . *So glad. Talk later. I love you.*

Kezia put the phone down. She went to school.

This was the freshman-year version of what Kezia would do, in a bigger and more complete form, in senior year. The letter that had arrived in November of freshman year would, by senior year, have become an old, settled thing that Kezia had — in her own time, in pieces, with her grandmother and Dr. Ramirez and Sofia and Ms. Calloway — slowly worked through. By senior year, Kezia would be the one writing letters to the person, not just receiving them. By senior year, Kezia would forgive — in the specific way Ms. Calloway had taught her to forgive in third grade. By senior year, Kezia would be — in her own way — done.

But that was in the future.

In November of freshman year, Kezia was just a kid who had been carrying something alone for too long and who had, on a Wednesday afternoon in Ms. Calloway's office, finally put part of it down.

The cohort, that night, did not know all the details. Sofia, who Kezia had told, did not tell anyone else. Sofia had not asked permission. Sofia had just decided, in her own way, that the cohort would find out when Kezia was ready to tell them.

Kezia would tell the cohort, in pieces, across freshman and sophomore year. By junior year, the cohort would know almost all of it. By senior year, the cohort would have walked the road with her.

But on this Wednesday in November of freshman year, Kezia had just slept for the first time in three weeks.

That was enough.

That was the work for tonight.

Kezia, the next morning, sat down in Room 104 at 9:02 and Ms. Calloway gave her, from the front of the room, the smallest nod — the one that meant *I see you. You did the work. You are okay.* Kezia nodded back.

The cohort, in Room 104, did not notice the nod.

The nod was for the two of them.

The cohort would, in their own ways, notice in time.

For now, Room 104 was where Kezia was. The cohort was around her. Ms. Calloway was at the board.

Kezia was — for the first time in November — present.

— Kezia

CHAPTER TEN

The First Time I Asked

— Sofia —

The first time I asked the cohort for help was the second week of December.

I have not, in my life, been a kid who has asked for help. The cohort has asked me for help. The cohort has been asking me for help since maybe second grade. I have been the call-Sofia kid for the cohort for a long time.

The pattern, when I look back, has been:

Kid in cohort has something hard. Kid texts Sofia or finds Sofia in the hallway. Sofia listens. Sofia helps in whatever way the kid needs. Kid feels better. Sofia goes on with her day.

The cycle, in middle school, happened maybe two or three times a week. In high school — even more. The cohort had, in November, started leaning on me a lot. Kezia had told me on Wednesday. Theo had told me about Rachel. Marcus had asked me about how to handle a thing with his sister Aaliyah. Jordan had told me about the question-first experiment. Priya had been talking to me about the Critic showing up in geometry. Amara had been telling me about Olivia.

That is — and I am writing this in my journal because I want to be honest with myself — that is five cohort kids in three weeks I have been the call-Sofia for. Five. In three weeks.

I had not, in that same period, been the kid who needed help.

The first time I needed help and did not get it was, I now realize, the previous week. I had had a hard week. My mother had been working long hours — she had picked up extra shifts at the hospital because one of her coworkers had been out sick — and my mother had not been home for dinner three nights in a row. My father had been at home, but my father — and I love my father — my father is not the parent I go to when I am having a hard week. My father is the parent I go to when I want to be quiet and watch a movie. My mother is the one I talk to.

My mother had not been there.

I had, that week, been doing all my homework and going to school and having lunch with the cohort and listening to four different cohort kids tell me things and going home and watching TV with my dad and going to bed. I had been functioning. I had been completely functioning. I had also — and I want to write this down — I had been quietly miserable.

I had not told anyone.

I had not told the cohort because the cohort was telling me things. I had not, in some unspoken way, known how to say to the cohort: *also I am having a hard week*. The cohort had been talking. I had been listening. The shape of the conversations had not had a moment in it for me to say *also*.

I had not told my father because my father had been doing his best and had been tired and I had not wanted to add to it.

I had not told my mother because my mother had not been there.

I had carried it, by myself, for a week.

By the end of that week — the first week of December — I had been, in my own way, just as bad off as Kezia had been. Not in the same shape. The shape was different. I had been

sleeping. I had been eating. I had been getting good grades. The functioning had been fine.

The inside had been bad.

I did not, until Saturday morning of that week, recognize this.

On Saturday morning, my mother was finally home. She was making pancakes. She said, *Sof. Sit. Talk to me. I have not seen you all week.*

I sat down.

I started talking about school. I told her, automatically, about Theo and Rachel and Kezia and Marcus and Jordan and Priya and Amara and Olivia and Maya in the art room.

I told her about everybody else.

She listened. She made pancakes. She listened more.

Eventually she put down the spatula. She turned around. She said, *Sof. You have just spent twenty minutes telling me about eight other people. Stop. How are you.*

I said, *I am — I am fine.*

She said, *Sof.*

I said, *Mom. I am —*

I started crying.

I cried in the kitchen at the breakfast table on a Saturday morning with the pancakes burning behind my mother.

My mother turned the stove off. My mother sat down across from me. My mother let me cry.

When I could talk, I told her. I told her about the week. I told her about the four cohort kids who had been telling me things. I told her about not telling anyone myself. I told her about feeling — I had not had this word for it before, but the word came up while I was talking — *invisible*.

Invisible.

That had been the word.

I had spent the week being a function for other people and had not, in that week, been a person to anybody.

I had been invisible. To myself, even.

My mother, when I said the word, nodded. She did not say I know. She did not say *that is hard*. She just nodded. The nod, I now realize, was her saying yes. *Invisible is exactly the right word.*

My mother said, Sof. *I am sorry I have not been here this week. The hospital is a mess. I am going to be back to normal next week. I am going to make sure I am here.*

I said, Mom. Thank you.

She said, *but listen to me. The longer thing is bigger than this week. You have been being everybody's call-Sofia for years. You are going to keep being. You need — and I want you to actually do this, not just say it — you need a call-Sofia of your own. You need at least one person you can call when you have a hard week. The person cannot be me alone. I am your mother. I am there. But I am not in the cohort. The person needs to be — at least one of the cohort needs to be the kid you can text when you have a hard week.*

I said, Mom. I do not — I do not know how to do that.

She said, Sof. *You are fourteen. You do not yet know how to do many things. This is one of them. You are going to learn. Pick one of them.*

I said, Amara, *probably.*

She said, okay. Tell Amara. Today.

I texted Amara, that Saturday morning, while my mother was making me new pancakes.

I texted: Amara. *Can I tell you something. I had a hard week. I did not tell anyone. I am okay. But I want — I want to have someone I tell. I want it to be you, if you are okay with that.*

Amara texted back in three minutes.

Amara texted: Sof. Yes. Yes yes yes. *I have been waiting for you to ask. I have been the call-Amara for years. I am ready. I am here.*

I cried at the table, with the new pancakes in front of me.

My mother said, Sof. *Tell me what she said.*

I told her.

My mother smiled. My mother said, Sofia. *The cohort has been ready to hold you this whole time. You just had to ask.*

I said, Mom. *That sounds simple when you say it.*

She said, Sof. *The simple things are the hardest things. The simple things are the things people spend decades figuring out. You are figuring it out at fourteen. You are ahead. You are way ahead.*

I said, Mom.

She said, Sofia. *I am so proud of you.*

We ate pancakes.

I have been texting Amara since.

I have not, in the two months since, had another Saturday-pancakes crying moment. I have not needed one. The texting Amara — even when the things I have to tell her are small — has been working. The texting has been the small ongoing version of the call-Sofia. The carrying-alone is now happening in real time, with Amara, every day, in small pieces. The big things have not been building up.

Amara texts me sometimes too. The flow goes both ways. We are, in some real way, each other's call-someone.

This is — and Ms. Calloway, when I told her about it in December, said something about this — this is what the cohort is for. The cohort is not a one-way listening structure. The cohort is a web. The web has — when it is working — multiple nodes. Each kid in the cohort needs to be able to be both a giver and a receiver. The web breaks when one kid is always a

giver and never a receiver. The web also breaks when one kid is always a receiver and never a giver.

I had been, my whole life, almost only a giver.

The web, with respect to me, had been a little broken.

I had not noticed.

Amara had noticed, I think. So had Marcus. The cohort had been waiting for me to let them in. The asking — I had not, in fourteen years, learned how to do it.

I learned it in December.

I am going to keep practicing.

The practice is, in some way, harder than the giving. The practice is harder because the giving is in my muscle memory. The giving is automatic. The asking requires me to interrupt myself, mid-helpfulness, and say *also, here is what is going on with me*. The interrupting is the work.

I am going to interrupt myself. I am going to do it every week.

Ms. Calloway, the day I told her about the December moment, said: *Sofia. The thing you just figured out is the thing therapists figure out in graduate school. You figured it out at fourteen. I want you to remember that, for when you become a therapist someday — and I think you will. The thing they will teach you in grad school about self-care and boundaries and not over-functioning — you are doing the homework for it now. You are ahead.*

I said, Ms. Calloway. Why do I keep being ahead.

She said, *Sofia. Because you have been in this room with me since you were six. The room has been doing the work. You have been doing the work. You are ahead because you started early. Most kids do not get to start at six. You did. The cohort did. That is the gift.*

I said, thank you.

She said, Sofia. I am proud of you. Please ask.

I am asking.

— Sofia

(P.S. — I told the cohort, eventually, that I had had a hard week and that I had not told them. The cohort, at lunch the next Monday, was — and the cohort being the cohort, was not angry or hurt. The cohort was — they were sad I had not told them sooner. The cohort had been ready for years. The cohort had been waiting. The cohort welcomed the asking the way the cohort welcomes everything — with food and questions and a small private moment where Marcus looked at me across the table and gave me the nod that meant I see you doing the work. I nodded back. The cohort kept eating. The cohort is what it is.)

(The cohort is the cohort.)

(That is going to be a thing I say a lot in this book, I think.)

(The cohort is the cohort.)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Party I Did Not Go To

— Marcus —

In mid-January, I was invited to a party.

The party was, by my best understanding, a real party. The kind of party teenagers had that I had heard about for years but never been at. The kind with — apparently — alcohol that older kids had taken from their parents' liquor cabinets, and music played too loud, and a basement and a hot tub and parents who were either out of town or pretending to be out of town.

I had been invited because I had become — somewhat unexpectedly, since I am not the most social kid in the freshman class — somewhat friendly with a guy named Cole. Cole was on the freshman basketball team with Darius. Cole and Darius and I had been eating lunch together sometimes, with the cohort and with the smaller circle of basketball kids who had been gathering, by accident, at our lunch table.

Cole was a sophomore. Cole had been redirected to freshman basketball because he had been cut from JV, but he was, by age, fifteen. Cole knew older kids. Cole was — and the cohort had figured this out by November — one of those kids who, even as a sophomore, was already moving in the social circles of upperclassmen.

Cole's friend was throwing the party. The friend was a junior. The friend's parents were going to be in Florida for the

weekend. The party was on a Saturday in the second week of January.

Cole invited Darius and me both.

Darius and I talked about it on a Tuesday after practice. Darius said *Marcus. I am not going. My parents would kill me. I am not even going to ask them.*

I said *Darius. I am going to ask mine.*

Darius said *Marcus. Why.*

I said *Darius. I do not know if I am going. I just – I want to ask. I want to see what they say.*

Darius said *that is fair.*

I asked my parents that night at dinner.

I said, *Mom. Dad. Cole invited me to a party on Saturday. It is at a junior's house. The junior's parents are out of town. There will be – there will probably be drinking. I want to be honest with you about that. I do not – I am not planning to drink. I just want to ask if I can go.*

My mother put down her fork. My father put down his fork.

My father said, *Marcus. Thank you for telling us the truth about it.*

My mother said, *Marcus. We need to talk about this. Both your father and I.*

My father said, *let us talk about it tonight after dinner.*

I said, *okay.*

After dinner – Aaliyah went to her room, the dishes got cleaned up – my parents and I sat in the living room. My mother on the couch. My father in the armchair. Me on the other end of the couch.

My mother said, *Marcus. I want to say a few things. Then I want you to talk. Then your father will say things. Then we will decide together.*

I said, *okay.*

My mother said, Marcus. You are fourteen. You are in ninth grade. You are too young to go to a party where there is drinking at a house where the parents are out of town. That is the answer your father and I would both, instinctively, want to give. No, you cannot go. The reason is — the simple reason is that you are too young. There are real risks. There are kids who get hurt. There are kids who do stupid things and have those things follow them. We do not want that for you.

She paused.

That said — and this is the part where I want to be a little more honest than just giving you the no — that said, you are also a kid who has, your whole life, been good at making decisions for himself. You told us about the lie about the bike when you were six. You have been honest with us since. You have not, as far as I know, ever made the kind of choice that would make us seriously worried about you. You are, at fourteen, more trustworthy than your father and I were at sixteen.

So I want to not just say no. I want to ask you a question.

She said, Marcus. Why do you want to go to this party.

I sat with it.

I had not, until that moment, articulated to myself why I wanted to go. I had not, even, fully decided that I wanted to go. I had been carrying the question for two days.

I said, Mom. Dad. I want to be honest. The reason I want to go is — partly — that Cole invited me, and I want to be the kind of kid Cole keeps inviting to things. I do not want to be the kid who turns down everything. Cole is — Cole is the kind of kid who knows older kids. If I go to this party, even just for an hour, Cole will think of me as the kind of kid he can invite again. If I do not go, Cole might stop inviting me to anything.

I paused.

That is — that is the social part of why I want to go.

I paused again.

The other part — and this is harder to say — the other part is that I am curious. I have heard about parties like this for two years. I have never been to one. I want to know what they are like. Not so I can — I am not going to drink. I am not going to do anything stupid. I just want to see one.

I stopped.

My mother said, Marcus. Thank you for being honest.

My father said, Marcus. I want to tell you something. Are you ready.

I said, yes.

My father said:

Marcus. The social reason — the Cole will think I am cool reason — is not a good reason. I want to be very direct about that. A kid who only invites you to things if you go to parties where there is underage drinking is — and I am sorry, Cole might be a great guy in other ways, but on this specific axis — Cole is, on this specific axis, a kid who is going to test you. He will keep testing you for the next four years. The test will not stop with this party. There will be other parties. There will be other things. The test will keep going.

If you go to this party because Cole invited you and you want Cole to keep inviting you — what you are learning is I will go to risky things to be invited. That is a lesson that will follow you. It will follow you in college. It will follow you in your twenties. The kid who goes-to-things-because-of-Cole becomes the adult who goes-to-things-because-of-the-boss-or-the-girlfriend-or-the-business-partner. That is a pattern I do not want for you.

If you do not go to this party because Cole invited you — what you are learning is I make my own choices. I will go to things I actually want to go to. I will not go to things I do not actually want to go to. The right kind of friend is one who keeps inviting

me anyway. That is the lesson that will protect you for the rest of your life.

He paused.

That is the social part.

Now the curiosity part. That is a real thing. I do not blame you for being curious. I was curious at fourteen. Your mother was curious at fourteen. The curiosity is normal.

But — Marcus — the curiosity is not, in fact, well-served by this party. The curiosity wants to know what a high-school party is like. You will, over the next four years, have many chances to find out. You will probably go to one in your senior year that is appropriate for your age and where your friends are present and where, if things get weird, you can leave. That is the version of seeing a high-school party you actually want. This version — fourteen, with a bunch of upperclassmen you do not know, alcohol you should not have, in a house you do not know — this version is not curiosity well-served. This version is curiosity being used as a cover for something else.

He stopped.

That is my opinion. Your mother and I are aligned on this. We do not want you to go.

That said — we are going to let you decide.

I looked at him.

I said, *what?*

My mother said, Marcus. You are fourteen. You are going to be in many rooms in your life where your father and I are not. You are going to make many decisions that we cannot make for you. The Saturday party is — we could just say no. We have the legal authority. But we want — we want you to know what we think, and then we want you to make the call. We will support whatever you decide. We will pick you up if you want to come

home early. We will not judge you if you go. We will be proud of you if you do not go. We will love you either way.

You decide.

I sat for a long time.

I said, *guys. Can I have until tomorrow morning.*

My father said, yes.

I went to my room.

I did not sleep well.

I lay in bed for a long time. I went through what my father had said. I went through what my mother had said. I went through what Darius had said. I went through what Cole had said.

I thought about the cohort.

I imagined going to the party Saturday night and then sitting at lunch with the cohort on Monday and telling them about it. I imagined Sofia's face. Sofia would not, exactly, judge me. Sofia would do the *I am listening, I am not going to make you feel bad, but I am also worried* face. The face would be a small kind face. The face would also be — and I knew this in my body — the face of a friend who would, eventually, ask me a hard question about why I had gone.

