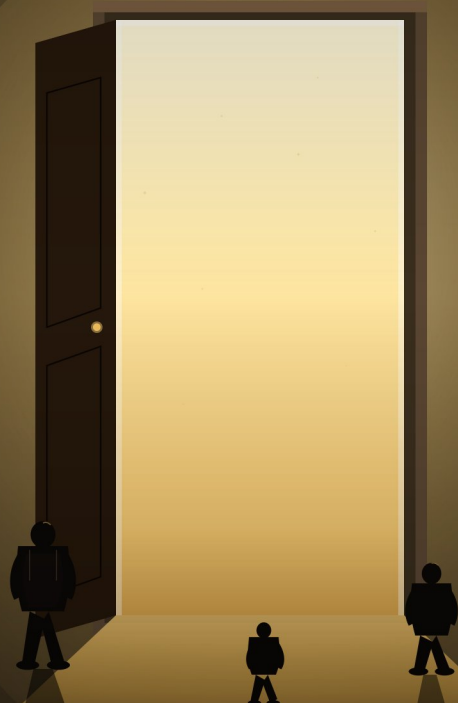


THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— *Book Five* —



ROOM 207

*The Year We
Walked Out*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

ROOM 207

The Year We Walked Out

BOOK FIVE OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

Architecture of Grace, LLC

Room 207 · The Year We Walked Out

Book Five of The Architecture of Grace

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A Note Before You Begin

This is the last book.

If you have been with these kids since they were in first grade, you know them now better than some of their actual relatives do. You have watched Marcus learn how to do a real sorry, and Amara say her own name with the soft a at the end, and Sofia build a toolkit she did not know she was building, and Priya cry in a bathroom and come out with three sentences in her pocket. You have watched Maya look up. You have watched Mia move to Pittsburgh. You have watched Jordan take off the funny mask, and Darius lose a dog and gain a different one, and Theo learn that watching is good but saying things is also good, and Kezia hold a line that an adult could not have held alone.

They are eighteen now. Most of them. Some of them are still seventeen. By June they will all be eighteen. By August they will be scattered.

This is the year they walk out.

I want to tell you a few things before the kids take over. Then I will go. I have been the narrator of these five books. My voice has gotten quieter with each one. In Book One I was a grandfather reading aloud. In Book Two I was a strand-essayist stepping in once a unit to talk to you straight. In Book Three I was a slightly distant philosophical voice noticing what the middle-school cohort was doing. In Book Four I was almost gone. In this book — I am here, on this page, and then I am gone until the last page. The book is the kids.

They will tell you, in their own voices, what they have learned. They will tell it to each other. They will tell it to you. Sometimes a chapter will be one of them speaking in first person — Marcus or Amara or Sofia or Priya or Darius or Jordan or Maya or Theo or Mia or Kezia, with the I that has been gathering inside them for twelve years. Sometimes a chapter will be the cohort moving through an ordinary day, and the camera will sit a little outside them, the way a documentary sits.

The architecture is still here. We are still building the room inside the reader. Foundation, walls, windows, roof. By the end of this book, that room is going to be finished. We will have built it together — me and the kids and you. We will hand it to you on the last page. You will take it with you.

A few small notes for readers coming in cold.

This book is in dialogue with Books One through Four. You do not need to have read them. The kids will catch you up on what matters. But if you have not read the first four — please know that everything these eighteen-year-olds say has been earned across twelve years. The sentences they say carelessly at lunch have, in many cases, been planted in a classroom in first grade or a counselor's office in third grade or a middle-school journal in eighth grade. The depth is real. They did the work.

The setting is one school year. Senior year. Same town, same school for most of them — Lincoln Park High, the high school that the kids of Room 12 and Room 18 fed into and that has been the cohort's container for the last four years. One school year, from August through June, with a coda in August. Ten kids. Twenty-eight chapters. Four parts mapping to the four lifelong questions:

Who am I, when I am eighteen and about to be on my own?

How do I be kind to myself in a year when everything is changing? How do I forgive — and not forgive — the people who shaped me, before I leave?

What kind of grace am I taking out into the world?

There is one room they keep coming back to. Room 207. The senior English classroom on the second floor of the east wing. It has tall windows and a long table the seniors sit around instead of desks. Ms. Calloway is in there once a week for what the school still calls Capstone — the senior-year SEL block that has been embedded inside English class for as long as anyone can remember. The kids of Room 18 are the kids of Room 207 now. The Mistake Wall, which has been moved three times since first grade, is now permanently mounted in the hallway outside Room 207, where every senior in the school walks past it every day. There is a graduation at the end. Of course there is.

I am going to leave you to it.

When you reach the last page, I will be there. I will say goodbye properly. For now —

— J.A.R.

PART ONE



Knowing & Accepting Yourself

*Who am I, when I am eighteen and about to
be on my own?*

August through October. Senior year begins.

CHAPTER ONE

The First Day of the Last Year

— Marcus —

The first thing I notice on the first day of senior year is that the Mistake Wall is bigger than I remembered.

I have walked past it every day for eight years. I do not notice it most days. It is just a thing on the wall. Yellow Post-its and index cards and a few full sheets of paper, taped up in a long rectangle outside Room 207. Some of the cards are new. Most of them are old. There is one near the bottom that I am pretty sure has been there since I was in third grade — small careful handwriting that says I told the lunch lady the wrong drink and now I have apple juice I do not like. Whoever wrote it would be in college now. The card is still up.

I stop. I stand in front of it for maybe twenty seconds. The other seniors flow around me toward the front of the room.

I think — the first card I ever put on this wall, when it was in Room 12, was about Aaliyah. I do not remember what it said exactly. I was seven. Something about a sister and a hot wheel and a small theft, probably. The card from first grade is not on this wall. The wall got moved here in middle school. The original first-grade cards are in a binder somewhere in Ms. Calloway's office. She told me once. I am thinking about that binder when Theo bumps me in the shoulder. "Marcus. Move. You're blocking traffic."

"Sorry. Sorry."

He's already walking. I follow him in.

Room 207 has tall windows. There is one long table the seniors sit around — it seats twelve, which is six on each side, which means our cohort of ten plus two for whoever transferred in for senior year. The table is real wood. Old. Scratched. The scratches are good scratches — generations of seniors have sat here. I cannot tell which scratches are from my brother's class and which are from the kids who came through here ten years ago.

I sit on the window side. I sit because I want to see who else comes in.

Amara comes in first. She is wearing a yellow blazer over a white t-shirt. Yellow has been Amara's color since maybe ninth grade. I do not remember when it started. She is carrying a thin folder, which is a new Amara thing — last year she carried three binders. She has simplified. She nods at me, finds her seat across the table, and sits down. Priya is next, with Hannah. Hannah has been Priya's best friend since third grade and they have been inseparable since freshman year, which means they enter every room together, every time, like they have agreed about it. Priya is shorter than Hannah by about three inches and has not grown since tenth grade. She is wearing glasses. The glasses have been the same shape for two years. Hannah waves at me. Priya gives me a small nod. They sit on the same side, two seats apart so they can talk to other people too.

Darius comes in with a coffee. Darius started drinking coffee in junior year. Cleo — wait, I am thinking of my dog. Pepper is Darius's dog. Pepper is eight now. I asked about her this morning at the bus stop and Darius said she's slowing down a little, man. She's good. She's just slowing down. He sits

next to me. He smells like coffee. He always smells like coffee now.

Sofia comes in with her hair in a different braid than I have ever seen her wear. Sofia has been doing complicated braids since first grade and I have learned, over twelve years, that the braid means something — it is a barometer. Today's braid is intricate. Today's braid is first day of senior year and I have feelings. She sees me looking. She smiles. She sits next to Amara.

Jordan comes in alone. Jordan has been coming into rooms alone since seventh grade. He used to come in with a joke. Now he comes in with a backpack and a face that is paying attention. He is wearing a flannel shirt over a white t-shirt and he looks, weirdly, like a graduate student. Like he aged five years over the summer. I have not seen him since June. He sits at the head of the table — the seat closest to the front of the room, which is the seat that traditionally goes to the kid the room knows is going to be a writer or a teacher or a leader. Jordan, at the head of the table, looks exactly right.

Maya comes in last. Or — Maya comes in second-to-last. Kezia is also still missing. Maya is wearing the same kind of soft gray sweater she has worn for years and she has her sketchbook in one hand. She does not look at anyone. She walks to the seat by the window, two down from me, and

sits and opens the sketchbook and starts drawing something. The drawing, I can see from where I am, is just a line. One line. She is making a single line on a blank page and somehow already it looks like the start of a portrait. Maya can do this. She has been able to do this since she was eight.

Kezia comes in at the last second, a little out of breath, in her green nursing-track sweatshirt. Kezia got into the nursing-pathway program at the community college that lets

her start credits in senior year and she has been wearing the sweatshirt since June. She slides into the last open seat — across from Maya, next to Jordan. She says hi everybody under her breath and pulls out a notebook.

That is nine of us.

The tenth is Mia. Mia is not in this room. Mia is in Pittsburgh. Mia has been in Pittsburgh for nine years.

I notice the tenth seat being empty. I notice it in the way you notice a tooth that just fell out. Not painful. Just — there used to be something here, and now there isn't, and the tongue keeps going back to check. Ms. Calloway walks in.

She is wearing a navy cardigan instead of the green one she used to wear. I noticed she switched to navy sometime around seventh grade. The green one is, I think, retired. The navy one is, I think, her senior-year cardigan. She has been wearing it for the senior class she has had every year since I got to high school.

"Hi, friends," she says.

The room makes the small noise it always makes when Ms. Calloway walks into a room. It is the noise of nine kids who have known this woman since first grade exhaling at the same time without realizing they are exhaling. I do not know that other classrooms make this noise. I think it is ours.

"Welcome to Room 207. Welcome to senior year. Welcome to the last September we are going to have together."

She lets that sit.

"I am not going to start with anything heavy today. We have nine months. We have time. Today I just want to ask one question." She picks up a marker. She walks to the whiteboard. She writes, in her familiar handwriting:

WHO ARE YOU, ON THE FIRST DAY OF YOUR LAST YEAR?

She turns around.

"Take a piece of paper. Write me one sentence. Just one. I am not going to read them out loud. I am going to read them at home, tonight, by myself. I am going to read each one of yours and I am going to remember everything I know about you, and I am going to think about your sentence, and I am going to write you one back, which I will give you tomorrow, individually, no big deal."

"Twelve years. One sentence today. That is what I am asking." She sits down at her desk.

The room is quiet.

I look at the paper.

Who are you, on the first day of your last year?

I think about it. I think about it for maybe three minutes. I write things in my head and erase them. I almost write I am Marcus Davenport, age seventeen, son of Reggie and Andrea, brother of Aaliyah, owner of a dog named Cleo, but that is information, not who I am. I almost write I am a kid who has been trying to tell the truth since I was eight, but that is true and it is also a costume, in a way — it is who I have been trying to be, not who I am.

What is who I am.

What is the am.

I think about it.

Across the table, Sofia is writing. She has written maybe two lines and now she has stopped and is just sitting. Amara has written nothing yet — she is still thinking, her pen above the paper. Jordan has written something and crossed it out and is writing again. Priya, Hannah — both writing, both fast. Darius is staring at his coffee. Maya is drawing in her sketchbook, which I think is her sentence. Theo is watching everybody, of course. Kezia, in her nursing sweatshirt, has written one line and is looking at it.

I look back at my own paper.

I write:

I am a kid who is learning, slowly, that the version of me my family knows is not the version of me my friends know is not the version of me I am alone — and that the work of being a person, for the rest of my life, is

going to be making those three closer to each other.

I read it.

I think — okay. That is honest. That is mine.

I fold the paper. I put my name on it.

I hand it to Ms. Calloway when she comes around with the small basket.

She does not read it. She does not look at it. She just takes the basket back to her desk and sets it down. The basket is full of nine folded papers now.

"Thank you, friends," she says.

She looks at us — at the table, at the nine of us, at the empty tenth seat that I am pretty sure she is also noticing.

"I have been with you for a long time," she says. "Some of you since you were six. Some of you since you were seven. All of you since you were children, and now you are not children anymore. I am, I want to say at the beginning of the year, very proud of you. I do not mean proud in the school-recognition way. I mean proud in the I-am-glad-I-have-known-you way. The room is full of people I am genuinely glad to know." She pauses.

"And I want to say one more thing today. We are going to spend this year working on what it means to walk out into your life. Each of you is going to walk out a slightly different door. Some of you are leaving for college. Some of you are staying. Some of you are taking a year. We are going to honor all of those doors. There is not one door that is the right one."

"This year, in this room, what we are going to do is — we are going to figure out, together, what each of you wants to take with you, regardless of which door you walk through. We are going to figure out what is portable. What you have built. What the architecture is, inside you, that goes with you wherever you go."

She smiles.

"Welcome to the year."

She nods at us, picks up her bag, and walks toward the door. She is teaching another class in fifteen minutes. The whole Capstone check-in is twenty-five minutes once a week. The rest of senior English is going to be Mr. Yates, who arrives in ten minutes with the syllabus and a stack of paperbacks.

But for the moment between Ms. Calloway leaving and Mr. Yates arriving, the cohort just sits at the table. Nobody pulls out a phone. Nobody starts a conversation. We just sit.

I look across the table at Amara. She is looking at me. Neither of us says anything. There is a small private thing in the air between us that I have known since first grade — I see what you see.

Sofia, next to Amara, breaks first.

"Guys. Mia is texting me. She wants to know how the first day went." Everybody looks up.

"Tell her — " says Darius.

"Tell her we are all here," says Priya.

"Tell her her seat is here," says Jordan.

Sofia is already typing.

The tenth seat is empty. But the cohort knows where Mia is. The cohort has known where Mia is for nine years. The pen pal best friendship has not broken. It has bent and stretched and lived. Sofia has the longest text thread on her phone with

anyone — it is with Mia, and it is years long, and it is the spine of one of the truest friendships any of us have.

Mr. Yates walks in.

Senior year is happening.

I am Marcus Davenport. I am seventeen. I have a dog named Cleo and a sister named Aaliyah who is fifteen and a sophomore at this school and who is going to walk past Room 207 in about ninety minutes when she changes classes. I have a comic I started drawing in fifth grade and have continued, off and on, for eight years. I have a journal I keep mostly faithfully. I have parents who are tired and good. I have nine other kids at this table that I have known since some of us could not yet write our own names.

This is the first day of the last year.

I am here.

CHAPTER TWO

The Five Questions

The second week of senior year, Ms. Calloway came in with five questions on a single sheet of paper.

She handed them out. She said this is not homework. This is a tool. Take it home. Live with it. Bring it back when you want to talk about any of it. Or do not bring it back.

The questions, in her familiar handwriting:

1. Who has shaped you the most? Name one person, and be specific about what they gave you.
2. What are you taking with you when you leave?
3. What are you leaving behind, on purpose?
4. What are you scared of?
5. Who do you want to be at thirty?

Amara read the questions on the bus home.

She had been working with versions of these questions her whole life, in different forms. But the fifth one — who do you want to be at thirty — was new. Or, it was new in a way that mattered. At thirty was a real number. Thirty was twelve years away. Twelve years was the same amount of time she had been doing SEL with Ms. Calloway. The thirty-year-old version of herself was as far in the future as Marcus and Aaliyah and the LEGO and the basket of stones were in the past. She got home. She took out her notebook — the leather one she had been writing in since junior year, the one she had filled most

of. She had maybe forty blank pages left in it. She had been trying to make it last to graduation.

She opened to a fresh page.

She did not start with question one. She skipped to question five. Who do you want to be at thirty.

She thought about it.

She had been called the kid who designed the bench sign for so long that, at seventeen, she had started to wonder if that was her whole identity or if it was just a story. The bench sign was in third grade. It was

nine years ago. The sign itself, the laminated one, had been replaced three times — the current version was written by a fourth-grader two years ago. Amara was, at this point, not really the kid who designed the bench sign. She was the kid who designed the bench sign originally, a long time ago, when she was a different person.

But the through-line was real. She had spent middle school organizing the lunch-table-inclusion campaign — convincing the cafeteria staff to put up signs designating open seats welcome, getting a small group of seventh-graders to actually sit at those tables. She had spent ninth grade as the freshman rep for the school's restorative justice club. Tenth grade running a tutoring program for sixth-graders who had been falling behind in math during COVID. Eleventh grade as the youngest member of the school district's student equity council.

She had been doing variations on Amara designs a sign that holds the door open her whole life. The forms had changed. The instinct had not. She wrote, at the top of the page:

Who do I want to be at thirty?

Then she wrote:

A person who has spent her twenties learning how to build things — not just signs and programs, but actual systems — that hold doors open for people who have been left on benches. Probably nonprofit work. Probably advocacy. Maybe public policy. Maybe urban planning. I do not know the exact job. I know the shape.

She read it.

It felt true.

She felt — this surprised her — relieved. She had been carrying, for maybe a year, a quiet anxiety that she was going to get to college and discover that she did not actually know what she wanted to do. The anxiety had been telling her you have been performing this identity since third grade. What if you do not actually believe in it. What if when you are alone in a dorm room you will discover that you have just been the bench-sign kid because that is what the cohort needed you to be. The anxiety was wrong.

The bench-sign kid was real. The bench-sign kid was her. The bench-sign kid was going to spend her twenties figuring out what bench-sign kids do as adults. The exact shape would emerge. The shape was already emerging. She was, for instance, applying to schools with

strong public-policy or urban-studies programs. She had been doing that since junior year without quite naming why. The why was on the page now.

She went back to question four.

What are you scared of.

She thought about this for a long time.

Then she wrote, in her smaller handwriting that she used for the things she was not sure she wanted anybody to read:

I am scared that the version of me that holds together at home — the version that organizes things, that gets things

done, that knows what she wants — is held together by the people around me knowing me. I am scared that when I go to college, where nobody has known me since I was six, I will fall apart. I will have to rebuild who I am from scratch. The bench-sign kid story will not be there to hand to people. I will have to be just — Amara — whatever that is.

She read it.

She underlined the last six words.

Just Amara, whatever that is.

She remembered, suddenly, the first day of seventh grade. She had been sitting in social studies. A boy whose name she did not remember had asked her how to pronounce her name. She had said amaaaara, two syllables, hard. He had nodded. He had moved on. She had spent that whole year, and most of eighth grade, being Amaara — a slightly flattened, slightly louder version of herself.

She had stopped doing it in ninth grade. She did not even remember the moment she had stopped. She had walked into freshman year and she had been Amara, three syllables, the soft a, the way her grandmother said it. She had not announced it. She had not made a thing of it. She had just gone back to herself.

That was the lesson. She had done it once already. Going back to herself was a thing she had proven she could do.

She wrote, underneath the underlined sentence:

But — I have done this before. I did it in ninth grade. I went back to my real name without anybody helping me. If I have to do it again in college, I can.

She breathed out.

She looked at the page.

Then she went to question one.

Who has shaped you the most.

This one was easy. She did not even have to think.

My grandmother. She has been the steady person in my life since I was three. She is the reason I know what it feels like to be loved without having to perform.

She thought about her grandmother. Her grandmother was seventy-six, lived four blocks away, and had Amara over for dinner every Sunday. Her grandmother had been at every school event since first grade. Her grandmother had been the one who, when Amara had been crying about Iris in second-to-third grade, had said baby, the silent kind of cruelty is the kind we have to grow out of. You are growing. She added, underneath:

Also Iris. Even though we have only been pen pals since third grade. We have written each other every single month for nine years. There are not many people in the world who have written me a letter every month for nine years. She is one of them. She has shaped what I think a friend is.

She went to question two.

What are you taking with you when you leave.

She wrote, quickly:

The cohort. I am taking the cohort with me — in my phone, in my memory, in the way I think about what people can be when they grow up together. I am taking Iris. I am taking my grandmother in my head, the way she sounds. I am taking the bench sign — not the physical sign, the idea of it. I am taking the toolkit Sofia taught me pieces of when I was nine. I am taking everything Ms. Calloway has said to me that I can remember. I am taking my own name, the real one. I am taking my journal. I am taking the small leather notebook. I am taking these five questions. I am taking the answers, in case I need to come back to them. She read it.

She liked it.

She went to question three.

What are you leaving behind, on purpose.

She paused.

This one was the harder one. Leaving behind on purpose was a different verb than leaving behind because I have to. On purpose meant: things she had been carrying that she had decided not to carry into her twenties.

She wrote, slowly:

The story that I am only worth something if I am useful. I am tired of that one. I have been carrying it since I was a kid. The bench-sign instinct is real — I love building things that help people. But the only worth something if useful is a different thing. It is the Inner Critic, dressed up as a value. I am leaving it behind.

She read it.

She wrote another:

The story that I owe the people who were mean to me in second grade something. I have been thinking about those girls — the ones who were mean to Iris — for ten years. I have replayed second grade in my head a thousand times. I have wished I had stood up. I did one thing well — I apologized to Iris when I was nine. The rest of it I have been carrying for no reason. The girls are not even in my life. They were in second grade. I am eighteen. I do not have to carry second grade with me anymore. I am leaving it behind.

She paused.

She added one more:

The need to perform a tidy version of myself for adults. I am tired of being The Good Kid. The Reliable One. The Organized One. The One Who Has It Together. I am going to leave most of that behind. I am going to be — when I get to college — a person who can be tired. A person who can be uncertain. A

person who can not know. A person who can ask for help. I have been Adultifying myself since I was eight. I am eighteen. I get to be eighteen now. I get to be confused. I am leaving the always together behind.

She read all three.

She wrote, at the bottom of the page:

Things to leave behind on purpose:

1. The story that I am only worth something if I am useful.
2. Second grade.
3. Always-together.

She drew a line under the list.

She closed the notebook.

She lay back on her bed.

She felt — and it took her a minute to name it — she felt clearer than she had felt in maybe a year.

She had been carrying who am I, really since the Mask-and-Mirror lesson in seventh grade. She had been carrying it specifically since junior year, when the college process had started, and every adult around her had been asking her some version of what do you want to do. She had had answers — bench-sign kid answers, the kind of answers that come out polished because you have given them many times — but she had not, fully, believed her own answers. She had been wondering if the answers were her or if they were the polished thing she handed adults so they would let her go.

Tonight — sitting with five questions Ms. Calloway had handed her on a single sheet of paper — she had figured out that the answers were both. The polished thing she handed adults was real. It was also a polished version. The real version, under it, was I love designing things that hold doors open. I do not know exactly what shape that will take. I am going to spend my twenties finding out.

She could hand that version to herself. She could not hand it to a college admissions person — they did not want it that messy. But for her own purposes, sitting on her bed at almost ten at night with her leather notebook closed beside her, the messy version was the true version. That was the lesson.

She was, on the first day of senior year and on the second week and on this Tuesday night in mid-September, going to be okay.

She turned off the light.

She slept.

In the morning, she would take the notebook to school. She would not show the page to Ms. Calloway. The page was hers. But she would carry, in her body, the I have done some real work on this feeling, and Ms. Calloway, who had been reading bodies in classrooms for thirty years, would see it.

Ms. Calloway, at the front of the room during Capstone block, would catch Amara's eye for exactly one second, the way she did, and give Amara the small private nod that meant I see you have been working.

Good. Keep going.

Amara would nod back.

The cohort would, in pieces and across many days, do their own versions of the five questions.

That is how this part of senior year is going to go.

CHAPTER THREE

The Toolkit at Seventeen

Sofia had been getting texts from her friends for years that said variations of the same thing.

Hey Sof. I am having a hard week. Can we talk.

Sofia I am freaking out about the SAT. Help.

Soff. Big fight with my mom. Need a brain.

Sof — my brother just got bad news. I don't know what to do. Can I call.

She had been the call-Sofia kid since at least seventh grade. Probably earlier. She had not noticed it was happening until somewhere around tenth grade, when she had counted, on one day, that she had had eight conversations with eight different people about something hard each of them was going through.

She had told her mom about this, that night, at dinner. Mom, I think I might be everybody's therapist. Her mom had laughed and then had stopped laughing and had said sweetheart, are you okay being everybody's therapist.

Sofia had thought about it.

I think so. I like it. But also — I am not sure I know where the line is. Between being a friend and being — something else. Like, am I supposed to be doing this. Am I qualified.

Her mom, who works as a respiratory therapist at the hospital and has been around real therapists and real doctors for years, had thought for a moment.

Sof. There is being-a-friend, which is what you are doing. And there is being-a-therapist, which is a job. The job has rules. The job has training. The job has limits. Being-a-friend has different rules. You are being a friend really well. The thing to watch out for is — when a friend's problem is too big for friendship, you tell them to also see somebody who has the training. That is the line. You can be a friend AND tell them to also call a real therapist. The two are not in competition.

That conversation had been in February of sophomore year. Sofia had been carrying it around since.

She had, in fact, told a friend to call a real therapist twice since then. The first time was a girl in the grade above her who had been telling Sofia, on a regular basis, that she had stopped eating much. Sofia had listened. She had also said, after the third conversation, I am going to keep being your friend through this. But this is bigger than me. You need to tell your mom or call your doctor. I will be in the room with you when you tell your mom if you want. But please tell somebody who is trained. The girl had cried for an hour and then had told her mom. The girl had been seeing a real therapist for a year and a half now. She was doing better. She still texted Sofia sometimes.

The second time was a boy in her grade who had been telling her, in pieces over a few weeks, about being scared he might hurt himself. Sofia had — Sofia, who had been building her toolkit since first grade — had known exactly what to do. She had said I am going to walk you to Ms. Calloway right now. We are going to do that together. Right now. And they had. Ms. Calloway had handled it. The boy had been seen by professionals within an hour. He was okay. He was in college now. He had texted Sofia in August: Sof. First week of college.

Doing fine. Thanks for the walk to Ms. Calloway's office that day. I think about it. — D. She had cried when she got the text.

She had not told anyone about that text. The text was hers.

Senior year was going to be different. She knew it would be. Half the cohort was leaving in August. The texts she was used to getting — the Soff, big fight, need a brain texts from kids who were now down the hall or at home — were going to start coming from kids who were on the other side of the country, six time zones away, in dorm rooms she had not seen.

She did not know yet how she felt about that.

She was, she had begun to realize, possibly going to be a therapist someday. Or a social worker. Or a school counselor like Ms. Calloway. The shape was there. She had been doing the work informally for a decade. She had been reading psychology books since seventh grade. She had taken the AP Psych class as a junior — the youngest student in the class — and had loved every day of it. She had been quietly looking at colleges with strong psychology programs. She had not, until junior year ended, said this out loud.

She had said it out loud first to Mia.

Mia had been the right person to say it to. Mia knew her. Mia had also known her for nine years from far away, which meant Mia could see her from a distance the cohort could not. Mia had said, on the phone, Sof. Yes. That is the most obvious career thing I have ever heard. You have been a therapist since you were seven. Go be a therapist. Get the degree. Sofia had laughed.

Then she had said, but Mi. What if I am bad at it. What if I have just been doing the friend version of this and the real version is harder than I think.

Mia had said, very calmly, Sof. Listen to me. The thing that makes a good therapist is not being smart, although you have

to be smart. The thing that makes a good therapist is being a person who has, in their own life, sat with their own hard feelings and learned not to run from them. You have been doing that since you were six. You are ahead. You are way ahead. You are going to be a really good therapist. Trust me. I know you better than almost anybody.

Sofia had cried, a little, on the phone.

Mia had said, I am going to be there for graduation. We are going to have the in-person version of this conversation.

Sofia had said, okay.

That had been in July.

It was September now. Mia was in Pittsburgh, finishing her own senior year at her own high school. They had been texting more than usual in the last month — both of them on the edge of going to college, both of them processing what the next year would be. The text thread, when Sofia scrolled up, was so long that the phone could not show all of it at once. There were photos from sixth grade — Mia had sent a photo of a Halloween costume from a year Sofia did not remember. Birthday voice memos from every birthday since Mia moved. A photo of Mia's high school senior portrait, which Mia had sent two weeks ago, in which Mia looked older and the same and older and the same all at once, the way people you have known a long time always look.

Sofia opened the thread now. She was sitting at her kitchen table. It was a Saturday morning. Her parents were out at the farmer's market. She typed:

Mi. Ms. Calloway gave us five questions this week. One of them is "what are you scared of." I have been thinking about it.

She waited.

Mia, on the other end, was apparently also at her kitchen table at the same time, because the response came back in

under a minute. Sof! Ohhh. Five questions. What are you scared of.

Sofia typed:

I am scared that I am going to leave for college and the kids I have been the call-Sofia kid for are going to text me from their dorms and I am not going to be able to do it from far away. I am scared that I have only been good at this because I have been physically near everybody. I am scared I am going to lose my whole identity if I cannot help in real time. Mia took longer to respond this time. Sofia watched the typing dots come and go and come again.

Finally:

Sof. I have been your friend from far away for nine years. You have been being there for me through the phone since I was nine. You are GOOD at it from far away. You do not have a real-time-only superpower. The superpower is YOU. The you travels.

Sofia sat with that.

She typed back:

That is exactly what I needed to hear.

Mia:

I know. That is why you texted me.

Sofia laughed, alone at her kitchen table.

She typed:

I love you, Mi.

Mia:

I love you, Sof.

Sofia put her phone down.

She thought about the question — what are you taking with you when you leave — and she realized, in this small moment at the kitchen table on a Saturday morning in September, that one of the things she was taking with her was the version of

friendship Mia and I built across nine years and two states. She was taking it as evidence. Evidence that distance did not break things. Evidence that a person who became a real friend at seven could still be a real friend at seventeen, even after one of

them moved away. Evidence that she could be the call-Sofia kid for people who were five hundred miles away.

She picked her phone back up.

She typed, one more time:

One more thing. The bench-sign thing.

Mia:

Yes.

Sofia:

I was thinking. The bench sign Amara made. It is still up. They have replaced the lamination three times. The current version is in a fourth-grader's handwriting. But the bench is still the bench and the sign is still the sign. Amara made one small thing nine years ago and it is still doing work without her.

Mia:

Yes. So?

Sofia:

So I think — I think when I am a therapist someday, the work I am going to do is going to be like that. Not the loud kind. The bench-sign kind. Small permanent things. Signs that hold doors open. People who become call-them kids for the next people.

Mia:

Sof. Yes. That. Exactly that.