I imagined, alternatively, not going. I imagined sitting at lunch with the cohort on Monday and not having a story to tell. I imagined Cole, in the hallway later, asking me where I had been. I imagined saying *I did not go*. I imagined Cole's face — Cole's face would, probably, be a small look of recategorization. Cole would, in his head, move me from *might-be-a-cool-freshman* to *not-a-cool-freshman*. Cole would, possibly, not invite me to the next thing.

I sat with both versions for a long time.

I thought — *okay. Which version of me do I want to be.*

The Cole version of me — the *want-Cole-to-keep-inviting-me* version — is, my father had said, the version that would keep testing me for the rest of my life.

The Sofia version of me — the *I-make-my-own-choices* version — is the one that would, by my father's argument, protect me.

I thought about Ms. Calloway. *Be the version the cohort knows.* The cohort knows the not-going version. The cohort knows me as the kid who, since first grade, has made the harder honest choice when the harder honest choice was the one that fit. The cohort knows the version of me that, at six, told my parents about the bike. That version of me would not go to this party.

I went to sleep around two.

In the morning, I came down to breakfast.

I said, *Mom. Dad. I am not going.*

My father said, *Marcus. Good.*

My mother said, *Marcus. Thank you for thinking about it.*

I texted Cole during third period. I said, *Cole. I am not going to be able to make Saturday. Thanks for the invite. Maybe next time.*

Cole texted back, two hours later: *No worries. Next time.*

That was it.

Cole did not, in fact, stop inviting me to things. Cole invited me to a different thing two weeks later — a Saturday at the basketball court at the park, with just basketball, no drinking, no upperclassmen. I went. Cole and I shot hoops for two hours. Cole did not bring up the party. The friendship — such as it was — kept going.

My father had been wrong, in one specific way. Cole had not stopped inviting me. The *being the kid who turns down the party* had not, in this case, cost me Cole.

My father had also been right, in the bigger way. Being the kid who makes his own choices was the version of me I wanted to be. It was the version the cohort knew. It was the version I had been since I was six.

The Saturday party, I heard later, was — by every report — not actually that big a deal. A few kids drank. A few kids did not. There was no police visit. There was no kid who got hurt. There was, in some ways, less drama than I had been imagining.

I had been imagining a significant event. The Saturday party had been a normal small high school thing.

The fact that it had been a small thing did not, by the way, mean my decision had been the wrong decision.

The decision had not been about the party. The decision had been about the pattern.

The pattern I had set on that January Sunday was the pattern I was going to keep setting, in pieces, for the next four years.

The pattern was: *I do not go to things just because somebody invited me. I go to things I actually want to go to. I make my own choices. I tell my parents the truth even when telling the truth might mean they say no. I listen to what they think, and then I decide.*

That is — and Ms. Calloway told me, when I told her about the conversation in late January, that this was the right name for it — that is the adolescent boundary practice.

The boundary practice is a thing. The boundary practice is something fourteen-year-olds either start doing or do not start doing. The kids who start at fourteen, by Ms. Calloway's account, have an easier time at seventeen and twenty and twenty-five. The kids who do not start at fourteen have to

start later. Either way, the boundary practice is — at some point — going to have to begin.

I started in January.

The cohort, in their own ways, was starting too.

The book has eleven chapters left.

— Marcus

(P.S. I told the cohort about the party — about not going — at lunch the next Monday. The cohort had — I should have known — the cohort had heard about the party because Theo had heard about it because the noticing-kid hears everything. The cohort asked me whether I had been invited. I said yes. Theo said Marcus. Did you go. I said no. The cohort cheered. Quietly. Like the cohort. The cohort cheers things like this in basements and at lunch tables. The cohort is the cohort.)

(The cohort is the cohort. I am saying it again. I am going to say it a lot.)

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pittsburgh, in January

— Mia —

I am writing this from my bedroom in Pittsburgh.

It is January. I am fourteen. I have been in this bedroom for five years, since we moved here when I was nine. Before that, I lived in Lincoln Park. Before that, I was a kid in Room 12 with the cohort, learning how to read alongside Sofia and Marcus and the others.

The cohort, in some real way, has been my closest friendship for nine years even though I have not, in five of those years, lived in the same town.

This is a thing I have been thinking about a lot lately. I want to write it down.

When I moved away at nine, the cohort and I had a deal. We did not write the deal down. We did not, exactly, even say the deal out loud. But the deal was: we would stay in each other's lives. Not the way kids who go to the same school stay in each other's lives — that was no longer possible. The way kids who live in different cities stay in each other's lives. With effort. With letters. With phone calls. With visits. With memory.

We have been keeping the deal for five years.

Some of the keeping has been easy. Sofia and I have a text thread that is, by now, years long. Marcus calls me on my birthday every year, and I call him on his. Maya sends me a card with a small drawing every Christmas, and I keep them in

a folder on my desk. There are eleven of them now, including some from before she really knew how to draw.

Some of the keeping has been hard.

The hard part has been that — and I am writing this in my journal because I want to be honest — the cohort has been growing without me. The cohort, day by day for five years, has been getting to know each other in ways I have not been part of. The cohort has been to each other's houses for sleepovers I have not attended. The cohort has had inside jokes I do not understand. The cohort has been through middle-school graduations and breakups and field trips and lunchtime arguments that I have heard about in summary but not been inside.

I am, in some real sense, a historical cohort member.

I am the cohort member who was there at the beginning and is now far away.

The cohort knows me. The cohort loves me. The cohort would, if asked, list me as one of the ten.

But the cohort, on most days, is the nine kids who are in the building. I am the tenth who is on the phone.

I have been trying, this year — the year the cohort started high school — to figure out what I am in relation to the cohort.

I have been thinking about it because I had — and I am writing this so I do not forget — I had a hard fall.

The hard fall was about a new friend I made here in Pittsburgh. Her name is Lila. Lila is, in some real sense, my Pittsburgh-Sofia. Lila is the kid who became my best friend in Pittsburgh in fifth grade, when I had been here for two years and had not quite found a person yet. Lila and I have been close for four years.

Lila, in October, did a thing that surprised me. She — and this is the embarrassing version of the story — she dropped

me. Not officially. There was no fight. There was just a slow distancing. Lila started spending most of her lunches with two other girls. Lila stopped texting me back the way she had. Lila, by November, was — for all practical purposes — no longer my best friend.

I had not seen it coming.

I had cried in my bedroom for two weeks in November.

I had not, in those two weeks, told the cohort.

I had not told the cohort because — and this is the thing I want to write about — I had not told the cohort because of a small dumb pride thing in my head. The pride thing was: I had been telling the cohort, in occasional updates over the years, about my Pittsburgh life, including about Lila. The cohort had been my long-distance audience for the building of *Mia in Pittsburgh*. The story I had been telling the cohort was that I was doing fine, that I had friends, that I had a life. Telling the cohort that Lila had dropped me would have been — I had felt, in my head — telling the cohort that the *Mia in Pittsburgh* story was not entirely true.

I had not wanted to tell the cohort that.

So I had been carrying it alone.

This was — and I am going to use Sofia's word, because Sofia's word for what she did last month is the same word — this was invisible-ing myself.

I had been making myself invisible to the cohort, on a specific topic, for a month, because I had not wanted to tell them the part of my life that was not going well.

In early December, I broke.

I called Sofia. It was a Sunday afternoon. I called and she picked up. I had not even — I had not had a plan to tell her. I had just been calling to say hi.

She said Mi. And something in her voice — Sofia has been able to hear things in my voice from far away for years, the way only people who have been your friend across distance can — something in her voice was *I can hear that something is up*.

I told her.

I cried on the phone.

Sofia listened.

When I was done, Sofia said:

Mi. *Three things*.

One. *I am sorry I did not ask. I have been telling you about everybody else this fall. I should have, in the asking, also asked about you specifically. I should have noticed the Lila updates had stopped. I am sorry.*

Two. *Lila is — Lila sounds like a kid who has decided to move on. That is — that is sad. That is the truth. The truth of fourteen is that some friendships do not last. The truth of fourteen is that the kids you were close to at ten are sometimes not the kids you are close to at fourteen. You did not do anything wrong. Lila did what Lila did. It is not on you.*

Three. *Mia. Listen to me. The cohort knows you. The cohort knows the real you. The cohort knows the version of you that has a hard week and that does not always have everything in Pittsburgh figured out and that sometimes has friends who drift. The cohort does not need you to be the perfectly-okay-in-Pittsburgh-Mia. The cohort wants the real Mia. The real Mia includes the Lila-thing. The cohort can handle the real you. We are not going to think less of you. We are going to know you better.*

I cried more.

I said, Sof. *Why are you always — why is Sof always Sof.*

Sofia laughed.

Sofia said, *Mi. I am Sof because — I do not know. I have just always been. The cohort has been doing this work for years. The Sof you are talking to is the result of nine years of practice.*

I said, *the practice is real.*

Sof said, *the practice is real.*

We talked for another hour.

When I hung up, I felt — and I am writing this in my journal because I want to remember — I felt seen. I felt seen from five hundred miles away. I felt seen by a friend I had not been in the same room with for nine years. I felt seen because Sofia had asked, and I had told, and Sofia had been Sofia, and the cohort — even across distance, even in pieces — was the cohort.

I have told, since that Sunday afternoon, more cohort members about Lila. I told Marcus a week later. I told Amara two weeks after that. I told Maya. I told Kezia.

The cohort, in pieces, has held it.

I am, in some real way, closer to the cohort now than I was in August. Because I told them about something hard.

This is — and I am writing this so I do not forget — this is the lesson. Telling the cohort about something hard does not make me less of a cohort member. Telling the cohort about something hard makes me more of one.

I had — for five years — been protecting an image of Mia in Pittsburgh that the cohort had not actually been asking me to protect. The protection had been my own. The protection had kept me, in small ways, at arm's length from the people who would have wanted to know.

The Lila thing — which was painful — broke the arm's-length.

Lila, by the way, is now nothing to me. I do not have any animosity toward Lila. Lila is just a girl I used to be friends

with. There are kids like that in everybody's life. We grow apart. We do not always know why. Lila is — at fourteen — going to have many of these. So am I. So is the cohort. So are you, if you are reading this.

But the cohort — the cohort that has been built since I was six — is not a friendship that is going to drift the way Lila and I drifted. The cohort is going to last.

I know this in my body. I have known it since I was nine and we made the deal.

The deal is being kept.

I am going to keep keeping it.

I am going to keep telling them when something is hard. Not just when something is good. When something is hard. The cohort can hold both.

That is the lesson of fall.

The lesson is — and I am writing this down — the lesson is that the cohort works in both directions. The lesson is that being a cohort member means receiving as much as giving. The lesson is that I, the kid in Pittsburgh, am not absolved of the receiving work just because I live far away.

I have to ask. I have to tell. I have to let the cohort be the cohort for me, not just for itself.

I am going to.

— Mia

(P.S. Sofia and I have decided that we are going to do a standing Sunday call for the rest of high school. Once a week. Sunday afternoon. Just us. The call has, so far, been short — fifteen minutes — but the call is there. The call is the architecture. The call is the bench-sign-equivalent for the long-distance version of our friendship.)

(Sofia, in her own apartment-bedroom-at-her-parents'-house in Lincoln Park, has been keeping the call on her calendar.

Sofia has not, in two months, missed one. Sofia is – I want to write this down – Sofia is, in some real sense, my closest friend in the world. Even from five hundred miles away. The friendship has been built by careful, repeated effort. The effort works. The effort is the friendship.)

(That is the truth I have been figuring out at fourteen.)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Wall in February

In the second week of February, the Mistake Wall had a hundred cards.

It had had eight when the year started — the cards from the original cohort that had moved over from the middle school. By the end of September, there had been twenty. By October, forty. By December, eighty. By the second week of February, a hundred.

The Wall had become, in some quiet way, a thing the whole freshman class was using.

Ms. Calloway had not announced this. Ms. Calloway had not, at any point, said *students, please use the Wall*. The Wall had just become — by gradual contagion, the way cohort architecture spreads — the place freshmen went when they had a thing they wanted to put down.

The cards were various. Many were small. *I lost my dog's favorite toy and have not told my mom. I cheated on the geometry quiz Wednesday. I told my best friend I was sick on Friday because I did not want to hang out. I made fun of a kid in lunch period and he heard me.*

Some were bigger. *My dad has been drinking again and I have not told anyone. I have not eaten lunch in two weeks. I have been hiding in the library. I told my mom I hate her last Saturday. I meant it. Now I do not know what to do.*

Ms. Calloway read the bigger ones quietly. She did this — by long practice — without making it obvious. She walked past the Wall on her way to and from her classroom, and she scanned, and she noticed. When she saw a card that suggested a kid was in real trouble, she would, gently and indirectly, find a way to check on the kid. Sometimes she would know who wrote the card. Sometimes she would not. When she did not, she would — through Ms. Wong, the freshman counselor — find out, gently, and a kid would get checked in on without ever knowing that the card had been the reason.

This was the version of the Mistake Wall the cohort had grown up with. The Wall was, on the surface, a place to put cards. The Wall was, underneath, a signaling device. A kid in trouble who did not yet know how to say it out loud could write a card. The adults who watched the Wall could see the signal. The kid could be helped.

The Wall was, in some real way, the most important piece of infrastructure in the building.

The cohort knew this. The freshman class, by February, was starting to know it.

Theo stood in front of the Wall one Wednesday morning in mid-February.

He was alone. The hallway was empty. It was 7:42. The bell rang at 7:55.

He stood and looked at the Wall for maybe four minutes.

He had been thinking — for the last few weeks — about whether he should write a card.

This was new. Theo had not, in the eight years of his life that the cohort had had a Mistake Wall, ever written a card. Theo had been the kid who watched the Wall, not the kid who used it. Theo had been the kid who noticed when other kids were using the Wall.

But Theo, in February of freshman year, was tired.

The tired had been building for weeks. The Rachel thing in October had been only one of the noticings. By February, Theo had noticed — and routed, in different ways, to different adults — six different kids who were going through hard things. Three were in the cohort. Three were not. The routing had been working. The weight had, in each case, been put down. The trouble was: the routing had also been, over the months, accumulating.

Theo had been, all year, the noticing kid in more rooms than he had been the noticing kid in any previous year. Middle school had been small. Middle school had been one classroom most of the day, with the cohort, with one or two teachers Theo trusted. High school was — and Theo had been figuring this out for months — high school was an order of magnitude more rooms. Seven classes a day. Different kids in each. Different teachers. Different cafeteria scenes. The amount of noticing-work Theo's brain was doing every day was, by February, exhausting him.

The exhaustion had been showing up in small ways. Theo had started sleeping more on weekends. Theo had been slower to pick up his phone in the group chat. Theo had been — and this had been bothering him — less observant at lunch, because his attention had been used up by the time lunch came.

The exhaustion had been, all month, telling Theo something.

The thing the exhaustion had been telling Theo was: *you are doing too much. You need to do less. The noticing has been good. The noticing has also been more than one fourteen-year-old can sustainably do.*

Theo had not — until this Wednesday morning, in front of the Wall — known how to say this to anyone.

He had thought about telling Ms. Calloway. He had thought about telling his mother. He had thought about telling Sofia, who he knew would understand. He had thought about all of them.

He had not told any of them.

He had not told them because — and this was the thing he was working out, standing in front of the Wall — because being the noticing kid was, in some real way, who Theo had been his whole life. Theo had been being the noticing kid since first grade. The cohort had been built around Theo's noticing, in some real way. Ms. Calloway, in third grade, had specifically named Theo's noticing as a gift in front of the whole class. The noticing had been Theo's role in the cohort for eight years.

Telling somebody that the noticing was too much felt, to Theo, like he was telling somebody that he was not, anymore, the person the cohort had been counting on him to be.

He had not known how to say that.

He had been carrying it.

Standing in front of the Wall on the second Wednesday of February, Theo, fourteen, picked up a card from the small stack Ms. Calloway kept on a small ledge by the Wall. He picked up a pen. He stood for another minute.

Then he wrote.

He wrote:

I have been the noticing kid since first grade. I am, this year, more tired than I have ever been. I do not know how to stop noticing. I do not know how to tell the cohort that I am tired. I am writing this here because I do not yet know how to say it anywhere else.

He paused.

Then he wrote, at the bottom of the card:

— T.

He almost did not sign it. He almost left it anonymous. He thought about it for a second. Then he wrote T. He did not write his full name. The T was enough. The cohort would know. Ms. Calloway would know. The other freshmen would not.

He pinned the card to the Wall.

He stood for another minute.

Then he walked to first period.

Ms. Calloway, walking down the freshman hallway at 8:15 on her way to second period, saw the new card.

She stopped. She read it. She read it twice.

She knew, immediately, who wrote it.

She walked into Room 104. She set up for second period. The cohort came in. The cohort sat down. Theo was one of them. Theo did not look at her differently. Theo did not, by his face, signal that anything had changed. Theo had — as Theo always did — slipped into the room and taken his seat and was, by all surface measures, a normal-looking fourteen-year-old.

Ms. Calloway taught second period.

After second period, she said, quietly, as Theo was packing up his bag, *Theo. Can you come see me during fifth-period free block.*

Theo said, yes.

He came at fifth period.

He sat down across from her.

Ms. Calloway said, *Theo. I read your card.*

Theo said, *I knew you would.*

She said, *Theo. I want to say a few things. Then I want you to talk. Then we are going to make a plan. Okay?*

He said, yes.

She said:

Theo. You did exactly the right thing. You used the Wall. You named the thing. You signed it — T, which is the right level of public — and you put it up. The Wall has been doing its job. You used it the way it is supposed to be used. I am proud of you.

He said, thank you.

She said:

Theo. The thing you are saying — that you have been the noticing kid since first grade, that you are tired, that you do not know how to stop noticing — that is not a thing you have to solve overnight. That is a thing we are going to work on over the next four years. Maybe over the rest of your life. The noticing kids — the kids like you — sometimes burn out at thirty. Sometimes at forty. Sometimes at fifty. The ones who do not burn out are the ones who, in their teens and twenties, learn to take care of the noticing apparatus. The taking-care is the work. The taking-care is what we are going to start now.

She said:

Three small things, Theo. We can talk about more in the next few weeks. But three for now.

He said, yes.

She said:

One. You are going to take some Sundays off from noticing. I know that sounds weird. The noticing is in your nature. You cannot turn it off completely. But you can decide, on certain days, I am not going to make a plan about anybody else today. Sundays are a good day for this. On Sundays, you read. You take pictures. You sleep. You eat breakfast slowly. You do not, on Sundays, scan the room. If you find yourself scanning, you redirect to what I am doing right now. The Sunday is the rest day. The noticing kid needs a rest day. Every week.

Two. You are going to start telling the cohort when you are tired. Not in a complaining way. In a here is what is going on with me way. The cohort has been doing this work in the other direction — the cohort has been telling you their things. They have not been asking you for yours, because you have been quiet about it, and you have given the impression you do not have things. You have things. You are going to tell them. Pick one cohort kid this week. Tell them about being tired.

Three. You are going to come see me on Fridays during eighth-period free block. Every Friday, for the rest of freshman year. We are going to spend twenty minutes together. Not for therapy — Ms. Wong does that, if you want it, and I encourage you to consider it — but for processing the week. We are going to debrief what you noticed. We are going to talk about what you can let go of. We are going to make sure the noticing apparatus does not accumulate weight across the weekend. The Friday meeting is the valve. The valve releases the pressure.

He sat with this.

He said, Ms. Calloway. That is — that is a real plan.

She said, Theo. It is. We are going to start it Friday.

He said, okay.

He went to sixth period.

That night he wrote in his journal:

Today I wrote a card and pinned it to the Wall. I signed it T. The Wall worked. Ms. Calloway read it. Ms. Calloway found me. Ms. Calloway has a plan. The plan involves Sundays off, telling the cohort I am tired, and Friday eighth-period meetings.

I want to remember: the Wall worked. The Wall worked because I used it. The Wall does not work if you do not write the card. The Wall has been hanging in the hallway my whole life. I have walked past it ten thousand times. I have, today, used it for the first time.

The Wall, it turns out, is for me too. Not just for other people. I am, at fourteen, learning a thing some of the cohort has been doing for years and I have been watching them do. I am learning to put my own things on the Wall.

The Wall has my card on it now. The card is signed T. Ms. Calloway and the cohort know who T is. The other freshmen do not.

That is the right level of public for me.

That is the noticing kid version of using the Wall.

He put the journal away. He slept.

In the morning, he found Marcus at his locker. He said, Marcus. *Can we walk together to first period.*

Marcus said, yes.

They walked.

Theo said, Marcus. I want to tell you something. I have been tired this year. I have been doing the noticing thing in the bigger building and the bigger building has been wearing me out. I have not told anybody. I am telling you because Ms. Calloway told me to tell at least one of you.

Marcus said, Theo. I have been waiting for you to tell me.

Theo said, you knew?

Marcus said, Theo. The noticing kid does not get to hide from the cohort. I have noticed you have been tired since November. I have not pressed because I thought you would tell me when you were ready. I am glad you are ready.

Theo said, Marcus. Thank you.

Marcus said, Theo. The cohort is going to take some of the noticing for the rest of the year. You do not have to do it all. We are going to spread it out.

Theo said, I do not know how that works.

Marcus said, we will figure it out. You will, on Sundays, not notice. The rest of us will, on Sundays, notice extra. We will

trade.

Theo laughed.

Theo said, *Marcus. You sound like Ms. Calloway.*

Marcus said, *Theo. I learned it from her. Some of it has stuck.*

They walked to first period.

This is what mid-year looks like, in the cohort.

The cohort, in February of freshman year, was figuring out that being the cohort meant spreading the work. Theo had been doing too much. The cohort would, going forward, do some of his work for him. In return, the cohort would get the version of Theo who had energy at lunch and who could be present in the way the cohort wanted him to be. The architecture, in February, was being added to.

The Wall was getting fuller. The cohort was being the cohort.

Part Two of freshman year was, by mid-February, nearing its end. The cohort had figured out, in pieces, who they were going to be in the bigger building. Marcus had set the boundary practice. Sofia had learned to ask. Theo had learned to put a card on the Wall. Kezia had learned to tell somebody. Mia had learned that the cohort could be the cohort across distance.

Part Three, which is about forgiveness and the people who shaped us, starts in March.

Part Three is shorter than Parts One and Two — only five chapters — because freshmen, at fourteen, do not yet do the adult forgiveness work the seniors do in Book Five. The freshmen do the first version of it. Forgiving themselves, mostly. Forgiving each other, a little. Forgiving an adult, in one specific case. The adult work comes later.

Part Three is coming.

PART THREE



Empathy & Forgiving Others

*How do I forgive — and not forgive — the
people around me, including myself?*

March and April. The forgiving months.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Old Story

— Amara —

I want to tell you about a thing I did in second grade.

You may have heard about this if you have read the earlier books. The version that has been in the books is the short version. The full version, which I have not told anybody before, is something I have been carrying for seven years.

In second grade, there was a girl named Iris. Iris was new. Iris was quiet. Iris did not, in the first weeks of school, have a friend group. Iris was the kind of kid who, by the second month of second grade, was sometimes alone at lunch.

There were two girls who were unkind to Iris.

The unkindness was not the loud kind. The unkindness was the quiet kind. The two girls — I am not going to name them, partly because I have made my peace with them across the years and partly because they were eight when this happened and they are now fifteen and I do not need to hold them, by name, in this book — the two girls would, at lunch, sit at a table and laugh at Iris when Iris walked past. They would, at recess, exclude Iris from games. They would, in subtle ways, make Iris feel that she was not welcome.

I saw this happen. I saw it for two months.

I did not say anything.

I did not say anything to the two girls. I did not say anything to Iris. I did not say anything to Ms. Calloway. I did not say

anything to my mother or my grandmother. I — Amara, age eight, the kid who would, a year later, design the bench-sign and be known for the rest of her life as a kid who included people — I let it happen. For two months.

In November of second grade, I did one thing right.

I went up to Iris. I sat with her at lunch. I started a friendship with her. The friendship lasted, in some form, for the rest of second grade. That was the thing I have been credited for in the bench-sign story.

What has not been in the story is the two months before I sat with her at lunch.

The two months when I watched and did nothing.

I have been carrying that for seven years.

In second grade, after the friendship with Iris began, I did not, in some real way, fix the original thing. The two girls who had been unkind kept being unkind. I did not stand up to them. I did not, exactly, even protect Iris from them — I just became her friend on the side. The unkindness, when it happened, kept happening. Iris and I would sit together at the lunch table, and the two girls would, sometimes, still walk by and make a face, and I would not say anything to them. I would just be Iris's friend.

When I was eight, I did not know what to do about the two girls. I did not have, at eight, the vocabulary or the skill to say *what you are doing is mean. Stop.* That kind of confrontation was not in my third-grade toolkit. By fourth grade I had some of it. By middle school I had more. By high school I have it, mostly.

But in second grade — when the unkindness was actually happening — I did not have it.

I have been, since I was eight, holding a small specific grief about second grade.

The grief is: *I should have done more, sooner, and I did not.* The grief has not, in seven years, gone away. It has gotten smaller. It has gotten quieter. The bench-sign story has, in some real way, covered the grief — the story has told everybody, including me, that I am the kid who includes people. The story is true. It is also a covering. Under the covering, there is the grief about second grade.

In March of freshman year, in Ms. Calloway's class, we did a unit on forgiveness.

The unit was the kind of unit Ms. Calloway runs every year for the cohort. We have been doing forgiveness units since first grade. The shape changes by age. The third-grade version was about *forgiving and trust are not the same*. The fifth-grade version was about *forgiving without an apology*. The seventh-grade version was about *the cost of not forgiving*. The ninth-grade version was about *forgiving yourself*.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of Room 104, said:

Friends, I want to do something a little different this year. We have done many forgiveness units. Most of them have been about forgiving other people. This year, I want us to focus on the harder direction. I want us to focus on forgiving ourselves.

She paused.

The reason this is harder is that, when somebody else has hurt you, you can — sometimes — find a way to forgive them, because you can see them as separate from you. You can see their context. You can see what they were carrying. You can see why they did what they did. The forgiveness has a kind of distance built in.

When you have done a thing you wish you had not done, the distance is gone. You are the person who did the thing. You cannot, in the same way, get away from yourself.

The work of self-forgiveness is therefore a different kind of work. It is — for many people — the harder kind.

She wrote, on the board:

THINK ABOUT ONE THING YOU DID OR DID NOT DO THAT YOU HAVE BEEN CARRYING. WRITE IT DOWN. WE WILL NOT SHARE OUT LOUD. WE WILL JUST WRITE.

I sat at my desk in Room 104.

The thing came up before I could stop it.

Second grade. Iris. The two months.

I wrote it on the paper.

I wrote it in summary form — the two months I watched Iris be excluded in second grade and did not say or do anything about it. I did not name the two girls. I did not, in the writing, defend myself. I just wrote the thing.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the room, said:

Now — and this is the hard part — I want you to write, underneath the thing, three things.

One. How old you were when the thing happened.

Two. What you knew, at that age, that you could have done differently.

Three. What you did not yet know, at that age, that an older you knows now.

I wrote.

One. I was eight.

Two. I knew I could be Iris's friend. I knew that part. I did, eventually, do that.

Three. I did not know — and this is the part I am writing in real time, because I am realizing it as I write — I did not know how to confront the two girls who were being mean. I did not know that confrontation was a thing eight-year-olds could even attempt. I had no model. Nobody had taught me. The cohort, at that point, was still figuring out the apology-and-forgiveness

work — we were still in early stages of even understanding what those words meant. The standing up to mean kids skill was not in the cohort's toolkit yet. It came later — by fifth grade, we had pieces of it. By eighth, we had most of it. By ninth, we have it. At eight, I did not have it.

I read what I had written.

I read it three times.

I thought about it.

I thought — okay. I was eight. I did not have the skill yet. I did the part I could do. I made friends with Iris. The other part — the standing-up-to-the-two-girls part — was beyond my eight-year-old capacity.

I thought — the grief I have been carrying for seven years is a grief that an adult-me has been holding over an eight-year-old me, for not having a skill the eight-year-old me did not have access to. That is not fair to eight-year-old me.

I sat with this for a long time.

Ms. Calloway said, Take your time. There is no rush.

I sat with it.

Then I wrote, at the bottom of the paper:

To eight-year-old me — I forgive you. You did not have the skill yet. You did the part you could do. You did it well. You started a friendship with Iris that lasted through high school in the form of pen-pal letters. You did, in the long run, more good for Iris than the two girls could have done bad to her. You were eight. You did okay. I, at fifteen, am putting the grief down. I am letting you go.

I read it.

I started crying.

I cried at my desk in Room 104, quietly, with the paper in front of me. The cohort, around me, kept writing. Ms. Calloway, at the front, was sitting at her own desk and writing.

Ms. Calloway, when she lifted her head and saw I was crying, did not come over. Ms. Calloway just gave me the small private look that meant *I see you. Take your time. You are okay.*

I sat for another five minutes.

I read my forgiveness sentence again. I dried my face. I put the paper in my notebook.

Ms. Calloway, at the end of class, said:

Friends, the work you just did is some of the hardest work humans do. You do not, today, have to feel like the forgiveness is done. The forgiveness is a process. The paper you wrote today is – for many of you – the first step. Keep it. Read it again in a month. Read it again in a year. Read it again when you are twenty. The forgiveness is not a single act. The forgiveness is a slow building practice. The paper is your first brick.

She paused.

I am proud of all of you. You did the work today.

The bell rang.

The cohort walked out of Room 104.

Sofia, on the way out, walked next to me. Sofia did not say anything. Sofia just walked next to me. Sofia knew, in the way Sofia knows things, that I had been crying and that the crying was not the kind of crying that needed words. The crying was the kind that needed somebody walking next to me.

I walked, with Sofia, to fifth period.

At lunch, I told her.

I told her the full version. The seven-year-old grief. The two months. The two girls. The bench-sign that had, in some real way, been a covering of the original grief.

Sofia listened.

When I was done, Sofia said, *Amara. I have known you since first grade. I want to tell you something.*

I said, yes.

Sofia said:

Amara. The bench-sign was not a covering. The bench-sign was a response. The kid who designed the bench-sign was the kid who had – by that age, in third grade – gained the skill she did not have in second grade. The bench-sign was, in some real way, eight-year-old you fixing something that eight-year-old you did not yet have the tools to fix. It was a year late. But it was the same kid. The same instinct. The same person, who had grown.

You did not cover the second grade thing with the bench-sign. You answered it. The bench-sign is not separate from the Iris thing. The bench-sign is the follow-up to it. The same kid, with one more year of tools, doing what she had not been able to do the year before.

You forgive eight-year-old you for not having the tools. You also recognize that nine-year-old you did, with the tools she had by then, exactly what eight-year-old you would have done if she had been able to. The continuity is the point. The continuity is what makes this not a covering. It makes it a growing. You grew. You did the work.

The seven-year-old grief is – Amara – the grief of a kid who was already, even at eight, the kid she would later become. You just needed time.

I cried again. At the lunch table this time. Sofia put her hand over mine on the table.

Marcus, across the table, noticed. Marcus did not say anything. Marcus just nodded at me, the small I see you doing the work nod. Theo, who was at the other end, also nodded. Amara – Amara is me, I am writing this – saw the cohort holding the small private moment without making it loud.

I – I, Amara – received the holding.

I had been, for years, the kid the cohort did not have to hold up because I had it together. The cohort had been holding me up today, on this Wednesday in March, in a small way at a lunch table.

It was good.

I am writing this in my journal at home. The paper from Room 104, with the second-grade forgiveness on it, is in my notebook. The notebook is on my desk. I will, as Ms. Calloway suggested, read the paper again in a month. And in a year. And in five.

The forgiveness is, as she said, not done.

But the forgiveness has started.

Forgiveness, even of yourself, is — and I think this is true even at fifteen — something you start, not something you finish. You start the process. The process keeps going. Some weeks the forgiveness is easy and you do not even think of the thing. Some weeks it comes back. You read the paper. You remember. You forgive again.

The forgiving is a practice, like everything else. Like catching the Inner Critic. Like the toolkit. Like the cohort.

I am going to keep practicing.

The two months in second grade are not going to disappear. The two months are part of my story. The two months are also — and this is the thing Ms. Calloway taught us today — the two months are part of the story of how I became the kid who later designed the bench-sign.

The cohort, around me, was doing similar work in their own lives. Marcus, that day, was writing about Aaliyah. Sofia was writing about a thing in fifth grade. Priya was writing about a kid she had been mean to in fourth. Theo was writing about a moment when he had noticed something and had not, that one time, said anything. Jordan was writing about a friend he

had ghosted in seventh grade because the friendship had been demanding. Maya was writing about a teacher she had not, in the moment, given enough credit to. Darius was writing about a sibling he had treated badly when he was small. Kezia was writing about the small forgivenesses she has had to extend to her own mother — about which she will, in time, write a much longer story.