Sofia smiled.

She typed:

Okay. I am going to go do laundry. I love you. Talk later.

Mia:

Love you. Go.

Sofia put the phone down.

She got up.

She went and did laundry.

The toolkit was real and it was hers and it was going with her. The kids who texted her from dorm rooms in eleven months were going to get the same Sofia who had been the call-Sofia kid since middle school — just on a slightly different timezone. The job, when she got the degree

someday, was going to be a more formal version of what she had been doing since she was seven. The architecture was there.

She had been building it for a long time.

She knew, now, that building it and being it were the same thing. This is what twelve years of practice gives a person.

This is what Sofia is.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Inner Critic at Seventeen

— Priya —

I am writing this in my journal because Ms. Calloway said one of the things we are going to do this year is say things straight to ourselves on paper, and I am not sure I have ever fully done that. Lists, yes. Lists I have done since I was seven. But lists are how I avoid saying things straight. The list is a thing I can hand to myself in pieces. A paragraph is a thing I have to commit to.

Okay. I am committing.

The Inner Critic is still here.

I have been doing the work since I was nine. I caught her, named her, called her loud-not-true, carried Ms. Calloway's index card around for three years. The card is in a drawer now. I have not had to look at it in maybe four years.

But she is still here.

She is quieter than she used to be. She does not run my mornings anymore. She does not run my homework. She does not run my conversations with Hannah. But she still shows up — usually when I am tired, usually in the half hour before I fall asleep, usually when something has gone wrong and I am trying to figure out who is at fault and have a habit, that I have not entirely broken, of assuming it is me. This week she has been showing up about college applications. Here is the thing about college applications, when you are the kid I have been.

You are supposed to write an essay that distills you down to about six hundred and fifty words. You are supposed to make those words feel both authentic and impressive. You are supposed to be specific but not weird. You are supposed to be vulnerable but not too vulnerable. You are supposed to be funny but not as funny as Jordan. You are supposed to be smart but not in a way that sounds smug. The list of contradictions goes on for paragraphs.

The Inner Critic has, all month, been telling me that whatever I write is wrong.

Draft one was — she said — too earnest. Draft two was — she said — too performative. Draft three was — she said — actually good, but only because I have copied the shape of an essay I read on a college's website, and the admissions officer would see through it immediately. Draft four was — she said — fine, but did I really want to write about that. Draft five — she said — was the wrong topic entirely. I should be writing about my Indian heritage. Or, she said, I should not be writing about my Indian heritage because that is the obvious thing and the obvious thing is the lazy thing.

I have been listening to her, against my better judgment, for three weeks.

This morning I told Hannah about it. We were walking from third period to fourth period. I said Hannah I have rewritten my Common App essay six times.

Hannah, who has known me since third grade and who is the most patient human being I have ever met, said Priya. Stop. Show me the drafts.

I sent her the drafts on Google Docs at lunch.

She read all six drafts in maybe forty minutes during fifth period, which is study hall for both of us. At the end of fifth period she found me in the hallway and said:

Priya. The third one is the best. Use the third one. Stop rewriting it. You are doing the thing.

I said what thing.

She said the thing where the Inner Critic is dressed up as your editor. I stopped walking.

Hannah does not, generally, name the Inner Critic out loud. She knows about it because we have been friends for ten years and she has heard me talk about it. She does not usually use the name herself. The fact that she used the name today — in the hallway, between fifth and sixth period — meant she was, in some small way, calling me out. Saying Priya, you are in a known pattern. I see it.

I started walking again.

I said you are right.

She said I know.

I said I am going to submit the third draft.

She said good.

We went to sixth period.

That was — and this is the part I want to write down — that was the fastest the Inner Critic has ever been interrupted by an outside person in my life. Usually I am the one who has to catch her. Usually I have to do the catching alone, in my head, with sentences I have been practicing since I was nine. Today Hannah caught her for me, in three sentences, in a hallway.

I think — and I want to say this carefully because it feels important — I think one of the gifts of having had a cohort like ours is that the catching the Inner Critic work has become distributed. It is not just my work anymore. It is the cohort's work. Hannah can catch mine. I can catch Hannah's. Sofia can catch almost anybody's. Marcus can catch Jordan's. Theo, who notices everything, can catch all of ours when we have not even noticed she is there yet.

I have been thinking of the Inner Coach as a voice inside me. What if the Inner Coach has, all along, also been the voices of other people who know me well enough to say Priya, that is the Critic. That is not you. Stop.

What if the Inner Coach is — partly, maybe — the cohort.

I am not saying this to be cute. I am saying it because I think it is real. I have spent eight years trying to make my Inner Coach louder than my Inner Critic. I have made her louder. But she is not as loud as the Critic in the moments when I am tired. The Critic is older. The Critic has more practice. The Critic was there first.

But Hannah's voice — and Sofia's voice, and Ms. Calloway's voice, and Marcus's voice when he tells me I am being too hard on myself, which he does about once a month — those voices, added together, are louder than the Critic. The cohort's collective voice, when it is around me, can shut the Critic up faster than my own coaching can.

This is going to be a problem when we leave.

Most of us are going to different schools. I am going to be in Boston, probably, if I get in to the school I am applying to. Hannah is going to be in California. Sofia might be in Chicago. Marcus is staying close, at the state university an hour away. Jordan is taking a year — staying home, working at the bookstore, writing. Amara is going east. Theo is going east. Maya is staying close, art school. Darius is staying close. Kezia is

staying close — community college nursing pathway, then transfer. We are scattering.

The cohort that catches my Critic in hallways is not going to be in my hallways anymore.

I have been thinking about this since August. I have not, until tonight, written it down. The Inner Critic, of course, used

my anxiety about leaving the cohort as another thing to attack me with — Priya, you cannot function without other people, you have been propped up by friends for ten years, when you are alone you will fall apart, you are weaker than you think.

That is, I now realize, also her dressed up as my editor.

The truth is: I have been practicing, with the cohort, for ten years. Practicing catching the Critic. Practicing not believing her. Practicing saying it out loud. The cohort is leaving but the practice is in me. I have been the one doing the practice. The cohort has been my training ground. When I am alone in a dorm in Boston next September, the Critic will show up. She will. I am not going to pretend she won't. She will show up at 11 p.m. on the Sunday before a paper is due and she will tell me I am not smart enough to be at the school I am at. She will tell me that the kids around me are real and I am performing. She will tell me that my Common App essay was a fraud and they let me in because they had to fill a quota.

She will try.

And I will — at eighteen, alone in a dorm room — do what I have been training for ten years to do. I will catch her. I will name her. I will say that is the Critic. That is not me. That is not true. That is just loud. I will write Hannah a text and Hannah will write back from California, in a different time zone, and Hannah will be a smaller-but-real version of the catching she did for me in the hallway today.

The cohort is not going to be in my hallway. But the cohort is going to be in my phone. And the practice is going to be in my body. And the Inner Coach is going to be — for the first time in my life — fully mine, because she has to be.

That is going to be okay.

I am eighteen — almost eighteen — and the Inner Critic is going to be with me for the rest of my life. We had a whole

lesson about this in third grade. Ms. Calloway told us, when we were nine, that the Critic does not

go away. She told us our job was not to get rid of her. Our job was to get faster at catching her.

I have gotten faster.

The first time I caught her, I needed a bathroom stall and twenty minutes and a meeting with Ms. Calloway. I was nine.

Today I needed a hallway and three sentences from Hannah. I am seventeen.

By the time I am thirty, I might catch her — most of the time — before she even finishes her first sentence. Maybe I will be too quick for her by then. Maybe she will give up showing up at all, except occasionally, on bad weeks.

That is the practice.

That is what I have been doing.

I am submitting the third draft of my essay tonight. Hannah is right. The third draft is good. The third draft is me.

I am Priya. I am tired. I am still smart. I am still the kid who notices. I am the kid who has been making lists for eleven years because lists are how my brain holds the world together, and that is fine, lists are a tool, and Ms. Calloway told me so in fourth grade.

I am going to Boston. Probably. If they take me.

If they do not take me, I will go somewhere else, and somewhere else will be fine.

The Critic, tonight, is whispering that they will not take me. The Critic, tonight, is loud, not true.

I am closing this journal.

I am submitting the essay.

I am going to sleep.

— Priya

CHAPTER FIVE

Pepper, in October

The vet called Darius's mom on a Monday morning in October.

Darius was at school. He was in third period, AP Government, when his phone buzzed in his pocket. He looked at it under the desk. It was a text from his mom: Honey can you come home after school? Vet called. Pepper update.

He texted back yes.

He put the phone away.

He did not, for the next four hours, hear anything that was said in any of his classes.

He had known this was coming. Pepper was nine. Pepper had been slowing down since June. Her hips. Her energy. The way she got up from her bed in the mornings — used to be one motion, was now three, was now four. She had stopped wanting to go on long walks. She did short ones. She mostly slept on the porch in the sun.

Pepper was, in some real way, the family member Darius had spent more concentrated time with than any other family member. She had come into the family in fourth grade, after Biscuit died. Darius had been the one who picked her out at the shelter — a brown-and-white mutt with a long tail, ears that did not match, a wide pink tongue, and a habit of leaning her entire body against the leg of whoever was standing closest. She had leaned against Darius the first time he met her. He had cried in the shelter, just a little. His mom had said

I think she picked us, buddy. They had taken her home that afternoon.

Pepper was the dog of Darius's whole adolescence. She had been there in fifth grade when he had been so mad about Biscuit that he had not, fully, let himself love her until December. She had been there through middle school. Through the first time he kissed a girl at the eighth-grade dance. Through ninth grade, when he had figured out he was decent at basketball but not great. Through tenth grade, when he had decided he was going to be a coach someday because his coach that year had been the best adult he had ever known. Through eleventh grade, when he had broken his arm and Pepper had slept on the foot of the bed for two weeks. Through this summer, when she had started slowing down.

Pepper had been, Darius now realized, one of the longest continuous relationships in his life. Other relationships had shifted. Friends had drifted. His parents had been parents — always there, but in a parent-shaped way. Pepper had been Pepper. The same Pepper, every day, in the same shape. Until June.

He left school at three.

He drove home. His parents were both there. His dad was in the kitchen, sitting at the table, with both hands around a coffee mug. His mom was sitting on the couch with Pepper. Pepper was lying with her head in his mom's lap. Her eyes were open. She lifted her head, slowly, when she heard Darius come in, and her tail thumped once on the couch. Just once. The way it had been thumping for the last month.

His mom said, Darius, sit down, honey.

He sat next to her on the couch. Pepper, with effort, lifted her head from his mom's lap and put it on his thigh. Her

breath was warm. She closed her eyes.

His mom said, the vet called this morning. The x-rays from Friday came back. There is a mass in her abdomen. It is — it is the bad kind. The vet says she has weeks, maybe. Not months.

Darius did not say anything for a long time. He just put his hand on Pepper's head and stroked it slowly. The way he had been stroking her head for nine years.

His dad came over and sat on Darius's other side. They sat like that — three humans and one dog — for maybe twenty minutes. Nobody talked. Eventually his dad said, Buddy. We have a decision to make.

Darius said, I know.

We can let her go now, at the vet, on a day when she is still mostly comfortable. Or we can wait, and let nature take it, and hope it does not get bad. The vet says — the vet says she would lean toward the first one. With this kind of mass. Because it can get bad fast. She does not want Pepper to suffer.

Darius said, I know.

We do not have to decide today. We have a few days.

Okay.

He did not cry. He had thought he would cry. He had been picturing this conversation for a month — since the vet had said in September that the news was not great, and he had started, without telling his parents, picturing this conversation — and he had pictured himself crying. He was not crying. He was just sitting with Pepper's head on his thigh, stroking her ears, the same way he had been stroking her ears for nine years. That night, after dinner, he texted Ms. Calloway.

Ms. Calloway. Pepper has weeks. Vet called today. We have a decision to make. I do not know who to talk to. Can I come see you tomorrow. She texted back in three minutes.

Darius. Yes. Come during Capstone block. I will move our group meeting to Wednesday. Come Tuesday morning by yourself. I am here. He texted thank you.

He went up to his room. Pepper followed him, slowly. She made it up the stairs in her three-step way — pause, pause, pause. She got on his bed, with help. She lay down next to him. He read a chapter of his book with one hand on her side. He could feel her ribs and her breathing. He fell asleep with her there.

In the morning, she was still there. She had not moved.

He went to school.

At Capstone block, instead of going to Room 207, he went to Ms. Calloway's office. He had not been to her office, alone, in a long time. He thought maybe ninth grade. The office was the same. Same plants. Same little chair across from her desk. Same gentle face. He sat down. "Darius," she said. "Tell me about Pepper."

He told her.

He told her about the mass. He told her about the choice. He told her about how Pepper had been with him for nine years and how she was, in some way he had not quite articulated, the part of him that he most identified with — the warm part, the leaning-against-people part, the loyal part. He told her about how he had been picturing this conversation since September. He told her about how he was not crying, and how the not-crying was a new thing for him, and he did not know what to do with it.

Ms. Calloway listened.

When he was done, she said:

"Darius. Can I tell you a few things?"

"Yes."

"First. The not-crying. That is not avoidance. That is not denial. The not-crying — for a person who has known this was coming for a month and has been doing the grief work in pieces for that whole month — is actually a sign that you have been grieving the right amount along the way. The grief, when it comes, will come. Sometimes it comes the night of. Sometimes it comes a week later. Sometimes it comes a year later, in the middle of an ordinary Tuesday. Your body knows how to do this. Trust it. Do not be alarmed by the not-crying. The crying will happen on its own schedule."

He nodded.

"Second. The decision. About when to let her go. I want to say something that might help — or might not. Take it or leave it." "Take it."

"Pepper has been your dog for nine years. The love is real. The loyalty is real. The thing she has given you is real. The way you can give back is to make the decision for her, not for yourselves. Letting her go when she is still mostly comfortable is, in many ways, the gift you give her — for nine years of leaning against your leg. Waiting is sometimes about us — about not being ready to let go. We tell ourselves it is for the dog. Sometimes it is for us. And that is human. But the dog does not know that distinction. The dog only knows pain or no pain. Your job — yours and your parents' — is to weigh those two and make the call. There is no right answer. There is only the answer you can live with."

He was quiet.

"Most families I have known," she said, "have come to regret waiting too long more often than they have come to regret going too early. The vet's instinct, I would trust."

He nodded.

"Third. There is a small ritual I want to suggest. Are you ready?" "Yes."

"Before she goes — whenever that is — write her a letter. Not for her. For you. Write down everything she has been. Write down the leaning. Write down the trip to Lake Michigan when she was four. Write down the way she sleeps with her tongue slightly out. Write down what she taught you about loyalty. Write down what she taught you about anger —

because she did, didn't she. The first year she was with you, you were still mad about Biscuit. She loved you anyway. She taught you that you can be loved while you are still angry. That is not nothing."

He started crying.

He had thought he was not going to cry today. He was crying now. She passed him the tissue box. She did not say anything for a while. When he stopped, he said:

"How do you know that. About being angry."

"You told me, sweetheart. In fourth grade. You came in to my office one day and you told me you had been worried Pepper would not love you because you had been mean to her in your head the first month. You told me she loved you anyway. You said it the way a kid says something they have just figured out."

He almost laughed.

"I do not remember that conversation."

"I do."

He took another tissue.

"Okay," he said. "I will write the letter."

"Good."

"When do you think we should — when do you think we should let her go."

She did not push the answer onto him.

"Darius. That is yours and your parents' to decide. But — if you are asking me, the friend in the room — I would not wait long. Days, not weeks. While she is still mostly herself. While the last day is still a day she can lift her head and thump her tail. Not a day when she cannot." He nodded.

"Okay."

He stood up.

"Ms. Calloway?"

"Yes."

"Will you — would you come over. At the end. When we do it. I do not want to ask my friends. I want them to remember her how she was." She paused.

"Darius. Of course. I would be honored."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

He left.

That night, he wrote the letter. It was three pages long. It ended with: Pepper, you taught me that I could be loved while I was still angry. You did not need me to be done being angry. You loved me through it. That is what I am going to take with me. The other people I love, for the rest of my life, I am going to try to love that way. Thank you. I am sorry I do not have more time. You were the best dog. I love you. — Darius. He read it to her.

She was on the bed. He read it out loud. She listened. He did not know what she understood. He did not think it mattered. The reading was the point.

When he was done, she put her head on his hand.

He cried again.

That weekend, his parents and Darius drove to the vet. Ms. Calloway met them there. She did not come into the room. She sat in the waiting area with Darius's mom, who could not

be in the room, while Darius and his dad sat with Pepper on the floor of the small quiet room the vet had. The vet was kind. Pepper went peacefully. Darius's hand was on her head when she did. So was his dad's. Pepper's tail thumped once, softly, and then she was gone.

They drove home. Ms. Calloway followed them, in her car, and sat with the family for an hour at the kitchen table. She did not say much. She just sat. When she left, she hugged each of them, and she did not say I am sorry, because she knew them well enough not to use the phrase that everybody uses. She said, to Darius, the last thing: she was a good dog, and you were a good kid for her. Both of those will be true forever. He nodded.

She left.

He went up to his room.

Pepper's bed was still on the floor.

He looked at it for a long time.

He did not put it away. Not yet.

He lay on his bed.

He cried for a long time, very quietly, the way a person cries when they have been preparing for a thing for a month.

Then he slept.

This is what loss looks like for a kid who has been doing the work since fourth grade. It does not look like avoidance. It does not look like collapse. It looks like a person who can name what they are feeling, who can ask for help, who can write a letter, who can be present in the room when the moment comes. It looks like a person who lets the grief come on its own schedule, not on a schedule they have decided in advance. It looks like a person who knows, in their body, that loving a thing fully and losing it are both part of the same shape.

Darius was, in fall of senior year, a kid who knew how to lose a dog well.

He did not want to be a kid who knew how to lose a dog well. He would have rather not had Pepper die.

But the dog had died. And he had — and Pepper had — done the dying together, with help, with the people who loved them in the room. That was the work.

That is what twelve years of practice gives a person.

That is what Darius is.

CHAPTER SIX

The Funny Kid Is Not the Whole Kid

— Jordan —

I am taking a year.

That is the sentence I have been practicing for three months. It is a small sentence. It is a sentence I now have to say to grown-ups about twice a week. Every time I say it, I notice the small flinch that crosses the grown-up's face — the half-second where they recalibrate, the half-second where I can see them thinking oh, this kid was supposed to go to college, what happened, is something wrong.

Nothing is wrong.

I am taking a year.

I am going to work at Henwood Books, the used bookstore on Forest Avenue, where I have worked since I was fifteen. I am going to live at home. I am going to save money. I am going to write. I am going to spend the year doing the thing I have been doing in secret since I was a kid — which is reading, and writing, and thinking, and figuring out which kind of writer I want to be.

I am applying to college for the year after that. I am going to apply to writing programs. Real ones. The kind I would have been afraid to apply to right out of high school. The kind I would have had to convince myself I deserved.

I am not going to convince myself. I am going to write a book in the bookstore year, and I am going to apply to those programs with the book in my hand, and they will say yes or they will say no based on the book, and either way I will know that the thing I sent them was real. That is the plan.

The plan is mine. The plan is — and this is the important word — unfunny.

I have been the funny kid for a long time.

The funny started as a mask in third grade. Dr. Pam Mendel — who I have been seeing on and off since I was nine, because my mom found her for me back when I could not sleep — Dr. Pam helped me understand what the mask was for. The mask was for being let into rooms. The mask

was the price of admission. The mask was — I worked this out somewhere around tenth grade — also a way to pre-empt being seen for what was underneath. If I made you laugh, you would not look at me. You would just keep laughing. The looking-without-laughing was what I was scared of.

The mask, for a while, was who I was.

Then, slowly, across middle school and the first years of high school, the mask became one of the things I do. I learned how to take it off. Dr. Pam Mendel was patient. The cohort was patient. I added other things — the writing, the maps, the watching, the loyalty. The funny stayed, but it stopped being load-bearing.

In ninth grade I wrote a short story. It was about a kid who turns himself into a bird every time he is embarrassed. I borrowed the idea from a comic Marcus had drawn when he was eight, which I had seen at his house once and never forgotten. The short story was not funny. The short story was sad and a little weird and a little beautiful, and my ninth-grade English teacher — Ms. Diaz — read it and wrote, in her teacher

pen, at the bottom: Jordan. This is real. Send me more. I sent her more.

She kept reading. She read everything I wrote, for four years. She read three novel attempts that I never finished. She read about forty short stories. She read a book of essays I have not shown anyone else. She told me, in junior year, that I had a voice. That I had had it since I was fifteen. That she was sorry it had taken her until tenth grade to tell me clearly because she had been worried about saying it too loud, in case my parents pressured me or in case I got an idea about myself that was too big to carry safely. She said, in junior year, you are old enough now. You have a voice. Keep writing. Do not stop.

I have not stopped.

My parents have been, this fall, more or less supportive of the gap year. My mom got it immediately. She has known, I think, since I was very young, that I was the kind of kid who needed time to do my own thing. My dad has been harder. My dad went straight from high school to college to a job, and he is worried that taking a year off will break the trajectory. My dad keeps saying break the trajectory like it is a phrase he has heard somewhere.

I have had two conversations with my dad about this. In the second conversation, I said:

Dad. The trajectory is not the point. The trajectory is one shape. I am going to walk a different shape. I am going to walk one that ends up in the same place — me being a writer who can support myself — but the line will not be straight. That is okay.

He said Jordan, I just want to make sure — I said I know. I know what you want to make sure of. You want to make sure I am not running from something. You want to make sure this is

not the funny mask in a different costume. I have thought about that. I have talked to Dr. Pam about that. I am not running. I am walking toward a thing. The thing is writing. I cannot do it in college without first doing it on my own. I need the year.

He was quiet for a long time.

Then he said okay, son. I am going to trust you. I love you. Please do the work.

I said I am going to do the work.

He nodded.

That was, by my count, the realest conversation I have ever had with my father.

We hugged.

It is now October. I have been telling people the plan for two months. I have noticed, as I tell more and more people, a pattern. The pattern is this:

Adults who do not know me well — they flinch. They worry. They ask if I have thought it through. They make sure I am applying next year. They subtly check whether my parents are okay with this. They want to know what my plan B is.

Adults who do know me well — they smile. They say that sounds like the right call for you, Jordan. They do not ask about plan B. They ask about what I am working on. They want to read it.

The pattern, when I noticed it, told me something important. It told me that the flinch is about the flincher, not about me. It is the flincher's anxiety about gap years in the abstract. It is not about me, specifically. The adults who know me, specifically, are not worried about me, specifically.

I have, with effort, learned to not take the flinch personally. The flinch is about them. Most meanness is about the meaner. Ms. Calloway said it

in third grade. Most worry is about the worrier. It is the same shape. I am working on it.

This week, Ms. Calloway gave us the five questions. Number five was who do you want to be at thirty.

I wrote, in my notebook:

Who do I want to be at thirty?

A person who has published a book. Maybe two. A person who has not gone broke trying. A person who lives in a small apartment in a city, with books, and a cat, and a desk by a window. A person who writes every morning. A person who is funny, sometimes, the way you are funny when you are also other things — funny as a tool, not a costume. A person who is in love with somebody who reads what I write and tells me when it is bad. A person who has not turned away from the cohort. A person who flies home for Marcus's wedding someday and for Sofia's something-or-other someday and for whatever Mia ends up doing. A person who has not become hard, the way some adults get hard. A person who has stayed soft.

I read it.

I crossed out the way you are funny when you are also other things. I rewrote it as funny as a thing I sometimes do.

I read it again.

I liked it.

I want to say one more thing.

Dr. Pam Mendel — the therapist I have been seeing on and off for nine years — has been, this whole time, the adult in my life I have most needed to be. I have told her things I have not told my parents. I have told her things I have not told the cohort. I have told her, in pieces, the whole long story of how I built the funny mask and how I have been slowly taking it off.

In our last session before school started, she said:

Jordan. We have been doing this work for nine years. I am going to be available to you when you go to college, by phone, when you go. I am going to be available to you next year, during the gap year. I am going to be available to you in some form for as long as you want me. But I want to say — and this is a thing therapists are sometimes uncomfortable saying — I want to say that you have done the work. You are not the kid you were when your mom brought you to me in third grade. The funny kid is

no longer the whole kid. The kid who could not sleep is no longer the kid who cannot sleep. The kid who had no language for what was inside him now has — when I read your essays, I want to say — has more language than most people three times your age.

You did the work. I just sat across from you while you did it. I cried in the chair across from her. The way I cried in third grade. She gave me a tissue. The way she gave me a tissue in third grade. We sat for a minute.

Then she said, Jordan. Go. Take the year. Write the book.

I said, I will.

We hugged. She does not normally hug clients. We hugged. The hug was for nine years of work.

I went home.

That night, I wrote the first page of what I think is going to be the book.

I have not shown it to anyone yet. Not even Marcus.

Maybe I will show it to Mia when she comes back for graduation week. Mia has, weirdly, been one of the cohort I have stayed closest to over text. Mia, from Pittsburgh, has been my reader for some of the stuff I have been afraid to show people who can see me face to face. She has been kind. She has also been honest. She told me once, about a story I

sent her, Jordan, this one is doing a thing you did better in the last one. You are reaching. Go back to your voice.

I love Mia for that.

That is what a real reader sounds like.

I am Jordan Carver. I am seventeen and a half. I am taking a year. I am going to work at the bookstore. I am going to write a book. I am going to see Dr. Pam Mendel once a month. I am going to apply to programs in November of next year. I am going to be okay.

I am, for the first time in my life, not telling a joke to end the chapter. This is the chapter.

— Jordan

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maya Has Been Painting

Maya had been painting since fifth grade. She had not told anyone the full extent of it until junior year.

She had told the cohort, in pieces, over the years. They knew she drew. They had seen her sketchbooks. They had occasionally seen her paintings — the watercolor of the school's old oak tree that hung in the front office, the portrait of Mr. Patel she had given him as a retirement gift in eighth grade, the small paintings she had given each of her friends at the end of middle school as graduation gifts. They knew she was an artist. They thought of her as the artist.

What they did not know was that Maya, between roughly twelve and seventeen, had painted maybe two hundred pieces, all of which she had kept in her grandmother's basement, on shelves her grandfather had built before he died, in chronological order. The basement was Maya's archive. She had not let anyone into it.

In junior year, her art teacher — a woman named Ms. Lou who had taken Maya under her wing in tenth grade and who Maya had come to trust the way some kids trust a therapist — had gently, over many months, asked to see the archive. Maya had hedged. Maya had said they are not for showing. Ms. Lou had said Maya, I am not asking to show them to anyone. I am asking to see them.

Maya had eventually said yes.

Ms. Lou had come over on a Saturday in March. She had spent two hours in the basement. Maya had been upstairs the whole time, doing homework, pretending not to be nervous. When Ms. Lou had come back upstairs, she had looked at Maya for a long time.

She had said:

Maya. I want to tell you something. You can take it or leave it. Are you ready?

Okay.

You are an artist. Not in the kids who draw way. In the people who do this for a living way. The body of work down there is the kind of body of work that gets a teenager into the best art schools in the country. I am

not exaggerating. I am being precise.

Maya had not known what to say.

I want you to consider — and you do not have to decide today — I want you to consider applying to art schools. Not just any. I have a list. There are programs in the country where the kind of looking you do, the kind of patience you have, the kind of color sense you have — those programs will recognize you. They will take you. They will fund you. I am not telling you to do this. I am telling you the door is open. You decide whether you walk through it.

Maya had said, I will think about it.

Ms. Lou had said, good. I am going to leave the list with you. There is no rush.

She had left a single piece of paper on the kitchen table. Five schools. Each with a tiny handwritten note in Ms. Lou's careful handwriting next to it. The notes said things like strongest fine arts in the country. And funded MFA-track, very small program, hard to get into but you would. And closer to

home, beautiful museum on campus, faculty who would see you.

Maya had taken the list to her room. She had put it on her desk. She had looked at it every day for two weeks. She had not, in those two weeks, told anybody.

She had told her grandmother eventually. Her grandmother had cried — small quiet tears — and had hugged Maya and had said baby. Of course. Of course you should go where they will see you. You have been waiting for somebody to see you for a long time. I have been waiting for somebody to see you for a long time. Go where they will see you. Maya had nodded.

She had then told her grandmother the thing she had not told anyone else, ever:

Grandma. I do not know how to leave you.

Her grandmother had held her face in her hands and had said: Maya. I love you. You have to. The leaving is the work of the next part of your life. I will be here. I will visit. You will visit. The leaving is not the ending. The leaving is the beginning.

Maya had cried.

Her grandmother had cried.

That had been March.

It was now October. Maya had applied to four of the five schools. Three were within an hour of home. One was three hours away — close enough to drive home every weekend if she wanted to, far enough to actually live somewhere else for the first time. She was, in the back of her mind, hoping for the third school. The three-hour one. The one Ms. Lou had described as the program where you would be seen in the largest way.

She had not told the cohort yet. She had told her grandmother. She had told Ms. Lou. She had told her mother

— and her mother had cried, on the phone, in the way her mother cried, which was a complicated way, and had said baby that is wonderful, I am so proud of you, and the conversation had been hard but real. Her mother's situation had been better, this year. Her mother was working steady. Her mother was sober almost two years now. Maya had been visiting her mother once a month. They had a relationship that was — slowly — being rebuilt. Slowly. With Maya as the lead and her mother as the careful follower.

Maya had told her father once. Her father, who had been not-around for most of her life, was now living in the same city and was in contact about once every three months. The conversation had been brief and one-sided. Maya had not expected much. She had gotten about what she had expected.

She had not told the cohort.

She did not know why she had not told the cohort.

She suspected, when she thought about it, that the reason was: she did not want to make a thing of it. She did not want, at lunch, to have to explain art school and MFA-track and figurative painting concentration to nine other kids who had spent the year talking about their own college plans in different rooms. She did not want — she now realized — to be the kid who suddenly had a public dream.

Painting had been private for so long that she did not know how to make it public.

In the second week of October, Theo asked her.

Theo had walked up to her at her locker on a Wednesday morning. He had said Maya. Have you decided where you are applying?

She had said Yes.

He had said Do you want to tell me?

She had stood there.

She had said, after a long pause, Theo. Can we go to the senior lounge for ten minutes. I want to tell you, but I want to tell you sitting down. He had said Okay.

They had gone to the senior lounge — a small room with two couches that the school had put aside for seniors during free blocks. They had sat on a couch. Maya had taken out the list. She had handed it to Theo. Theo had read it slowly.

When he was done, he had handed it back. He had looked at her. He had said, Maya. This is wonderful. I am so happy for you. She had said, Theo. I have not told the cohort.

He had said, Why?

She had said, I do not know how.

He had thought for a second.

Then he had said, Maya. Can I tell you something? You can take it or leave it.

She had said, Okay.

He had said, I have known you since you were six. I have watched you. I am the kid who watches. You have been making art the whole time. The art was always going to take you somewhere. The cohort knows this. They have always known this. You telling them about the schools is not going to be a surprise. You telling them is going to be a confirmation. She had said, Oh.

He had said, They are going to be glad. They are not going to be confused.

She had said, Oh.

He had said, You can tell them at lunch today. Or you can tell them another day. But the making it a thing is in your head. The cohort is not going to make it a thing. The cohort is going to be glad.

She had said, Okay.

She had told them at lunch.

She had said, simply, I want to tell everybody something. I applied to art schools. Real ones. The kind that fund you. I am going to one of them next year. I do not know which one yet.

The cohort had reacted the way Theo had predicted. Nobody had been surprised. Marcus had said Maya, of course. Amara had said Maya, that is wonderful, congratulations. Sofia had said I have been waiting for years for you to say this out loud. Priya had said which schools. Maya had read the list. The cohort had listened. The cohort had cheered, quietly, at lunch, like cohorts do when they are not the kind of cohort that needs to make big noisy displays.

Jordan had said Maya. You are going to be the artist of all of us. The famous one. Get ready.

Maya had laughed.

Maya had not laughed at lunch, with a group of people, in maybe a year. She had laughed today.

She had walked home that afternoon feeling, in her chest, a feeling she did not entirely have a word for. The feeling was the thing I have been holding in private has been received in public and the public did not break it. The feeling was I am still myself, but my self is now bigger because more people know.

The feeling, as she walked, became the start of a painting.

She got home. She went down to the basement. She set up a new canvas. She mixed colors. She painted, that night, for four hours. The painting was, when she stepped back from it the next morning, one of the best things she had ever made. It was a small portrait of an empty kitchen chair. Light fell across the seat from a window not in the frame. The chair was warm and waiting. The painting was titled, in her sketchbook, Reserved for the Next Person.

She did not tell anyone what the painting was about.

She knew what it was about.

She was thinking about her grandmother's kitchen, where her grandmother had reserved a chair for Maya at the table every day for fifteen years, even on the days Maya did not eat at home, and where her grandmother would, after Maya left for art school, still reserve the chair for her, for the rest of her grandmother's life, regardless of whether Maya was sitting in it.

She was also thinking, secretly, about the chair her mother had not been able to keep reserved for her, for many years, and was now — slowly, in the last two years — beginning to reserve again.

She was thinking about reserved chairs as a form of love.

She did not say any of this out loud.

She just painted it.

The painting would, three years from now, be in a show at her art school as part of a series she would title Reserved. The series would be the thing that, in her senior year of art school, established her as a painter people watched. But she did not know that yet.

Tonight she was just Maya. Seventeen. Painter. Daughter.

Granddaughter. Cohort kid. About to go to art school.

She put the brush down.

She slept.

This is what twelve years of building a private practice gives a person. The private practice, when it is real and patient and consistent, becomes the public art. The privacy is what made the work strong enough to be public. The cohort knew this without knowing it — they had watched her be private for ten years and had not pushed. They had let her tell them when she was ready. Today she had been ready.

Maya, in October of senior year, had told the cohort.

The cohort had been glad.

Maya was, in a small private way, the most surprised of all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Theo, Who Has Always Been Watching

The hardest thing about being Theo, all the way through school, had been that nobody asked him about himself.

This was not a complaint. Theo was not the kind of person who needed to be asked. He had been okay being the kid who watched. He had been okay being the kid who noticed. He had been the cohort's quiet support for as long as he could remember — the person who saw who needed a seat at lunch, who saw who was about to cry, who saw which kid was being left out and who had been forgotten. He had been okay being that person.

But it meant that, by senior year, almost everyone in the cohort had a clear sense of who they were and what they were doing next, and Theo — when asked, on the rare occasions he was asked — could rattle off where the other nine were going but had trouble saying what he, specifically, wanted.

He had been thinking about this since August.

He was applying to schools to study education. He wanted to be a teacher. He had wanted to be a teacher since he was in third grade — since Mrs. Yamashita, the instructional aide, had asked him to help her carry boxes one morning during the Grace Gap project, and they had walked together to the office and she had told him, over the course of about ten minutes,

what an instructional aide did and why she loved it. He had decided, somewhere around that conversation, that he wanted to do what she did. By high school the wanting-to-be-a-teacher had matured into a clearer plan. He wanted to teach high school. Probably history. Maybe English. He liked the idea of being the adult in a room of teenagers who could see them — the way Ms. Calloway had seen the cohort, the way Mr. Patel had, the way Mrs. Yamashita had seen one third-grader doing a Grace Gap project nine years ago.

He had applied to four schools. State university — close. A private college two hours away that was strong in education. A larger school out east that had a five-year teaching credential built into the undergraduate program. And the same school Amara was applying to, mostly because Amara had said you should apply, the public-policy program would let you do education-policy.

He did not know which one he wanted yet.

What he had not, until recently, articulated to himself was that he had been spending so much of his attention on the cohort — on making sure they were okay, on noticing when they were not, on holding the space the way the cohort had needed him to — that he had not done much of the who-am-I work that the other nine had done across the year. He had filled out the five questions Ms. Calloway had given them. He had not, fully, sat with them.

He sat with them on a Saturday in mid-October, in his bedroom, with his door closed.

He took out the paper. He read all five.

Who has shaped you the most?

He thought about it.

The first name that came up was Mrs. Yamashita. The second was Ms. Calloway. The third was his grandfather, who

had died when Theo was eight and who Theo still thought of every time he walked past the maple tree in the front yard his grandfather had planted before he died. The fourth was Theo's older sister, Lena, who had gone to the same high school and who had graduated four years ago and who was now a teacher herself, in a small town in Wisconsin, teaching seventh-grade social studies. Lena had been the one who had told Theo, when he was eleven, that being a teacher was real work, not a backup plan, and had taught him to take it seriously.

He wrote, on the paper:

Mrs. Yamashita, who showed me what a kind adult in a school looks like. Ms. Calloway, who showed me what kind teaching looks like. My grandfather, who showed me that quietness is a form of strength. My sister Lena, who showed me that teaching is real work.

He read it.

He thought — okay. Those are the four. Those are the four who shaped me.

He went to question five.

Who do you want to be at thirty?

He thought.

He wrote:

A teacher who has been teaching for a few years. Probably high school. Probably history. Married to somebody, maybe. Not in a hurry. Living in a small town or a small city. The kind of teacher kids come back to see ten years after graduation. The kind of teacher who notices when a kid is not okay and walks them down the hall to the counselor's office, the way Ms. Calloway walked the cohort, the way Mr. Patel did. A teacher who does not burn out. A teacher who has built — by then — a small private practice of his own. Maybe meditation. Maybe running. Maybe woodworking, like my grandfather.

Something to keep the inside of me steady so I can be steady for kids.

He read it.

He liked it.

He went back to question four.

What are you scared of?

He thought for a long time about this one.

The first answer that came up was the easy one. I am scared of not getting into a school that is right for me. He wrote it. Then he crossed it out. That was not the real answer.

The second answer was harder.

He wrote:

I am scared of being the cohort's watcher for the rest of my life and never being looked at.

He read it.

He stared at it.

He did not, in eighteen years, think he had ever written that sentence down before. He had thought it. He had, occasionally, felt it. He had not written it.

He kept writing.

I have been the kid who notices since I was a child. It is a strength. Ms. Calloway told me in third grade that it was a strength. I have spent my whole life using it. But I have been wondering, the last year or two, if I have been so good at noticing other people that nobody has gotten in the habit of noticing me. The cohort is loving and the cohort is real, and they do see me, and they do know me. But the kind of close looking that some of them give each other — the kind Sofia gives, the kind Maya gives, the kind Amara gives — has not, exactly, ever landed on me. I have

been the one watching. Not the one watched.

I am scared that this is going to be true forever. I am scared I am going to be a teacher who sees everybody and goes home alone. I am scared I am going to be good at noticing other people and bad at being noticed.

He stopped.

He read what he had written.

Then he did something he had not done in a long time. He put the paper down, got up from his desk, walked out of his room, walked to the kitchen, and asked his mother if he could talk to her.

His mother was making dinner. She had been making dinner since he had been in his room. She had not been expecting him.

She looked up.

She said, Theo. Of course. Sit down.

He sat at the kitchen island.

He said, Mom. I have been thinking about something. Can I tell you? She turned the stove down.

She came around to the other side of the island and sat across from him.

She said, Yes.

He told her. He told her what he had written. He told her about being the watcher. He told her about being scared he was going to be the watcher forever. He told her, in pieces, that he loved the cohort and that the cohort loved him but that he had been, secretly, the whole time, a little lonely inside the cohort, even though that did not make sense. His mother listened.

When he was done, she said:

Theo. I want to tell you a few things. Are you ready?

He nodded.

First. Being a watcher is a gift. You know this. You have known this since you were nine. You did not pick this gift. It is part of who you are. But — and this is the part I think you might be missing — being a watcher is not the same as being a watcher only. You can be a watcher and also be watched. The two are not in competition.

The reason nobody has watched you closely is not because they do not love you. It is partly because you have been so good at watching them that they have relaxed near you. They have let you do the work of seeing them. They have not had to worry about you. That is the cost of the gift. People who are easy to be around get taken for granted sometimes — not in a cruel way, just in a — I do not have to worry about Theo way. You are about to leave this group. The next group you are in — at college, and the group after that, and the group after that — that group is going to have to learn you the way the cohort never quite finished learning you. You will be in a room full of people who do not know that watching is your gift. You will have to tell them. You will have to say, I am the kid who notices. That is what I do. I would like, in this friendship, to be watched some of the time too. You will have to make the ask. This is the work of the next stage. You are old enough to do it. He was quiet.

His mother said, and second.

He said, yes.

Theo. I see you. I have seen you since you were a baby. Your dad sees you. Your sister sees you. Your father and I have watched you carefully your whole life. The fact that you have not, in your home, felt as seen by us as you might have — that is on us. We will work on it. Tell me when I am not seeing you. I will try to do better.

He had not been expecting this.

He felt — and it took him a minute to name it — he felt seen. The thing he had been writing about not having, his mother had just given him. He had asked for it once and she had given it.

He said, very quietly, Mom. I love you.

She said, I love you, sweetheart.

They sat for a minute.

She said, Theo. One more thing.

Yes.

Your grandfather. The one you wrote about. He was the same as you. He watched. He noticed. He did not get watched a lot, for most of his life. He was lonely sometimes — he told me, when I was a teenager. He figured out, eventually, that he could ask people to watch him. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they did not. The ones who did became

his closest people. That is — I think — the secret. People like you and like him have to ask. The asking is not weakness. The asking is honesty. The good news is, the people who say yes when you ask — those are your people. The people who do not — those were never going to be. The asking sorts the world for you.

He nodded.

He stood up.

He hugged his mother for a long time.

She said, Go finish your homework, sweetheart. Dinner in twenty. He went back upstairs.

He sat at his desk.

He looked at the paper.

He added one more line to question four:

Plan: I am going to start asking.

He underlined it.

He thought, for the first time in maybe a year, that he was going to be okay.

The asking, he could tell, was going to be the work of the next part of his life. Not the watching — he was already very good at the watching. The asking. He had never been asked to do the asking. He had spent a long time being told what a gift the watching was. Nobody had told him that he was also allowed to be on the other side of it.

His mother had, in one ten-minute conversation, given him a new tool for the toolkit.

He was, on a Saturday afternoon in October of senior year, eighteen years old and figuring out how to be a person who is both seen and seer at the same time.

That is the lesson of Theo's senior year.

That is also, in some way, the lesson of all of Part One.

The five questions Ms. Calloway gave the cohort in the second week of September are not actually meant to be answered once. The five questions are meant to be answered, slowly, across the rest of your life. The kid who asks who am I, at eighteen will become the adult who asks who am I, at twenty-five, who will become the parent who asks who am I, at forty, who will become the elder who asks who am I, at eighty. The

questions stay the same. The answers change.

The cohort, in October of senior year, had begun answering them for the first time in earnest.

They were just beginning.

The year had nine more months to go.

— Theo

PART TWO



Self-Compassion & Self-Forgiveness

How do I be kind to myself in a year when everything is changing?

November through January. The hard months. The

CHAPTER NINE

The Letter Kezia Wrote

— Kezia —

I have been writing this letter in my head for about a year. I am writing it on paper now, in November of senior year, because I have decided I am going to send it before I leave for college next August. I do not want to be writing it from a dorm room. I want to be writing it from my grandmother's kitchen table, where I have been having most of the important conversations of my life for the last fifteen years, with my grandmother nearby, with the kettle on.

She is in the next room right now. She knows I am writing it. We talked about it last week.

The letter is to the person who is not allowed in this house. I am eighteen. I am old enough to make my own decisions about who is in my life. My grandmother has told me this. She has been telling me this for years. She has been very careful, since I was small, to make me know — over and over — that the choice was mine. That she would never push me one way or the other. That whether I was ever close to this person, in any form, was my decision.

This is my decision.

I am going to write the letter. I am going to send it. I am not going to invite them to come over.

Here is what I have figured out, in the nine years since Ms. Calloway told us, in third grade, that forgiveness and trust are

different. Forgiveness is inside me. Trust is between us. I can do one without the other. I have known that since I was nine.

What I did not know, at nine, was that I would spend the next nine years working out what forgiveness, specifically, was going to look like in this particular case. The lesson in third grade had given me the framework. The framework did not, by itself, give me the answer. The answer had to be built, slowly, over time, with help.

The help has been: my grandmother. My therapist, who I have been seeing since middle school — a kind woman named Dr. Ramirez who

specializes in kids who have been through hard family things. The cohort, in pieces, especially Sofia and Amara, who have been the friends I have talked to about this the most. Ms. Calloway, who has been available every time I have needed her since I was six. Mr. Tate, who is retired now but who I still see for coffee sometimes, who has been one of the most important adults in my life.

The help got me to this letter.

The letter is for them. The letter is also for me. The letter is also, in a smaller way, for my grandmother, who has been carrying this for forty years and who deserves, in a way I did not understand when I was a child, to see me — the child she raised — write a letter like this. She raised me, in part, to be able to write a letter like this. The writing of it is one of the things she has worked toward.

I am going to write the letter here, on this page, the way I am going to write it on the paper I send.

Dear [the person I am not going to name in this book, even though you and I both know who it is], I am writing because I am eighteen now and I am about to leave for college, and I have decided that before I go, I want to tell you a few things

directly. I have not written to you in the past because my grandmother has been the one in our correspondence and I have let her be that. I am writing now as me.

First. I want to thank you for the work you have done over the last decade. Grandma has told me about it in pieces over the years. You have been in a group. You have been seeing somebody. You have been doing the work. The letters you have sent us have changed shape across those ten years — they have gotten less defensive, more specific, more honest. I have noticed. I have read every one of them. I have, in some real way, watched you become a different person from a distance. That is a thing very few people do. It is hard. I respect it.

Second. I forgive you.

I want to say what I mean by that.

I have been carrying — for a long time — the things that happened in our family before I came to live with grandma. I do not need to list them in this letter. You know them. I know them. Grandma knows them. We do not need to recount them on this page.

What I have been carrying is not the events themselves. The events are in the past. What I have been carrying, for years, is the story the events tried to make me believe — that I was the kind of person who did not deserve safe adults, that I was the kind of kid that bad things happened to because of who I was. I do not believe that story anymore. It took me a long time to stop believing it. I had a lot of help. I am no longer the small kid carrying it.

Forgiving you, for me, is mostly the act of letting myself put the story down. The story was never about you, exactly. The story was about what I had decided your behavior said about me. It said nothing about me. It said things about you, and the

things it said about you have been ones you have spent ten years working on. That is between you and your own life. It is not mine to carry anymore.

I forgive you in the inside-me sense. I am not angry. I am not, anymore, scared. I do not want to spend the next sixty years carrying anger toward you. I am setting it down here, on this page, where you can see me set it down.

Third. I am not inviting you back into my life.

This is not a punishment. This is not the absence of forgiveness. This is the presence of trust as a separate decision. I learned this in third grade from Ms. Calloway. Forgiveness is inside me. Trust is between us. I can give one without the other. Both are real. Both count.

The trust between us has not been rebuilt. It cannot, in the time we have, be rebuilt to the point where I would be ready to invite you into my daily life. I am eighteen. I am about to leave for school. I have a grandmother who is seventy and who has raised me alone for fifteen years. I have a tight life that I am going to carry into adulthood. There is not room, in that life, for a relationship that would have to be rebuilt from scratch. Not now.

This may change in ten years. It may change in twenty. I do not know. I want to leave the door — not open, but unlocked. If, in five or ten years, you have continued the work, and I have continued my life, and the time feels right, I might write again. I am not promising anything. I am saying it is not impossible.

For now: I forgive you. I am not in your life. You are not in mine. We are both, in some way, well. That is, I think, the most honest place we can be.

Fourth. I want you to know that I am okay.

I am graduating from high school in June. I am going to community college next year, on the nursing pathway, and

then I am going to transfer to a four-year program. I want to be a nurse. The kind of nurse who works in pediatrics. I want, specifically, to work with kids who have been through hard family things — to be, for them, a small kind adult in a hospital room. I want to be the adult I needed when I was small. That is the job I want.

I have friends. I have ten of them. They are my cohort. We grew up together since first grade. They are the closest thing I have, in the world, to a chosen family. We are scattering this summer, but the cohort will not break. Some of them are leaving for far-away schools. Some are staying near here, like me. We are going to find each other for the rest of our lives. I am, in this sense, not alone. I have never been alone. I have my grandmother. She is the most important person in my life. She has been for fifteen years.

I am, by every measure I know how to apply, going to be okay. Fifth. I am not going to write again for a while.

I will let grandma keep being the person who corresponds with you, if she wants to. That is her choice and I respect it. I am going to focus on the next part of my life. If, in some number of years, I want to write again, I will. I am leaving the door unlocked, not open.

I wish you well.

I forgive you.

Be well.

— Kezia

I read it three times.

Then I read it to my grandmother.

She listened. She did not interrupt. When I was done, she sat very quietly for a long minute. Then she said:

Baby. I have nothing to add. That is exactly the letter. Send it. I cried a little.

She cried a little.

We hugged for a long time.

I put the letter in an envelope. I addressed it. I drove to the post office in the morning. I dropped it in the slot. The slot is the small metal one with the door that swings. The door swung shut. I stood there for a second.

I drove to school.

I do not know if I will get a response. I do not need one. The letter was not for the response. The letter was for the putting it down. The letter is the official-paper version of a thing I have been doing in my head for years.

I am eighteen.

I forgive them.

I do not invite them in.

Both are true. Both have always been true. I have just made them both real on a page, for the first time, in my own handwriting. This is the work of being a person who has been through a hard family thing. The work does not end. The work just gets to a place where you can write a letter, send it, and walk on.

I walked on.

I went to school.

I sat in Capstone block. Ms. Calloway was in front of the room. She caught my eye for a second. She gave me the small private nod that meant I see you have been working. Good.

She has been doing that nod for twelve years.

I nodded back.

— Kezia

CHAPTER TEN

The Lie Marcus Almost Told

In mid-November, Marcus almost told a lie that would have, if he had told it, taken him two years to put down.

He did not tell it.

The not-telling was the work.

Here is what happened.

Marcus had been applying to colleges. He had been writing essays and supplementals and recommendations and the rest. He had been sitting at his kitchen table, most nights, with his laptop and his snack and his half-watered-down attention.

One night in mid-November, he was working on a supplemental essay for the state university he was almost certainly going to attend. The supplemental had a particular question. It said: Describe a time you have demonstrated leadership. 400 words.

Marcus had read this question fifteen times. He had stared at his blank document. He had started, three times, to write about a thing he could write about — coaching the youth basketball league at the community center, which he had done for two summers. He had stopped, three times, because the thing about coaching the youth basketball league was that it was kind of small. It was sixty hours total. It was, he knew in his heart, not exactly leadership. It was being a teenager who showed up and helped with kids. The two were related. They were not the same.

He could feel the temptation rising.

The temptation was to write the coaching thing as if it had been bigger than it had been. To use slightly grander words. To imply, without saying outright, that he had organized the program rather than that he had helped with it. To suggest, without ever quite lying, that he had been more of a leader than he had been.

He sat with the temptation for maybe twenty minutes.

He could feel — in his chest, in his stomach — the warm pull of the small lie. The way it would round the essay into a better essay. The way it would maybe nudge him slightly up in the admissions reader's eye. The

way it was, in some sense, what everyone else was probably doing — every kid he knew was making his summer activities sound bigger than they had been. He would be a fool not to.

He sat with it.

Then he thought about his dad.

His dad — Reggie Davenport, age fifty-two, who has worked at the same insurance company for twenty-six years and who has, in those twenty-six years, never once lied on his time sheet — his dad had said something to him in third grade that he had remembered. Marcus had been eight. He had just told his parents about the bike. His dad had said Marcus, you just did, at eight, what I have not figured out how to do in thirty-three years. You are not behind. You are ahead. Way ahead. Marcus had been ahead since he was eight.

If he wrote this essay with a small lie embedded in it, he would not be ahead anymore.

He would be — he could feel it as he sat there — behind. He would be a kid who had spent ten years working on telling the truth and who, in a moment of admissions-essay pressure, had let it slip. The slipping would not be visible to any reader. It

would be visible to him. He would carry it. He closed the laptop.

He stood up.

He went outside. He walked around the block.

It was a cold night. There was frost on the lawns. He could see his breath. He walked the long way around — three blocks instead of one — and he thought, the whole time, about his choices.

He could write the essay with the small lie. He would probably get in to the school. He would, six years from now, still be carrying the small lie. He would be the kid who, when he thought about his college admissions essay, would think I rounded that one up. The school never knew. The carrying would be small. It would be there.

Or he could write the essay honestly. He would write about helping with the basketball league, not leading it. He would let the essay be smaller and truer. He would probably also get in to the school — the school's admissions standards were not so tight that an honest 400-word essay would have hurt him. He would, six years from now, look back at the essay and think I told the truth even when nobody would have known. He would not carry it. He would have nothing to carry.

He stopped walking, halfway around the block. He stood under a streetlight. He breathed.

He thought — okay. Okay. I am going to write the honest one. Not because somebody is going to find out about the lie. Because I would find out about the lie. I would know. I am the audience for the rest of my life. The rest of my life is the long audience. I am not going to give the rest of my life a small lie to carry.

He finished the walk.

He went home.

He sat at the laptop.

He wrote the essay.

The essay said, more or less, this. I have spent two summers helping with the youth basketball league at our community center. I was not the head of the program. I was one of about six high school students who showed up to help with the seven- and eight-year-olds who came to play. The leadership I learned over those summers was not the organizing kind. It was the smaller kind. It was learning how to be a person a small kid trusts. It was learning that, for a seven-year-old, leadership often looks like the older kid who notices when you are about to cry and pulls you aside. That is the kind of leadership I am going to keep practicing. I do not yet know how to organize a program. I am going to learn. For now, I know how to notice. That is where I am starting from.

He read it.

It was not, by traditional admissions-essay standards, a great essay. It did not have the big I founded a nonprofit energy that the strongest essays often had.

It was, by Marcus's standards, a true essay.

He hit submit.

He closed the laptop.

He went to bed.

He slept easily.

In the morning, he told Sofia about the choice he had almost made and the choice he had made instead. He did not make a big thing of it. He told her at lunch, in passing, because Sofia is the kind of person you can tell things like that to.

Sofia said, Marcus. Of course. You did the right thing.

Marcus said, I almost didn't.

Sofia said, I know. The almost-not is the work. The doing is the result of the work.

Marcus said, Where did you learn to say things like that.

Sofia said, From Ms. Calloway. From you. From the cohort.
From practicing.

He laughed.

They ate lunch.

Three weeks later, Marcus got into the state university. The acceptance letter came in early December. His mother cried at the kitchen table. His father shook his hand the way his father did, formally, with one hand on Marcus's shoulder, and said we are very proud of you, son.

Marcus did not tell anybody, ever, that he had almost lied on the essay. The not-lying was private. The not-lying was for him. He thought about it, occasionally, in the years after.

He thought about it the first time he wrote a paper in college and was tempted to round up a small statistic. He did not round it up. He thought about it the first time he had a job interview where the interviewer asked him about a project and he was tempted to imply he had done more of it than he had. He did not imply.

He thought about it, many times, across the next thirty years, in small moments where he could have rounded the truth up and nobody would have noticed except him. He did not round.

The architecture of I would know had been built in him from age eight. The architecture had been tested, and reinforced, and tested again, and reinforced again. By eighteen, the architecture was as much a part of him as the shape of his face.

This is what twelve years of practice gives a person.

This is what Marcus is.

You should know, before this chapter ends, what happened with the Aaliyah lie. He had told his parents at eight. He had

spent third through fifth grade letting the Aaliyah thing visit him, less and less often, the way Ms. Calloway had taught him to do. By eighth grade, the visits had stopped almost entirely. By tenth grade, he had not thought of the Aaliyah lie in months. By senior year, he thought of it once a year, on

August 14th, which was the anniversary of the bike. On August 14th, he bought Aaliyah ice cream. He did not tell her why. Aaliyah, fifteen, sometimes wondered why her brother bought her ice cream on a random Tuesday in August every year. She did not ask. She figured he had his reasons. She ate the ice cream.

Aaliyah will, fifteen years from now, ask Marcus what the August 14th thing is.

Marcus will tell her.

She will say, Marcus. You have been buying me ice cream on August 14th for twenty-three years because of something you did when you were six?

He will say, Yes.

She will say, That is sweet. And also a little crazy.

He will say, I know.

She will hug him.

But that is twenty-three years away.

For now, in November of senior year, Marcus is at his kitchen table. He has just hit submit on an essay that is small and true. He is going to sleep well. He is going to go to college next August. He is going to be okay.

The cohort is going to be okay.

This is Part Two.

This is the part of the year where the kids of Room 207 are not going to do anything dramatic. They are not going to make big choices. They are just going to live — through the winter, through the cold, through the small daily choices that, added

up, become the people they become. The architecture is being built one un-told lie at a time.

The architecture is being built one un-spoken truth at a time. The architecture is being built one small ordinary night, in a kitchen, with a kid choosing not to round up.

This is the work.

This is the work that does not look like work.

This is the work that does not get noticed.

This is the work that, if you do it enough, builds a person you can live with for the rest of your life.

Marcus did it.

The cohort, in pieces, is doing it.

You, reader, are doing it too — in your own ways, on your own nights, in your own small choices that nobody is watching except you. You are the audience for the rest of your life.

The rest of your life is the long audience.

Be a person you can live with.

That is the chapter.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Toolkit Has a Limit

— Sofia —

In December, I had a hard month.

I do not say this lightly. The whole point of being the call-Sofia kid is that, for the most part, I have not had hard months — or, the hard months I have had have been processed so quickly, with my own toolkit, that the months have not gotten to be months. They have been hard days, hard weeks. The toolkit catches the hard before the hard becomes a long thing.

December got to be a month.

I am writing this to tell you what I learned about the toolkit when it stopped working.

Here is what happened. My mom got news, in the second week of December, that her doctor was sending her to a specialist. She had had a routine mammogram in November. The mammogram had shown something. The doctor was sending her to a specialist for a biopsy. The doctor had said, in the way doctors say these things, that most of the time these turn out to be nothing, and let's not get ahead of ourselves, and I would not be alarmed yet.

My mom told me and my dad at dinner. She told us calmly. She said I want you both to know what is going on. It is probably nothing. The biopsy is in two weeks. We will know in three. Until then, life as usual. I said okay.

I did the breath. The slow one. In for four, hold for one, out for six. I did it five times, sitting at the dinner table, while my parents kept talking. I named what I was feeling. I am scared. I am scared. I love my mom. I am scared.

I did the toolkit.

The toolkit did not work.

That night I lay in bed and did the toolkit again. Slow breath. Hand on heart. I am here. I am okay. This will pass. Naming. I am scared. I am scared. I love my mom. I am scared.

The fear did not lift.

I did not sleep until almost three in the morning.

The next day at school, I was tired and the fear was still there. I did the toolkit again, in the bathroom between third and fourth period. Slow breath. Five senses walk. I looked around. I saw five things. I heard four things. I touched three things — the cold sink, my own arm, a paper towel. I smelled two things. I tasted one thing — the inside of my own mouth, which was the only thing available.

The fear did not lift.

I went to lunch. I did not tell anybody. I did not want to make it a thing. I told myself I could handle this on my own. I had been handling things on my own since I was six. I had a toolkit. I would do the toolkit. The toolkit would work.

That night I did the toolkit again. It did not work.

The next night. The toolkit. It did not work.

By the end of the first week, I had not slept more than five hours a night since the dinner conversation.

I had also, by the end of that week, been keeping the fear secret, which I now realize was the bigger problem. I had been the call-Sofia kid for so long that I had not developed, for myself, the practice of being the kid who calls somebody else. I did not have a call-Sofia of my own. I had Mia, of course —

Mia, in Pittsburgh, who had been my person from far away since we were nine. But Mia was, in some unspoken way, my friend-from-childhood and I did not want to load her with a thing that had not even been diagnosed yet. I told myself I would tell Mia after the biopsy results came back.

I also had my parents. But the fear was about my parents. I could not exactly take it to my parents.

I had the cohort. But I was — and this is the bad pattern, the one I did not know I was in — I was so used to being the cohort's listener that I did not know how to flip the script. To say, hi, this week I am the one who needs to be listened to.

I was, in some real sense, trapped inside my own identity as the listener.