The cohort, all together in Room 104 that Wednesday in March, was doing the first version of the self-forgiveness work.

The work will continue. The work will continue for the rest of our lives.

That is — and I am writing this so I do not forget — that is the lesson of freshman year, Part Three.

The work continues.

— Amara

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aaliyah, at Eleven

Aaliyah was eleven now.

Marcus, in March of his freshman year of high school, took her out for ice cream on a Saturday afternoon. It was not August 14. The August 14 tradition was eight years old by this point — Marcus had been doing it since he was seven, when he had decided, in some private internal way, that the date he had lied about the bike would be the date he, every year for the rest of his life, took his sister out for ice cream and just *was* with her. Eight years. Eight ice cream trips. Aaliyah, for several years now, had known the date mattered. Aaliyah had not, until last year, asked Marcus why.

Last August 14 — six months ago — Aaliyah, at ten, had asked. She had said, in the car after the ice cream, *Marcus. I am old enough now. Tell me why we always do this on August 14.*

Marcus had told her.

He had told her about the bike. About the lie. About the next day, when he had told their parents. About the two-day not-talking. About the conversation with their dad. About Ms. Calloway, in third grade, helping him learn how to apologize. About the cohort. About the small particular weight of the ten-year-old story that he had been carrying since he was six.

Aaliyah had listened.

Aaliyah, at ten, had said, *Marcus. I do not remember any of that. I was three.*

Marcus had said, *I know. That is part of why I did it. I wanted the day to mean something to me. The day did not have to mean anything to you. It was — it was my repair thing.*

Aaliyah, at ten, had said, Marcus. *Can I tell you something.*

Marcus had said, yes.

Aaliyah had said, Marcus. *I have known you my whole life. You are not the kind of brother who would lie about my bike. The version of you I know would never. I am — I am glad you carried the day. But I want you to know — for me — you did not have to. The bike thing is not, for me, a bike thing. It is just — it is just an old story about a small kid. You are not him anymore. The you-I-have-known has been the you for as long as I have been a person who knows things.*

Marcus had, in the car, started crying.

Aaliyah, at ten, had said, Marcus. *Pull over. Take a minute.*

Marcus had pulled over.

They had sat in the car for ten minutes. Marcus had cried. Aaliyah had been quiet. Aaliyah, at ten, had been — Marcus had realized, that afternoon — Aaliyah was, increasingly, the kind of person who could sit in a car with a crying older brother and not need to fill the silence.

After ten minutes, Marcus had said, Aaliyah. *Thank you. For saying that.*

Aaliyah had said, Marcus. *I have been waiting to say it for a couple of years. I just did not know it was the bike specifically. Now that I know it is the bike — I can be specific.*

They had driven home.

That had been August.

In March of freshman year — six months later — Marcus had decided, on a Saturday, to do an unscheduled ice cream trip. Not on August 14. Just a regular Saturday. He had thought, in the morning while making cereal, *I do not have to wait until*

August. The August trip is the August trip. But the being with Aaliyah thing is – it can be more than once a year.

He had asked her at breakfast.

He had said, Aal. Ice cream this afternoon.

She had said, Marcus. It is not August. Are you okay.

He had said, yes. I just – I felt like ice cream. I felt like ice cream with you. Want to go?

She had said, yes.

They had gone.

The ice cream place was Mason's, which had been the place Marcus had taken her every August 14 since he was seven. The owner, Mr. Mason himself, was now in his late sixties. Mr. Mason had known Marcus and Aaliyah for years, by face if not always by name. Mr. Mason had served the two of them – by Marcus's count – nine times now, including today.

They sat at the small two-person table near the window.

Aaliyah said, Marcus. Why today.

Marcus said, Aal. I have been thinking. Since you told me, last August, that the August thing did not have to be a once-a-year thing.

Aaliyah said, I did not say it that way.

Marcus said, no. You did not. But you said the being together thing was bigger than the bike thing. I have been thinking about that for six months. The August date is – it is the date the bike happened. But the being with Aaliyah thing is – that is something I want more of. Not because of the bike. Because of you.

Aaliyah said, oh.

She ate some ice cream.

She said, Marcus. That is – that is nice.

Marcus said, Aal. I want to say one more thing. Can I say it.

She said, yes.

Marcus said, *I forgive me for the bike. I have, for years, said I forgive me for the bike, and then six months later I have not really forgiven me, and I have brought it back out. I want this March ice cream trip to be — for me — the I really forgive me for the bike thing. The bike is — I have done the work. The lie is eight years old. The repair has been eight years long. The repair is, by any measure, done. I am the version of me that the cohort and you and the family know. I am not the six-year-old who lied. The forgiving — I am — I am giving it to myself. Here. With you. With ice cream.*

Aaliyah said, Marcus. Good.

She said, Marcus. *I have been waiting for you to do this.*

Marcus said, *you have?*

Aaliyah said, Marcus. *I have been watching you carry the bike for as long as I can remember. You are not — you are not bad at it. You carry it well. But I have, since I was maybe seven, been wanting you to put it down. The bike is a kid story. You are not a kid anymore.*

Marcus said, *I am fourteen.*

Aaliyah said, Marcus. *Fourteen is not six.*

Marcus said, *I know.*

They ate ice cream.

After a while, Aaliyah said, Marcus. *Can we keep doing the August thing.*

Marcus said, *yes. I want to.*

Aaliyah said, *good. I like the August thing. It is, like, our thing. Even if the why of it is — even if you are putting the bike down, I want to keep the thing. The thing is bigger than the bike now.*

Marcus said, *yes.*

He thought about it.

He said, Aal. The August thing is now, officially, not about the bike. The August thing is about — it is about you and me. The

bike is what started the August thing. The bike is no longer the reason for the August thing. The reason is — you and me. The being together. The ice cream.

Aaliyah said, good.

She said, one more thing.

He said, yes.

She said, Marcus. When I am older, I want — I want to start a thing too. Not the August thing. A new thing. Maybe a thing for you and me on, like, your birthday. You take me out in August. I take you out on your birthday. We trade. We have two days a year.

Marcus said, Aal. Yes. Let us do that.

Aaliyah said, starting this year.

Marcus said, my birthday is in two months.

Aaliyah said, I know. I have been planning.

Marcus said, what.

Aaliyah said, Marcus. I have been thinking about this for months. You take me out. I want to take you out. It is — it is fair. I have been mom-and-dad savings for it for, like, six months. Mom and Dad gave me a small allowance every week for chores. I have been saving. I will pay. We will go somewhere. You will pick. I will pay.

Marcus said, Aal.

He started crying again. In Mason's. At the table.

Mr. Mason, behind the counter, was used to this. He had seen Marcus cry at the table several times across the years. He gave Aaliyah, from behind the counter, the small thumbs-up that meant you are okay. The crying is the good kind.

Aaliyah said, Marcus. You are crying a lot today.

Marcus said, Aal. I am fourteen. I cry a lot in general. This is not unusual.

Aaliyah laughed.

They finished the ice cream.

Marcus drove her home.

He went to his bedroom.

He wrote in his journal:

Today I went to Mason's with Aaliyah. Not August 14. Just a Saturday. I told her I was forgiving me for the bike. I told her, this time, that I meant it. She said she had been waiting. She told me she wants to start a Marcus birthday tradition where she takes me out. We are going to do it in May. She has been saving for months.

The cohort, when I tell them about today, will say – Sofia will say – Marcus. The cohort knows the cohort version of you. The cohort version of you is not the bike version. The cohort version is bigger. And Sofia will be right.

The bike was – and I want to write this down – the bike was the founding story of who I was going to become. The bike was what made me, at six, the kid who told the truth at seven. The bike, in some real way, built me. I would not be Marcus-the-cohort-kid if the bike had not happened.

I am keeping the bike.

I am putting down the weight of the bike.

Both at the same time.

The bike is part of my story. The weight is not.

The story stays. The weight goes.

Today, at Mason's, with Aaliyah, the weight went.

The cohort, in their own ways, is putting weights down too. Amara put down the second-grade Iris weight in March. Priya is, apparently, working on a fourth-grade weight she is going to tell me about next week. Jordan has been writing his fictional cohort book, which is in some sense his version of putting down a the funny had been load-bearing for too long weight. Theo put down the I have to do all the noticing alone weight. Sofia put

down the I have to be the helper for everybody weight in December. Kezia put down the I have to carry the letter alone weight in November.

The cohort, in freshman year, has been a lot about putting down weights.

The weights have been weights we have been carrying since we were small. The freshman year is, in some real way, the year we are first old enough to recognize the weights and to put them down on purpose. The architecture is — and Ms. Calloway said this in March — the architecture is now being used. Foundation, walls, windows, roof — all built. The kid living in the house is now starting to use it. Putting things down on the floor. Picking different things up. Rearranging the furniture. Making the house their own.

That is freshman year.

That is — I think — the lesson of Part Three.

Putting weights down on purpose.

Aaliyah told me, today, that she has been waiting for me to do it. I have, today, started.

— Marcus

(P.S. Aaliyah is eleven. Aaliyah is, in some real way, already a better person than I was at eleven. Aaliyah is going to be — she is — Aaliyah is the kind of sister who, when I am thirty, will be one of the most important people in my life. I do not say this lightly. I am writing it down so I remember at thirty. Aaliyah will be twenty-seven. She will, by then, be — I think — a really good person doing a job she likes with people she loves. I am — I am proud to know her. I am proud that I am her brother.)

(The cohort is the cohort. Aaliyah is, in some real way, the cohort+1. She has been my cohort, in some real sense, since she was born. She is, at eleven, very much my person. I am — I am very lucky.)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Friend Jordan Stopped Texting

There was a kid, in fourth grade, that Jordan had stopped being friends with.

The kid's name was Ben. Ben had been Jordan's outside-the-cohort friend. Ben had been in their elementary school but not in their cohort — Ben had been in the other section in second grade and had ended up in Jordan's class in third. Ben and Jordan had hit it off because they had both, in some real way, been the funny kids in the classroom. Ben had been a fast-talker. Jordan had been a fast-thinker. Together they had been — for one year, third grade — a kind of small two-person comedy act that the rest of the class had enjoyed.

In fourth grade, Ben had started getting heavier. Heavier in the body. He had gained, over the course of fourth grade, what looked like fifty pounds. Ben had also gotten louder. Ben had gotten more aggressive. Ben had started, by the second half of fourth grade, doing things in the classroom that Jordan had been embarrassed by. Ben would, in the middle of a lesson, say loud jokes that the teacher had to stop and correct. Ben would, at lunch, pick on smaller kids in a way that was no longer cute. Ben would, on the playground, sometimes hit kids — not hard, but enough that they noticed and that Jordan, watching, had felt his stomach tighten.

Jordan had not, in fourth grade, known what to do about Ben. Jordan had been, at nine, the kid who had not yet started seeing Dr. Pam — the funny mask had been at its heaviest, not yet known to Jordan as a mask. Jordan had been the funny kid. Ben had been the funny kid. Together they had been the two funny kids.

The cohort had been — gently, in their cohort way — telling Jordan in pieces that Ben was not great, but Jordan had not, exactly, known how to break up with a friend at nine. The cohort had not had a vocabulary for graceful friend-exit yet.

So Jordan had — slowly, across the spring of fourth grade — ghosted Ben.

Jordan had not, exactly, said *I do not want to be friends anymore*. Jordan had just, slowly, stopped being available. Stopped sitting next to Ben at lunch. Stopped, on the playground, being the second half of the comedy act. Stopped, at the end of the year, accepting Ben's invitation to a birthday party — Jordan had said he had to go to a family thing, which had been true that day but had also been, in retrospect, the kind of excuse a kid uses when he is hoping to not say the real thing.

By the end of fourth grade, Ben and Jordan had not been friends anymore. Ben had not, technically, been told. Ben had just, by some unspoken process, been left behind.

Ben had transferred schools at the end of fifth grade. Ben's family had moved. Jordan had not seen Ben since.

Jordan, at fourteen, in March of freshman year, with the self-forgiveness paper in Room 104, had thought about Ben.

The Ben thing, Jordan now realized as he was writing, was not — exactly — a thing he had been carrying. The Ben thing had been mostly forgotten for years. It had come up, in his head, once or twice in middle school when he was thinking

about what had happened to Ben — Jordan would, occasionally, wonder where Ben lived now and whether Ben had gotten less aggressive and what kind of fourteen-year-old Ben had become.

The Ben thing was not a grief. The Ben thing was — and this was the word Jordan came up with at his desk, with his pencil, looking at the paper — the Ben thing was *unfinished*. It was a piece of his life that had ended without any closure. It had not ended with a conversation. It had not ended with an explanation. It had not ended with a naming. It had just — petered out.

Jordan wrote it down.

Fourth grade. Ben. I stopped being friends with him without ever telling him I was doing it. I just slowly disappeared from the friendship. He probably noticed. He probably had no language for it either. He was nine. I was nine. We were both not yet at the stage of being able to say this friendship is not working for me. I just left. He was — he had been a friend who was getting harder to be around, and instead of talking to him or telling somebody about it, I just — vanished.

He read what he had written.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the class, was still saying the three questions. One. *How old were you.* Two. *What did you know that you could have done differently.* Three. *What did you not yet know.*

Jordan wrote.

One. I was nine.

Two. I knew that I was uncomfortable around Ben. I knew Ben was being mean to smaller kids. I knew I did not want to be near him anymore. I did the part I could do — I withdrew. That part was — that part was for me, and it was, in some real way, okay. Self-protection at nine is allowed.

Three. What I did not know — at nine — is that there was a third option. The option was not stay friends and pretend and was not vanish without saying anything. The third option was tell an adult that Ben was struggling. The third option was — and I am writing this in real time, the way Amara wrote hers — the third option was route the noticing, the way Theo does now. I was noticing something about Ben. Ben was, in some real way, going through a hard fourth grade. The weight gain, the aggression, the loud-acting-out — those were signals. I was, at nine, the kid in the closest position to read them. I was the friend. I could have, in theory, told a grown-up. I could have told Ms. Cassidy, our fourth-grade teacher. I could have told Mr. Tate, the school counselor. I could have told my mother.

I did not.

I did not, at nine, know that telling adults about a friend was a thing kids did. I had not, at nine, learned the routing skill. The cohort, at nine, was still figuring it out. We had — we had the cohort's own internal version, where we told each other things. But for kids outside the cohort, we had not yet had a routing skill.

I learned the routing skill in pieces between then and now. Theo, this year, has been the cohort's most advanced practitioner of it. Sofia has been close behind. Marcus and Amara have it too. I have it, now, at fourteen — when somebody outside the cohort is struggling, I have language for what should I do about this. I did not have that language at nine.

He sat with it.

I forgive nine-year-old me for not having the routing skill. Nine-year-old me did the part he could do — he kept himself safe. The other part — helping Ben — was beyond his fourth-grade ability. I did not, at nine, have the tools.

I do, at fourteen, have them.

He thought about it more.

He thought — *I wonder where Ben is.*

He had not had this thought, in this specific form, in five years. He thought — *I wonder if Ben is okay.*

This was — and Jordan recognized it as he was writing — this was the grown-up version of the question. The nine-year-old question had been *I want Ben to leave me alone.* The fourteen-year-old question was *I hope Ben is okay.*

Jordan, at his desk, wrote a third paragraph that Ms. Calloway had not asked for.

He wrote:

If I could find Ben today — if I knew where he was — I think I would write him a short letter. I would not tell him about the disappearance. I would not bring up fourth grade. I would just say — Ben. I hope you are doing well. I have been thinking about you. We were friends for a year, in third grade. I do not know if you remember. I hope you are okay. — Jordan.

I think Ben would receive that letter and would either remember me or not remember me. Either way, the letter would, in some small way, complete the unfinished friendship. The friendship would have a small last act. The last act would be one nice letter, fourteen-year-old me to fourteen-year-old him, no apology, no explanation, just a wish that he is okay.

I do not know where Ben is. I cannot send the letter.

But I can — and I am, right now — write a practice letter in my journal that says the things I would say. The practice letter is, in some small way, the version of the closure I can give myself. The Ben thing is now slightly less unfinished. The Ben thing has been named. The naming is, in some small way, the work.

He read it.

He was, like Amara, crying a little, at his desk, in Room 104. He did not cry the same way Amara had. He cried smaller. He cried in the way Jordan cries — quietly, with the funny mask slightly cracked. He was, in some real way, allowing himself to be a non-funny kid in this moment. He was allowing it because the moment was for the non-funny him.

He read his paragraph about Ben again.

He thought, in his head, *Ben. I hope you are okay.*

He thought it the way you think a prayer. Out into the world. Not because you expect the world to answer. Because saying the prayer is the practice.

He put the paper in his notebook.

The bell rang.

After class, Jordan caught Ms. Calloway at the door.

He said, Ms. Calloway. *Can I ask you something.*

She said, yes.

He said, *if I wanted to find somebody I lost touch with in fourth grade — like, find their address — how would I do it?*

She said, Jordan. *Are you serious about this?*

He said, *I think — I think I am.*

She said, *I am going to think about it. There are a few ways. The most ethical is — your parents probably have your fourth-grade class roster somewhere. Or the elementary school might have a forwarding address from when his family moved. I can ask. I will let you know in a few days.*

He said, *thank you.*

She said, Jordan. *Why do you want to find him.*

He said, *I want to write him a small letter. Not an apology. Just a hi, I hope you are okay letter. I — I have been thinking about it today.*

She said, Jordan. *That is a good thing to want to do. Let me think about it.*

She said, *I am proud of you.*

He said, *thanks.*

He walked to fifth period.

Two weeks later, Ms. Calloway found Jordan in the hallway during second-period passing. She said, *Jordan. I have an address for Ben. I called the elementary school. They had it on file. It is a P.O. box, but it should work.*

She handed him a small slip of paper.

He said, *Ms. Calloway. Thank you.*

That weekend, Jordan wrote the letter.

He wrote it in pencil, on a small card. The card was about three sentences long. The card said:

Ben. This is Jordan. We were friends in third grade. I have been thinking about you. I hope you are doing well. — Jordan.

He put the card in an envelope. He addressed it to the P.O. box. He put a stamp on it. He mailed it on Sunday.

He did not, exactly, expect a response.

Three weeks later, a card came back.

The card was also short. The card said:

Jordan. Holy cow. I cannot believe you tracked me down. I remember you. I am doing okay. I live in Ohio now. I am in eighth grade. I am okay. Thanks for thinking of me. — Ben.

There was a small drawing in the corner of the card. The drawing was a small cartoon of two kids laughing. The two kids were, by the style of the drawing, them at nine. Ben had drawn it. Ben had remembered them as the two laughing kids.

Jordan read the card four times.

He put it in his desk drawer.

He sat for a while.

He thought — *Ben is okay.* He thought it specifically. *Ben is okay. I have been wondering, in the back of my head, for five years. I have an answer now. Ben is okay.*

He thought — the letter worked. Not because of any deep effect on Ben. Because of the effect on me. The unfinished thing has now been finished. The closure was real.

He wrote in his journal:

The forgiveness paper from Room 104 turned into a real thing. The real thing was — I sent a card to a kid I had not spoken to in five years. I asked him if he was okay. He said he was. That is — that is, I think, the whole closure I needed. The Ben thing is done. The Ben thing has been put down.

The cohort, in their own ways, are doing similar things. The forgiveness practice — Ms. Calloway said this is the first version. The first version, I am realizing, can sometimes produce real outcomes. A letter that gets sent. A card that comes back. A drawing of two laughing kids.

The practice can produce small concrete things, not just feelings.

That is the lesson.

— Jordan

He told the cohort about Ben at lunch the next Monday.

The cohort cheered.

Marcus said, Jordan. You are a hero.

Jordan said, Marcus. I sent a card. I am not a hero.

Marcus said, Jordan. The card is the thing. The card is the work. The work is heroic.

Jordan said, Marcus. You are too much.

Marcus said, Jordan. I know.

They laughed.

The cohort ate lunch. The school year continued.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Girl Who Was Mean to Priya in Fourth Grade

Priya, in March, had a different version of the forgiveness work.

Priya was not forgiving herself. Priya, on her paper in Room 104, had written about a kid who had been mean to her in fourth grade. The kid's name was Olivia. Not the new-Olivia who was now at the cohort lunch table — a different Olivia, from elementary school, who had moved away after sixth grade. This Olivia had been, for several months in fourth grade, the kid who had decided that Priya was a target.

The targeting had been specific. Olivia had made fun of Priya's lunch — Priya's mother packed her roti and aloo sometimes, which Olivia had laughed at and called *that weird brown food*. Olivia had, on several days at recess, told other girls not to play with Priya. Olivia had — and this was the worst one — taken Priya's notebook on a Tuesday in October of fourth grade and had drawn on Priya's drawings, ruining several pages of Priya's careful pencil work.

Priya, at nine, had cried at home about Olivia for weeks.

Priya, at nine, had not known what to do about Olivia. Priya had — eventually, in November — told Ms. Calloway about the notebook incident. Ms. Calloway had handled it. Olivia had

been spoken to. Olivia had been required to apologize. Olivia had, in front of Priya and Ms. Calloway, said *I am sorry*.

The apology had been — even to nine-year-old Priya — clearly fake. Olivia had said *I am sorry* the way kids say *I am sorry* when an adult is making them. The eyes had not been sorry. The body language had been *I would do it again if I could*. The apology had not been real. Olivia had, in the weeks after, been less openly mean to Priya — because she had been watched — but had not become any nicer in private. Olivia had simply moved her meanness to small unwitnessed moments.

The targeting had continued, in muted form, through the rest of fourth grade and into fifth grade. Olivia had moved away at the end of sixth grade. Priya had not seen her since.

This was — and Priya had not, until the forgiveness unit in Room 104, articulated it this way — this was the origin story of the Inner Critic.

The Inner Critic in Priya's head had, since fourth grade, used language that was Olivia's. The Critic, when she was at her loudest, said things like *you are weird, your food is gross, nobody wants to play with you, your drawings are bad and somebody could ruin them*. These were not, in Priya's mind, original Critic-thoughts. These were, in some real way, Olivia-quotes that the Critic had been recycling for five years.

Priya had been hearing Olivia's voice in her own head since fourth grade.

She had not, until March of freshman year, known what to call this.

She wrote, on the forgiveness paper:

Olivia, in fourth grade, was mean to me. The meanness lasted, in various forms, from October of fourth grade until she moved away in sixth. The meanness has continued, after she moved, in my own head. The Inner Critic in my head uses

Olivia's words. The Inner Critic has been Olivia, in some real way, for five years.

Today I am writing the forgiveness paper about forgiving Olivia. Or maybe – I am not sure yet – about forgiving the Critic.

She paused.

She wrote:

I want to think about what forgiveness means here. Olivia, for years, never apologized in a real way. Olivia, by all evidence, did not feel sorry. Olivia just moved away. The relationship had no closure. Olivia, in some real way, was not finished with her meanness toward me – she just left town.

Ms. Calloway, in third grade, taught us that forgiveness and trust are not the same. That you can forgive somebody without trusting them again. That the forgiveness is for you, not for them.

I want to forgive Olivia.

Not because Olivia deserves forgiveness. Olivia does not, by any measure of did the work, deserve forgiveness. Olivia, by all reports, has not done the work.

I want to forgive Olivia because the Critic in my head has been paid by Olivia for five years. The Critic has been running, all this time, on Olivia's words. Forgiving Olivia is, in some real way, firing the Critic. Telling the Critic that Olivia's words are no longer authorized. Telling the Critic that her contract is up.

The forgiveness is for me.

It is also – and this is the part I am writing in real time – it is also a strategic move against the Critic. If I stop being mad at Olivia, the Critic loses some of her power. The Critic's power, in some real way, has been built out of my unfinished anger at Olivia. If I finish the anger by forgiving, the Critic has less to work with.

She read it.

She thought about it for a long time.

She wrote:

Forgiving Olivia.

Olivia – wherever you are – you were nine when you were mean to me. You were probably going through your own thing. I do not know what. I will never know what. Whatever it was, you took it out on me and on my lunch and on my notebook. That was not okay. That was, to a nine-year-old me, a real injury.

I am, at fifteen, putting the injury down. The injury is no longer going to live in me. I am – and I am writing this as I think it – I am revoking your permission to be in my head. The Critic in my head has been using your voice. Starting today, the Critic does not get to use your voice. The Critic has to find her own words. Your words are revoked.

Your meanness was nine-year-old meanness. I am, at fifteen, no longer subject to it. I forgive you. I do not trust you. I do not want to know you. I do not need to hear from you. I do not need you to apologize. The forgiveness is mine to give. I am giving it. I am giving it because I am taking my head back.

– Priya

She read it. She read it three times. She read it once out loud, in a whisper, at her desk.

She had not expected, this morning, to be doing this work today. She had expected to do some version of the forgiveness assignment. She had not expected to write a *Dear Olivia* letter that was, in some real way, an exorcism.

The Critic had been quiet, in Priya's head, the entire time she was writing.

This was unusual.

The Critic had been quiet for – Priya checked the clock – twenty-eight minutes. The Critic had not, in five years, been

quiet for twenty-eight uninterrupted minutes during the daytime.

The Critic was — Priya now realized — the Critic was *afraid of this letter*.

Priya almost laughed.

She thought, in her head, *the Critic is afraid. The Critic knows what I just did. The Critic is, in some real way, the kid who was just told she has to find new material because her old material has been revoked.*

Priya put the paper in her notebook.

The bell rang.

After class, Ms. Calloway said, Priya. *Can you stay for a minute.*

Priya stayed.

Ms. Calloway said, Priya. *I do not need to read your paper. I just want to ask you — are you okay?*

Priya said, Ms. Calloway. *I just did something. I am — I think I am okay. I think I might be more than okay.*

Ms. Calloway said, *tell me.*

Priya told her.

Ms. Calloway listened.

When Priya was done, Ms. Calloway said, Priya. *What you just figured out is one of the deepest things in psychology. The fact that the Inner Critic has been using somebody else's voice. The fact that forgiving the person is, in some real way, firing the Critic's voice writer. This is — this is the kind of insight that adult therapists describe to their forty-year-old patients. You are fifteen. You did it on your own. You did it in a thirty-minute class period.*

Priya said, Ms. Calloway. *I have been working on the Critic for five years.*

Ms. Calloway said, Priya. *The five years of work made today's insight possible. The five years built the readiness. The five years are the reason the thirty minutes worked.*

She said, Priya. *I want you to do one more thing.*

Priya said, yes.

Ms. Calloway said, *I want you to test it. For the next week, when the Critic shows up, I want you to listen carefully to what she is saying. If she is using Olivia's old words – the weird, the food is gross, the nobody wants to play with you – I want you to interrupt her and say, in your head, those words are revoked. The contract is up. Find new material.*

You will, I think, find that the Critic is slower this week. She will be searching for material. She has lost the auto-pilot. She will get faster again – she will find new material eventually, because that is what the Critic does – but the transition period will be quieter. Take advantage of the transition period. Use it to do things. Talk to people. Try things. The Critic is, this week, on a small vacation.

Priya said, Ms. Calloway. *That is – that is a specific plan.*

Ms. Calloway said, *I have been doing this work for thirty years. I have a few plans.*

Priya laughed. She went to fifth period.

The week that followed was – and Priya wrote about it in her journal – the quietest week with the Critic since fourth grade. The Critic did try to show up. Twice in geometry. Once in chemistry. Once in the hallway. Each time, the Critic had, audibly, Olivia language in her mouth. Each time, Priya said, in her head, *revoked. Find new material.* Each time, the Critic – Priya could feel this in her body – paused. The Critic had not been prepared. The Critic had been operating on autopilot. The autopilot was now off.

By the end of the week, the Critic had not yet found new material. The Critic had been silent, mostly, for seven days.

This was — and Priya wrote it down — unprecedented.

Priya did not know how long the quiet would last. Priya knew, from five years of practice, that the Critic would eventually find new material. The Critic always did. The Critic was, in some real way, in the writing-new-material business.

But — and this was Priya's insight, at the end of the week — the new material was going to be slower in coming, and was going to have to come from somewhere else. The new material would no longer be Olivia. The new material would have to come from, perhaps, new sources. Older kids in the hallway who had been unkind. A teacher who had said a critical thing. A boy in chemistry who had laughed at her answer. Sources from after fourth grade.

The Critic would, in some real way, have to re-source.

The re-sourcing was going to take time.

Priya, in March of freshman year, had bought herself — by writing a forgiveness paper — possibly months of quieter Critic.

This was — and Priya wrote it down — a gift to herself.

She thought, in her head, *I have just given myself months of quieter mind. I did the work. The work paid off.*

She slept, that week, like a person who was getting back something she had been missing for years.

Part Three of freshman year was, by the end of March, drawing to a close.

The cohort, in different ways, had each been doing forgiveness work that month. Amara had forgiven herself for the second-grade Iris weight. Marcus had forgiven himself for the bike. Jordan had completed the unfinished thing with Ben. Priya had revoked Olivia's contract with the Inner Critic. Sofia,

Maya, Theo, Darius, Kezia — each, in their own ways, had done their own versions of the work. Some had been smaller. Some had been bigger. All had been real.

The Mistake Wall in the freshman hallway, by the end of March, had a hundred and forty cards.

Part Four — the Grace section — starts in April.

PART FOUR



Grace

*What kind of fourteen-year-old am I going
to be?*

April through June. The closing months.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The End of the Season

— Darius —

The freshman basketball season ended in the second week of April. We had — let me get the record right, because I am writing this in my journal and I want to remember — we had finished eight wins and ten losses. The team had been, by the standards of the freshman level, fine. We had been the kind of team that lost the close ones and won the easy ones. We had not, all season, played a perfect game. We had also not been, at any point, embarrassed.

I had played fourteen games. I had started two of them — both late in the season, after the starting point guard had sprained his ankle. I had averaged about six minutes per game. I had scored, total, twenty-three points across the season. I had — the stat I was actually most proud of — I had eleven assists and one turnover. The ratio was, by my coach's account, very good for a freshman.

The last game of the season was on a Thursday. We had played a school across town. We had lost. The score had been forty-one to thirty-six. I had played four minutes. I had not scored. I had thrown a pass to a teammate who had made a layup. The assist counted as one of my eleven.

After the game, in the locker room, the coach — Coach Henley, who is a thirty-something former college player who took the freshman team this year because, he had told us at

tryouts, he had wanted to coach kids before he started coaching JV next year — Coach Henley had stood at the front of the locker room and had talked to us for fifteen minutes.

I want to write down what he said because it had landed for me. He had said:

Boys. Sit down. Listen.

We sat.

This was a freshman team. Most freshman teams are. The point of a freshman team is not to win games. The point of a freshman team is to teach you how to be on a team. You have, this season, learned a lot about how to be on a team. Some of you have learned how to be a starter. Most of you have learned how to be the kid who plays four minutes and is excited every one of them. Both are valuable. Both are real. I want to say a few things specifically.

He pointed to each of us in turn. I am not going to write down what he said to every kid. I will write down what he said to me, because it is mine.

He pointed at me.

He said:

Darius. You played the fewest minutes of any kid on the starting rotation. You were, by my count, the smallest kid on the team for most of the season. You did not, when you were on the floor, ever play like a small kid. You played like a kid who knew the game. You passed when you should have passed. You moved without the ball. You set screens. You did the work most kids do not want to do.

Some of you, watching Darius, may not have noticed how much work he was doing. You have to watch carefully to see Darius. He does not — and this is a compliment — he does not put himself in front of the camera. He is, by every measure, a team player. He makes the kid he is passing to look better. He

makes the other team's defense look worse. He is, in basketball terms, what we call a floor-raiser. The whole team plays better when Darius is on the floor.

Darius — I am going to recommend you to the JV coach for next year. Most freshmen do not get recommendations like that. You will, in some likelihood, be on JV next year as a sophomore. Some of you will not be. That is okay. The recommendation is mine to give. I am giving it to Darius.

I sat there.

I had not been expecting that.

I had not, in fact, been expecting any recognition from Coach Henley specifically about me. I had figured, going into the meeting, that I would be lumped in with the other bench kids in some generic good job everybody speech. I had been wrong.

*Coach Henley moved on to the next kid. He gave each kid a personal thing. The kid next to me was the starting point guard who had sprained his ankle — Coach Henley told him he had a real future and to take it easy on the leg over the summer. The kid two down from me — the one who had been our leading scorer — Coach Henley told him *you are going to be a star*. The kid at the end of the bench — the kid who had played, total, maybe ten minutes all season — Coach Henley told him *you have a kind heart for this game. I want you back next year. The kindness is the thing.**

That last one was — and I am writing this in my journal because I want to remember — that last one was the one that landed hardest for me.