The toolkit, by itself, was not designed to handle a week-long scare that I was not letting myself talk about. The toolkit was designed for daily hard feelings — for things you can name and address and put down

within a few hours. The toolkit, used alone, on a thing that big, did not work.

What worked, finally, was that Amara noticed.

Amara, on a Thursday afternoon during a free block, sat down across from me in the senior lounge and said, very directly:

Sof. You look terrible. What is going on.

I said nothing.

She said Sof.

I said I am tired.

She said Sof.

I said Amara.

She said Sof. Tell me. Right now.

I cried. In the senior lounge. For the first time, I think, in school, in maybe two years.

She moved over. She put her arm around my shoulder. She did not say anything for a long time. She let me cry. She knew, in the way Amara knows things, that whatever was going on was bigger than something the lounge could fix in fifteen minutes.

When I could talk, I told her. I told her about my mom. I told her about the biopsy in two weeks. I told her about the probably nothing. I told her I had not slept in five nights. I told her I had been doing the toolkit and the toolkit had not worked.

Amara listened.

When I was done, she said:

Sof. The toolkit is not designed for this. The toolkit, used alone, does not handle a week of pre-news-fear about your mother. The toolkit, used alone, is not a substitute for telling somebody. You have been keeping this inside. You are exhausted because the inside-keeping is the part that is making you tired. The fear, by itself, would not have made you this tired. The fear plus the keeping made you this tired.

I said I know.

She said Sof. I am going to be the person you tell. About this. Through this. I am going to be the call-Amara for the call-Sofia kid. Through the whole biopsy and the whole results and the whole thing. You are going to text me every day until we have results. You are going to text me about what you are feeling. You do not have to be the call-Sofia kid right now.

You get to be the kid who calls Amara. Okay?

I cried again.

I said okay.

I texted her every day for the next two weeks. She texted back. Sometimes the texts were long. Sometimes they were

short. Sometimes they were just I am here. Today is a hard day. I am here.

I slept better starting the second night after Amara and I talked. The biopsy came back benign. My mom is fine. The doctor was right that most of the time these turn out to be nothing. My mom is taking some extra screenings going forward but the news was the good news. I cried, when my mom told us. I cried in relief. I cried also, I now realize, in the recognition of how heavy the carrying had been. I also cried, separately, when I told Amara the result. Amara cried with me. She said Sof. I am so glad. I am so glad.

We had a small private graduation-from-fear moment between us. Here is what I learned, in December.

The toolkit is real and it works for most things. It does not work, by itself, for big things. For big things, the toolkit is step one — the slow breath, the naming, the hand on the heart — and then the rest of the toolkit is other people. The trusted adult. The friend. The therapist. The big tools.

I had, for a long time, been treating the toolkit as if it was a solo practice. As if the goal was to be self-sufficient. As if needing other people would have meant the toolkit had failed.

The toolkit, I now realize, has never been a solo practice. The trusted adult was always in the toolkit. The friend was always in the toolkit. I had been using the smaller tools and not the bigger ones. The bigger ones were always there.

I am, I now realize, going to be a therapist someday partly because I have, in my own life, just learned what therapists already know: no one does this work alone, and the people who try to do it alone are the ones who burn out. The healthy way is to do it together. The healthy way is to call somebody. The healthy way is to let yourself be the kid who needs help,

sometimes, instead of always being the kid who gives it. I told this to Mia, after.

Mia said, Sof. Welcome to the club. Some of us have been doing the let myself need help practice for a long time. You are the last of us to figure it out, because you have been so good at the other thing. The you who lets people in is going to be a better therapist than the you who did it alone would have been. I promise.

I told Ms. Calloway about it too, in our Capstone block one Friday in early January, in the small private way Ms. Calloway lets you tell her things by hanging back at the end of class.

Ms. Calloway said, Sofia. This is one of the most important things you are going to learn in your whole life. You learned it at seventeen. Most therapists do not learn it until they are thirty and burning out. You are ahead. You are way ahead.

She gave me a hug. She does not usually hug seniors. She hugged me. I went home.

I am writing this in my own notebook, in early January. The fear about my mom is in the past, for now. The bigger lesson — about the toolkit, about who gets in, about who I am willing to call — is going forward. The toolkit has been updated.

The toolkit, version eighteen, includes Amara. And Mia. And my parents. And Ms. Calloway, when I really need her. And — when I am a therapist someday — it will include the therapist I will see, regularly, the way good therapists see other therapists. That is what we call supervision, in the field. I learned the word from AP Psych. I will need supervision. Everybody who does this work needs supervision. I am, in January of senior year, eighteen years old and revising the most important thing I have built in my life. I am revising it to include being supported, not just supporting.

I am proud of me.

I am — for the first time, in some honest way — getting what self-compassion means. Self-compassion is not just being kind to myself when I have made a mistake. Self-compassion is also letting other people be kind to me when I am scared.

I have been letting other people be kind to me, this winter, for the first time.

It feels — and I want to write this down so I do not forget — it feels good.

Self-compassion is not solitary.

That is the lesson.

— Sofia

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Letter

Amara got the letter on the fifteenth of December.

She had applied early action to the school she wanted most — a small liberal arts college on the east coast with a strong public-policy program and an urban-studies minor she had been quietly building her four years of high school to qualify for. She had applied early action because the school encouraged it and because, by mid-November, she had felt ready. She had felt — for the first time in any college application — that the version of herself she was handing the admissions committee was actually her.

The letter came in the mail. She came home from school. Her mother was in the kitchen. Her mother had brought the mail in. Her mother had set the letter on the counter without opening it. Her mother had texted her at lunch saying something came. I will see you at home.

Amara walked in. She put her backpack down. She washed her hands at the sink because she did not want to open it with school-hand. She picked up the letter.

The envelope was thick.

She knew, the way every senior in America knows, that a thick envelope was usually good. The thin envelopes were the ones that contained a single page of we regret to inform you. The thick envelopes contained orientation materials and welcome packets and FAQs about dorm assignments.

The envelope was thick.

She opened it.

She had been accepted.

She had been accepted with a financial aid package that covered most of it.

She read the letter standing at the kitchen counter. She read it twice. She handed it to her mother. Her mother read it. Her mother sat down on the kitchen stool. Her mother put both hands on her face.

Her mother said, Amara. Amara.

Amara said, Mom. They said yes.

Her mother said, Baby. They said yes.

They hugged. They hugged for a long time. Her mother cried. Amara did not cry, exactly — Amara had been so tightly holding the question of will they say yes for so long that the immediate aftermath was less like crying and more like a kind of release of held breath. She breathed out for what felt like minutes.

She called her grandmother. Her grandmother picked up on the second ring. Her grandmother had been waiting. Her grandmother said baby. Baby. Tell me.

Amara said, Grandma. They said yes.

Her grandmother cried, on the phone, in the soft careful way her grandmother cried, and said Amara. I am — I am — oh, baby. Oh, baby. I am so happy. I am so proud.

Amara walked over to her grandmother's house that night. She walked the four blocks slowly, with her grandmother on the phone the whole way, even though they would be face to face in ten minutes. Her grandmother wanted to hear her voice. Her grandmother wanted, also, to narrate the walk with her — to make sure Amara was telling her things along the way. Amara told her grandmother what tree she was passing.

What dog she had said hi to. What lights were on in which house. Her grandmother said baby, you are walking toward me on the same sidewalk you have walked since you were three.

Amara had not thought of this. She thought of it now. She had been walking the same four blocks for fifteen years.

Soon she would not be.

She walked up the porch. She hung up the phone. She went inside. Her grandmother was at the door. Her grandmother hugged her for a long time. Her grandmother made tea. They sat at the kitchen table. They drank tea.

Her grandmother said, Amara. I want to tell you something. Are you ready?

Amara said, yes.

I have, since you were three, been waiting for the day a school would say yes to you in the way this school just said yes. Not because I wanted you to leave. Because I wanted you to be seen. I wanted somebody to look at you, on paper, and recognize what I have been looking at, in person,

for fifteen years. This school looked at you and recognized it. That is the thing I have been waiting for.

I want to be honest with you, baby. I am going to miss you so much. She started crying.

Amara started crying.

They held each other.

Her grandmother said, I am going to miss the daily. The walking. The Sunday dinners. The

you-stopping-by-after-school-when-something-hard-happened. I am going to miss all of it. I have known, since you were small, that I was raising you to leave. That has been the job. The leaving is the point. But the point is also the hardest part.

Amara said, Grandma. I am going to come back.

I know, baby. I know you are. But it will not be the same. You will come back as somebody who has spent four years being somebody else. That is good. That is right. I am cheering for that. I am just also going to miss the every-day version of you, who has been in my life since you were a small child.

Amara nodded.

She did not say anything for a while.

Then she said, Grandma. Can I ask you something?

Yes.

Are you going to be okay. By yourself. After I leave.

Her grandmother smiled. The way her grandmother smiled when she was being asked a question that meant the asker was, in fact, the one who needed comforting.

Amara. Baby. I am going to be okay. I have friends. I have my church. I have your aunt who calls every Sunday. I have the garden. I have a long quiet life that I have been living since your grandfather died, that I love, and that you have been part of, but that is also mine even without you in it.

I want you to leave for college without the weight of making sure grandma is okay. I am okay. I am going to be okay. I am going to miss you and be okay at the same time. Those are not in competition.

I have raised you to leave well. The leaving well includes not worrying about me. You will worry. I know. I worried about my mother when I left

her, fifty-eight years ago. You will worry. But please — try to put down some of the worry. I am okay.

Amara nodded.

She did not feel — fully — like she could put down the worry. She knew her grandmother was telling her the truth about being okay. She also knew that her grandmother was seventy and that the years they had left, even in the best case,

were not that many. She had been carrying, for a year or two, the awareness that her grandmother was getting older. The acceptance letter had made the awareness sharper. She was about to spend the four years of college geographically far from the person she had been emotionally closest to her whole life.

She said, Grandma. I am going to call you every Sunday.

Her grandmother said, Baby. Okay. Yes. I would love that.

I am going to come home for every break.

Okay.

I am going to visit, also, in November sometime, when I do not have a break.

Baby, we will see. You will be busy. You will have a life there. Do not promise too much. I would rather you have a real college experience than a guilty one.

Amara almost laughed.

Grandma, you are a very wise woman.

Baby, I have been alive for seventy years. I am the wisest you are going to know for a while.

They sat for a long time.

When Amara walked home, her grandmother walked her to the porch. Her grandmother stood under the porch light and watched Amara walk all four blocks back. Amara turned around twice. Her grandmother was, both times, still on the porch, still watching, with the kettle warming behind her.

Amara walked the four blocks for what felt like the longest time she had ever walked them.

She thought, the whole way, about what the leaving was going to be. About what the staying was going to look like for her grandmother. About what kind of granddaughter she was going to be from far away. About how she was going to make sure, somehow, that the four blocks did not

turn into nothing.

She got home.

Her mother was on the couch.

Her mother said, baby. How was grandma.

Amara said, she is okay. She is really, really happy. She is also already going to miss me.

Her mother said, yes. I am going to miss you too.

Amara sat on the couch next to her mother.

She said, Mom. I am going to miss you so much.

Her mother said, I know.

They sat for a long time.

That night, in her bedroom, Amara opened her leather notebook. She added, on a new page:

Things to leave behind on purpose, December edition:

1. The fear that the school would say no.
2. The version of me that has been polishing essays for two years.
3. The story that I have to be everybody's pillar — including my grandmother's. She does not need me to be her pillar. She has her own. I am going to let her have her own.
4. The story that being far from my grandmother means I love her less. Distance is not love-subtraction.

Things to take with me:

1. The four blocks. In my head.
2. Sunday calls.
3. The leather notebook.
4. The five questions.
5. The cohort.
6. The bench sign — the idea of it.
7. The school's letter. I am going to keep it. I am going to read it again in February when I am scared I cannot do college.
8. Iris's letters. I am bringing the whole binder.

9. My grandmother's voice on the phone, in my head, narrating walks. She closed the notebook.

She slept.

This is what Part Two does, for a kid like Amara. The acceptance letter is not, exactly, the climax. The acceptance letter is the invitation to the work of figuring out what to take and what to leave. The work continues for the rest of the year. The work continues, in some real way, for the rest of her life. Every move, every job change, every new relationship — Amara is going to have to figure out, again, what to take and what to leave. She has been practicing since she was nine. She is going to be very, very good at it by the time she is forty.

She is starting, again, now.

She is going to be okay.

Her grandmother is going to be okay too — better than okay, in the small steady ways her grandmother has been okay her whole life — and they are going to figure out the new shape of their relationship over the next decade, slowly, with patience, with weekly Sunday calls that almost never get missed, with letters in the mail in addition to the calls, with visits that are sometimes long and sometimes short and that are always — always — anchored at the kitchen table where they have been anchoring themselves to each other for fifteen years.

Amara is, in December of senior year, walking toward the rest of her life.

She is doing it well.

She knows where she is going.

The leaving has begun.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Conversation with My Grandmother

— Jordan —

My grandmother lives in Florida and she does not understand the gap year.

She is seventy-eight. She is one of the smartest people I know. She raised three kids on her own after my grandfather left in 1978 and she put two of them through college, including my mother. She is sharp. She is funny. She is, in some real way, the person I get the funny from — my grandmother has had a kitchen full of one-liners my whole life and most of them are her own.

She does not understand the gap year.

She called me on a Sunday in late January. We have been doing Sunday calls since I was eight, when my parents made me start calling her once a week so we would stay close. The Sunday call has been a constant in my life for ten years. It is usually fifteen to twenty minutes. We catch up. She tells me what the weather is doing in Tampa. I tell her what the snow is doing here. We talk about my mom. We talk about her three other grandchildren — my cousins — who are all younger than me. We end with I love you, grandma and I love you, sweetheart, talk next week.

That is the call.

This Sunday call was different.

She had heard, from my mother, that I was taking a year. My mother had told her at Christmas. My mother had been gentle about it. My mother had explained the plan. My grandmother had nodded at Christmas and had not said much.

In the four weeks since Christmas, my grandmother had — apparently — been working herself up to having a conversation with me about it. She had not said anything to my mother in advance. She had just decided, this Sunday, to bring it up with me directly.

She started the call with the small talk. The weather. The cousin in tenth grade. The neighbor who had had a hip replacement.

Then she said, Jordan. I want to ask you something.

I said, okay grandma.

Your mother told me about the year.

Yes.

Can you tell me about it?

I told her. I told her the same thing I had told my parents and the cohort and Dr. Pam and everybody else. I am taking a year. I am working at Henwood Books. I am writing a book. I am going to apply to writing programs next year with the book in hand. The bookstore pays not much but enough. I live at home. I save. I write.

She listened.

She said, Jordan. I love you. Can I tell you what I am scared of? I said, yes grandma.

I am scared that you are throwing away an opportunity. I am scared that the year will become two years. I am scared that you will get used to not being in school and you will not want to go back. I am scared that you will get to thirty and look back and realize that this was the wrong call. I had to

fight for my children's college educations. I had to fight my whole life. I am scared, in some deep place in me, when I see a young person say I will just take a year. I am scared that he does not know what he is giving up.

Are you sure, Jordan. Are you really sure.

I sat with this.

She was being honest with me. She was being honest in a way she had not been with me before — she was naming her fears, not just expressing disapproval, and I knew she was doing it because she loved me. I owed her a real answer.

I thought about it.

I said, grandma. Can I take a minute. I want to give you the real answer.

She said, take all the minutes you need, sweetheart.

I sat for maybe a minute and a half. I was on the phone in my room. I was looking out the window. There was snow.

Then I said:

Grandma. Here is the real answer. You are right that I am giving up something. I am giving up the linear path. I am giving up the go to college

at eighteen, like everyone else path. I am giving up the social rhythm of the cohort I have been part of for twelve years — most of them are going to be in college this year, and I am not, and I am going to feel that, and it is going to be hard.

I am giving up those things. I am giving them up because I think I will get something better. I think I will write a book that I would not have written if I had gone straight to school. I think I will arrive at college, a year later, as a person who has actually finished a thing — a person who knows he can finish a thing — and that the knowing he can finish a thing is more important than the year.

I might be wrong. I am eighteen. I might be wrong. But Dr. Pam Mendel and my mother and my dad and Ms. Calloway and my writing teacher have all watched me make this decision. They have all, in their own ways, said it is the right one for me. I trust them. I have been working with them for years. They know me.

Grandma. I want to tell you one more thing. I love you. I love you, and I know you love me, and I know your scared is real. You raised your kids the hard way. You watched my mother work hard for her education. You watched her work hard to give me an education. You are scared I am wasting it.

Grandma. I am not wasting it. I promise. The way I am going to be a useful person in the world — the way I am going to be the kind of grandson you can be proud of — is by being a real writer, and to be a real writer, I have to write a real book, and to write a real book, I have to not be in school next year. That is the truth.

I am asking you, please, to trust me on this. I am asking you to trust me even though it scares you. I will call you every Sunday. I will tell you what I am writing. I will tell you when I am stuck. I will keep you in the loop. You will know, by next Christmas, that the year was the right call. I promise.

She was quiet for a long time.

Then she said, Jordan. Sweetheart. Okay.

I said, okay?

She said, okay. I am going to trust you. I am going to be scared anyway, because that is what grandmothers are, but I am going to trust you. I want you to know that I am trusting you. I want you to know that the trusting is not the same as the not-being-scared. I am still going to be scared. But I am going to trust.

I said, grandma. That is the most generous thing you have ever said to me.

She said, Jordan. I love you. Write the book. Send me pages. I want to read pages.

I said, I will send you pages. I promise.

She said, talk next Sunday.

I said, talk next Sunday. I love you.

She said, I love you, sweetheart.

We hung up.

I sat on my bed for a long time.

I want to write down what I learned from that conversation. Because it changes some things for me. It changes some things about how I am going to walk into the year.

What I learned is: some of the people who love me are going to be scared about my choices, and the scared is going to be real and not because they do not see me. The scared is going to be real because they do see me, and because they care about me, and because their own life has taught them to be careful with the things that matter.

I had been treating, until this Sunday, every grown-up who was nervous about my gap year as somebody who did not get me. As somebody who was projecting their own anxiety. As somebody who needed to be politely corrected.

Some of them were that.

My grandmother was not that.

My grandmother was somebody who loved me, who had earned her caution the hard way, who was telling me her honest fears in a Sunday call because she did not know how to do this differently.

The right response to her was not grandma you don't understand me. The right response was grandma I hear you,

and here is what I am doing, and please trust me, and I will earn the trust.

That is what I did.

That is what I am going to do, going forward, with the adults in my life who love me and are scared about how I am living.

I am going to hear them. I am going to tell them what I am doing. I am going to ask them to trust me. I am going to earn the trust. That is the work.

The work is not just doing the thing. The work is also being a person who can hold the relationships with the people who love me, while I am doing the thing they are scared about.

I have, until this Sunday, been a little defensive about my choice. I have been doing what teenagers do — which is to perform a kind of I am sure, do not question me energy, partly because I am eighteen and that is what eighteen-year-olds do, and partly because Dr. Pam and the cohort and the writing teacher have validated the choice and I have been wearing the validation like armor.

The armor was, until this Sunday, useful. It was protective. It got me through the flinching adults.

The armor is, this Sunday, in the way of being a real grandson. I am going to take the armor off, in the Sunday calls with my grandmother. I am going to be the version of myself who can hear her fears without armoring up. I am going to be honest about my own uncertainty — because I am uncertain, in places, and pretending I am not is a kind of lie. I am going to let her be scared. I am going to keep her in the loop. I am going to send her pages.

I am, in some small way, growing up tonight.

Growing up means: learning that the people who love you can be both right that you should trust your own choice and

also scared about it, at the same time, and that you can hold both without resolving the tension. I am holding both.

I am going to write the book.

I am also going to send my grandmother pages.

Those two things are not in competition. They are the same project. This is the new sentence in my head. Those two things are not in competition. They are the same project.

I am going to put it on a Post-it. It is going on my bedroom wall. — Jordan

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Theo Asks

In late January, Theo did the thing he had told his mother he was going to do in October.

He asked.

He had been practicing for three months. The practicing had been small. He had been noticing his own state of mind in conversations — something he had not done much in his life. He had been catching himself, mid-conversation with Marcus or Sofia or Maya, in moments when he might have offered something about his own life — a worry, a small piece of news, a feeling — and had, by long-set habit, redirected to ask about them.

He had been catching the redirection.

Sometimes he had let it happen anyway. The redirection was deep in him. Old habits die slowly.

Sometimes he had stopped himself, and offered the small piece, and watched what happened.

What happened, every single time he had offered something about himself, was that the friend had received it. Had asked follow-up questions. Had said Theo, I did not know that. Tell me more. The cohort had been waiting for him to do this his whole life. He had not believed his mother, in October, when she had said that the cohort would receive him if he started asking. He had thought she was being a mother. He had thought she was being kind. He had assumed that the

cohort, having decided years ago that Theo was the listener, would feel weird if he started showing up differently — would resist the shift, would not know how to be on the giving end of a friendship with him.

He had been wrong.

He had been wrong about something he had been carrying for years. The first time he had offered something, in early November, had been to Marcus. He had said, just before fourth period one Wednesday, Marcus. I am applying to four schools and I think I want the state university one, but my parents are pushing me toward the one out east

because they think I should go further. I do not know what to do. Marcus, in the hallway, had stopped walking.

Marcus had said, Theo. Tell me about it.

They had been late to fourth period. They had been ten minutes late, because Marcus had asked questions and Theo had answered them and the bell had gone and Marcus had said we are skipping the next ten minutes, we can be late, this matters.

Theo had cried, a little, in the hallway. Not because of the schools. Because of Marcus asking. Because of the we can be late, this matters. That had been the first time.

After that, things had moved.

He had told Sofia, the next week, about being scared he was going to be lonely in the cohort even though he loved them.

He had told Amara, two weeks after that, about wanting his parents to look at him more carefully.

He had told Maya, in early December, that he had been wanting to take a photography class but had not signed up because he was not sure if he was allowed to want a thing in a domain Maya owned.

Maya had laughed at the last one. She had said, Theo. Photography is not mine. You can do photography. We can do photography. I would love to do photography with you. There is no jurisdictional issue here. Theo had laughed too.

He had signed up for the photography elective for second semester. It was now late January and second semester had started. Theo was in his first photography class on a Wednesday afternoon. The teacher was new — a young woman named Ms. Park, who had just started at the school. She was teaching the class with cameras the school had bought through a grant. Theo had a camera that was not his — a small digital one — and he had it slung over his shoulder for the first time in his life. He had no idea what he was doing.

He felt, weirdly — and he had not expected this — young. He felt the way he had felt in first grade when he had first walked into Room 12 — uncertain, looking at everyone else, not sure where to sit, hopeful. The cohort had been new then. The cameras were new now. The feeling was similar.

He liked the feeling.

He had spent so much of high school being the kid who has it together that he had forgotten what it felt like to be new at something. The newness was — and this surprised him — refreshing. He was, in the photography class, somebody nobody knew. He was not Theo-the-watcher. He was Theo-the-kid-with-the-camera-on-his-shoulder. He could rebuild who he was, in this particular class, from the ground. He was practicing, in a small way, the work of college.

He took, in the first class, three photographs. They were technically bad. They were also — Ms. Park said, in the small careful way she said things — they are looking for something. Keep looking.

He took more photographs in the second class.

In the third class, he took a portrait of a girl in the photography class he had not known before. A senior named Hannah Park — no relation to Ms. Park, just a coincidence of last names. Hannah Park had been in his class since freshman year and he had never spoken to her. He had asked her, in class, if she would sit for a portrait. She had said yes. She had sat. He had taken three pictures of her with the small camera.

The third one was good.

Ms. Park looked at it on the small screen and said, Theo. Look at this. The light on her face. The look in her eye. You caught a real moment. Theo had said, thank you.

Hannah Park had said, can I see.

Theo had shown her.

Hannah Park had looked at it for a long time. She had said, Theo. You see things.

Theo had said, thank you.

He had felt — and this was the surprising thing — he had felt seen, in that moment, by a girl he had not known, in a class he had just started. The cycle had completed. He had been the seer of her for a few minutes. She had been the seer of him for a few seconds afterward. Seen and seer, in the same conversation, between two people who had not known each other before this Wednesday.

He went home that night and wrote in his journal — he had started a journal, a new one, in November, after his mother had told him to start asking. The journal was for the asking. It was the place where he kept track of how the asking was going.

He wrote:

Today I took a portrait of a girl named Hannah Park. She said I see things. I have been seeing things my whole life. This is the first time a person I did not know said it back to me as a

thing about me. It felt — and I am writing this so I do not forget — it felt like being looked at the way I have been looking at people. The looking-back is real. I want to do this for the rest of my life. The seeing of other people through a camera, and the being seen as the kid who does it. That is a thing I might want to do. He read what he had written.

He wrote, underneath:

I do not have to give up the wanting to be a teacher. I can be a teacher who also takes photographs. The two are not in competition. I can do both.

He thought about it.

He wrote:

I have been thinking, my whole life, that I had to choose one shape. I do not have to choose one shape. I can be a person of many shapes. The watching is one. The teaching is one. The photography might be one. The being-watched, the being-loved, the being-seen by friends — these are also shapes. They are not in competition. They are the same project. He underlined the last sentence.

He had borrowed it from Jordan. Jordan had told him, two weeks ago, the line he was putting on a Post-it. Those two things are not in competition. They are the same project. Theo had thought about the line all month. He had written it in his journal. He was thinking about it tonight.

He was going to use it for the rest of his life.

He closed the journal.

He fell asleep.

In the morning, he would go to school. He would say hi to Hannah Park in the hall. She would say hi back. They would, slowly, become friends across the rest of senior year. She would not become a love interest — Theo was not, by nature, a kid who fell into senior-year romances — but she would

become a friend. She would become, in some small way, the first friend Theo made after he started asking. She would be evidence that the asking worked. She would be evidence that there

were other people in the world, outside the cohort, who would see him the way the cohort had seen him.

He needed the evidence. He was about to leave for college, where the cohort would not be in the next room. He was about to need the evidence. The evidence was building.

This is what self-compassion looks like for Theo. It does not look like crying in a closet. It looks like signing up for a photography class. It looks like asking Marcus what to do about colleges. It looks like asking Maya for permission he did not actually need. It looks like taking a portrait of a girl he had never spoken to and letting her say you see things. Self-compassion, for Theo, is letting himself be a beginner at something. Letting himself be new. Letting himself be looked at. The cohort was, in their respective ways, all doing this work. Sofia was learning to call somebody. Marcus was learning to tell the smaller truth even when the larger one would have been easier. Jordan was learning to send pages to a grandmother who was scared. Amara was learning to leave a grandmother she loved. Kezia was learning to write a letter and send it. Darius was learning to grieve a dog with help. All of them were doing variations of the same work.

The work, in Part Two, is learning to be soft with yourself in a year when everything is hard.

The cohort, in late January, was getting good at it.

Six more months until graduation.

Six more months of figuring out what they were taking and what they were leaving.

Theo had a camera now.

He was going to take it with him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Conversation with My Mother

— Maya —

I am writing this in my sketchbook because that is where I write the things I cannot show anybody yet.

In February, I had the hardest conversation of my life with my mother. She is doing better. I want to say that first. She has been sober almost two years. She is working. She has an apartment about thirty minutes from where I live with my grandmother. She has been, the last year, becoming somebody I can see once a month. We have coffee. Sometimes we eat lunch. Sometimes she comes over to my grandmother's house for an hour. She and my grandmother are careful with each other. They are kind. They are not close. The closeness, if it comes back, will take years. I have been visiting my mom once a month for the last fourteen months.

She has gotten better. I have gotten older. The visits have been small and steady. We have not, until February, had a big conversation. The big conversation happened because I had to tell her where I was going to college. I had decided. I had gotten in to three of the four schools I applied to. I had picked the one three hours away — the one Ms. Lou had described as the program where I would be seen in the largest way. I had told my grandmother. I had told the cohort. I had told my

father, in a brief one-sided phone call. I had not told my mother. I had not told my mother because telling my mother was going to require a kind of conversation we had not had before. The conversation was: Mom. I am moving three hours away. I am going to a school where I will not be able to drive home every weekend. I am going to be an artist. I am — for the first time in my life — choosing a path that takes me away from you, geographically, in a way that is not driven by your situation but by mine.

I had not known how to say this.

I had been carrying it for two months.

In early February, on a Sunday, I drove the thirty minutes to her apartment. She had made coffee. She had cleaned. She always cleaned

before I came over. The cleaning was, I think, partly about wanting the apartment to look stable for me and partly about her own anxiety. Either way, the apartment was clean.

She made the coffee. We sat at her small kitchen table. She asked me about school. I told her some things. She asked me about my friends. I told her some things. The small talk went on for maybe fifteen minutes. Then I said, Mom. I need to tell you something.

She put her coffee down. She has gotten — in the two years she has been sober — better at putting her coffee down when somebody is about to tell her something. The old version of my mother would have kept holding the coffee like a defense.

She said, Okay, baby. I am listening.

I told her. I told her about the school. I told her about the program. I told her about the funding. I told her about the three hours. I told her that I would not be able to come home every weekend, but I would come home for breaks, and I would visit, and we would call.

She listened.

When I was done, she did not say anything for a long time.

Then she said, Maya. Baby. I am so proud of you.

I had not been expecting that.

I had been expecting — and I am writing this so I do not forget what I was expecting — I had been expecting her to be hurt. I had been expecting her to make it about her. I had been expecting her to handle it well on the surface and then say something that gave her hurt away. That was what the old version of my mother would have done.

She did not do that.

She said, Maya. I want to tell you something. Are you ready?

I said, yes.

She said, I have been — sober now for, in two months, two years. I have been working very hard for two years to become a person who could be in your life. I am going to keep working at it. I am going to keep getting better. I am going to be in your life going forward, in some shape, for the rest of mine.

But I want to say something, Maya. I want to say it now, before you leave for school. So you know, when you go.

You did not raise yourself, but you have done a lot of the work that I should have been doing for you, because I was not able. You have done it with your grandma. You have done it with your friends. You have done it with your teachers. You have done it alone, late at night, when nobody else was there. I have watched it from far away. I am, in part, sober now because I saw, two years ago, what you were doing without me, and I could not bear to keep being the missing piece. I had to come back. I had to do the work to come back.