The kid he said it to — his name is Mateo — had been, all season, the cheerleader of the bench. Mateo had clapped harder than anyone when somebody else made a basket. Mateo had hugged the starters when they came off the floor.

Mateo had been, by every social measure, the glue of the freshman team. Mateo had not, ever, complained about not getting in. Mateo had not, ever, asked the coach for more minutes.

Coach Henley had named Mateo's kind heart in front of the whole team.

I had — and I want to write this down — I had felt, in that moment, that Coach Henley was doing something I had not, until then, fully understood that coaches could do.

Coach Henley was giving each kid the thing they needed.

The starting point guard needed to hear *take care of your body*. The leading scorer needed to hear *you have a future*. I needed to hear *you do the unseen work*. Mateo needed to hear *the kindness is the thing*. Each of us, in that locker room, had walked in needing a specific small recognition. Coach Henley had given each of us our specific small recognition.

This was — and I am writing this for me, in March — this was the teacher version of coaching. Coach Henley had been coaching us, all season, like Ms. Calloway teaches us. Specifically. Individually. With attention to the kid you actually are, not the player I wish you were.

I had not, until that locker-room moment, fully understood this. I had thought, all season, that Coach Henley was just a basketball coach. A guy who made us run drills. A guy who taught us plays. He had been, in fact, a teacher in basketball form.

The cohort, when I told them about the locker room speech the next morning at lunch, was — typically — the cohort about it. Marcus said *Darius*. Coach Henley sounds like Ms. Calloway with a whistle. Sofia said *Darius*. Are you crying. I was, in fact, crying. At the lunch table. Talking about a four-minute basketball game.

Sofia handed me a napkin.

The cohort kept eating.

This is — and I have been thinking about it since — this is one of the things I want to take away from freshman year.

The take-away is: good adults are good adults across professions. A good teacher does the thing my teachers do — Ms. Calloway, Mr. Patel before he retired, Ms. Wong this year. A good coach does the same thing — Coach Henley. A good therapist does the same thing — Dr. Pam Mendel does it for Jordan, Dr. Ramirez does it for Kezia. A good nurse, I assume, does the same thing — Kezia is going to be one, eventually, and Kezia is going to be the version of a nurse who does for her patients what these adults do for us.

The thing the good adults do is: *they see you specifically*. They do not, when they look at you, see a generic kid. They see the actual kid you are — your particular shape, your particular work, your particular gift, your particular thing-you-need-to-hear. They give you the specific thing. The specific thing is the gift.

The specific thing, when an adult gives it to you, makes you feel — and the cohort and I have been getting this gift since first grade — makes you feel known.

Being known is — and I am writing this in my journal because I want to remember at fifteen and twenty and thirty — being known is, in some real way, the most important thing an adult can give a kid.

I am, in freshman year, more known than I have ever been. The cohort knows me. Ms. Calloway knows me. Ms. Wong knows me now, because I went to see her in February when I had been worried about a quiz. Coach Henley, for one season, has known me. My parents, increasingly, have been knowing me — my dad, since we started doing work in sixth grade, has

been getting better at knowing me, and we are, in March of freshman year, in some real way, closer than we have ever been.

I am — at fourteen — known.

That is, in some real way, the freshman year accomplishment. The accomplishment is not the basketball stats. The accomplishment is not the grades, though my grades have been fine. The accomplishment is — being a kid who, in many rooms in many buildings, is known by many adults and many peers as Darius, specifically. Not Darius, the basketball kid. Not Darius, the cohort kid. Just Darius. Specifically. The one whose dog Pepper is at home wagging her tail. The one whose dad has been working on himself. The one who passes when he should pass. The one whose grandmother lives in another state and writes him letters once a month. The one who is fourteen and not yet had his growth spurt and who plays four minutes a game and who is, by every measure, exactly where he is supposed to be.

That kid.

That kid is known. That kid is okay. That kid is going to be okay for a long time.

— Darius

(P.S. I told my dad about Coach Henley that night. My dad said son. I am proud of you. I said Dad. Thank you. My dad said Darius. I am — I am going to come watch you in JV next year. Every game I can. The basketball is — it is a thing I can do with you. I said Dad. I would like that. He said we are going to do it. My mom, in the kitchen, was listening. My mom did not say anything. My mom just smiled the smile she does when she is, in some private way, very happy. The cohort, in the group chat that night, was the cohort. Marcus sent a picture of his comic with a basketball player in it. Sofia sent a heart emoji. Mia in

Pittsburgh sent Darius! Coach Henley sounds like a guy. The cohort is the cohort. I am the cohort kid. The cohort kid is me. We are – I am – okay.)

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Grandfather's Brush

In May, Maya's grandmother gave her something.

It was a Sunday. Maya was at her grandmother's house, which she had been at most Sundays since fall — Sunday dinner with her grandmother had become, by April, a fixed point in Maya's week. Her grandmother lived in the same house Maya's grandfather had lived in until he died, when Maya was three. Maya did not remember her grandfather. Her grandmother had been a widow for eleven years.

This Sunday, after dinner, her grandmother said, *Maya. Come with me. I have something for you.*

They walked, slowly — Maya's grandmother was seventy-three and walked slowly even on her best days — into the small back bedroom that Maya's grandmother had been using, since her husband died, as a sort of storage room. The room had boxes. The room had old papers. The room had a small chest in the corner that had, on the lid, her grandfather's initials carved in.

Her grandmother opened the chest.

She pulled out a small wooden box.

The box was about the size of a paperback book. The box had a hinge. The box was old.

She handed it to Maya.

She said, *Maya. This was your grandfather's.*

Maya opened it.

Inside the box was — a paintbrush. A single paintbrush. The brush was old. The bristles were worn at the tip. The handle was wooden. The handle had — Maya could see, when she turned it in her hand — the small fingerprint-shaped wear patterns of a hand that had held this brush many times.

There was also, in the box, a small folded piece of paper.

Maya took the paper out. She unfolded it.

The paper was a small note in old handwriting. It said:

To my grandchild — I have been painting in the basement since I was fourteen. Nobody knows. I have been keeping the work in a box behind the furnace. If you have found this, and the box behind the furnace is still there, the work is yours to see. Use the brush if you want. I have used it for forty years. It is, in some real way, the only thing I have made that I want to leave behind.
— Grandfather

Maya read the note twice.

Maya looked at her grandmother.

She said, *Grandma. He painted.*

Her grandmother said, *Maya. He did. He painted in the basement. He kept it secret. He thought — he thought, in his generation, that men did not paint. He thought it was — he thought it would have seemed strange to people. He kept it from everyone, including me, for the first fifteen years of our marriage. I found out, by accident, when I went into the basement to look for a tool. I saw the box. I asked him. He told me. He kept painting until he was sick. The last year of his life, he could not hold the brush steady. He stopped. He never showed his work to anyone but me. He never sold a painting. He never exhibited a painting. He did not have the cohort you have. He did not have the Mr. Ortiz you have. He did not have the kind of teachers who tell young men you should keep at this. He just painted, in the basement, by himself, for fifty years.*

The box is in the basement of his old workshop — the one that became, after he died, my basement. The box is still behind the furnace. I have not opened it in eleven years. I have left it there.

Maya. I want you to have the brush. I want you, when you are ready, to go open the box. I want you to see your grandfather's work. I have been waiting — and this is what I want to say to you — I have been waiting for you to be old enough to understand what it is. You are fifteen now. You are in Art II. Mr. Ortiz has been calling you an artist. You are old enough to understand what your grandfather was.

Maya, holding the brush, was crying.

Her grandmother let her cry.

Her grandmother said, Maya. Take your time.

Maya cried for a long time.

When Maya could talk, she said:

Grandma. He painted. He painted for fifty years. And nobody

She did not finish the sentence.

Her grandmother said, I know.

Her grandmother said:

Maya. He had a small life. He worked at the steel mill for forty years. He came home. He had dinner with me. He played with our daughter, who is your mother. He went down to the basement at night and painted, for an hour or two, and came back up and went to bed. He was, by all outside measures, a man who worked at the mill and had a family. He was also — and this is the part nobody knew — he was also, in private, an artist. He was a very good artist. The paintings in the box are — I have looked at them — they are real paintings. They would have been, if he had ever shown them, recognized as the work of a serious artist. They were not.

He did not, in his lifetime, have what you have. He did not have the safety to show his work. He did not have the cohort. He did not have the Mr. Ortiz. He did not have the moms and dads who would have said of course, son, go to art school. He had a 1950s working-class childhood where art was not — it was not a thing a kid from his family did. He painted anyway. He did it for himself. He did it because the wanting was bigger than the not-having-permission.

Maya. I am telling you this because — I have been watching you for fifteen years. I see, in you, what your grandfather had. The wanting. The making. The basement.

You have what he had. You also have what he did not have. You have the cohort, and Mr. Ortiz, and a school that lets you take Art II as a freshman, and a mother who will, eventually — she is not all the way there yet, but she will be — a mother who is going to support you going to art school.

You are going to do, in plain view, what your grandfather did in secret.

The brush is — Maya — the brush is, in some real way, the lineage. You hold the brush. He held the brush. The brush is what connects you. The brush is the handoff. He could not have known you would be the one to take the brush. He hoped. He wrote the note. He believed there might be, someday, a grandchild who would do what he could not do. That grandchild is you.

Maya, holding the brush, kept crying.

Her grandmother sat on the small chair next to the chest.

After a long time, her grandmother said, Maya. We do not have to look at the paintings today. We can — we can wait until you are ready. Or we can go now. Whichever you want.

Maya thought about it.

She said, Grandma. Let us go now. I want to see them.

Her grandmother said, *okay*.

They walked, slowly, to the basement.

The basement was — and Maya had been in this basement many times — was a normal basement. There was a furnace. There was a small workbench her grandfather had built. There were shelves with old tools and old paint cans.

Her grandmother said, *the box is behind the furnace*.

Maya walked behind the furnace.

There was a metal box, about the size of a small suitcase. The box had been there for eleven years. The box had a small amount of dust on it. The box had a hinge.

Maya pulled it out. Maya opened it.

Inside were — paintings. Stacked. Many of them. Small canvases, maybe ten by twelve inches. Some unframed. Some on board, not canvas. Some on heavy paper. There were also — Maya could see — small notebooks. Sketchbooks. Years of them.

Maya took one painting out.

The painting was a small still life. A bowl of fruit. The fruit was — Maya could see, even at fifteen — was painted with extraordinary care. The light was right. The shadows were right. The colors were warm. The painting was, in some real way, quietly excellent.

Maya looked at it for a long time.

She took out another. A landscape. The yard in front of the house, in summer, in 1973 by the date on the back. The light in the painting was the same warm patient light as the bowl of fruit. The same hand.

She took out another. A portrait of a woman. The woman was, Maya recognized, her grandmother — her grandmother at maybe twenty-five years old. Maya had never seen her grandmother that young in person. The portrait was — Maya

was crying again — the portrait was loving. Her grandfather had painted her grandmother with the kind of attention you give to a person you love.

Maya looked through more.

There were about forty paintings in the box, by her count. There were maybe a dozen sketchbooks. The sketchbooks, Maya flipped through some of them, contained studies — pencil studies, watercolor studies, small drawings of hands and faces and trees and birds.

Forty paintings. Fifty years of work. All in a box.

Maya sat on the basement floor with the painting of her grandmother in her hands and cried for ten minutes.

Her grandmother, on the chair near the furnace, sat with her.

When Maya could talk, she said, *Grandma. These are — these are real.*

Her grandmother said, *I know.*

Maya said, *Grandma. What do — what do we do with them?*

Her grandmother said, *Maya. I have been thinking about this for eleven years. I have not, in those eleven years, known the right answer. I have, by leaving the box here, been waiting for the right answer. I think — and this is what I want to ask you — I think the right answer is that you take them. Not all of them, not now. Take one or two. Show them to Mr. Ortiz. Tell him about your grandfather. Ask him what to do.*

Mr. Ortiz will, I think, know.

If Mr. Ortiz says — these should be in a small show — then we can have a small show. At the high school, maybe. Or at the community center. The paintings would be seen, for the first time, fifty years late, but seen. Your grandfather would have been — your grandfather would have been very happy. Even fifty years late.

If Mr. Ortiz says – these are family pieces, keep them in the family – then we will. We will hang one in my house. Maybe one in your house. The rest in storage, waiting.

Either way, the paintings are no longer secret. The paintings are now – in our hands, in plain view, known.

Maya said, *Grandma. I want to show Mr. Ortiz.*

Her grandmother said, *good.*

They picked two paintings. The still life. The landscape. The portrait of the young grandmother Maya did not take – Maya wanted to keep that one private for now.

Maya put the two paintings in a small portfolio. She took them home. On Monday, she brought them to Art II.

She stayed after class.

She said, *Mr. Ortiz. I want to show you something. My grandfather painted. Nobody knew. He died eleven years ago. My grandmother just showed me his work.*

Mr. Ortiz said, *Maya. Show me.*

Maya opened the portfolio.

Mr. Ortiz looked at the still life. He held it for a long minute.

He said, *Maya. Your grandfather had – your grandfather had real eyes. This is a very good painting. The light is – the light is technically very accomplished. He was self-taught?*

Maya said, *yes. As far as we know.*

Mr. Ortiz looked at the landscape. He held that one for an even longer minute.

He said, *Maya. Your grandfather was an artist.*

He said, *Maya. I want you to bring the rest of them. Not necessarily here. But somewhere – bring them up out of the box. I want, if your grandmother is willing, to talk about a small show. I am thinking the high school art gallery. Two months. Forty paintings by an unknown self-taught artist who painted in a basement for fifty years. We would tell the story. We would*

name your grandfather. We would say this work was kept secret for fifty years because the artist did not have the support to show it. This is what gets lost when we do not give people the support. The show would be — Maya — the show would be important.

Maya said, Mr. Ortiz. I will ask my grandmother.

Mr. Ortiz said, Maya. Take your time. Talk to your grandmother. Talk to your mother. The show can happen this year or next or in five. Whenever your family is ready.

Maya said, I will.

She went to fifth period.

She told her grandmother that night on the phone.

Her grandmother said, Maya. I will think about it. Give me a week.

A week later, her grandmother called Maya back.

Her grandmother said, Maya. Yes. We are going to do the show. We are going to do it this year if we can. I have been waiting for fifty years to put your grandfather's work in plain view. I do not want to wait any longer.

Maya said, Grandma. I love you.

Her grandmother said, Maya. I love you. He would have — he would have loved you. The brush is yours. The show is going to happen. The waiting is over.

The show happened in September of Maya's sophomore year.

But this is Book Four. The show is not really part of Book Four. The show is part of what comes next.

What is part of Book Four is — Maya, in May of her freshman year, finding out who her grandfather had been. Maya holding the brush. Maya looking at the painting of her grandmother at twenty-five and seeing what love looks like in

oil paint. Maya, on a Sunday, in the basement, sitting on the floor and crying.

Maya, after that Sunday, was different.

The difference was small. The difference was specific. The difference was: Maya now had, in her hand, the brush her grandfather had used for fifty years. Maya now knew that she came from a lineage of secret painters who had not had what she had. Maya now knew that the work she was doing in the basement of her own house — and yes, Maya still painted in a basement, the basement at her own house where she lived with her mother — was not, anymore, just her work. It was — in some real way — the continued work. The brush had passed from one hand to another. The making had not ended in 1973. The making was continuing in 2026, with the same brush, in a different basement, in a different generation, in a different city.

Maya was, at fifteen, the next generation.

She would, when she went to art school in three years, take the brush with her.

She would, when she had her own studio in her twenties, hang the painting of her grandmother at twenty-five on the wall above her work table.

She would, when she had her own first solo exhibition in her late twenties, include — and this is in Maya's future, beyond Book Four — include one of her grandfather's paintings in the show, alongside her own, with a small label that said *Augusto Rivera, 1925-2013, untitled landscape, 1973*. The label would not, otherwise, explain. The visitors to the show would not necessarily know who Augusto Rivera was. The visitors would only see — the very good landscape and the artist's small acknowledgment of where she came from.

That was in the future.

In May of freshman year, Maya was just — a kid with a brush. A kid who, in some real way, had been waiting — for fifteen years — to find out where the wanting in her had come from.

The wanting was — in some real way — inherited.

The wanting had a name. The name was Augusto. Augusto had been her grandfather. Augusto had wanted, his whole life, to make paintings. Augusto had — alone, in a basement, in secret — done so. Augusto had died at eighty-eight, with the work in a box, with a note for the grandchild who might, someday, take up the brush.