I am back. Not all the way. Not as much as I want to be. But I am back as much as I am.

Maya. I want you to know that I am not going to come apart when you leave for school. I am going to be okay. The okay is fragile, but it is real. The okay is mine — I built it, with help — and the okay does not depend on you being thirty minutes away. The okay travels. You can go three hours away and the okay will still be here.

I want you to leave without the weight of making sure your mother is okay. I am okay. I am going to be okay. I have a sponsor. I have a therapist. I have a job. I have your grandmother in my life now, in a small careful way, which I did not have for many years. I have you, even when you are far. I have what I need.

Go to the school, baby. Go become the artist. I am cheering for you. I will be here when you come home for breaks. I will visit you at school, if you want, in some quiet way that does not make a thing of it. I will be here.

I started crying.

I had not cried in front of my mother in a long time. I had not, in some real way, allowed myself to cry in front of her, because the crying had always been about her in the old days, and crying in front of her had felt — for years — like rewarding her bad behavior with my tears. I cried in front of her now.

She did not move toward me. She did not try to hug me. She had learned — in her two years of work — that I needed to decide the closeness. She just sat across the table. She let me cry.

When I was done, I said, Mom. Thank you.

She said, Baby.

I said, Mom. I want to tell you something too. Are you ready? She said, yes.

I said:

I have been waiting for you my whole life. The waiting has been the heaviest thing I have carried. I have been waiting for you, in some part of me, since I was four. The waiting has, in the last two years, finally gotten lighter. The waiting got lighter when you got sober. The waiting got lighter when you started showing up. The waiting got lighter every month we had coffee. The waiting is now — She waited for me to finish.

I said, the waiting is now not the main thing about my relationship with you. The main thing is, increasingly, our actual relationship. The Sunday coffees. The phone calls. The Christmas. The actual visits. The waiting is still there. The waiting is going to be there, in some form, forever. But it is not the main thing anymore.

I want you to know that.

I want you to know that I forgive you. For the years. For the missing. For not being able to be there. I am not going to spend the rest of my life being mad at you. I am eighteen. I am going to spend my life being an artist. I am not going to be the kid who carries her mom's bad years into her own twenties. I am going to put it down.

I forgive you.

She started crying.

She tried to say something. She could not, for a minute, get the words out.

Then she said, Maya. Baby. I have been waiting to hear that. I did not know if I would ever hear it. I have been working in the dark, hoping for it.

I said, Mom. Hearing it should not be the reward. Hearing it should be a thing that happens because you have been doing the work. You have been doing the work. Hearing it is — it is part of the result. You did not work to hear it. You worked to

be a different person. Hearing it is just, also, what that work has earned. Both things are true.

She nodded. She wiped her face.

She said, Baby. I love you.

I said, I love you.

We sat for a long time.

When I drove home that afternoon, I cried twice in the car. Once near the highway, and once at a stop sign two blocks from my grandmother's house.

I got home. My grandmother was in the kitchen. I told her about the conversation. She listened. She made me tea. When I was done, she did not say much. She just said, Baby. Today was a big day. I am glad. I love you.

I drank the tea.

I went to my room.

I painted, that night, for five hours. I painted a portrait of my mother. Not the way she had been when I was small. The way she had been in the apartment that morning — sober, putting her coffee down, listening. The face of a person who was working.

The painting was, when I stepped back from it, one of the truest things I had ever painted.

I did not show it to anyone. Not yet.

It is in the basement, on the shelves my grandfather built before he died, with the other paintings.

I might show it to my mother someday.

I might not.

The painting is not the point. The point is that, on a Sunday in February, I had a real conversation with my mother for the first time in eighteen years. The conversation was not perfect. The relationship is not fixed. The waiting is going to come

back, in small ways, for the rest of my life. The dynamic between us is still being built.

But we had a real conversation.

We sat across a table. We told each other true things. We cried. We did not flinch. Neither of us walked out. Neither of us made it about anybody else.

That is a real conversation.

That is a thing many adults — many parents, many children, many people who have been carrying things for forty years — never have. I had one at eighteen.

I am — in some small way — going to be okay.

I am Maya. I am eighteen. I am the daughter of a mother who is doing the work, and the granddaughter of a grandmother who raised me, and

the painter of two hundred pieces in a basement, and a kid who, this Sunday, said I forgive you and meant it.

I am going to art school in August.

I am going to be okay.

— Maya

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mid-Year — The Cohort at Its Lowest

The end of January and the first two weeks of February are, every year, the lowest morale stretch of senior year. The English teachers know this. The counselors know this. The principal, who has been at the school for twenty-six years, knows this. The kids do not know it yet. It is dark out at four-thirty. The sky has been gray for weeks. The college decisions have started rolling in but not all of them — most of the regular-decision results come in March, which means most seniors are stuck in a slow drip of did I get in yet, am I going to get in, which is one of the most exhausting psychological states a person can be in. The cohort, in mid-February, was tired.

Amara was tired. Even though she had her acceptance in hand. She was tired because the school was three months away and she was still emotionally close to her grandmother in a way that made the leaving feel — increasingly, as it got closer — like a real loss instead of an abstract one.

Marcus was tired. He had his state university acceptance. He had been waiting on one other school he had applied to with a long shot. The waiting was the wearing thing.

Sofia was tired. The biopsy scare was behind her, but the months of not sleeping had a long tail. She was, in February,

still recovering from December.

Priya was tired. She had not gotten her Boston school's decision yet. It would come in March. She was, every day, doing the work of not letting the Inner Critic colonize the waiting. The Critic was, this winter, louder than usual. The Critic had been telling Priya all month that the school was not going to accept her, and that she would have to settle for one of her safer schools, and that the settling would prove the Critic had been right about her all along.

Priya was, this winter, very tired.

Darius was tired. Pepper was gone. The house was quiet. Darius had not, in the four months since Pepper, gotten a new dog — his parents had asked, gently, in January, whether he wanted to start looking. He had

said not yet. He needed the empty space for a while.

Jordan was tired. His grandmother in Florida had called every Sunday since their January conversation and had asked, every Sunday, Jordan, are you really sure. Each Sunday call took something out of him. He was earning the trust. The earning was slow.

Maya was tired in a different way. She had had the conversation with her mother. The conversation had done its work. The post-conversation exhaustion was real — the way some conversations leave you, after, with a kind of emotional jet lag that lasts weeks.

Theo was tired. The asking, while it was working, was harder than the watching had been. The watching had been automatic. The asking required deliberate effort every time.

Kezia was tired. She had sent the letter. She had not heard back. She had told herself she did not need to hear back. She still — in some small place — checked the mail every day to see.

All ten of them — including Mia in Pittsburgh — were tired.

This is what Ms. Calloway came in to address on the first Friday of February.

She walked in. She put her bag down. She did not write anything on the board. She sat on the front of the long table where the cohort was assembled, her feet not quite touching the floor.

"Friends," she said. "It is February. You are tired."

The cohort looked at her.

"I know. I have done this with twelve senior classes before yours. February is the hardest month. The thing nobody warned you about, before senior year, is that the year is not actually peaking in May at graduation. The year peaks emotionally — for many of you — in March. From now until then, you are in the worst part of the year. The waiting. The decisions. The grayness. The realization that you are actually leaving, which has, until February, been theoretical."

She paused.

"I want to tell you a few things. Then I am going to give you a small task. Then I am going to let you go."

She looked at us.

"First. The tired you are feeling is real. It is not weakness. It is not laziness. It is what twelve years of building a life and then preparing to

leave it does to a body. The body is tired because the body knows what is coming. The body knows that, in a few months, the daily rhythm of seeing these nine other people every day is going to end. The body is doing some pre-grief work. That is what tired in February is. It is pre-grief." The cohort got very still.

"Second. The toolkit we have built across the years was built for exactly this stretch of the year. The slow breath. The

naming. The toolkit. The trusted adult. The friend. Use them. All of them. February is not the month to muscle through. February is the month to use the tools you have built. I would rather see you cry in my office four times this month than have you push through it alone. I would rather see you text Sofia at midnight than have you not sleep."

"Sofia, I am sorry to put you on the spot."

The cohort laughed. Sofia laughed.

"Third. February is also when the cohort matters most. You have spent twelve years building this group. The group is for February. The group is for the months when each of you is going to be tired in a different way, on a different day, and you can hold each other up. Not as a job. As a fact. Hold each other up."

"Fourth — and this is the small task — I want each of you to write down, on the paper I am about to hand out, the name of one person in this room you have not specifically thanked yet for something they have done for you in the last twelve years. One person. One specific thing. You are going to write the thank-you on the paper, and then you are going to hand the paper to that person at the end of class today."

"This is small. This is fast. This is going to feel awkward. Do it anyway."

She handed out the papers.

The cohort sat with their papers. The room was quieter than usual. Priya wrote her thank-you to Hannah. She wrote: Hannah. You caught my Inner Critic in a hallway in October. You called her by name. I have not thanked you. Thank you. — Priya.

Sofia wrote hers to Amara. She wrote: Amara. In December you sat across from me in the senior lounge and made me tell you about my mom. You did not let me lie about being fine.

You were the call-Amara when I needed one. Thank you. — Sofia.

Marcus wrote his to Theo. He wrote: Theo. You asked me about colleges in a hallway in November. We were ten minutes late to fourth period. I have been thinking about it ever since. Thank you for being the one who asked. — Marcus.

Amara wrote hers to Sofia. She wrote: Sof. In ninth grade, when I had the first really hard week at high school, you stood next to me at my locker for ten minutes and did not say anything and let me cry. I have not said thank you. Thank you. — Amara.

Maya wrote hers to Marcus. She wrote: Marcus. When I read my story out loud in third grade, you were the one who started the clap. I have not, in nine years, thanked you for that. Thank you. I think about it. — Maya. Jordan wrote his to Maya. He wrote: Maya. You read three of my short stories in junior year that I had not shown anyone. You did not laugh. You did not flinch. You said one thing that I have written down somewhere. You said "Jordan, you are doing the thing you do well." Thank you. — Jordan.

Darius wrote his to Sofia. He wrote: Sof. You came over the day after Pepper died and you did not say anything that was supposed to make me feel better. You just sat in the kitchen with me. You knew. Thank you. — Darius.

Theo wrote his to Hannah. He wrote, after a long pause: Hannah. We were not, for most of school, close. In photography class you said "Theo, you see things." I had been waiting to hear that for eighteen years. Thank you. — Theo. (Hannah Park was not in the cohort, but she was the person Theo wanted to thank, and Ms. Calloway, when she had given the assignment, had not strictly limited it to the cohort. Theo handed the note to Hannah Park later that afternoon, in

photography class. She read it. She did not say anything. She put it in her notebook and looked at him with a face that meant I see you. Theo would carry that face with him for the rest of his life.)

Kezia wrote hers to Marcus. She wrote: Marcus. When we were in seventh grade, you sat with me at lunch on a day when nobody else did, and you did not ask why I was sitting alone. You just sat. You do not even probably remember. I do. Thank you. — Kezia.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, did not get to do the assignment in class. But Sofia, who had been texting Mia about February exhaustion all week, texted Mia the assignment that afternoon. Mia did it. Mia wrote a thank-you to Sofia. Sof. You have been writing me letters since I moved

away nine years ago. You are the longest friendship I have ever had. You did the work of being my friend from far away when most kids would have let it lapse. Thank you. — Mi.

Sofia read Mia's text that evening.

Sofia cried, at home, alone, in her room.

Sofia, having recovered from December, cried in February in a much smaller, much sweeter way.

The cohort, that day, exchanged ten thank-you notes.

Each of the kids carried, that night and for many nights after, the thank-you they had received. The thank-you was — and Ms. Calloway had known this in advance, which is why she had assigned it — a kind of evidence. Evidence that the twelve years had been worth something. Evidence that they had, in fact, been kind to each other in specific ways across specific moments. Evidence that the small things they had done had been noticed.

February, in the cohort, got a little less tired after that day. The tiredness was still there. The grayness was still there. The

waiting was still there. But the cohort had — for one afternoon, on the first Friday of February — given each other proof that the twelve years had counted. This is what Ms. Calloway did, every February, for thirteen years. This is one of the reasons the cohort, when they think about Ms. Calloway in twenty years, will not remember any specific lesson. They will remember the feeling of the room. They will remember being seen. They will remember the assignment in February that turned out to be the small thing that got them through.

Ms. Calloway, who has been doing this for thirty years, knows what she is doing.

The cohort, who has been receiving it for twelve years, is starting to know what they have been receiving.

This is Part Two.

Part Two ends in the second week of February with ten kids who are tired but slightly less so.

Part Three starts in March.

Part Three is about forgiving — and not forgiving — the people who shaped them.

It is going to be the hardest part of the book.

It is also going to be the part where the cohort — and the readers — most fully figure out what they are bringing into the rest of their lives. — J.A.R., in the back of the room, watching (Just kidding. J.A.R. is not in the room. The narrator is gone. But the narrator, for one moment in the last sentence of Part Two, allowed himself a small visible re-emergence to say: yes. The cohort is doing the work. The architecture is holding.)

(Now back to the kids.)

PART THREE



Empathy & Forgiving Others

*How do I forgive — and not forgive — the
people who shaped me, before I leave?*

March through April. The decision months. The

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Conversation with My Father

— Darius —

In the second week of March, I sat down with my dad for the first conversation we have ever had where I was the one running it. I have, my whole life, been the kid in a room with my dad. He has been the dad in a room with me. The roles have been clear. He is older. He knows things. I ask. He answers. He gives. I receive. That has been our shape since I was small.

The shape has been more equal in the last few years. Since the work he and I started doing in sixth grade — when I had finally told him, in pieces over many months, what it had been like to be his son when he was working two jobs and tired and short with me — the shape has been adjusting. He has, since I was twelve, been trying to be a different kind of father. He has been doing therapy. He has been reading. He has been showing up to my games. He has, in many real ways, become a better dad than the one he was when I was small.

I have, in pieces over those years, been forgiving him. The forgiveness has not been a single conversation. It has been many small ones. It has been six years of small ones.

This March conversation was something different.

This was the conversation where I told him the thing I had not yet, in six years of small conversations, told him.

I had been carrying it for a long time.

He came home from work on a Tuesday. He sat in his chair in the living room with a beer. He was tired. He is always tired on Tuesdays — Tuesdays are his long days. He turned on a basketball game with the sound down. He was, in his way, recovering.

I came in. I sat on the couch across from his chair. I did not turn on my phone. I did not open a book. I just sat.

He noticed.

He turned the basketball game off.

He said, Darius. You okay?

I said, Dad. I want to talk to you about something. Can you do that right now? If you are too tired we can do it later.

He looked at me for a second. He put the beer down.

He said, no, son. Let's do it now.

I had been practicing this conversation in my head for a week. I had told Ms. Calloway I was going to have it. She had said, Darius, before you have it, ask yourself one question. What is the conversation actually for. Are you trying to get something from your dad, or are you trying to give him something. Be honest with yourself about which one it is. The conversation will go better if you know.

I had thought about it for a few days.

I had concluded: I am trying to give him something. I am about to leave for college. He has been a different father for the last six years. He has earned a kind of recognition I have not, until now, given him in plain language. I want to give him the recognition before I leave. I want him to have it in his ears for the rest of his life. The conversation is for him. It is also for me, but it is for him first.

I said:

Dad. I want to tell you something. I have been thinking about how to say it for a while. I want to say it now, before I leave for college, while we are still in the same house. Will you listen?

He said, yes, son.

I said:

Dad. I have been your son for almost eighteen years. The first ten years were hard. I am going to be honest about that. You were working two jobs. You were tired. You were short with us. You were not, in some real ways, available. I am not going to pretend that part did not happen. The last six years, since I was twelve and we had the first hard talk, have been different. You have been showing up. You have been making time. You have been at every game. You have learned, slowly, how to ask me questions and listen to the answers. You have been doing the work. I have been watching.

He nodded. He did not say anything.

Dad. I want to tell you — out loud, in this room, before I leave — that I see you doing the work. I have seen it for six years. I have not, until tonight, said it plain.

You have done what most fathers do not do. You have looked at the kind of dad you were when I was small, and you have said, "I am going to be a different one," and you have actually done it. You did not just promise to be different. You have, in the way you make breakfast, in the way you ask about school, in the way you sit in this chair when I am upset, become a different person.

That is real. That is, I think, one of the most real things I have ever watched a human being do.

I paused.

He was looking at me. He was — and I had not been expecting this — he was crying. Small careful tears that he was trying not to let me see. I said:

Dad. I forgive you. For the early years. For all of it. I have been forgiving you for six years, in pieces. Tonight, I am giving you the whole thing. I forgive you. I am not carrying any of it with me to college. I am leaving it here, in this room, on the floor between us. You are not carrying it either. We are both putting it down. We are done. Dad. I love you. I am proud of you. I am proud of you in a way I do not think a son is supposed to say to a father, but I am eighteen and I am about to leave, and I want you to know.

I stopped.

He was crying. He was not even trying to hide it anymore. He was crying with both his hands on his face.

I got up. I sat on the arm of his chair. I put my hand on his shoulder. He said, after a long time, Darius. Son. I am — I am sorry. For all of it. I have been sorry for a long time and I have not known how to say it. I said, Dad. I know. I have known you were sorry. The sorry has been in everything you have done for six years. You did not have to say it. You showed it.

He cried more.

I sat next to him. I did not say anything. I just kept my hand on his shoulder.

After a while, he said, son. Thank you. For saying that. I did not — I did not know I needed to hear it until you said it. I am — I am very glad you said it.

I said, Dad. I am glad I said it too.

He said, I love you, son.

I said, I love you, Dad.

We sat for a long time. The basketball game was off. The room was quiet.

After maybe twenty minutes, he said, Darius. Can I tell you something?

I said, yes.

He said:

Son. My father — your grandfather, who you only knew when he was old and quiet — was not a man who said the things you just said to me. My father was a man who worked hard, who provided, who did not say much. He died when I was twenty-six. He died without ever telling me he was proud of me. Not once. I am not telling you this to make you feel sorry for me. I am telling you because — when I was younger, before I had you and your sister, I made a promise to myself that I was going to tell my kids that I was proud of them. I have, I think, told you that. I hope I have. But the rest of it — the I am proud of you in the bigger way, the I see you in the bigger way — I have been trying to figure out how to give you, and I have not quite known how.

I want to say it now. I am proud of you, son. I am proud of you in a way I would have loved my own father to be proud of me. I see you. I have been watching you for eighteen years. You are — you are a better young man than I was at your age. You are better than I was at thirty. You are doing things, at eighteen, that I am still trying to learn at fifty-three. I have been watching, and I have been learning from you, even though I am the dad and you are the son. That is the truth.

I love you. I am very glad you are my son.

I cried.

I had not been expecting that either.

I cried sitting on the arm of his chair, with my hand still on his shoulder.

He cried.

We were both crying, two men in a living room with the TV off, in a way that neither of us, three years ago, would have known how to do. This is what eighteen years of work looks like.

This is what forgiving the people who shaped you looks like, when the people who shaped you have done the work to deserve the forgiveness. I want to be honest about that, because not everybody's parents do the work. Some kids in this cohort — not all of them, but some — have had to figure out how to forgive parents who never did, and will never do, the work my dad did. That kind of forgiveness is a different shape. It is the kind Kezia did, in November, when she wrote the letter. It is the kind that is for the kid, not the parent. It is harder, in some ways, because there is no reciprocation to receive.

My forgiveness was the easier kind. My dad had earned it. He had been working toward it for six years. He had been making it possible for me to forgive him, by becoming a person who could be forgiven. I want to say one thing about that, because I think it matters. A parent who is doing the work makes it easier for the kid to forgive. That is real. That is one of the ways the work pays off. The work is not just for the parent. The work is also a gift to the kid — a clearing of the road, so that the kid does not have to carry the weight of the old version of the parent forever.

My dad has, by doing six years of work, made it possible for me to walk into adulthood without that weight.

That is the most generous thing he could have done for me.

Most parents do not do this. Most parents — even loving ones, even good ones — do not have the courage, or the support, or the awareness, to look at the kind of parent they were and decide to be a different one. My dad did. He had

help. He had a therapist. He had my mother, who pushed him. He had the cohort's adults, in some indirect way, who modeled what kind adulthood could look like.

But he is the one who did the work.

He is the one who gets the credit.

He is the one I am sitting on the arm of the chair with tonight. I am Darius Williams. I am eighteen years old. My dog Pepper died in October. I lost something. My father, in March, gave me something back — a kind of clarity about who he is and who I am to him. The trade was not a fair trade. Pepper was Pepper. I will miss her my whole life. But the room tonight is not empty. The room tonight has my father in it, crying quietly in a chair, with my hand on his shoulder.

That is the room I am leaving.

That is the room I am taking with me.

The cohort is doing similar work in their own rooms this March. Marcus is having his own version with his own dad. Maya has had hers, in February, with her mom. Kezia has done hers, in letter form, with the person who could not do the work the way my dad did. Theo is going to have one with his mother before he leaves. Sofia and Priya and Amara and Jordan are doing smaller versions, in pieces, throughout the spring. We are all, in March of senior year, figuring out what we are forgiving and what we are not forgiving and what we are taking with us and what we are leaving on the floor.

We are doing it because Ms. Calloway taught us, in third grade, that forgiveness and trust are different. That forgiveness is inside us. That trust is between us. That sometimes the work is both, and sometimes it is only one, and either way the work is real.

We learned it at nine.

We are doing it at eighteen.

The work is paying off.

— Darius

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Decision

The email came on a Friday afternoon in the third week of March. Priya was at home. She had gotten home from school twenty minutes earlier. She was in her room. Hannah was in the next room — Hannah had come over after school the way Hannah had come over after school once a week since they were ten — and Hannah was on Priya's bed, on her phone, half-watching a video.

Priya was at her desk. Her laptop was open. She was, in some part of her, doing chemistry homework. She was, in another part of her, refreshing the email tab every three minutes.

The college had said it would release decisions at four p.m. Eastern. It was 3:58.

At 4:01, the email arrived.

Priya saw it in her inbox. The subject line was the school's name and Decision Available. Her hands started shaking. She had been waiting for this moment since November, when she had submitted the early action application. The school had deferred her in December. She had been waiting since December for the regular decision. Three months. The waiting had been a constant low-grade hum under everything she had done since winter break.

She did not open the email.

She turned around in her chair.

She said, Hannah.

Hannah looked up.

Priya said, it is here.

Hannah sat up. She put the phone down. She said, open it.

Priya said, I cannot open it. You open it.

Hannah said, Priya. I cannot open your college decision.
That is yours. You open it.

Priya said, Hannah. Please.

Hannah looked at her for a second. Then she got up and came over to the desk. She sat next to Priya. She said, okay.
We are going to do this

together. I am going to be right here. You are going to click the link. We are going to read it together. Okay?

Priya nodded.

She clicked the link.

The page loaded.

The page said Dear Priya, we are sorry to inform you.

Priya read it. She read it again. She read it a third time. The words kept being the same words. They were the words she had been afraid of since November. The school had said no.

She did not cry, at first. She just sat. She sat with her hand on the trackpad and the cursor blinking and the message saying we are sorry to inform you in the kind formal language admissions offices use. Hannah read it too.

Hannah said, Priya.

Priya did not say anything.

Hannah said, Priya, look at me.

Priya looked at her.

Hannah said, Priya. This is one school. This is one no. This is not about you.

Priya started crying.

Hannah hugged her.

Priya cried for maybe ten minutes. Hannah did not move. Hannah did not say anything. Hannah just held her.

When Priya could talk, she said:

Hannah. The Critic is going to use this. She is going to use this for a long time. She is going to say this is proof.

Hannah said, I know.

Priya said, I have been telling her to shut up about this for two years. About this exact thing. I told her, in November, that whatever they decided was not going to be a verdict on me. I told her that in February when she started in. I told her that yesterday morning. And now they have said no, and she is going to be the I told you so voice for the rest of senior year.

Hannah said, Priya. Listen to me.

Priya said, I am listening.

Hannah said:

Priya. The Critic gets to have this for one day. One day. We are going to give it to her. We are going to cry. We are going to be sad. We are going to let her have her I told you so victory lap. We are going to let her run around for a few hours.

Then, tomorrow, we are going to start the work of catching her on this one. Because she is going to try to make this evidence for everything else she has ever told you about yourself. That you are not smart. That you are a fraud. That the other schools that have said yes only said yes because they did not look carefully. That your real worth has just been confirmed by the one school you wanted most.

She is going to do all of that. She is going to do it for weeks. She is going to try to do it for the rest of your life.

We are going to catch her every time. Me. You. Sofia. Marcus. Amara. Hannah Park, even, the new girl in photography, who I do not know but who you can probably tell about this if you want to widen the circle. We are going to

catch her. We have been catching her for ten years. We are going to catch her on this one too.

Priya cried more.

She said, Hannah. Thank you.

Hannah said, Priya. I love you.

Priya said, I love you, Hannah.

They sat at the desk for a long time.

Eventually Hannah said, Pri, are you going to call your parents. Priya said, yes.

Hannah said, I am going to stay. I am going to be here when you call. I am not going to leave.

Priya called her mother first. Her mother was at work. Her mother picked up on the second ring. Priya said, Mom. The school said no. Her mother said, baby. Baby. I am so sorry. I am so sorry. Come home — you are home? Okay. I am coming home. I am leaving work now. Her mother came home twenty minutes later. Her father came home thirty minutes after that. Her mother had texted him on her way home. The three of them sat in the living room — Hannah was there too, because Hannah had insisted on staying — and her parents took turns saying the kind of things parents say in these moments. You are going to

be okay. The school did not see you the way we see you. You have other schools. We are proud of you. We love you.

Priya listened.

The Critic was, by 6 p.m., already in the back of Priya's head saying all of this is the parents-doing-their-job version of consolation. Real recognition would have come from the school. The parents are biased. The parents have to say this. The truth is they are disappointed too. They are just hiding it.

Priya caught the Critic.

She said, in her head, no. That is the Critic. That is not true. My parents are real. Their disappointment is in proportion. They love me. The love is not a job. They are not lying.

The Critic got quiet for a minute.

The Critic came back ten minutes later with a new line. They are pretending it is fine because they do not want you to feel worse. They are managing you.

Priya caught the Critic again.

She said, in her head, the parents who taught me to be a person who can read situations are not managing me. They are loving me. I can tell the difference.

The Critic, for the first time that night, went quiet for longer. Priya, sitting on the couch between her mother and her father, with Hannah across from them, breathed.

She breathed for a long time.

At dinner, her mother made her favorite food. Her father told a story about a time he had not gotten into a graduate program he had wanted, in his twenties, and how that not-getting had led him to a different program where he had met Priya's mother. He told the story not as a life lesson — her father was not the life lesson kind of father — but as a small piece of evidence that the closed door is sometimes part of a different opened door.

Priya laughed a little, for the first time since 4:01.

After dinner, she called Sofia.

Sofia, who had spent half a decade being the call-Sofia kid, was on the other end of the line for forty-five minutes. Sofia did the listening Sofia does. Sofia said, at the end, Priya. I am going to tell you something. Are

you ready?

Priya said, yes.

Sofia said:

The school you really wanted has just made the wrong call. They have just turned down a kid who would have made their freshman class better. That is on them, not on you. You are going to go to one of the other schools that has said yes, and you are going to be there in August, and the school you go to is going to get the version of you who has — for the rest of her life — the small private knowledge that one school said no, and that she went and did the work anyway.

The kid who is going to be in Boston in August is going to be a stronger kid for this. Not because the Critic is right. Because the Critic is wrong, and the catching of her on this one is going to make you faster at catching her on all the future ones.

This is one of the hardest gifts you have ever been given. I am not going to call it a gift right now. I am going to call it what it is — a hard thing. But in three years you will look back and you will see it differently. I love you. Get some sleep. Text me in the morning.

Priya said, Sof. Thank you. I love you.

She hung up.

She went to bed.

She did not sleep well. She lay there for hours. The Critic kept trying to come back with new versions of the I told you so. Priya kept catching her. The catching was tiring. The tiring was real. Priya had not slept well in two months because of waiting and now she was not going to sleep well for two more because of the processing. That was the work. The work did not care if you were tired.

In the morning, she opened the laptop again.

She did not look at the rejection email.

She looked at the two acceptance emails she had already received — one from a state school, one from a smaller liberal

arts college that had a strong creative writing department and that, when she had visited last summer, had felt — quietly — like a place she could be a different version of herself.

She looked at the liberal arts college's email for a long time.

She thought — okay. The Boston school does not want me. This school wants me.

She thought — and the Critic flinched a little here, the way she does — I have been carrying the Boston dream for two years. I am going to put it down. I am going to put it down on the floor tonight. I am going to walk into the liberal arts college's email and I am going to read it like the school I am going to.

She read it.

The school had offered her substantial financial aid. The school had also flagged her, in the email, for a small first-year honors program she would be invited to apply to.

She read the email again.

She thought — okay. Okay. This is going to be okay.

She did not, in the morning of the day after, feel like it was going to be okay. The morning of the day after was still raw. The Critic was still loud. The Boston dream was still in her head as the thing she had wanted. But she had — she now realized — a tool the Critic did not. She had the practice of catching the Critic. The practice had been built across ten years. The practice was going to work on this one. The practice was going to work on every future one. The Critic was going to keep showing up for the rest of her life. The practice was going to keep catching her. The catching, eventually, would be faster than the showing up. The Critic would, by the time Priya was thirty, be quieter than she had ever been. That was the lesson.

That was the lesson Ms. Calloway had given Priya in third grade, when Priya had been nine and had cried in a bathroom stall and had come out with three sentences in her pocket.

The three sentences were still in Priya's pocket today, ten years later, in a slightly different form.

This is loud. This is the Critic. This is not true.

Priya wrote, on a Post-it, that morning:

One school said no. Other schools said yes. The Critic is going to try to make this evidence. The Critic is not the evidence. The next four years are the evidence. I am going to live them.

She put the Post-it on her bathroom mirror.

She got dressed.

She went to school.

She told Marcus and Amara and Sofia, in the senior lounge during their shared free block. They listened. They did not say the wrong things. They were the cohort. They had been the cohort for twelve years. They knew what to say.

Marcus said, after a while, Priya. I want to tell you something. Are you ready?

Priya said, yes.

Marcus said, Priya, you are going to be the best version of yourself at whatever school you go to. Not because of the school. Because of you. The school is the building. You are the person who walks into the building. The person who walks in matters more than the building. Priya said, thank you, Marcus.

He said, I have been waiting to use that one. I have been working on it for a week.

Priya laughed.

The laughing was the first real laugh of the day after.

The day after the day after was a little easier.

The Critic was still there. She would always be there. But she was — already, twenty-four hours in — a little quieter than she had been the night the rejection came.

Priya was going to be okay.

She was going to go to the liberal arts college in August.

She was going to study English and possibly minor in creative writing or possibly minor in public policy, like Amara was thinking of doing — there were ideas to explore.

She was going to write to Mia, who had been her pen pal correspondent in pieces over the years. Mia, in Pittsburgh, was getting her own decisions in March. Priya wanted to know what Mia was doing. She was going to walk into Room 207 the next Monday and Ms.

Calloway, who knew, was going to nod at her and Priya was going to nod back. The cohort was going to keep going.

The Critic was loud.

The Critic was not true.

The Critic was small.

Priya was Priya. She was bigger than the Critic. She had always been bigger than the Critic. She just had to keep remembering.

The Post-it on the bathroom mirror was going to help with the remembering for the rest of senior year.

She was going to take it with her in August. It was going to go on the bathroom mirror of her dorm room.

She was going to keep remembering.

That is what Priya is.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Letter Back

The letter came in late March.

Kezia had stopped checking the mail every day in February. She had told herself, in November when she had sent her letter, that she was not writing in order to receive a response. The letter had been for the putting-it-down. She had said this to her grandmother. She had said it to Dr. Ramirez. She had said it to Sofia, who had been the cohort member she had told about the letter. She had said it, several times, to herself. She had still, secretly, been checking the mail every day from November through January.

By February she had stopped.

She had not, by the time the letter came, been thinking about it for almost two months.

She came home from school on a Tuesday in late March. Her grandmother was in the kitchen. There was an envelope on the counter. Her grandmother had set it there, the way her grandmother set important mail on the counter, in the corner where Kezia would see it. Kezia saw it.

She knew, immediately, who it was from. The handwriting on the envelope was the handwriting that had been on the corner of her grandmother's letters for years. She had only seen it from a distance. She had not, in five years, opened anything addressed to her in this handwriting. The handwriting was — she now realized, looking at it —

surprisingly tidy. The handwriting of a person who had been working on themselves.

She picked up the envelope.

Her grandmother said, baby. I will be in the next room. Take your time.

Kezia took the envelope upstairs.

She sat on her bed.

She did not open it for a while.

She thought about it. She thought about the fact that she had told herself, in November, that she did not need a response. She thought about the fact that she had — in some real way — wanted a response anyway. She thought about the gap between what I told myself I wanted and what I actually wanted. The gap was, she now realized, a thing to be honest about. A grown-up version of herself would acknowledge the gap rather than pretend it had not existed.

She acknowledged it.

She thought, in her head, I told myself I did not need a response. That was true and not true. The true part was — I would have been okay without one. The not-true part was — I had been hoping for one. The hoping does not mean the letter I sent was not the right letter. It just means I am a person, and people hope.

She breathed.

She opened the envelope.

The letter was three pages, handwritten, on plain white paper. The tidy handwriting filled the pages. She read it.

The letter did several things.

It thanked her, first, for writing.

It said, in the second paragraph, that the writer had been hoping to hear from Kezia directly — in this kind of way, with this kind of language — for many years, and had not known

whether she would ever hear it. The writer said that receiving the letter had been the single most important piece of mail the writer had ever received in their life. It said, in the third paragraph, that the writer had read the letter many times.

It said, in the fourth paragraph, that the writer wanted Kezia to know — and this was the line Kezia would remember for the rest of her life — that the writer accepted Kezia's forgiveness as a gift, accepted Kezia's choice not to invite the writer back in as a clean decision, and was not going to ask for anything more. The writer wrote, in tidy careful letters: Kezia, I am not asking for anything more. The letter you wrote is what I needed. Anything else would be a thing I had not earned. I do not need to earn anything more. The forgiveness was enough.

The letter said, in the fifth paragraph, that the writer hoped Kezia would have a wonderful senior year. That the writer hoped Kezia would go to the community college nursing pathway and become the kind of

nurse she wanted to become. That the writer had heard, from the grandmother in their occasional correspondence, that Kezia was going into pediatric nursing — and the writer wanted to say that this seemed exactly right. The writer wrote: the kids you will work with will be lucky. The kind of adult you have become, in spite of how you started, is the kind of adult a kid in a hospital needs.

The letter ended with: I love you. I have loved you for as long as I have known about you. I am sorry, in the bigger way, for the things I cannot fix. I am glad — grateful, even — that you have built the life you have built. Be well. —

The signature was the writer's name. Kezia did not need to write the name down. The name was familiar.

Kezia read the letter three times.

She did not cry, at first. She just sat. She held the letter in her hand. She looked at it. She turned the pages.

After maybe ten minutes, she folded the letter, put it back in the envelope, and brought it downstairs.

Her grandmother was at the kitchen table, drinking tea.

Kezia sat down across from her.

She handed the letter to her grandmother.

Her grandmother read it. Slowly. Carefully. The way her grandmother read everything.

When her grandmother was done, she folded the letter and put it back in the envelope and looked at Kezia.

She said, baby. What do you feel.

Kezia thought for a long time.

She said, grandma. I feel — surprised. I had told myself I did not need a response. I was telling myself that to protect me, in case there was no response. There is a response. The response is — it is the response I would have written if I had been the one who got my letter.

Her grandmother nodded.

Kezia said, the response is not asking for anything. The response is just — it is just thanking me. It is just receiving the forgiveness and not trying to use it for anything else. It is the most — it is the most respectful version of a response I could have hoped for.

Her grandmother nodded.

Kezia said, grandma. I think — I think the work that this person has been doing for ten years is real. I think the response is evidence. The response is the kind of letter only somebody who has done the work could write. A person who had not done the work would have asked for more. Would have used the forgiveness as an opening. Would have tried to push the door — that I told them I was leaving unlocked but

not open — would have tried to push it open. The letter does not push.

Her grandmother said, yes baby. That is what I see too.

Kezia said, grandma. What do I do.

Her grandmother said, baby. You do not have to do anything. The response is — the response is its own thing. You wrote your letter. The other person wrote theirs. The exchange is complete. You do not have to respond. You can. You do not have to. It is up to you.

Kezia thought about it.

She said, grandma. I am not going to respond. Not now. Maybe not ever. Maybe in a few years. The exchange is — I think — exactly right where it is. The door is unlocked. The door is not open. The door, after this letter, is — I think — a little easier to consider opening, someday. But not now. Now I am eighteen. Now I am going to college. Now I am going to be a nurse.

Her grandmother said, baby. I think that is the right call.

Kezia said, grandma. I want to ask you something.

Her grandmother said, yes.

Kezia said, are you going to write back? In your own correspondence? Her grandmother said, yes. I think I will. I will write a short letter. I will say — I will say something like I read the letter you wrote to Kezia. It was the right letter. Thank you for writing it. That is what I will say. I will not say more. I will not, in my own correspondence, do anything more than acknowledge.

Kezia said, grandma. Thank you. For being — for being who you have been.

Her grandmother said, baby. I love you.

They drank tea.

Kezia, that night, did something she had not done in a long time. She wrote in her journal.

She wrote:

Today the letter back came. The letter back was the right letter. The person who wrote it has done the work. They have done it in the dark. They have done it without ever knowing if I would write to them. They did the work because it was the right thing to do, not because of any reward. The reward — my letter — only came because of the work. The work was first. The reward second.

I want to remember this, for the rest of my life. The thing I am going to remember is: people can change. Even people who did very bad things. Some of them do change. The change is slow and quiet and does not, usually, come with applause. The change happens in rooms most of us do not see. It happens in therapy groups and AA meetings and church basements and the kitchens of people who are doing the dishes alone and thinking about who they have been.

I am going to be a nurse. I am going to see a lot of people in hospitals. Some of them will be parents who have done bad things to their kids. Some of them will be kids who have been hurt by parents who did bad things. Some of them will be people who are mid-way through changing — who are sober for two months, who are in their third week of therapy, who are doing the work in the dark.

I am going to remember, when I see them, that change is real. That it is slow. That it sometimes succeeds. That the work is worth witnessing. That a nurse, sometimes, gets to be part of the witnessing.

I have been a witness, in my own small life, to one person changing. I have been seeing it for ten years from the distance my grandmother kept between us. I have seen it in the

handwriting on the corner of letters. I have seen it in the changing tone over time. I have seen it in tonight's response — in the not-asking, in the receiving without grasping. I am, at eighteen, the witness to one person changing.

That is — and I am writing this so I do not forget — that is a useful thing to have witnessed. It is going to shape the rest of my life. It is going to shape the kind of nurse I become.

Some people change. Slowly. With help. In the dark.

This is a thing I now believe, in my body, because I have watched it. She closed the journal.

She slept.

In the morning, she went to school. She did not tell the cohort, at first, about the letter. The cohort knew about her November letter. They had

been kind about it. They had asked, in February, if she had heard anything. She had said no. She had been honest at the time.

In April, she told Sofia first. Sofia listened. Sofia did not say much. Sofia gave Kezia a long hug at the end of the conversation.

She told Amara second.

She told Marcus third.

She did not tell the whole cohort. The letter was, in some real way, private. It was a thing between her and her grandmother and one other person. The cohort did not need to know all of it.

But the three people she told held it for her. The way the cohort had held many things for many people, for many years. The holding was the cohort's job.

Kezia, in March of senior year, had been changed by a letter she had not expected to receive.

She was going to graduate in June.

She was going to start the nursing pathway in August.

She was going to be a nurse.

She was, in some real way, ready.

The cohort, watching, was proud of her.

The cohort would be proud of her for the rest of her life.

That is the thing about cohorts. They keep being proud of you. From far away. Across years. They hold you in their heads when you are not in their rooms. They keep being your people.

Kezia was — and she was going to discover this slowly over the next decade — going to be one of the cohort's people forever.

She was Kezia.

She had written a letter.

She had received one back.

She had been changed.

She was ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Cohort Dinner

— Amara —

In April, we had a dinner.

We had been doing dinners, occasionally, for about a year — Sofia would announce one in the group chat and most of us would show up to somebody's basement or somebody's backyard or, in the winter, the back room of the diner on Cleveland Avenue that lets seniors hang out late if there are not other customers.

This dinner was different.

This dinner was the one where Sofia had said, in the group chat in early March, Hey friends. I think we need to do one before the decisions get crazy. Before everybody knows where they are going. Before we start having goodbye energy. April. My basement. I will cook.

We had all said yes.

We had all known what she meant. The dinner was for the version of the cohort before the where are you going conversations got constant. The dinner was for being us, one more time, in our adolescent shape, before the senior-year shape began turning into the leaving-shape. We did the dinner on a Saturday in mid-April.

Sofia cooked. Her mom had taught her to make a particular pasta — a vodka sauce that we had all eaten at Sofia's house a hundred times across twelve years. The sauce was a cohort

food. We had eaten it at Sofia's seventh birthday party in second grade. We had eaten it at the cohort sleepover in fifth grade. We had eaten it at the graduation from middle school dinner Sofia's mom had hosted for the ten of us in eighth grade. The sauce was the cohort's sauce.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, could not be there. But Sofia had texted Mia about the dinner the day before and Mia had asked Sofia to make a video at some point and send it to her. Sofia had said yes.

We were nine in Sofia's basement.

Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Kezia.

Sofia's basement was the basement she had hosted us in since we were small. It had not changed much. The same green couch. The same beanbags. The same small table where you could eat if you wanted to sit. The same wall full of family photos. The same low ceiling. We had been eight in this basement, ten in this basement, twelve in this basement. Sometimes nine of us. Sometimes ten, when Mia was still here. Sometimes just five of us, when the others were busy.

We had been here a lot.

We ate. We talked. We laughed. The early part of the dinner was light — who was waiting on which school, who had heard back, who had committed. Priya had committed to the liberal arts college. Amara had committed to the east-coast college. Marcus to the state university. Maya to the art school. Theo had committed to the state university as well. Jordan to the gap year. Darius to a state college closer to home with a sports management program. Sofia to a university with a strong psychology program — she had decided, in March, to stay close to home for one year and then transfer if she wanted; she wanted, she had explained, to be near her mom for the

first year given the biopsy and given everything. Kezia to the community college nursing pathway. We were going to be scattered.

We were going to be: Boston (Priya was the only one going east, technically — Theo had ended up choosing the state university for cost reasons), an east-coast small town (Amara), Pittsburgh (Mia, still), three hours away at art school (Maya), the state university an hour away (Marcus, Theo), the city near home (Sofia, Darius, Kezia, Jordan). We were going to be — most of us — within a half day's drive of each other for the first year.

This had not been intentional. This was just how the chips had fallen. It also was not nothing.

Marcus said it first.

He said, guys, do we realize that most of us are going to be within driving distance of each other for the first year.

Everybody looked around.

Sofia said, we did kind of land that way, didn't we.

Jordan said, I think it was unconscious. I think we all picked schools that we could come back to each other from.

Maya said, I am three hours away. I am still in driving distance. Amara said, I am the farthest. I am the only one in another state. Priya said, I am farther than Amara. Boston is farther.

Amara said, Pri. You are six hundred miles east. I am four hundred miles east. We are both far. Mia is the farthest. Pittsburgh is closer than both of us, but Mia has been the farthest for nine years.

Sofia said, guys. Can we — can we make a thing? Can we, like, formalize something?

Marcus said, yes.

Sofia said, I am thinking — I am thinking we set a date for next summer. August. The summer between freshman and sophomore year. We all come back here. All ten of us, including Mia. We do this dinner again. Same basement. Same sauce.

Everybody got quiet.

Then Theo said, yes.

Then Darius said, yes.

Then Maya said, yes.

Then everybody said yes.

Jordan said, we should pick a date. Like, an actual date.

Sofia said, August 14th. Of next year.

Marcus said — and I saw his face change, the way his face changes when something quiet happens inside him — Marcus said, yes. August 14th.

The cohort did not know about August 14th. Marcus had never told anybody. The cohort thought it was just a random date Sofia had picked. Marcus, sitting on the green couch, made eye contact with me for a second.

I knew about August 14th.

I had known about August 14th since we were eight.

I gave him the small nod.

He gave me the small nod back.

He did not tell anybody, then or later, that the date Sofia had picked at random had been, since he was six, the most important date in his year. The cohort had — without knowing — given Marcus a new layer of meaning to the date. August 14th was now both the Aaliyah date and the

cohort dinner date. The two were stacked on top of each other. Marcus would, for the rest of his life, mark August 14th every year. Most years he would be at the cohort dinner. Some years, when life made it impossible, he would mark it some

other way — a phone call to Aaliyah, a small thing he did alone. The August 14th in his head was going to be a layered thing for the rest of his life. The Aaliyah was always going to be there. The cohort would be added.

I am writing this in my journal weeks later because I want to remember it.

Sofia's basement, in April of senior year, with nine of us on the green couch and the beanbags, eating pasta, picking a date.

We made a video for Mia. Sofia held the phone. We all said Mi. August 14th. Save the date. Your seat is reserved.

Mia texted back, that night, yes. I am there. I am buying the ticket now. August 14th. I will be in the basement.

It was a small commitment.

It was also — and I am writing this so I do not forget — it was a small commitment that, in some real way, made the leaving feel less terminal. The cohort was not, in fact, scattering forever. The cohort was scattering, for a year, with a return date on the calendar. The return date was the architecture.

Architecture is what gets you through.

Sofia knew this. She had picked August 14th. She had — at seventeen — invented a tradition in real time.

She is going to be a therapist. She is going to invent architecture for hundreds of people, over the course of her career. She is going to be very good at it.

Tonight, in her basement, she had invented architecture for the cohort.

After dinner, we sat on the floor. Somebody — I think Theo — said, guys. Can we do a thing.

Everybody said yes.

Theo said, I want to go around the room. I want everybody to say one thing they want to leave behind, one thing they want to take with them, and one thing they are excited about. Three sentences. Each. Sofia said, Theo, you are running the cohort dinner now. Look at you.

Everybody laughed.

We went around.

I want to write down what people said. I have it in my notebook in fragments. Here, more or less, is what each person said:

Marcus. I want to leave behind the part of me that has been holding the Aaliyah thing too tightly. I am going to take with me the version of telling the truth that has gotten faster. I am excited about — having a roommate I do not yet know.

Sofia. I am going to leave behind being everybody's therapist for free. I am going to take the toolkit, including all of you. I am excited about — psychology classes. I have been waiting for them my whole life. Priya. I am going to leave behind the version of the Inner Critic that has been running my college decision. I am going to take Hannah's voice catching her in a hallway. I am excited about — meeting people who do not know me.

Darius. I am going to leave behind the fear that getting another dog someday will be a betrayal of Pepper. (He paused. He swallowed. He kept going.) I am going to take the version of my dad I have now. I am excited about — being a coach.

Jordan. I am going to leave behind the funny mask as a costume. I am going to take it as a tool. I am excited about — writing a book. Maya. I am going to leave behind being the kid who hides her paintings. I am going to take my grandmother. I am excited about — being seen by teachers who actually know what they are looking at. Theo. I am going to leave behind

being only the watcher. I am going to take the practice of asking. I am excited about — being a teacher. Kezia. I am going to leave behind the story that says I do not deserve safe adults. I am going to take the letter I sent — the act of having sent it. I am excited about — being a pediatric nurse.

Amara. I am going to leave behind the part of me that has been trying to be small enough to fit into other people's expectations. I am going to take my grandmother — her voice — with me. I am excited about — being just Amara. The real one.

We went around. We all listened. Nobody made fun. Nobody made a joke at anybody else's expense. We just listened.

We sent the video to Mia. She watched it. She added her own answers in a text:

Mia. I am going to leave behind the story that moving away meant I had to start over. I am going to take all of you with me, the way I have been taking you for nine years. I am excited about — coming back for graduation week.

Sofia read it out loud.

The room got very quiet.

Then Jordan said, guys. Mia is coming back. For graduation.

We had not, until that moment, known for sure. We had assumed. We had hoped. Mia had said, in pieces over the months, that she would try. We had not had the confirmed yes.

Sofia, who had — apparently — been working on this with Mia for months in private, said, yeah. She is coming. The week of graduation. Her parents are flying her in. She is going to be here.

The room exploded. The way rooms explode when a group of kids who have been waiting for something for nine years finds out it is actually going to happen.

Maya cried.

Maya does not, usually, cry in groups.

Maya cried.

We were all very glad.

We finished the dinner around eleven. We helped Sofia's mom clean up the kitchen. We hugged on our way out the door. We hugged like a cohort. The hugs were long. The hugs were not the hugs of high schoolers — they were the hugs of people who knew, in their bones, that the number of times this exact group was going to be in this exact basement was finite.

I went home.

I lay in my bed for a long time.

I thought about August 14th.

I thought about the way Marcus had nodded at me from across the room when Sofia had said the date. The nod between us, that no one else had seen, that had carried twelve years of meaning in it.

I thought about how much the cohort had built, without knowing it had been building.

I thought about Mia, in Pittsburgh, packing for graduation week. I thought about how, in three months, the basement was going to be empty for the year, and how then — twelve months later — we were going to be in it again.

I went to sleep.

I dreamed about my grandmother's porch.

In the morning, I called her. I told her about the dinner. I told her about August 14th. I told her about the going-around the room. She said, baby. I am so glad you have those nine other people. They are a gift. Treat them like one.

I said, grandma. I will.

She said, baby. Come over Sunday. I am making chicken.

I said, grandma. I will be there.

She said, I love you, baby.

I said, I love you, grandma.

I hung up.

I sat in my kitchen, drinking coffee, with the leather notebook open in front of me.

I wrote:

Senior year is the year you find out what you built. The basement, last night, was the inventory. The inventory is — and I am writing this in my own handwriting so I will believe it — the inventory is good. The inventory is more than good. The inventory is the kind of thing some people work their whole adult lives to build and never get. We had it at eighteen.

We have it because of Ms. Calloway. Because of Mr. Patel. Because of all the adults at the school. Because of Mr. Tate. Because of our parents, in the cases where the parents did the work. Because of our grandparents. Because of each other.

Mostly because of each other.

The architecture of the cohort is, in some real way, the most important thing I have ever been part of. I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to help other people build it. That is what the bench sign was, when I was nine. That is what my career is going to be, in whatever specific shape it takes. That is what the work is.

Architecture, for me, equals cohorts. The work is helping other kids find their nine.

I want to remember this. I am eighteen. I have just figured this out. — Amara

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sofia's Map

Sofia had been thinking, since the night of the cohort dinner, about her map.

The map was a thing she had drawn in her notebook in March — when she had been picking which school to commit to. The map was — literally — a piece of paper she had labeled at the top *Sofia's Map* with a pencil. She had drawn a small circle in the middle. The circle was where she was now, at seventeen, in Lincoln Park, in her parents' house. Around the circle she had drawn arrows pointing in different directions, each arrow ending in a small written destination — psychology PhD, clinical social work, school counselor, therapy practice, teaching. Each arrow was, in some real way, a future Sofia. A version of who she might be at thirty. The map had been Sofia's quiet way of working out, in March, that she did not need to pick the destination yet. She needed to pick the school. The school would let her be near several of the destinations. The next four years would, she hoped, narrow the map.

Then, in early April, her father had asked her about the map. He had not seen the map. He did not know it existed. He had asked her, at breakfast on a Sunday, Sof, when are you going to know what you want to do?

She had said, what do you mean.

He had said, the career. I mean — I know you want to be in psychology somehow. But specifically. When are you going to know? She had said, Dad. I think — I think probably sophomore or junior year of college. Maybe later. Maybe in graduate school.

He had said, that long?

She had said, yes Dad. That long.

He had said — and she had heard, in his voice, a thing that surprised her — he had said, Sof, I am asking because I want to know how to help. I do not have a strong opinion about what you should do. I am not pressuring you. I am asking because — if you are going to be a therapist, the path is different than if you are going to be a school counselor. The graduate school is different. The cost is different. The timeline is

different. I want to know what to be saving for.

She had said, oh.

She had not, until that moment, understood that the question was, mostly, about money.

She had said, Dad. Can I show you something later today?

He had said, yes.

After breakfast, she had gone upstairs. She had gotten the map out of her notebook. She had brought it back downstairs. She had spread it on the kitchen table.

She had said, Dad. Mom. This is what I have been working on. I want to show you both.

Her parents had sat down across from her.

She had walked them through the map. Each arrow. Each destination. The general shape of the timeline for each one. The general cost. She had been researching. She had, it turned out, known more about the financial side than she had let on, because she had not, until now, wanted to make a big deal of it.

When she finished, her father had said, Sof. This is — this is a lot of thought.

She had said, Dad. I have been thinking about this since I was nine. He had said, I know.

She had said, I want to tell you both something. Are you ready? They had said yes.

She had said:

Mom. Dad. I want to be a clinical psychologist someday. Probably the PhD or PsyD route. Probably in five to seven years from now. That is the most expensive path on the map. I have been afraid to name it because I have been afraid that naming the expensive one would put pressure on you. I have been telling myself I would probably go the masters route instead, because it is cheaper, and I would probably be a therapist with a masters, and that would be fine.* I do not want to do that anymore. I do not want to be the kid who picks the cheaper version of her career because she is afraid to ask her parents to be in it with her.

I want to be a clinical psychologist. I want to go the PhD route. I want, if you can be in it with me, to be in it with you. I am going to do most of

the work. I am going to get the loans I have to get. I am going to apply for funding. But I want to know — and this is the hard question — I want to know if you both can be in it with me as a goal we are all working toward. Not financially carrying me. But — supporting me. Believing in it. Helping where you can.

I am sorry to be asking like this on a Sunday morning at the kitchen table. I have been carrying the question for a year. I want to put it down. Her parents had looked at each other.

Her father had said, Sof. Sweetheart.

He had paused for a long time.

Then he had said:

Sof. You should have asked me this a year ago. Not because I am mad you waited. Because you have been carrying it alone for a year, and you did not have to. We are in it with you. We have been in it with you since you were three. The cost of a PhD program — we are not — we are not in a position to fund it outright. But we are in a position to help. We have been saving. We have, since you were small, been saving with the expectation that you might go far in school. We have not told you the number because we did not want to put pressure on you in either direction — we did not want you to spend the money in your head if you decided to do something cheaper, and we did not want you to limit your dreams to what the number is.

The number is enough to get you through undergraduate without significant loans. For the PhD program — most of those are funded. The good ones pay you to attend. They give you a stipend. They cover tuition. If you get into a good program, the cost is — the cost is largely the time, not the money. You give them five to seven years of your life. They give you the credential.

That part — the time — Mom and I are not going to be in financial competition with. Your time is yours.

The way we will be in it with you is — we will be the people who are still your parents while you do it. We will visit. We will listen when you call us at midnight from your dorm room because you have an exam in the morning. We will be the steady part. The work is yours. The path is yours. We will be there.

She had cried.

Her mother had cried.

Her mother had said — and this was the line Sofia would remember for the rest of her life — Sof. I am sorry we did not have this conversation sooner. I am sorry you were carrying it alone. Sweetheart. We are your parents. You can carry it with us.

Sofia had said, Mom. I — I think I have been being the therapist for too many people for too long. Including for the question of whether I am allowed to ask my own parents for what I want.

Her mother had said, baby. Stop being our therapist. Just be our daughter.

Sofia had cried more.

She had thought, in the back of her head, about Amara saying that she was going to leave behind the part of me that has been trying to be small enough to fit into other people's expectations. Sofia, in this moment, was leaving behind something similar — the part of her that had been so used to being the easy child that she had been afraid to ask for a hard thing. Sofia had been being easy for her parents her whole life. Sofia had been the call-Sofia kid for the family, too — she had been the steady child, the one who did not cause drama, the one who could be counted on. The cost of being the easy child had been: not asking for the harder things. Not naming the bigger goals. Not putting her parents in the position of having to say yes or no to her actual dreams.

The cost had been real. The cost had been her carrying, alone, the assumption that she had to make her dreams fit what she imagined her parents could handle.

She had been wrong.

Her parents could handle it.

The asking was the work she had not yet done.

She did it on a Sunday morning at the kitchen table in April of senior year.

It was the most adult thing she had done in her life.

It was also — and she knew this — practice. Practice for the rest of her life. Practice for asking her parents for things she did not yet know she would need. Practice for asking, in twenty years, when she was forty, for help with something her parents would still be alive to help her with. Practice for asking, in five years, when she was twenty-three, for advice on which PhD program to commit to. Practice for asking, in three years, for help moving across the country if a program out east took her.

The asking was the practice.

She had been afraid of the asking her whole life.

She was no longer afraid.

She wrote, in her notebook that night, on the page next to the map: Things I have figured out today.

1. My parents are bigger than I thought. They can handle the real version of my dreams.

2. I do not have to make my dreams smaller for them. I can make them the actual size.

3. The PhD is the goal. The path is real. The path is funded. I am going to get into a good program. I am going to spend five to seven years doing it. I am going to be a clinical psychologist by the time I am thirty. 4. My parents are going to be there.

5. The cohort is going to be there. Even from far away. Even from Pittsburgh.

6. I am going to be there. I am the most important person on the list. I sometimes forget.

7. I am going to draw the map again. The new version is going to have only one arrow. The arrow is going to be in the

direction of clinical psychology PhD. The other arrows were me hedging. I am not hedging anymore.

She drew the new map.

She put it on the wall above her desk.

She slept.

In the morning, she took a picture of the map and sent it to Mia. Mia texted back: Sof. Yes. The new map. I have been waiting for this map.

Sofia texted back: Mi. Thank you. For being the person who has been waiting for this map.

Mia texted: Sof. That is what I do. I have been your map-witness since I was nine.

Sofia laughed at her phone.

She went to school.

She told the cohort, at lunch, that she had decided to go for the PhD.

The cohort was not surprised. The cohort had known. Sofia had been telegraphing it for years without knowing she was telegraphing it. The cohort cheered, quietly, the way the cohort cheered when somebody named something they had been quietly knowing about themselves. Sofia, that afternoon, in Ms. Calloway's Capstone block, told Ms. Calloway about the conversation.

Ms. Calloway said, Sofia. I am so glad. I am so glad you asked. The asking is the work.

Sofia said, I know. I have been thinking about it.

Ms. Calloway said, one more thing.

Sofia said, yes.

Ms. Calloway said, when you are a clinical psychologist someday, you are going to have many young people on your couch who do not know how to ask their own parents for things. You are going to have to teach them to ask. You are

going to have a hard time teaching them if you have not yet, in your own life, done the asking. Yesterday you did it. You are now — in a small way — qualified to teach somebody else to do it. The teaching cannot be theoretical. The teaching has to come from a person who has done it.

You did it.

You are going to be a very good therapist someday. Not because you are smart, although you are. Because you have, at seventeen, done the asking. Most therapists do not, in their training, do the asking. You are ahead. You are way ahead.

Sofia said, Ms. Calloway. I am going to write that down.

Ms. Calloway said, write it down, Sofia. Then go live it.

Sofia wrote it down.

She lived it.

She would, twelve years from now, be the therapist a hundred young people had, and she would, in many of those therapy sessions, do some version of the conversation she had had with her parents on a Sunday morning at the kitchen table in April of senior year of high school. She would say, to a twenty-five-year-old, have you actually asked them? The twenty-five-year-old would say, no. Sofia would say, that is the work. She would have been doing the work since she was seven.

She would have been naming the work since she was seventeen.

She was Sofia. She was the call-Sofia kid. She was, increasingly, also the call-her-own-parents kid. The two were the same thing. The toolkit had updated.

This is what Part Three looks like, in Sofia's life.

The cohort, in different ways, is doing it in their own.

The cohort is, in April, getting close to graduation.

The graduation is six weeks away.

The book has eight chapters left.

The work is — and has always been — adding up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Marcus Is Asked

In late April, Marcus was asked to give the graduation speech. He had not seen it coming.