The grandchild was Maya. Maya had taken up the brush. The wanting continued.

— Maya

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Sentences Come Back

In the second week of May, Ms. Calloway gave back the sentences.

She had said, on the first day of school, that she would. She had been holding the small papers in a folder in her desk drawer for nine months. The folder had twenty-five papers in it — one for each student in second-period English I. The papers had not been read aloud. The papers had been the kids' private commitments from August.

She handed them out in class on a Wednesday.

She said, *friends. You wrote these on the first day. I have not read them aloud. I am not going to read them aloud now. I just want to hand them back to you. Take them home. Read them. See what you think.*

She walked around the U-shape and gave each kid their paper.

Sofia got hers.

She unfolded it.

She read what she had written nine months earlier.

By the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have asked at least one person, at least once, for help with something that mattered.

She read it twice.

She had not, since the first day of school, looked at this paper. She thought about the year. December at the kitchen

table with her mother. The pancakes. The asking Amara. The Saturday-pancakes phrase that had become her code for *I let myself be invisible to the cohort for a whole week and then broke open*. The texting Amara every day since. The small ongoing practice of asking, in pieces.

The sentence had come true.

The sentence had not just come true once. It had come true many times. It had come true every week since December. The asking had become — by May — normal. Sofia, who had spent fourteen years not asking for help, was now, in May, the kind of kid who texted Amara when she was having a hard week, who told her mother when she was tired, who said to the cohort at lunch *guys, I am going through a thing*.

The sentence had — and she had not, in August, predicted this — the sentence had been the most important sentence she had written all year.

She held the paper.

She thought — *okay. The sentence came true. The question is what to do with the paper now.*

She thought about this for a few minutes.

She decided — she would keep it.

She would keep the paper. She would put it in her notebook. She would, every May for the rest of her life, read it again. The paper would, in some real way, be a yearly check-in with the version of herself who had written it.

She would, by writing future versions of the sentence each year, build up a small archive of her own commitments. The commitments would change. The commitments would, in some way, be her — across time. The fourteen-year-old who had wanted to ask for help. The fifteen-year-old who would, in August of sophomore year, write a different sentence. The sixteen-year-old. The seventeen-year-old. The eighteen-year-

old who would, in Book Five, write the sentence that read *I want to have asked my parents for the thing I had been afraid to ask them for*. Sofia did not yet know that future sentence. But the practice of writing the August sentence and rereading it in May was, she now realized, a habit she was going to build.

The habit started today. The paper was the first paper.

She folded it carefully. She put it in her notebook.

Around the U-shape, the rest of the cohort were reading their own sentences.

Maya was reading hers. Maya had — Sofia happened to know, because Maya had told her the previous summer — Maya had drawn a small picture on her paper instead of writing a sentence. The picture had been a tree with a single leaf falling. The image had meant something specific to Maya at the time. Maya was looking at it now and was, Sofia could see, half smiling. The image had — apparently — also come true.

Marcus was reading his. Marcus was — Sofia could see from across the U — Marcus was crying a little. Quiet crying. Marcus would tell her later that his sentence had been *by the end of freshman year, I want to be true of me that I have, in every classroom I am in, been the cohort version of myself*. The sentence had — across nine months of Algebra I and chemistry and history and English — come true. Marcus had told every room about the comic. Marcus had not, anywhere, become a version of himself the cohort would not recognize. Marcus, in May, had read the sentence and had felt — and he would write in his journal that night — very proud of August Marcus for writing the sentence, and very proud of May Marcus for living it.

Theo was reading his. Theo would, when Sofia asked at lunch, tell her his sentence had been *by the end of freshman*

year, *I want to be true of me that I have, at least once, written something on the Mistake Wall.* The sentence had come true in February. Theo, holding the paper, was — Sofia could see — was very still. The stillness was Theo's version of being moved. Theo did not, often, cry. Theo took things in deeply, slowly, with very small visible changes.

Priya was reading hers. Priya was — and this was unmistakable, even from across the room — Priya was grinning. Priya's sentence, which she had told Sofia about in August, had been *by the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that the Inner Critic and I have a freshman-year relationship that is a step better than our eighth-grade relationship. Quieter. Faster catching. Less time wasted listening to her.* The sentence had — and Priya would tell the cohort at lunch — come true in the most extreme way Priya could have imagined. The Critic had, since the March revoking of Olivia's contract, been more than quieter. The Critic had been, for stretches of April and May, almost absent. The catching had gone from minutes to seconds to — sometimes — nothing, because the Critic had not had anything to say. The freshman year had been, in some real way, the year Priya and the Critic had renegotiated their entire relationship. The sentence had been wildly exceeded.

Amara was reading hers. Amara's face was — and Sofia knew this face — was the face Amara made when something she had not, at the time, known was important was now revealed to be important. Amara would, when asked, tell Sofia her sentence had been *by the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have made at least one new friend who I would not have made if I had stayed inside the cohort.* The sentence had — by the second week of school, when Amara had met Olivia at the locker — come true. Olivia was, by May, sitting at the cohort

table every day. Olivia was, by all measures, a friend. The sentence had been almost immediately fulfilled. But Amara, looking at the paper, had — Sofia could see — recognized what she had wanted in August and what she had gotten. The recognition was the moment. The recognition was the point of the paper coming back.

Darius was reading his. Darius was just — smiling. Darius's sentence had been, as Sofia would learn, *by the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have, at least once, been recognized for the unseen work*. The sentence had — three weeks earlier, in the basketball locker room, with Coach Henley — come true. Darius, holding the paper, had been — and Sofia could see this — Darius had been thinking about the locker room speech.

Jordan was reading his. Jordan was, characteristically, making a face that was both serious and funny. Jordan's sentence had been — and this would come out at lunch — *by the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have made the funny the third thing, not the first, in at least one important conversation with somebody outside the cohort*. The sentence had been — over and over, in different conversations through the year — fulfilled. Jordan would, looking at the paper, decide that the sentence for sophomore year would be a more ambitious version of the same project. The funny was, increasingly, a tool not a mask. The mask was, in May, off in most rooms.

Kezia was reading hers. Kezia was very quiet. Kezia's sentence — and Kezia would not, that day, tell anyone except Sofia what it had been — Kezia's sentence had been *by the end of freshman year, I want it to be true of me that I have, at least once, asked a grown-up for help with the hardest thing I am carrying*. The sentence had come true in November, in Ms.

Calloway's office, in the *what is going on* conversation. Kezia, holding the paper, was — Sofia could see — was thinking about her grandmother and about Dr. Ramirez and about Ms. Wong. Kezia was also, in some real way, thinking about the letter — which had, by May, sat on the kitchen counter for six months without Kezia reading it. The letter would, eventually, get read. Just not yet. The November sentence had been about asking for help. The sentence had come true. The next sentence — for sophomore year — would be its own thing.

Sofia took all of this in. From her seat in the U. Across nine months of being the call-Sofia kid for everybody in the room, plus learning to be the kid who asked.

She thought — *the cohort got their sentences right.*

She thought — *the cohort wrote, in August, what they needed to write. The cohort lived, across nine months, the work the sentences described. The cohort is, in May, holding the small private evidence that the work worked.*

She thought — *Ms. Calloway knew. Ms. Calloway knew, in August, that this would happen. Ms. Calloway has been doing this for thirty years.*

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the room, was watching the kids read. Ms. Calloway was not, herself, reading anything. Ms. Calloway was just watching.

Ms. Calloway was wearing the navy cardigan. The navy cardigan had been on her since October. The green welcome cardigan had been put away. The navy was the *we know each other now* cardigan.

Sofia caught Ms. Calloway's eye across the room.

Sofia gave her the small *thank you* nod.

Ms. Calloway returned it.

The bell rang.

The cohort walked out of Room 104.

Eight of them, plus the rest of the section. The Mistake Wall in the hallway, by May, had close to two hundred cards.

Sofia walked, with the paper in her notebook, to fifth period. She thought, on the walk — *the year has been good. The year has been hard. The year has built something.*

The year has built something.

Part Four has two chapters left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Last Day

The last day of freshman year was a Wednesday in the second week of June.

It was a half day. Final exams had ended on Monday. Tuesday had been the school's awards assembly, which the cohort had attended without expecting anything in particular but which had included — to the cohort's general astonishment — Amara getting an award for Outstanding Freshman in Civic Engagement, an award the school had apparently invented somewhere along the line for the freshman who most contributed to the social fabric of the school community. Amara had been, on the small stage, surprised and gracious. The cohort, in the audience, had cheered. Olivia, in the audience with the cohort, had cried.

Olivia had said, at lunch the next day, *Amara. You got that because of the locker. You got it because of all the lockers — me at the start of the year, others through the year. The school noticed. You did the work.*

Amara had said, *Olivia. The award is for the work I did because I was the kid who knew how to do it. The cohort is the reason I knew how. The award is, in some real way, the cohort's award. I am holding it for us.*

The cohort had — collectively — agreed that the award was theirs. Amara had put it, the next day, in her locker. Amara had

said, it stays here. Anybody can come look at it. It is the cohort's, in the cohort's locker, for the rest of high school.

That had been Tuesday.

Wednesday was the last day.

The morning was — by every measure — a strange kind of low-key party.

The teachers had given up trying to teach. The classes were short. Most teachers had brought snacks. Some had shown movies. Some had played games. Mr. Owens, in Algebra I, had let the kids draw on the whiteboards for the whole period. Marcus had drawn — Sofia saw later — a small comic with all twenty-six of the Algebra I students in it, each labeled with what they had said on the first day of school when Mr. Owens had asked their interest. Lacey-the-horseback-rider was in it. Aaron-the-video-gamer was in it. Mary-the-marine-biologist was in it. Marcus had remembered every name. Mr. Owens had taken a picture of the whiteboard before erasing it. The picture would, Mr. Owens told Marcus, go on his teacher's bulletin board next year as *the comic the Algebra I kid drew on the last day*.

In Room 104, Ms. Calloway had not, exactly, given up trying to teach. Ms. Calloway had used the period to do a final thing.

She had said, at the start of class:

Friends. The last day. I want us to do one small last thing. I want each of you, on a piece of paper, to write me a sentence. Just one. The sentence is for me. The sentence is: the thing I want Ms. Calloway to know, as we end this year together.

She paused.

The sentence can be anything. It can be a thank-you. It can be a critique. It can be a small thing I should know about you. It can be a thing about the class. It can be — and you have permission to do this — it can be just a sentence. I learned this year that I

am brave. I learned this year that the cohort is real. I learned this year that I hate algebra. Anything. One sentence.

You will put the paper in the basket. You will leave the classroom. I will read them tonight. I will not respond – there is no time for that – but I will hold each sentence as the small final thing you wanted me to know.

She handed out paper.

Sofia, at her desk, thought for a minute.

She wrote:

Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I asked Amara for help in December because of the work you have done with me since I was six. I would not have known how to ask without you. Thank you. – Sofia

She folded it.

She put it in the basket.

She read, over the course of the year, what other cohort kids had written. They were short. They were specific. They were the kind of sentences kids write when they have spent nine years with a teacher who knew them and who they were trying, in one sentence, to thank.

Marcus wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I am, finally, the version of me I want to be – and your room is, in some real way, where I learned what that version was. – Marcus.

Theo wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that the notice-route-put down framework has saved me. I am not, in May, as tired as I was in October. The work works. Thank you. – Theo.

Priya wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I revoked the Critic's contract because of you. Five years of practice with you made the revoking possible. The Critic is – in May – quieter than she has been since I was nine. – Priya.

Amara wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I forgave eight-year-old me in March. I had been carrying it for seven years. You gave me the room to put it down. Thank you. — Amara.

Maya — Maya did not write. Maya drew. Maya drew a small picture of a paintbrush, with the words *Grandfather's brush*, May 2026 underneath. Maya put it in the basket.

Jordan wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I sent a letter to Ben because of the forgiveness paper. Ben wrote back. The closure was real. The funny mask is, in May, lighter than it has been in years. The work is paying off. — Jordan.

Kezia wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I have not, yet, read the letter on the kitchen counter. I have been thinking. I am okay. I will read it when I am ready. I want you to know I have been sleeping for six months. — Kezia.

Darius wrote: Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that Coach Henley reminded me of you. I did not, until I told the cohort about him, realize how much my coaches and teachers and adults around me have, all together, been the same kind of grown-up. You are, I think, the original. The rest of them are the also like Ms. Calloway version. Thank you for being the original. — Darius.

The kids who were not in the cohort wrote their own sentences. Some were funny. Some were earnest.

Hannah wrote, Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that I have been part of the cohort by accident since I was eight, and your room this year was the first time I felt, in some real way, officially part of it. Thank you. — Hannah.

Olivia wrote, Ms. Calloway. The thing I want you to know is that the locker that broke me on the second week of school was the best thing that happened to me this year. Amara stopped.

The cohort table opened up. I am at the table. Thank you. – Olivia.

Ms. Calloway, when she read all of these that night at her kitchen table at home, would cry. Not loudly. The way Ms. Calloway cries – small, controlled, with a tissue and a small sigh. She would, when she was done, put the basket on the small wooden shelf in her bedroom where she kept the most important paper from her career. The basket would, by the end of her career, contain hundreds of similar sentences from hundreds of similar last days.

But this is Wednesday afternoon, the last day of freshman year, and the kids do not yet know what Ms. Calloway will do with the basket. The kids just put their papers in and walked out.

The bell rang at 11:30.

The cohort gathered in the freshman hallway.

The Mistake Wall, by the end of freshman year, had two hundred and seventeen cards.

Theo took a photograph of it.

The cohort walked out of the school together.

They had no plans for the afternoon. They had not agreed on what to do. They had just, by some unspoken cohort gravity, ended up walking out together. Eight of them. Plus Hannah. Plus Olivia. Ten total. (Mia, in Pittsburgh, was on her own last day of school in her own city – Mia would, by Sunday call that weekend, hear about the day.)

They stood on the front lawn of the high school.

Marcus said, *guys. Now what.*

Sofia said, *I do not know. We did not – we did not plan.*

Amara said, *Sofia. Are you suggesting we planned for an end-of-year cohort gathering. Are you the planner. You are the planner.*

Sofia said, *I was supposed to be. I forgot. The year was a lot.*

Jordan said, *guys. We could go to Mason's. Ice cream. It is summer.*

Marcus said, *yes.*

They walked to Mason's. It was about a mile away. They walked. They talked. They were — and Sofia thought about this on the walk — they were not, exactly, celebrating. They were not, exactly, processing. They were just being. Ten kids walking to an ice cream place at noon on a Wednesday in June after the last day of freshman year.

Mr. Mason — the same Mr. Mason who had been serving Marcus ice cream on August 14 every year since Marcus was seven — was at the counter.

Mr. Mason saw the ten of them come in.

Mr. Mason said, *the cohort.*

Marcus said, *Mr. Mason. The cohort plus two. Hannah. Olivia. They are with us.*

Mr. Mason said, *welcome.*

The cohort ordered. Mr. Mason — Sofia realized later — Mr. Mason gave them a small discount. Mr. Mason did not announce the discount. Mr. Mason just charged them a few dollars less than the total. Mr. Mason had — Sofia thought — been watching Marcus and the cohort for years. Mr. Mason was, in his own quiet way, the cohort's neighborhood ally.

They sat at the big table near the window.

They ate.

They talked about summer plans.

Marcus was working at the basketball league for younger kids — he had taken a job coaching the third and fourth grade group. Darius was doing the same league, the seven-and-eight-year-olds. Sofia was working at her mom's clinic doing front-desk work — her mother had gotten her the job because

she had thought it would be good for Sofia to see a workplace. Amara was going to spend most of the summer with her grandmother — they had agreed, in March, that Amara would come over on Wednesdays and Sundays for the whole summer. Priya was working at the library shelving books, plus doing the SAT prep that nobody else in the cohort was doing yet because Priya was Priya and was already thinking about junior year. Maya was going to be at the high school art studio every day — Mr. Ortiz had cleared it with the principal — preparing the September show of her grandfather's paintings. Jordan was working at the bookstore down the street. Theo was going to be the assistant photographer for the school yearbook, which was a paid summer position the school had just created. Kezia was going to be working at a small medical office near her grandmother's house, also her grandmother's idea, also part of Kezia's slow path toward eventually being a nurse.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, was working at a coffee shop.

The cohort was, in some real way, spread across the city.