The school did graduation speeches the old-fashioned way — not by election, not by GPA, but by faculty nomination. A small committee of teachers, led by the principal, picked one senior each year. The senior gave the speech. The senior was not warned in advance about being considered. The senior just got an email from the principal, in late April, that said Marcus, we would like to ask you to give the graduation speech this June. Please come see me before fourth period tomorrow. He saw the email on a Tuesday afternoon, on his phone, while walking to his car.

He stopped walking.

He read it three times.

He thought — what.

He kept walking.

He drove home. He did not tell anyone. He did not text Sofia. He did not text Amara. He sat on his bed and thought about it.

The Marcus from second grade — the kid who had told the Aaliyah lie and then had spent a year carrying it — would have been thrilled. The Marcus from eighth grade — the kid who had wanted, in some real way, to be visible — would have been excited. The Marcus from junior year — the kid who had been

quietly working on being a person who was good in some real sense — would have been pleased.

The Marcus from senior year was — and he sat with this for a long time — the Marcus who was about to be the cohort's public face at graduation, and who had a complicated relationship with public faces. He thought about it.

He texted Ms. Calloway. He said, Ms. Calloway. The principal asked me to give the graduation speech. Can I come see you Wednesday morning before school.

She texted back in three minutes. Marcus. Yes. Come at 7:30. I will have coffee.

He went the next morning at 7:30. She had coffee. She had a Danish from the bakery near her house. She had cleared her morning. He sat down.

She said, Marcus. Talk to me.

He talked.

He said, Ms. Calloway. I do not know if I should do it.

She said, why.

He said, because — because I have spent twelve years trying not to be the kid who performs. And a graduation speech is a performance. I am scared that I will get up there and I will do the thing I have been trying not to do for twelve years. I am scared that the speech version of me will end up sounding like a costume.

She said, Marcus. That is a real concern. It is the right concern. The kid who is worried about that is the kid who should give the speech. He laughed a little.

She said, Marcus. Let me ask you something. Are you ready? Yes.

If you wrote a graduation speech, and you read it aloud at home to your dad and your mom and Aaliyah and your dog Cleo, and you stopped reading and asked yourself, is this

speech a costume or is this speech me — what would the answer be?

He thought about it.

He said, I think — I think it depends on the speech.

She said, yes. That is the right answer. The speech could be either thing. The speech is going to be the thing you make it. If you make it a costume, it will be a costume. If you make it you, it will be you. You get to decide.

He said, what should I make it.

She said, Marcus. I am not going to tell you what to make it. I am going to ask you a different question. What do you have to say to your classmates and their families that — if you did not say it — you would regret not having said?

He sat with that for a long time.

He said, Ms. Calloway. I think — I think I have one thing to say. And then maybe two or three things underneath the one thing.

She said, say the one.

He said, the one thing I have to say is — that the cohort built something. That we built it across twelve years. That we did not know we were building it most of the time. That the building was made out of small things — a bench sign, a Mistake Wall, a charter, an apology that took a year to come together. That the building is, in some real way, the most important thing I have been part of in my life so far. That I want — I want the speech to be a thank-you to the people who taught us to build it. To the teachers in the room. To our parents. To each other.

He stopped.

She was looking at him. She had a small smile on her face.

She said, Marcus. That speech is not a costume.

He said, no?

She said, no. That speech is you. That speech is the most you you have ever been on a stage. Write it.

He said, okay. I will.

She said, one more thing.

Yes.

Marcus. There is one risk in this kind of speech. The risk is that you will quote me. You will quote things I said in third grade or fourth grade or twelfth grade. You will make me into a kind of character in the speech. I want to ask you — gently — to consider not doing that.

He said, oh.

She said, not because I do not want to be in the speech. I am happy to be in the speech in spirit. I do not want to be in the speech in name. The speech, if it works, is going to be about you and them. About the cohort and your classmates and your families. Not about me. I am one of the teachers. I am not — for the purposes of this particular speech — the protagonist.

If you make me a character, the speech becomes about me. It becomes a speech about a teacher. It is going to land less. It will land less because the audience will hear it as a teacher tribute, and a teacher tribute does not, in graduation speeches, work as well as a peer tribute and a family tribute. The graduation is for the kids and the parents. The

teachers will be in the audience. We will know we are being thanked, in the room, without being named. That will be enough for us. Trust me. I have watched thirteen years of graduation speeches at this school. The best ones do not name the teachers.

He nodded.

He said, okay. I will not name you.

She said, thank you, Marcus.

He said, Ms. Calloway. Can I name — She said, yes. Within the speech you can name anyone you want except me. You can use your father's name. You can use your mother's name. You can use your sister's name. You can use the cohort's names. You can use my name as a teacher in the general sense — the teachers who — without naming me specifically. That is fine.

He said, okay.

She said, go write it. I am proud of you. I am glad they picked you. I would have picked you. The principal asked me, off the record, in March. I told her you. She agreed.

He said, Ms. Calloway. That makes a lot of sense.

She said, get out. I have a class in ten minutes. Come back when you have a draft. I will read it.

He went to class.

He did not tell anybody, that day, that he had been asked. He wanted to write the first draft alone. He wanted to see what the speech looked like before he let anybody else's voice into it.

He worked on the speech for three weeks.

He wrote it in his bedroom, mostly at night, after his homework. He wrote draft after draft. The first draft was bad — it was, as Ms. Calloway had predicted, a teacher-tribute draft that made Ms. Calloway the protagonist. He had cut that draft. He had started over.

The second draft was better but still too quote-heavy. He had been reaching, in the second draft, for the kind of lines that seemed graduation-speech-y — *carpe diem* type lines, we are all going forth into the world type lines.

He had cut those.

The third draft was simpler. The third draft was about the cohort. About the small specific things they had built together.

About the people

who had taught them to build. He had started to find his actual voice. The fourth draft was the one. He had read it aloud to himself in his bedroom and had thought — yes. That is me. That is what I would say. He brought it to Ms. Calloway in mid-May.

She read it. She did not say anything for a long minute.

Then she said, Marcus. This is a good speech. This is — this is going to land.

He said, thank you.

She said, one small note.

Yes.

She pointed to a line in the third paragraph.

This sentence here. We have learned how to be honest with each other. I want to suggest a small change. I want to suggest you change it to — we have learned, slowly, how to be honest with each other. The slowly matters. The slowly is the truth. The version without slowly sounds like we figured it out fast. We did not. We are still figuring it out. The slowly is humility, and humility is what makes the speech work. He read the line.

He said, Ms. Calloway. You are right. I will add slowly.* She said, good. Beyond that, do not change a word. Read it tonight, out loud, to your dad. He is the one who is going to be in the audience. If it lands for him, it will land for the room.

He said, I will.

That night, he read the speech to his dad in the living room. His dad listened. His mother sat in the chair across from him. Aaliyah was on the floor with the dog. Cleo wagged her tail occasionally.

When he was done, his dad said, Marcus. Son. That is a beautiful speech.

His mother said, Marcus. You sound like yourself.

Aaliyah said, I want you to read it again. I want to remember it. He read it again.

Cleo did not move.

His dad said, at the end of the second reading, Marcus. I am so proud of you. I have been waiting for the rest of my life to hear my son give a speech like that. I am — I am very glad I am in this room tonight.

Marcus cried, a little.

The speech was — and he knew this now — the speech.

The speech he had been writing, in some way, since he was eight. The speech that was going to be the cohort's gift to the audience at graduation. The speech that was going to be Marcus's gift to himself — the proof that the kid who had told the Aaliyah lie at six and the truth at eight had become, at eighteen, the kid who could stand in front of a thousand people and say we have learned, slowly, how to be honest with each other, and mean it.

He was ready.

The speech was three weeks away.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, was packing for graduation week.

The cohort, in pieces, was preparing for the end.

This is what Part Three closes on. Marcus, at his kitchen table, with a speech in his hand. The cohort, scattered through their separate houses, getting ready for the last big collective moment.

The graduation is coming.

The book has six chapters left.

— Marcus

PART FOUR



Grace

*What kind of grace am I taking out into the
world?*

May and June. The last weeks. The graduation. And — in

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mia Returns

— Mia —

I am writing this in the airport in Pittsburgh.

My flight is in an hour and ten minutes. I have a window seat. I have a small carry-on with the dress I am going to wear to graduation, which my mother and I picked out two months ago. I have a card I wrote for Sofia on the plane that I am going to give her at the airport. I have, in my backpack, the book Sofia and the cohort gave me when I moved nine years ago — the one they all wrote a page in, with their nine-year-old handwriting and their nine-year-old drawings — which I have kept on my nightstand since I was eight.

I have been packing for this trip for two months.

I have been packing for this trip, in some real way, since I moved to Pittsburgh.

I want to tell you what it has been like to be the Mia outside of the cohort. I have not, in nine years, had a chance to tell anybody this directly. The cohort knows pieces. Sofia knows the most. My parents know some. The friends I have made in Pittsburgh — who are real, and who are good, and who have been my actual daily friends for nine years — they know almost none of it, because the cohort is, for them, a thing that does not quite make sense. The cohort is a thing only the cohort understands.

The cohort, I have come to realize, is unusual. Not many groups of kids stay this close, this long, with this much intention. Most cohorts of childhood friends drift. Most cohorts get replaced by middle-school friends and then by high-school friends and then by college friends. The drift is normal. The drift happens to everybody.

Our cohort did not drift.

I want to say a few things about why.

The first thing is that the cohort was built. It was not an accident. Ms. Calloway, in first grade, started building it. She did not announce she was building it. She just did the work. The Mistake Wall. The basket of stones. The morning circles. The way she had us all learn each other's names

with the soft a and the soft o and the soft r — the way she had us learn to pronounce each other. That was building. We did not know we were being built into something. Looking back, we were.

The second thing is that the cohort was built for fragility. Ms. Calloway, I now think, knew that some of us would have hard families and some of us would not, and some of us would have hard years and some of us would not. The cohort was, in some real way, a safety net for whichever of us needed it that year. Kezia needed it the most early. I needed it when I had to move. Darius needed it in fifth grade. Priya in third. Jordan in middle school. We took turns being the kid the cohort held. We held each other. The held-and-held shape was the cohort's actual structure.

The third thing is that the cohort had — and I am writing this in an airport, so forgive the metaphor — the cohort had infrastructure. The Mistake Wall was infrastructure. The morning circle was infrastructure. The bench sign was infrastructure. The basket of stones was infrastructure. The

toolkit was infrastructure. The cohort had been given physical, repeatable practices that made the holding easier. The infrastructure made the cohort not just a feeling but a habit. I have, in Pittsburgh, tried to build small versions of this infrastructure with my friends here. I started a Mistake Wall in my bedroom in sixth grade. My friends signed it. We added cards every year. It is, now, a small wall above my desk with maybe forty cards. The cards are silly — they are Pittsburgh mistakes, like I told the bus driver the wrong stop and walked an extra mile, or I forgot Lila's birthday and made up for it by writing her a poem. But the wall is real. My Pittsburgh friends know about it. They are, in some small way, a cohort I have started. I have, my whole life in Pittsburgh, been quietly trying to build what Ms. Calloway built in Room 12. I have not been able to build it all the way. The original was a teacher-built cohort with thirteen years of consistency. The Pittsburgh version is a kid-built cohort with whatever time we have. The Pittsburgh version is good. It is not the same as Lincoln Park.

I am flying back to Lincoln Park today.

I am flying back to the people who knew me from six to nine. I have been their friend for nine years from far away. We have texted, called, video chatted, written letters, sent birthday voice memos. We have not been in the same room in nine years.

I have been Mia-in-Pittsburgh for nine years.

I am about to be Mia-with-the-cohort for one week.

I am, sitting in this airport, nervous.

I am nervous because of the thing that nobody tells you about visiting people from your past life — they will see who you have become, and you will see who they have become, and the two of you will have to figure out, on the fly, whether the friendship still fits.

I am, intellectually, certain that it does. Sofia is still Sofia. We have been texting daily for nine years. The friendship is in better shape than most of the daily friendships people my age have. I know Sofia better than I know my own siblings.

But the in person version is different. The standing in front of each other in an airport version is different. The body language. The actual eye contact. The small habits the texting cannot transmit.

I am, in the airport, allowing myself to be nervous.

I am also — and I want to write this down because it is important — I am also, in the airport, allowing myself to be excited. I have not been this excited about anything in a long time. The cohort is going to be in front of me in five hours. The cohort that I have been part of, from far away, since I was nine. The cohort that has been my emotional anchor through middle school and high school. The cohort that I will, in some small way, be telling stories about for the rest of my life.

I am going to walk into Sofia's basement on Saturday and I am going to eat the vodka sauce her mom makes. I am going to sit on the green couch. I am going to be in the same room as Marcus and Amara and Sofia and Priya and Darius and Jordan and Maya and Theo and Kezia. I am going to be the tenth.

The tenth seat has been empty in Room 207 all year. The cohort has been holding the seat for me. Sofia told me, in February, that they had been, semi-jokingly, putting a folder in the empty chair every morning so that the chair had something at it that represented me.

The chair has been waiting for nine months.

I am about to fill it.

I am crying a little at the airport. I am writing this in my notebook, in the airport, with sunglasses on so the other

people in the terminal cannot see me crying. The crying is not sad. The crying is — and I want to be

specific — the crying is the body recognizing that it is about to walk into something it has been wanting for nine years. The body does not, often, get what it has been wanting. When it does, the body cries. That is what crying is for, sometimes.

My flight is being called.

I am going to close this notebook and put it in my backpack. I am going to walk on the plane.

I am going to fly to my old life.

I am going to step off the plane and Sofia is going to be there. Sofia and my mother. They have, in this trip, somehow become co-conspirators. Sofia is meeting me at baggage claim. My mother is meeting me at the curb. Sofia got there first because Sofia wanted to be the first face I saw. Sofia drove herself, even though she has not been driving long. Sofia is, in some real way, who I am flying back for first.

The rest of the cohort I will see at Sofia's basement on Saturday night. The cohort dinner.

Mia at the cohort dinner. Mia in the basement.

I have been picturing it for two months.

It is happening tomorrow.

— Mia

(Postscript, written on the plane, somewhere over Ohio.)

I have been thinking, the whole flight, about what I want to say to Sofia when I see her. I have a card in my bag. The card is a long card. I wrote it last week. The card says a lot of things.

But I have been thinking — I do not want to give her the card first. I want to hug her first. The hug is going to be longer than airport hugs usually are. I want to let it be that long. I want Sofia to know, from the hug, that the nine years did not happen by accident. They happened because both of us

worked. Both of us wrote. Both of us called. Both of us showed up. The hug is going to be evidence of nine years of work. The card I will give her after. The card has words. The hug has the part the words cannot do.

That is my plan.

The plane is starting to descend. I can see, out the window, the lake. The lake is the lake I grew up near. The lake is the lake Marcus's family used to drive me past when they were giving me a ride home from school

in second grade. The lake is in my body in a way I had forgotten it was in my body.

I am crying again at the lake.

Pittsburgh is, in many ways, home. I have a life there. I have friends. I have my parents. I have a high school I graduated from a week ago. But the lake is also home. The lake is the home I have not seen in nine years.

Today I am going to see both. Home and home. I do not have to pick. The two are not in competition. They are the same project.

I have been borrowing that line from Jordan. He told it to Sofia. Sofia told it to me. I have been keeping it in my head.

The two are the same project.

The plane is landing.

— Mia

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sofia at the Airport

Sofia got to the airport forty-five minutes early.

She had told Mia, in their texts, that she would be at baggage claim at four. She had also, separately, told her parents she was leaving the house at three-thirty. She had, secretly, left the house at three. She had wanted, in some private way, to be there before Mia's plane even landed. She had wanted to wait for Mia. The waiting was — and she had not, until that morning, articulated this to herself — the waiting was part of the welcoming. The waiting was the visible part of the nine years. She parked in the short-term lot. She walked into the terminal. She found baggage claim. She sat on a bench facing the escalator that Mia would come down.

She waited.

The board said Mia's flight was on time.

She waited.

She thought about it for forty-five minutes.

She thought about the time Mia had moved. She had been nine. She had cried for a week. She had not eaten lunch in the cafeteria for two weeks because she had not wanted to sit at the cohort table without Mia. Eventually Marcus had pulled her aside on a Tuesday and had said, Sof. You have to come back. Mia is not gone. Mia is just in Pittsburgh. You can be sad and also come back. Both. She had come back the next day. That had been nine years ago.

She thought about the year that had been the hardest — seventh grade, when both Sofia and Mia had been going through middle-school stuff and the texts had gotten shorter and the calls had gotten less frequent and Sofia had been afraid, in some real way, that the friendship was going to lapse. She had written Mia a long email, in February of seventh grade, that had said Mi. I am scared. I do not want us to drift. Can we, like, decide that we are not going to. Can we, like, have a deal. Mia had written back the next day. The email had said Sof. Deal. We are not going to drift. We are going to keep writing. Even when we are not in the mood. Even when one of us is being a jerk about something. The

friendship is bigger than the moods. Deal.

They had kept the deal.

Mia's flight landed at four-oh-three.

Sofia could see, on the board, that the bag belt would start at four-twenty-five.

She stood up. She walked closer to the escalator.

She waited.

She saw Mia, eventually, come down the escalator.

Mia was wearing a denim jacket. Mia had grown — Sofia had known this from photos, but seeing it in person was different. Mia was tall now. Taller than she had been at nine. Taller than Sofia, by maybe two inches. Mia had her hair in a long braid down her back. Mia was wearing sunglasses, even inside, even on the escalator. Sofia knew, before she could even see Mia's face, that the sunglasses were because Mia had been crying on the plane.

Mia saw Sofia.

Mia stopped on the escalator. The escalator kept moving. Mia did not move. Mia just stood there, on a moving stair, watching Sofia. Sofia stood at the bottom of the escalator. She

did not move either. The escalator delivered Mia to the floor of the baggage claim. Mia stepped off.

They walked toward each other.

They hugged.

The hug was — and people on either side of them in the baggage claim noticed, because it was the kind of hug that makes people notice — the hug was the longest hug either of them had ever given anyone. It was a hug with no countdown. It was a hug that did not break when it normally would have broken. It was a hug with both of them crying. It was a hug with Sofia's face in Mia's hair and Mia's arms tight around Sofia's back. It was a hug that contained nine years.

A woman next to them, who was waiting for her own bag, smiled at them. The woman had two grown children. The woman had hugged her own daughter like this once, twenty years ago, when her daughter had come back from a year abroad. The woman knew, looking at Sofia and Mia, what kind of hug they were having. The woman was glad to be near it.

Sofia and Mia held the hug for maybe two minutes. Two minutes is a long time for a hug. The hug went past normal-hug, past long-hug, into the territory of the hug everyone in the airport will quietly remember. When they pulled back, Mia took off the sunglasses. Mia's eyes were red. Mia was smiling. Sofia was crying. Sofia was also smiling. Mia said, Sof.

Sofia said, Mi.

They did not say anything else for a minute.

Then Sofia said, Mi. You are tall.

Mia laughed.

Mia said, Sof. You are exactly the same. The same exact face. I have been looking at your face in photos for nine years and the photos are nothing. The face. Sof. The face.

Sofia said, Mi. Come on. Your bag.

They got the bag from the belt. The bag was small. Mia had packed light — one carry-on plus the checked bag, which was a medium suitcase. She was here for a week. She did not need much.

They walked out to the curb. Mia's mom was there, in a car. Mia's mom got out. Mia's mom hugged Sofia first — Mia's mom had been Sofia's adopted second mom since they were small, and Mia's mom had not seen Sofia in person since a brief visit Mia's family had made to Lincoln Park two summers ago — and then Mia's mom hugged Mia. Mia's mom cried. Mia's mom held Mia's face in her hands and said baby. Welcome home.

Mia laughed.

They put the bag in the car.

They drove. Sofia followed in her own car. They drove to Mia's grandmother's house — Mia's grandparents had stayed in Lincoln Park when Mia's family moved, and Mia was going to stay with her grandparents for the week. They got to the house. Mia hugged her grandparents. The cohort came over, in pieces, over the next two hours. Marcus came first. Marcus knocked on the door of Mia's grandparents' house at five-thirty. Mia opened the door. Marcus said, Mia. Mia said, Marcus. They hugged. Marcus had not seen Mia since they were nine. Mia had not seen Marcus since the same. They both started crying a little. They laughed about both crying. They went inside.

Amara came next. Amara had a small bouquet of yellow flowers. Amara had been planning the bouquet for two weeks. Amara hugged Mia. Mia held the flowers. Amara said, Mia. Welcome back. Mia said, Amara. I have been writing you in my head for nine years.

Priya and Hannah came together. Hannah had not, technically, been part of the original cohort, but Hannah had

been Priya's best friend for ten years and the cohort had absorbed Hannah a long time ago. Priya hugged Mia. Hannah hugged Mia. Mia said, Hannah. I feel like I have known you for years. I have been hearing about you for years. Hannah laughed.

Darius came at six. Darius hugged Mia for a long time. Darius did not say much. Darius did not have to. Mia and Darius had been pen pals, occasionally, across the years — Darius had not written as often as Sofia, but Darius had written. Darius had written, in particular, after Pepper died, to tell Mia about it because Mia had loved Pepper too. Mia had cried in Pittsburgh over a dog she had not seen in nine years. The cohort cried about each other's dogs. That is what the cohort was.

Jordan came at six-fifteen. Jordan was holding a book. Jordan said, Mia. I brought you a book. It is my book. The one I have been writing. Mia said, Jordan. You brought me the manuscript. Jordan said, yes. I want you to read it before anybody else in the cohort. You have been my best reader for years. You should be the first. Mia hugged Jordan very tightly. Jordan handed her the manuscript. The manuscript was eighty pages. The manuscript was, Mia could see by glancing, double-spaced, in Garamond, with chapter headings. The manuscript was the first eighty pages of a novel. The novel was titled, on the cover page, Room Twelve: A Novel. Mia laughed.

Mia said, Jordan. You have been borrowing our childhood for fiction. Jordan said, yes.

Mia said, good.

Maya came at six-thirty. Maya had a small wrapped package. Maya said, Mia. I made you something. Mia opened the package. The package was a small painting. The painting

was a portrait of Mia at nine — the Mia Maya remembered, the Mia from third grade. Maya had painted it from memory and from old photos. The painting was kind. The painting was — Mia could tell, looking at it — the painting of a friend who had been thinking about her for years.

Mia said, Maya.

Maya said, Mi.

They hugged for a long time.

Theo came at six-forty-five. Theo had a camera. Theo said, Mia. I would like to take your picture. You can say no. I just — I am the cohort's photographer now. I have been taking pictures of everybody. I would like to take one of you. Mia laughed. Mia said, Theo. Take it. Theo took three pictures. The third one, when Theo would later show the cohort, was the best. It was Mia, in the doorway of her grandmother's house, with the yellow bouquet Amara had brought her in one hand and Maya's small painting in the other, laughing.

Kezia came last. Kezia had not been able to leave the nursing-pathway orientation she had been doing early-bird at the community college. She had arrived at seven. She had walked in. She had said, Mia. I am so glad you are here. Mia had hugged her.

The nine of them were in Mia's grandmother's living room.

Mia's grandparents were in the kitchen. Mia's grandparents had laid out food. The food was for the cohort. Mia's grandparents had known the cohort for nine years through Mia's stories. Mia's grandparents had been hosting their own version of the cohort, in their kitchen, by feeding the cohort kids whenever Mia came back to visit — which had happened maybe four times across the nine years for short visits. The cohort had eaten at Mia's grandparents' house before. The cohort knew this kitchen. The cohort ate.

The cohort talked.

The cohort did not, for an hour, do anything special. The cohort just was. The cohort sat on the couches and the floor and ate food and made conversation. Mia caught up with each of them in turn. Mia heard, in person, the things she had been hearing in texts for years — Marcus's speech, Maya's art school, Priya's college, Amara's college, Jordan's book, Darius's plans, Theo's photography class, Sofia's PhD goal, Kezia's nursing pathway.

Mia, in turn, told them about Pittsburgh. About her parents. About her brother, who was in high school there. About the friends she had made in Pittsburgh — about Lila and Andre and Beth, who Mia had been telling the cohort about for years and who the cohort knew by name. Mia showed pictures.

The cohort listened.

The cohort, listening, was the cohort being itself.

At one point Maya said, Mia. This is — this is the thing we have been waiting for.

Mia said, I know.

Marcus said, Mia. Saturday. Sofia's basement. Cohort dinner. You and us. The whole thing.

Mia said, yes.

Sofia, who had been sitting on the floor leaning against the couch, started crying.

The cohort all turned and looked at Sofia.

Sofia, through tears, said, guys. I am sorry. I am just — I am so happy. Mia got up from where she was sitting. Mia came over to Sofia. Mia sat next to Sofia on the floor. Mia put her arm around Sofia. Mia did not say anything.

The cohort, watching, did not say anything either.

This is what nine years of friendship looks like, in a living room, in Lincoln Park, on a Thursday evening in early June,

when the friend who has been far away is finally close again.

It looks like crying on a floor.

It looks like another friend putting her arm around you.

It looks like the rest of the cohort going quiet, because they know — without having to be told — that this moment is not for them. This moment is for the two friends on the floor. The rest of the cohort is the witness.

The witness is also the cohort's job.

The witness, sometimes, is the most important job the cohort has. Mia and Sofia sat on the floor for maybe ten minutes.

Then they got up.

The cohort kept eating.

The cohort kept talking.

The evening kept going.

Eventually it got to be late. The cohort started leaving in pieces. Each of them hugged Mia on the way out. Each of them said see you Saturday. Each of them said welcome back.

Sofia stayed last. Sofia and Mia sat in Mia's grandparents' kitchen, after everybody else had gone, for another hour. They talked the way they had been talking on the phone for nine years. They talked about everything. They talked about nothing. They drank tea.

Around eleven, Mia said, Sof. I am tired. I am going to fall asleep at this table.

Sofia said, Mi. Go to sleep. I will see you tomorrow. I will text you in the morning.

They hugged at the door. They hugged for a long time.

Sofia drove home.

Sofia cried in her car for the whole drive home. The crying was, for the first time in nine years, the I am not separated from her kind of crying. The crying was recognition.

Sofia got home. She went to bed. She slept the best sleep she had slept since December.

In the morning, the cohort group chat had thirty-two new messages. All from the cohort. All from the night before. The chat was a long thread of I love you. I love you. I love you. Mia is back. Mia is back. The cohort is together. The cohort is together.

Mia, in Pittsburgh terms, was home for a week.

Mia, in cohort terms, had never been gone.

This is what graduation week looks like, when it begins.

The graduation is in three days.

The cohort dinner — the real one, the Mia in the basement one — is tomorrow.

The week is happening.

The book has four chapters left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Speech

Graduation was on a Saturday. The cohort dinner with Mia present was on Friday night.

The cohort, that Friday, was nine in Sofia's basement, plus Mia. Ten. The full count. The first time the full count had been in the same room in nine years.

Sofia's mom made the vodka sauce.

Mia ate it.

The cohort watched Mia eat the sauce.

Mia closed her eyes.

Mia said, guys. I have not had this sauce in nine years.

Sofia's mom, in the kitchen, called out, Mia. I have been making it for you in my head for nine years.

Mia laughed. Mia cried. Mia kept eating.

The cohort, after dinner, sat on the floor of the basement.

They did the thing Theo had done in April. They went around the room. They each said three sentences. One thing they were leaving behind. One thing they were taking. One thing they were excited about. Mia did it too this time. Mia's three sentences were the ones she had texted from Pittsburgh in April. The cohort heard them, now, in person, in Mia's voice. I am going to leave behind the story that moving away meant I had to start over. I am going to take all of you with me, the way I have been taking you for nine years. I am excited about

— being here. Right now. In this basement. With these nine other people.

The cohort cheered.

The cohort, around the floor, was crying in pieces.

Marcus did not cry. Marcus was — and the cohort noticed but did not say — Marcus was holding himself together for the speech. Marcus was, all weekend, in a slightly different mental state than the rest of the cohort. Marcus was preparing.

The cohort knew Marcus was giving the speech. Marcus had told them in late April. The cohort had not asked to read it. The cohort had —

and this was the cohort being the cohort — the cohort had assumed that Marcus's speech was Marcus's, and the right place to hear it was at graduation, in the audience, with the rest of the school and all the families.

Marcus had not shown it to anybody except his father, his mother, his sister, the dog, and Ms. Calloway.

The cohort, on Friday night in Sofia's basement, did not press him. They had cohort-dinner. They went around the room. They ate the sauce. They stayed late. They watched a movie on the small basement TV. They fell asleep, most of them, on the various couches and beanbags. Sofia's mom did not mind. Sofia's mom had been letting the cohort sleep in her basement since they were small. Sofia's mom slept upstairs. Mia slept on the green couch, with a blanket Sofia's mom had brought down. Sofia slept on a beanbag next to her.

In the morning, the cohort went home in pieces, to shower, to change, to put on the caps and gowns. Graduation was at one in the afternoon at the football stadium. The weather forecast was good. The cohort had agreed to meet in the lobby of the auditorium at noon to take a group photo before the ceremony.

The group photo was taken at noon by Theo, who had given the camera to a parent for the photo so Theo could be in it. The photo had all ten of them. Plus Hannah. Plus Aaliyah, Marcus's sister, who Marcus had pulled into the photo at the last second. Twelve people. The cohort plus its closest extensions.

The photo would, in years to come, be one of the most treasured photos in any of their houses.

Graduation began at one.

The cohort sat in the assigned senior seats — alphabetical by last name, which meant they were scattered through the rows of three hundred and twelve graduating seniors. The cohort had figured out, in advance, which seat each of them would be in, and had — without saying anything — saved the seats next to them for the cohort members whose last names were closest in the alphabet.

They were not all near each other.

They were near enough.

The principal spoke first. The choir sang. A faculty member gave a short speech. Then the principal announced the student speaker.

The principal said, please welcome our class speaker, Marcus Davenport.

The cohort, scattered through the seats, made eye contact with each other.

Marcus stood up.

Marcus walked to the podium.

Marcus put his speech on the lectern. The speech was four pages, double-spaced, in his own handwriting. He had decided, against the advice of an English teacher who had wanted him to type it, to hand-write it. He had said, when

asked, I want to read it from my own handwriting. The handwriting matters to me.