The cohort was also — and this was the thing they would discover over the summer — going to be in constant contact. The group chat would be active every day. Marcus and Darius would, twice a week, see each other at the basketball league. Sofia and Amara would, three times a week, meet for dinner. Priya and Maya would, on Wednesday evenings, work on Priya's college essay drafts (yes, Priya was, in freshman summer, already starting on college essays — Priya was Priya). Theo and Kezia would, on Sunday afternoons, take walks together — they had, over the spring, become a kind of quiet pair, the two cohort kids who did not need to say much when they were together.

The cohort was going to be — across the summer — the cohort. Then, in August, they would all go to sophomore year.

Sophomore year would be a different book — except it is not a different book. Sophomore year would not have a book of its own. The next book, Book Five, jumps to senior year. The sophomore and junior years of the cohort happen, in some real way, in the gap between Book Four and Book Five. The cohort does the work, year by year, that the freshman year set up. The cohort grows. The cohort, in pieces, becomes the seniors of Book Five.

But on this Wednesday afternoon at Mason's, at the end of freshman year, the cohort did not know about any of this. The cohort just ate ice cream. The cohort laughed. Olivia ate too. Hannah ate too. Ten kids at a table.

Outside Mason's, in the parking lot, when they were leaving, Marcus said, *guys. Hold on. Group picture.*

They lined up against Mr. Mason's wall.

Theo took the picture with his phone.

The picture had, in it: Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Kezia, Hannah, Olivia.

Eleven kids.

Theo sent the picture, in the group chat, with the caption *cohort plus two, last day of freshman year, June.*

Mia, in Pittsburgh, immediately responded with three heart emojis and *I love you guys. Save the seat at Mason's for me on the summer visit.*

The cohort would, on the August visit, take Mia to Mason's. The August visit was already planned. Mia was coming for ten days. Mr. and Mrs. Mason — Sofia would tell them in advance — would, on the day of the visit, give the whole cohort plus Mia free ice cream. The day would become — Sofia would not know this until later — would become an annual tradition. The

cohort, in some real way, by the end of freshman year, was already beginning to invent the annual traditions that would, in senior year, culminate in Sofia picking August 14th as the return date for adulthood.

But the senior year picking-of-August-14th was three years away. The annual Mason's-summer-visit was not yet a tradition, just a coming-into-being.

For now — at noon on a Wednesday in June, on the parking lot of Mason's — the eleven kids stood in front of Theo's phone camera and smiled.

The picture was — and Sofia would keep this picture on her phone for the rest of her life — the picture was the snapshot of who the cohort was at the end of freshman year. A snapshot of the eleven of them. A snapshot of what the cohort would have, by senior year, become.

Marcus, in the picture, has his arm around Aaliyah — Aaliyah is not in the picture, Aaliyah is at home, but the cohort, looking at the picture later, will all say that the position of Marcus's arm is the Aaliyah position. He is holding her in the picture even though she is not there.

Sofia, in the picture, is in the middle. Sofia is, even in this picture, doing what she has always done — being the steady center. Sofia is, in May, the kid who has learned to ask for help, but Sofia is also, in May, still Sofia. The steady is still the steady.

Amara is to Sofia's right. Amara is wearing yellow. Amara, in pictures, will be wearing yellow for the rest of her life.

Maya is on the end. Maya is, in the picture, holding her sketchbook — she had brought it with her, the way Maya brings her sketchbook everywhere. The sketchbook will, by senior year, have become an archive in its own right.

Theo took the picture so Theo is not in the picture. But Theo's eye is, in some way, in the picture. The picture is composed the way Theo composes things. Each kid is visible. Each kid is in light. Nobody is in shadow. Theo, in pictures, never lets anyone be in shadow.

Mia is not in the picture. Mia is in Pittsburgh. But the picture has — in some real way — a space for Mia. The eleven kids are arranged with a small gap between Sofia and Marcus, where, if Mia were there, Mia would stand. The space is for her.

The picture is the cohort, in its eleven-with-an-implicit-twelfth shape, at the end of freshman year.

The picture is going to follow them.

Some of them — when they go to college, when they go to grad school, when they move to other cities, when they have first jobs, when they have apartments of their own — will print this picture and put it on their walls. Maya will paint a small version of it that hangs in her studio. Sofia will keep it on her phone as a wallpaper for several stretches across the next decade. Marcus will, in his senior-year graduation-speech preparation, look at this picture many times to remind himself who he was writing the speech for.

But that is in the future.

For now, the picture is just — the picture. Eleven kids, in a parking lot, at the end of freshman year, smiling at a phone.

They walked home.

The cohort scattered, that afternoon, into the summer.

The summer happened.

Sophomore year happened.

Junior year happened.

Senior year happened.

The cohort kept being the cohort.

The Mistake Wall, in October of senior year, moved up to Room 207 with Ms. Calloway. By then, the Wall had over a thousand cards in it. By then, the cohort had been working with the Wall for thirteen years.

Mia came to graduation week.

The cohort walked across the stage in June of senior year.

Marcus gave the speech.

The cohort dinner happened.

The kids went off to college.

The August 14th tradition began.

But all of this is Book Five.

In Book Four, we end here.

The cohort, on a Wednesday in June, walked away from Mason's into the summer of freshman year.

The work was — and remains — the work.

The architecture is — and remains — the architecture.

The cohort is — and remains — the cohort.

The book has one chapter left.

Closing Words

— J.A.R. —

Hello.

I am back.

I have been almost entirely quiet for this book, the way I told you in the opening I would be. The kids have been talking. I have been listening. You have been reading. I hope you have liked them.

I want to say a few things before you close the book.

The first thing is — they are fourteen.

The cohort, at the end of this book, is fourteen and fifteen. Most of them have just finished freshman year. The voices you have been reading are fourteen-year-old voices. The voices know more than fourteen-year-olds usually get credit for knowing. The voices also know less than they will, by senior year, know. The voices are exactly the voices of fourteen-year-olds who have had — and you have walked through three books with them already, if you have read the earlier ones — fourteen-year-olds who have had a particular kind of support across their entire schooling.

Most fourteen-year-olds in this country are not like this cohort. I want to be plain about that. Most fourteen-year-olds have not had a Ms. Calloway since first grade. Most fourteen-year-olds do not have nine other kids who have been in their lives that long. Most fourteen-year-olds, walking into a new high school, are walking in alone. They do not have a built-in cohort. They do not have a Mistake Wall already moved into the hallway by friendly hands.

The cohort in this book is the idealized version of what fourteen looks like when the prior years have gone right. This is not most kids' fourteen. I want to be honest about that because — if you are a kid reading this book, and you are fourteen, and your fourteen looks very different — I do not want you to think you have failed at fourteen. You have not. You have had what you had. You are doing the work you can do with what you have. The cohort version is one possible version. It is not *the* version. It is a version that comes from a particular set of conditions that not every kid gets.

If you are a parent reading this book — please remember that the cohort in this book is, in some real way, the outcome of a community. Schools. Teachers. Other parents. The cohort was not built by any one adult. The cohort was built by many adults across many years. If you want your kid to have something like this — and many of you reading this do — the way to make it happen is to invest in the community around the kid. The school. The teachers. The other parents in the neighborhood. The therapist, if there is one. The coach. The librarian. The kind grown-ups in the third spaces of your kid's life. The cohort comes out of many small adult investments. It does not come from one heroic parent. It comes from a network. Build the network.

If you are a teacher reading this book — Ms. Calloway is, by Book Four, a kind of mythical figure. I want to be honest about that too. A real Ms. Calloway is a person, not a myth. She has bad days. She gets tired. She does not always know what to do. She, like every real teacher, makes mistakes. The Ms. Calloway in this book is the composite of the best teachers in their best moments. No real teacher is Ms. Calloway every day. No real teacher should feel they have failed for not being her every day.

But the moves Ms. Calloway makes — the noticing, the routing, the asking *what is going on*, the *what do you want to be true of you by the end of the year*, the small private nods to particular kids, the giving-back of papers in May — those moves are real moves. Real teachers do them. You — if you are a teacher — probably do many of them already, without naming them this way. The naming is what this book is offering. Naming moves you already do. So that you can do them on purpose. So that you can do them more often. So that you can teach younger teachers to do them.

The book is, in some real way, a teaching manual disguised as a novel. I have not, in three previous books, named it that way. I will name it that way now, because we are nearing the end. The series has been, all along, an attempt to put — into narrative form — the moves that good adults make for kids. The moves are recoverable. The moves can be done. The moves do not require special talent. The moves require attention and intention and a community of people who agree that this is the work. You can be that community.

You can be that kind of adult.

You can — even if you did not have a Ms. Calloway when you were a kid yourself — you can be a Ms. Calloway for the kids in front of you now. The cohort in this book is what happens when many adults do this work for many years.

There is, by the way, no shortcut. The cohort is twelve years of work. The freshman year of this book is the ninth year of the cohort's work together. If you started a cohort like this with a class of first-graders today, the result would arrive in your hands nine years from now. Most of you reading this will not see the full arc with any given class. But the moves you make this year are part of somebody's nine-year arc. The kid you are kind to in September of this year may be a senior in a

different building in May of nine years from now, doing something that traces — partly — back to you.

The cohort in this book is — in some real way — the testimony of nine years of small adult attention.



I want to say something about Book Five.

You may have read it. If you have, the small references in Book Four — the August 14th tradition, the Room 207, the senior year that is coming — will have read for you as the foreshadowing of a book you have already finished. The series, in some real way, is meant to be read in any order. Each book stands alone. The cohort in any of the books is recognizable, the same kids, doing different work at different ages.

If you have not read Book Five — it is waiting for you. You will meet these kids again at eighteen. You will meet them at the end of their schooling. You will see what the freshman-year work added up to by senior year. The cohort in Book Five is the cohort in this book, four years later. The work continues. The work pays off. The work, at eighteen, is in some real way more visible than it is at fourteen. The fourteen-year-olds have not yet had to leave each other. The eighteen-year-olds are about to. Book Five is the book about leaving each other.

This book is the book about walking together into the bigger building.

The two are companion pieces.



I want to say something about what is not in this book.

This book is freshman year. This book is one year, eight months long, fall through spring. This book is the first year of

high school. What is not in this book is — sophomore and junior year. The two middle years of the cohort's high school. The cohort lives those years. The cohort grows in those years. The cohort, in those years, does many things this book does not cover. Marcus joins the school newspaper. Amara starts a small extracurricular about civic engagement. Sofia gets her driver's license. Priya gets a national award for a piece of writing. Maya has her grandfather's show in September of sophomore year — and a second show, of her own work, in junior year. Theo becomes the school yearbook's lead photographer. Jordan starts taking creative writing classes. Darius makes JV basketball as a sophomore, and varsity as a junior. Kezia, in sophomore year, reads the letter on the kitchen counter. Mia, in Pittsburgh, has her own sophomore and junior year, with her own milestones, which the cohort hears about in real-time texts and Sunday calls. Olivia and Hannah are at the table the whole time.

The cohort, in those middle years, does the work freshman year set up.

I have not, in this series, written those two middle years. I have not written them on purpose. The series, I decided early on, would cover the bookend years of each phase. The bookend years are the years when the transitions happen. The middle years are when the work happens steadily, but the work is hard to make into a book. The work in middle years looks like — kids growing up. Kids doing their classes. Kids hanging out. Kids becoming more themselves. There are no big events. There are no major transitions. The work is, in some real way, invisible. The invisible years are real. The invisible years are where most of life happens. The invisible years are when the work between the books actually compounds.

But I am not writing them in this series. I am writing the visible years. First grade. Third grade. Eighth grade. Ninth grade. Twelfth grade. The bookend years.

You — reader — can imagine the middle years. The cohort has not been hidden from you in the gaps. The cohort has been living. The cohort has been growing.

Trust the gaps.

The gaps are full.



I want to thank you, briefly, for reading.

I am — as I have said in the other books — I am writing this series because I have been working with kids for thirty years, and I have wanted, for the last ten of those years, to put what I have learned into a form that would travel further than my classroom and my workshops and my speaking engagements can travel. A book travels. A book gets into bedrooms and cars and kitchens and waiting rooms. A book is read by people I will never meet.

You are one of those people.

I am — and I want to say this — I am very glad you read it.

The kids in the book are fictional. The kids who built the book — the real kids whose lives I have watched and learned from, in pieces, for thirty years — are real. The book is, in some real way, my way of thanking those real kids.

If you are one of those kids — and some of you, who know me, are — please know that the book is for you. The composites are not exactly any of you. The composites are all of you. The cohort in the book is what happened, in pieces, in many cohorts, across many years.

You are in the book.



I want to say one last thing.

The cohort, in this book, walks out of Mason's into the summer of freshman year. The picture is taken. The cohort scatters.

The cohort will, by my account, come back together many times over the next four years. The August summer visit with Mia will happen. The sophomore year will start. The work will continue.

In the meantime — for you, the reader — you have just spent some hours with these kids. You have heard Marcus's voice, and Sofia's, and Priya's, and Amara's, and Darius's, and Jordan's, and Maya's, and Theo's, and Kezia's, and Mia's. The voices are now in your head.

The voices are not, in fact, just the voices of fictional kids. The voices are — in some real way — the voices of the kind of kid you can help build.

If you are a parent, a teacher, an aunt, an uncle, a grandparent, a coach, a librarian, a Sunday school teacher, a soccer ref, a school bus driver, a neighbor, a coworker who watches a friend's kid sometimes, an older sibling, a babysitter, a youth pastor, a kid you live near — any of these. If you are any of these. You are, in some real way, a person who can help build the voice in a kid who is, right now, much younger than the kids in this book.

You can be the noticing adult.

You can be the *what is going on* adult.

You can be the *what do you want to be true of you* adult.

You can be the adult who lets a kid put down a weight.

You can be the adult who asks, instead of telling.

You can be the adult who knows that the cohort is a thing that gets built by small consistent kindness over many years.

You can build the cohort.

I do not mean *the* cohort — Marcus and Amara and Sofia and the rest. They are fictional. They do not need you to build them. They have been built.

I mean *a* cohort. Maybe several. Maybe one a year, in your work or your community or your home.

You can build small versions of this for the kids in front of you. You probably already are.

You probably do not call it *building a cohort*. You call it *being a good neighbor*. Or *being a good teacher*. Or *being a good aunt*. Or *being a good parent*.

The naming I am offering is — *that is cohort-building*.

The naming may help you do it more on purpose. May help you do it for more kids. May help you teach others to do it.

The cohort in the book is — in some real way — the aspirational model. It is what can happen.

Your real-world version of it is the version that does happen. The version that is, in fact, happening right now in your community, in small ways you have not yet noticed.

I want you to notice.

I want you to notice and to keep doing it.

I want you to be the kind of adult that, in twenty years, some kid you will not remember will write about in their own journal as *the grown-up who noticed me*.

That is the work.

That is the only work.

That is, in some real way, the whole work of being a grown-up in a child's life.



I will see you in Book Five — if you are going there next — or in the other books, if you are reading them out of order, or in the curriculum guide that exists separately from these novels, if you are a teacher who wants to bring this work into your classroom.

If you are not going anywhere next — if this is the last of the five for you, for now — that is also fine. Close the book. Go find a kid. Notice something about them. Tell them you noticed.

That is the homework.

That is the only homework.

The cohort, in their parking lot in June, are already doing it. You can do it too.

I am — as always — proud of you.

With all the grace I have to give —
— J.A.R.



Room 104: *The Year We Looked Up* is Book Four of *The Architecture of Grace*. The cohort walks into the summer of freshman year. The work continues. The kids will be back, four years later, at eighteen, in Book Five.

Walk with them. Look up. Notice.
— J.A.R.



END OF BOOK FOUR



the architecture holds

A high-school book about what eight years of careful work looks like when the world finally starts asking the question it was always going to ask.

The kids are fourteen.

Freshman year of high school. A bigger building. Twelve hundred kids instead of three hundred. Older students who tower in the hallways. The cohort has spent eight years building tools. They have been taught how to catch the Inner Critic, how to do a real apology, how to forgive, how to tell the truth about themselves. They have a Mistake Wall, which moved with them over the summer and now lives in the freshman hallway near Room 104.

What they did not have, before this year: twelve-hour days, classes with kids they didn't know, the SAT, the college conversation, social media in its high-school form, parties they were not invited to but knew about, kids getting cars, kids getting reputations. The toolkit is being tested.

The narrator steps back in this volume. The kids carry it. Most chapters are theirs — in their voices, in their heads, in the small private rooms they have built inside themselves over nearly a decade.

The architecture holds. That is told to you up front, because this is not a thriller. It is a quiet, durable book about becoming who you already are.



BOOK FOUR OF FIVE