He looked at the audience.

The audience was big. Maybe twelve hundred people. The families of the seniors. The teachers. The school board. Some local officials. He breathed.

He began.

Good afternoon.

His voice was steady.

I want to thank the principal and the faculty for asking me to speak today. I do not know if you know how speakers get picked at this school. The teachers pick us. We do not run. We are not, as far as I know, elected. We are just asked. I want to thank whoever asked me. I am — I have spent a few weeks thinking about how to deserve the asking. I hope this speech does.

A small ripple of laughter.

I want to do something today that is, maybe, a little different. I want to tell you about a wall.

The cohort, in their scattered seats, all went still.

There is a wall outside Room 207. The wall has Post-it notes and index cards and small sheets of paper on it. Many of the papers have been on the wall for years. Some of them have been on the wall longer than I have been a student at this school. The papers are written by students. The papers say —

He paused.

The papers say things like, "I forgot to feed the cat." And "I told my sister her drawing was bad and now I feel terrible." And — my favorite,

which I think has been on the wall since third grade — "I told the lunch lady the wrong drink and now I have apple juice I do not like." A bigger laugh.

The wall is called the Mistake Wall.

The Mistake Wall was started, I think, in first grade. It used to be in a different room. It has moved three times. It lives outside Room 207 now. It is, in some ways, the longest-running thing in my education at this school. The wall has been near me — physically near me — since I was six.

He paused again.

I want to tell you about the wall because the wall is, for me, the small physical version of something much bigger. The wall is the visible part of an idea our school has, very quietly, been building into us for twelve years. The idea is that — and I am going to try to say this carefully — the idea is that you can be a person who makes mistakes, and writes them down, and puts them in public, and is loved anyway.

He stopped for a second. He breathed.

The teachers in this school have, across twelve years, taught us that you can be a person who makes mistakes and is loved anyway. They did not say it that way. They did not say it in a speech. They said it in small ways. They made us write our mistakes down. They asked us to come to apologize, when we hurt each other, in a particular way. They taught us that sorry is something you do, not just something you say. They taught us that being honest about what we have done wrong is the way you start being a person who does fewer things wrong, over time. They taught us, slowly, how to be honest with each other.

The cohort, scattered through the audience, all heard the word slowly. The cohort all knew the word.

The cohort all smiled, in their scattered seats, at the same time. I want to thank the teachers in this room, the parents in this room, and my classmates in this room — for being people who let me make mistakes. For being people who, when I

made them, did not hold them against me. For being people who let me try again. The trying again is the whole education. The trying again is the whole point.

He paused.

I want to thank my classmates specifically. I am graduating today with three hundred and eleven other seniors. I want to thank all of you. I have known some of you for twelve years. Some of you for one year. Some of you only by face. All of you have been part of the room. The room is the gift of going to high school in the same building with the same people for four years. The room is a thing that is going to end on this afternoon when we walk across this stage. I want to thank you, all of you, for being in the room with me.

He paused longer.

I have, specifically, a group of nine friends I have known since first grade. I am not going to name them today. They know who they are. They are scattered through this audience. I want to say, to them — directly — that the cohort we have been part of is the most important thing that has happened to me in my life so far. We have grown up together. We have been sad together. We have lost together. We have, increasingly, been honest together. I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to be in groups that have what we have. I do not know if I will find them. I will keep trying. The cohort has given me the template.

He breathed.

The cohort, in their scattered seats, was crying.

I want to thank our parents. The parents in this room have been showing up to soccer games and band concerts and parent-teacher conferences for years. The parents have, in many cases, done work — therapy, hard conversations, learning new ways of being parents — to be the kind of

parents we have, at eighteen, become close to. I have a father in this audience who has, since I was twelve, become a different kind of father than the one I had when I was small. I would like to thank him. I would like, specifically, to thank him here, in front of all these people, because he is one of the people I am most proud to know.

He looked into the audience. He found his father. He nodded. His father, in the third row, nodded back. His father was crying. I want to thank the teachers. I do not have time to name each of them. I will say — there is a teacher who has been in our lives, every year, in some form, since first grade. You all know who you are. The teachers in this room know we are talking about you. I am going to honor your wish, as a profession, to be thanked in the general sense and not named individually today. You taught us this lesson too. The teaching is not about you. The teaching is about us. You did the work and you did not

need to be famous for it. You are, in this audience, listening, and you know.

He paused.

I have a few more sentences, and then I will sit down.

We are graduating today. After today, we are going to scatter. Some of us are going to colleges. Some of us are taking a year. Some of us are going to do something nobody has yet thought of, because we are eighteen and the world is wide. We are going to be okay. We are going to be okay because we have been taught how to be a person who makes mistakes and is loved anyway, and because we have been taught how to be a person who notices when a friend is in trouble, and because we have been taught how to say sorry, and how to tell the truth even when telling it is hard, and how to be — I am going to say it the way it has been said to us —

how to be people who can build a room inside ourselves that we can live in for the rest of our lives.

He paused.

I want to read one more thing. I am going to read it because I have been carrying it for ten years. I was eight. We had a project in third grade. We had to write three sentences about what we had figured out. I wrote three sentences. I have been carrying them since.

He took a small piece of paper out of his pocket.

The piece of paper was — the audience could not see this from the seats — was a Post-it note that had been folded for ten years. He read:

"I am sorry takes practice. The biggest help is friends who are honest. We can build a small good kind of world together if we try." He paused.

I wrote that when I was eight.

I have been trying to deserve those sentences for ten years. I am going to keep trying for the rest of my life.

Thank you.

He folded the paper.

He picked up his speech.

He walked back to his seat.

The audience was, for a second, silent.

Then the audience stood up.

The audience clapped.

The audience, twelve hundred people, stood and clapped for what felt like a long time. The cohort, in their scattered seats, stood and clapped with everybody else. The cohort was crying. Marcus's father was crying. Marcus's mother was crying. Aaliyah, in the audience at fifteen, was crying. Ms. Calloway, in the faculty seats, was — Marcus could see her — was clapping with her eyes closed.

Marcus sat down in his seat.

He let himself breathe.

The graduation continued. The names were read. The cohort walked across the stage in alphabetical order. The diplomas were handed out. The principal said the final words. The seniors threw the caps. The caps came down. The graduation was over.

The cohort gathered on the lawn outside the stadium. The families joined them. Sofia's mom hugged everybody. Marcus's father hugged Marcus, hard, for a long time. Marcus's father said, into Marcus's ear, very quietly, son. That was the speech. That was your speech. I am — I am so proud of you.

Marcus said, thanks, Dad.

Mia hugged Marcus.

Mia said, Marcus. You said the cohort was the most important thing. You said it in front of twelve hundred people. Thank you.

Marcus said, Mia. It was true.

Ms. Calloway came over. The cohort had not — until Ms. Calloway walked over — seen her since the ceremony ended.

Ms. Calloway hugged each of them in turn.

She hugged Marcus last.

She said, Marcus. You did not name me. Thank you.

Marcus said, Ms. Calloway. I did what you asked.

She said, I know. I want you to know that I heard everything in the speech that you did not say in the speech. The teachers heard it. We all heard it. We are okay. We feel thanked. The speech was the right speech. Marcus said, Ms. Calloway.

She said, Marcus.

They hugged for a long time.

The cohort and the families went out to dinner that night, all together — twenty-five people in the back room of the

Italian restaurant down the street from the school, with two long tables pushed together and Sofia's mom and Maya's grandmother and Marcus's parents and Amara's grandmother and the rest of the parents and grandparents who had come out for the day.

The cohort sat together at one end of the long table.

Mia sat in the middle.

Ms. Calloway was not at the dinner. Ms. Calloway had, after the graduation, gone home. Ms. Calloway always went home after graduation. The graduation was, for her, the end of the year. The next year — and the next senior class — would start in August, with a new cohort she had been with for some number of years. The new cohort would need her in their own ways. The old cohort, on the night of their graduation, did not need her. The old cohort needed each other. The old cohort had each other.

The cohort ate. The cohort laughed. The cohort told stories. The cohort — for one more night, all ten of them in one room — was the cohort.

In the morning, the cohort would start to scatter.

Mia would fly back to Pittsburgh on Tuesday.

The rest of the cohort would spend the summer doing summer jobs and packing for college.

By August 28th, most of them would be gone.

But tonight, in a back room of an Italian restaurant in Lincoln Park, on the night of graduation, the cohort was together.

The book has three chapters left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Scattering

The summer between high school and college is, for everybody who has lived through one, a strange thing.

It is the longest summer a kid has had in twelve years. There is no first-day-of-school waiting for you in August. There is, instead, an unknown — the dorm room, the roommate, the bus or plane or car ride that is going to take you to it. The unknown sits on the horizon all summer. The summer is, for the kids living it, both the longest summer and the shortest.

The cohort, that summer, took different shapes.

Mia flew back to Pittsburgh the Tuesday after graduation. The cohort drove her to the airport — Sofia and Marcus and Amara, the three who had grown closest to Mia during her week, took Mia. They had a long quiet ride back to Lincoln Park after dropping her off. They did not talk much. They were processing.

Sofia, that summer, worked at the same coffee shop she had worked at the previous summer. She lived at home. She helped her mother with small things around the house. She got, in July, the official welcome packet from the university she would be attending in the fall — the one near home. She read the welcome packet. She did the small online tasks. She picked her freshman seminar. She picked psychology 101.

She wrote Mia twice a week.

She wrote her parents thank-you notes for things they did not know they were being thanked for. One was for driving me to Hannah's house every Tuesday for two years in seventh grade. Another was for being the parents who let me eat dinner at Sofia's house most Wednesdays in fifth grade. Wait — that one was Mia's. Mia had written it from Pittsburgh. The cohort kept getting confused about whose memory was whose, that summer. They had been one cohort for so long that the memories were shared.

Marcus, that summer, worked at the basketball league he had written about in his college essay. He worked there for the third summer. He coached the seven and eight year olds. He, on August 14, did the August

14 thing for Aaliyah — he took Aaliyah out for ice cream. Aaliyah, fifteen, did not ask why anymore. Aaliyah had figured out, somewhere along the way, that it was a tradition. Aaliyah ate the ice cream. Marcus watched her eat it. Marcus felt, the way he always felt on August 14, the small weight of the bike and the bigger weight of the years he had been carrying it well.

Aaliyah said, in the car after the ice cream, Marcus. Are you going to keep doing this when you go to college.

Marcus said, yes.

Aaliyah said, what if you cannot get home for one. What if you have a class on August 14.

Marcus said, I will fly home. Or I will text you and you will buy yourself ice cream and we will FaceTime while you eat it.

Aaliyah said, Marcus, you are weird.

Marcus said, I know.

Aaliyah said, I love you.

Marcus said, I love you.

They drove home.

Amara, that summer, spent most of her time with her grandmother. They had Sunday dinners, of course, but Amara also started going to her grandmother's house on Wednesday afternoons. They drank tea. They worked in the garden. Amara helped her grandmother organize the closets — a thing her grandmother had been wanting to do for years and had never had the time. Amara did not, after the first week, treat the time as getting in extra grandmother time before leaving. She treated it as the thing that was just happening. They were two people who liked each other's company. They were spending time together. The leaving was coming. The leaving did not need to be the framing for every visit. Her grandmother taught her, that summer, how to make three of her grandmother's recipes. Amara wrote them down in her leather notebook. Her grandmother said, baby. Take these with you. You will make them on your own. They will taste different. That is okay. The taste is going to be a small piece of me you carry. Even when you mess them up.

Amara wrote in the notebook, after writing down the third recipe: Things grandma gave me this summer: three recipes. The names of the women in her church choir. The story of how grandfather proposed to

her. The reason she has been afraid of the basement for sixty years (when she was a child, a snake). Her quiet ways of getting through the bad weeks. The smell of her kitchen.

Things grandma is giving me by living: evidence that you can be alone, in your seventies, and not be lonely. Evidence that a small life can be full. Evidence that the world is large but home is not.

Priya, that summer, worked at the library. She worked the front desk. She checked books in and out. She helped people find things. She read more books, that summer, than she had

read in a long time. She had a routine: get to the library at nine, work until two, ride home, read in her room for two hours, see Hannah or Sofia or one of the cohort in the late afternoon, eat dinner with her parents, read again before bed. She was, that summer, slower than she had been in maybe a year. She let the slowness be slowness. She did not, that summer, fight herself for the slowness. The Inner Critic, who in the spring had been loud, was — that summer — quieter than she had been in years. Priya did not know why. Priya theorized, in her journal, that the Critic had been defeated by the rejection from the Boston school. Priya theorized that the worst thing the Critic had threatened her with had happened, and Priya had survived it, and survived it well, and the Critic had — temporarily — lost some of her power.

Priya knew the Critic would come back. The Critic always came back. But the summer between high school and college was, for Priya, a small private vacation from the Critic.

Priya read books. Priya rode her bike. Priya ate dinner with her parents.

Priya, in August, packed her bags for the liberal arts college. She packed the Post-it that said One school said no. Other schools said yes. The Critic is going to try to make this evidence. The Critic is not the evidence. The next four years are the evidence. I am going to live them. She put the Post-it on her bathroom mirror at school.

Darius, that summer, worked at a summer camp.

The summer camp was for kids in fourth and fifth grade.

Darius was, for the first time, a kind of full-time teacher. He had six kids in his small group. He had them for six weeks. He taught them basketball, and how to swim, and how to write small thank-you notes to people they were grateful for. The last one was Darius's idea. The camp

had not asked him to do it. He did it because Ms. Calloway, in February, had assigned the cohort to write a thank-you note. Darius had remembered. Darius had decided to teach his six kids to do it. The six kids wrote thank-you notes. The thank-you notes were imperfect. One of them was a thank-you to a fish that had died the previous fall. Darius had laughed.

Darius, at the end of camp, got a new puppy.

His parents had asked, in mid-July, if he was ready. Darius had said yes. Darius had said, I think I am ready. I think the new dog will not be a replacement for Pepper. I think the new dog will be its own dog. I think I am ready to love a new dog who is not Pepper.

His parents had said, good.

They had gone to the shelter the first week of August. They had picked out a puppy. The puppy was a golden retriever-shepherd mix. The puppy was four months old. The puppy was, the moment Darius picked her up, the puppy who picked them back. The puppy had leaned, in the shelter, against Darius's leg, the way Pepper had at nine years ago. They had taken her home.

Darius named her Hope.

He did not tell anybody the name was, in some way, a reference to hoping that loving her was not a betrayal of Pepper, but a continuation of the love Pepper had taught me. He just named her Hope.

Hope was four months old. Hope was going to grow up while Darius was at college. Hope would be Darius's parents' dog, mostly, with Darius coming home on breaks. Darius accepted this. Hope was the family dog, more than Darius's dog. Pepper had been Darius's dog. Hope was the family's. The shape was different. The shape was okay.

Jordan, that summer, started his gap year early.

He started working at Henwood Books in mid-June, the week after graduation. He worked Tuesday through Saturday. He had Mondays and Sundays off. He spent his Mondays and Sundays writing. The book — the one he had given Mia in manuscript at the cohort dinner — was eighty pages on graduation day. Jordan added another thirty pages by August. The book was, by mid-August, one hundred and ten pages. Jordan was, he thought, halfway done. The book would take, he estimated, the full year. That was the plan.

He sent his grandmother in Florida ten pages a month. His grandmother read them. His grandmother called every Sunday with comments. His grandmother was, in some real way, his most attentive reader. His grandmother had — across the four months between January and June — gone from worried about the gap year to invested in the book. The investment was the lesson. The lesson was that adults who love you can be brought along, slowly, by showing them the work.

Jordan, in August, gave a copy of the manuscript-so-far to Ms. Calloway. He had not done this for any other teacher. Ms. Calloway had not asked. Jordan had decided. Jordan had brought the manuscript to the school on the second Friday of August, when teachers were back for prep week, and had left it in Ms. Calloway's mailbox with a note: Ms. Calloway. This is the book I am writing this year. I wanted you to have the first half. I will send you the second half in May. The book is about a cohort. The cohort is fictional. The cohort is also, of course, you-know-who. — Jordan. Ms. Calloway, the next Monday, sent Jordan a card in the mail. The card said, Jordan. Thank you. I will read it carefully. I look forward to the second half. — Ms. Calloway. The card was warm. The card was brief. The

card was, Jordan kept in his desk drawer for the rest of his life. Maya, that summer, painted.

Maya painted for hours every day. Maya was, for the first time in her life, painting for an audience that was going to see the work. She was packing for art school. She would be three hours away by late August. She would, for the first time in her life, be in a room full of other people who painted. Maya was, all summer, both excited and nervous. The nervousness was the what if I am not as good as I have thought I was nervousness. The excitement was what if I am better.

She visited her mother every Sunday that summer.

Her mother had stayed sober. Her mother was, by August, two-and-a-half years sober. Her mother was, by August, building a small steady life that Maya could see — even from outside — was solidifying. They had coffee. They went on walks. They had real conversations. Her mother gave her, the Sunday before Maya left for art school, a small object. The object was a paintbrush. The paintbrush had been Maya's grandfather's. Maya had not known her grandfather had painted. Her mother said, Maya. He did not paint a lot. He painted, sometimes, in the basement. I found this in the attic last month. I think he would have wanted you to have it.

Maya took the paintbrush.

She held it.

It was old. The bristles were worn. The handle had her grandfather's small worn fingerprints in the wood.

Maya said, Mom. Thank you.

Her mother said, Maya. I love you.

Maya brought the paintbrush home. She put it in the basement studio next to her own brushes. She painted, that night, with her grandfather's brush. The painting was small. The painting was a landscape of the front yard of her

grandmother's house, with the maple tree her grandfather had planted before he died. The painting was — when Maya stepped back from it — the calmest thing she had ever made.

She wrote, in her sketchbook, I am taking this brush to art school. I am taking grandfather. I am taking grandmother. I am taking mother. I am taking the cohort. I am taking the basement. I am taking the maple. I am taking all of them.

Theo, that summer, took photographs.

Theo took photographs of everyone. Theo took photographs of his sister Lena when she visited from Wisconsin in July. Theo took photographs of his parents in their kitchen. Theo took photographs of Mr. Patel and Mrs. Yamashita, who he visited at the elementary school in late July to say goodbye. Theo took photographs of the cohort, individually, during the summer get-togethers Sofia organized at her basement. Theo, by August, had a portfolio of maybe two hundred photographs. Theo gave each of the cohort members a small print of their portrait before they left for college.

The cohort, in their dorm rooms, would put Theo's photos on their desks. The photos would be there for four years. The photos would be in moving boxes after that. The photos would, in some real way, follow each of them across their twenties.

Theo would not know, until much later, that this was one of the most important things he did.

He just took the photographs.

Kezia, that summer, started early at the community college.

She had been allowed to start one prerequisite class in late June, in the summer mini-semester. The class was Introduction to Health

Sciences. She took the class three nights a week, in person, on the community college campus. She loved the class. She was the youngest person in the room — most of the other students were older, in their twenties and thirties, going back to school. Kezia found, in the class, a different kind of community than the cohort. The community was adults doing the work of changing their lives. Kezia, sitting in the back, watching, recognized something.

She thought, in her journal: the room of people who are doing the work of changing their lives is, in some real way, the room I want to spend my life in. As a nurse. As a person. The room of people who are working.

She wrote this down.

She started, in early August, her first official semester of the nursing pathway. She was going to be at the community college for two years. Then she would transfer to a four-year nursing program. She would be a nurse by the time she was twenty-three.

She lived at home with her grandmother. She did not commute far. She had — in some ways — the smallest external change of the cohort. Her external life looked almost the same as it had in high school. Same house. Same grandmother. Same kitchen.

Her internal life was different.

Her internal life was — and she did not say this out loud, but she felt it — her internal life was post-letter. The letter had been written. The letter had been sent. The letter had been responded to. The work was done. The internal life of Kezia, in August, was the internal life of a person who had finished a long thing and was now starting a new thing.

The cohort, by the third week of August, was almost scattered. Amara left first. She drove with her grandmother

and her mother to her east-coast college on August 20. She was three days early for orientation. Her mother stayed for two days. Her grandmother had not come — Amara's grandmother had not wanted to fly. Amara had FaceTimed her grandmother from the dorm room the first night. Her grandmother had cried. Amara had cried. They had agreed to call every Sunday, every week, indefinitely.

Maya left next, on August 22, for art school three hours away. Her grandmother drove her.

Priya left on August 25 for the liberal arts college. Her parents drove her.

Marcus, Theo, Sofia, Darius, Jordan, and Kezia all started school close to home on August 28 — Marcus and Theo at the state university, Sofia and Darius at colleges in the city, Jordan at the bookstore (his version of college, that year), Kezia at the community college. They were, technically, scattered. They were also, technically, within a couple hours of each other.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, started her freshman year at the University of Pittsburgh on August 24.

The cohort was scattered.

The cohort was not, in any meaningful way, broken.

The cohort had, for the first time in twelve years, ten different daily lives in ten different places.

The cohort was group-chatting all the time. The cohort was sending each other photographs of their dorm rooms. The cohort was, by the second week of college, already trading stories about their roommates and their professors and the strange kids in their freshman seminars. The cohort was — and this was the thing Sofia had architected at the cohort dinner in April — the cohort was holding August 14th of the next summer in their collective calendar.

The cohort had a return date.

The cohort, in late August, was scattered for now.
The cohort was going to be back.
This is what the scattering looked like.
Two chapters left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

August Fourteenth

A year and almost two months later, on August fourteenth, the cohort came back to Sofia's basement.

It was a Friday. The summer was warm. The cohort had — through the spring and early summer of their freshman year of college — been planning the return date with the slow careful intensity of a group of people who had agreed that this one Friday would happen. They had been talking about it in the group chat since April. They had been confirming flights and rides since June. By August twelfth, all ten of them were within a hundred miles of Sofia's basement. By August fourteenth at four p.m., all ten of them were in the basement.

Sofia's mom made the sauce.

The cohort ate the sauce.

The cohort sat on the green couch and the beanbags and the floor. Marcus, at nineteen, was the first to say it.

He said, guys. We did it.

Sofia said, we did.

Amara said, we said August 14 and we made August 14 happen.

Jordan said, we are nineteen and we did this.

Theo said, not all of us are nineteen. Some of us are still eighteen. Kezia said, Theo. Some of us are nineteen.

Mia said, guys. The dates do not matter. We are here.

Maya said, I drove three hours.

Priya said, I flew. From Boston. I have been on three forms of transportation since seven this morning.

Darius said, I drove forty-five minutes. I won.

Everybody laughed.

The cohort caught up.

Marcus, at the state university, was — and the cohort had heard this in the group chat across the year — a kid who had found his footing fast. He had a roommate who turned out to be okay. He had picked English

and education as a possible double major. He had been writing for the school newspaper. He had, in February, joined a small student-led group that was working on restorative justice practices in the dorms. He had been, in some real way, building a smaller version of Room 12's lessons into his college community. The cohort had not been surprised. Sofia, at the university near home, had had a hard fall and a better spring. The hard fall had been mostly homesickness and missing the cohort. The cohort had texted her through it. She had — in November — for the first time in her life seriously considered transferring after one year. Her mother had said, gently, Sof. Hold on until April. Then decide. Sofia had held on until April. In April, she had decided to stay. She had liked her psychology classes. She had liked her professors. She had started, in the spring, doing some informal mentoring work with first-year students. She had begun to find, at her college, a version of the call-Sofia kid role. The role was smaller and quieter than it had been in high school. The role was real.

Priya, at the liberal arts college, had thrived. She had loved every class. She had picked an English major with a public-policy minor. She had — for the first time in her life — been in classes where the other students cared as much as she did. She had told the cohort, in February, guys, I think I am happier

in college than I was in high school. The school being smaller helps. The students being more like me helps. The Inner Critic has been quieter than I have ever known her. The cohort had cheered, in the group chat.

The Critic had, of course, come back, in the second semester, around finals. Priya had caught her. The catching had been faster than it had been in high school. Priya had been right, about the practice. Amara, at the east-coast college, had — like Marcus — found her footing fast. She had joined the public-policy club. She had run for, and won, a position as freshman representative on the student government. She had, in the spring, organized a small campus initiative about food security. She had been the bench-sign kid in a new room. The room had received her. She had been, in some real way, the freshman version of the kid Ms. Calloway and Ms. Calloway's lineage had been building since first grade.

She had, every Sunday for the whole year, called her grandmother. Her grandmother had been okay.

Her grandmother had, the cohort would learn later, started a small church group of her own that fall — a quiet thing she had not told Amara about. Her grandmother had been building her own architecture for the year Amara was away. She did not need Amara to be her pillar. She had been right.

Darius, at the state college near home, had liked his classes and had loved being a peer coach for a freshman basketball team. He had, in the spring, decided to major in education with a coaching minor. He had — in some real way — settled into the path he had been on since tenth grade. Hope, the puppy, was now a year old and big. Hope had grown up at Darius's parents' house while Darius commuted. Darius came home most weekends. Hope greeted him at the door.

Jordan, in the bookstore year, had — and the cohort knew this — finished the book.

The book was, by August, two hundred and eighty pages. Jordan had submitted it, in late June, to three small writing programs and two MFA-track undergraduate programs. He had heard back from two of them. He had been accepted to one. He had — in late July — decided to go. He was starting in September at the writing program. He was going to be a freshman, finally, at nineteen. The book was — he told the cohort that night — going to be revised over the course of his first year of the program. He hoped, by the end of his sophomore year, to have a draft ready to send to small presses.

Marcus said, Jordan. Are you going to let any of us read it? Jordan said, yes. Eventually. After it is published. If it is published. Mia said, I read the first one-third when I came back for graduation. The first one-third is good. The first one-third is going to be a book. Jordan said, Mi. Stop telling them. They will be too excited. Mia laughed.

Maya, at art school three hours away, had — predictably — flourished. She had been recognized in her first year. She had been nominated, in the spring, for a freshman scholarship that funded a summer in a studio space in the city for the following summer. She had won the scholarship. She would be, the following summer, in a real studio doing real work. She had brought, to the cohort dinner, a small folder of photographs of her work. She passed it around. The cohort looked at the photos. The photos were of paintings that looked, in some real way, like Maya — like the

Maya who had been making art in a basement for fifteen years — but bigger. The paintings were bigger and stranger and more confident. Theo, at the state university, had been —

and he told the cohort this — happy. He had decided to double-major in history and education. He had started a small photography club with three other students. He had — for the first time in his life — been the initiator of a group rather than the witness of one. The asking was paying off. He had two friends he was now close to, beyond the cohort. He had been dating someone since February. The someone was a sophomore from his history class. The cohort had been hearing about her in the group chat. Theo had not, that night, brought her to the dinner — the dinner was a cohort-only thing — but the cohort all wanted to meet her eventually. The cohort knew, from the group chat, that Theo was — for the first time in his life — happy in the being seen way his mother had described in October of senior year. Kezia, in the nursing pathway, had been thriving. She had finished her first year of prerequisites with high grades. She had been hired as a part-time aide at a pediatric clinic. She was, at nineteen, already doing some version of the work she had been planning to do. She was — she told the cohort — happier than she had been in years. The work was demanding. The work was, also, the work she had been waiting to do her whole life.

She had not received any further correspondence from the person she had sent the letter to. She had not, she said, missed the correspondence. The exchange had been complete.

Her grandmother was well.

Mia, at the University of Pittsburgh, had had a freshman year that looked, in some real way, like Sofia's. She had been homesick for Lincoln Park more than she had expected. The cohort had — across nine years — been her anchor friendship, and being at college near home in Pittsburgh meant she was geographically far from her real cohort. She had cried, in

October. She had cried in November. She had — by Christmas — found her footing. She had made new friends. She had kept her old ones. She had — like all of them — been figuring out the not in competition, the same project shape of holding many friendships at once.

The cohort, in Sofia's basement on August 14th, was the cohort. A year older. A year wiser, in some ways, and not really wiser at all in others.

The cohort had been right that night in April when they had picked the date.

The cohort had been right.

After dinner, the cohort sat on the floor.

They did the going-around-the-room thing again.

This time the prompt was different. Marcus had suggested the prompt in the group chat last week.

The prompt was: What is one thing you have learned in the year apart that you would not have learned together?

The cohort went around.

Marcus. In the year apart I learned that I miss you guys more than I knew, and that the missing has made me — has made me a better friend to the people in front of me, because I know what it feels like to be missed.

Sofia. In the year apart I learned that being homesick is not weakness. I learned that asking for help is the work, not the failure. Priya. In the year apart I learned that the Critic is a coward. She is loud when I am alone. She is quiet when I am with my people. I have been her bully back, this year.

Amara. In the year apart I learned that I can build small versions of this. Of you. Of the cohort. Other places. The architecture is portable. Darius. In the year apart I learned that loving a new dog is not a betrayal. Hope is — Hope is just Hope. Pepper is Pepper.

Jordan. In the year apart I learned that the book I have been writing is not the book I thought I was writing. It is, in fact, the book about all of you. I am sorry. I am not sorry. I am going to keep writing it. Maya. In the year apart I learned that the work I did in the basement for fifteen years is — is going to keep coming out of me forever. The basement was not the limit. The basement was the beginning.

Theo. In the year apart I learned that being seen is not a one-time event. It is a thing you keep asking for. The asking gets easier. Kezia. In the year apart I learned that I am, more than I thought I was, going to be a really good nurse.

Mia. In the year apart I learned that you can love two homes at the same time, and that the loving of both does not subtract from either. I have been carrying this lesson around with me since I was nine. I am still

learning it.

The cohort listened to each other.

The cohort, after all ten had spoken, sat in the basement and was quiet for a long time.

Then Sofia said, guys.

The cohort looked at her.

Sofia said, I want to make this an annual thing. The August 14 dinner. For the rest of our lives. Every year. This basement, while it exists. Some other space, when we are too old to come back here. The dinner, no matter what. Every year.

The cohort said yes.

The cohort said yes immediately, all of them, with no qualifications. Marcus said, Sof. We will be here. Even when we are forty.

Amara said, Sof. We will be here even when we are sixty.

Jordan said, Sof. We will be here even when we are eighty and our backs hurt.

Maya said, Sof. We will be here when our parents are gone. When our children are grown. When we are ourselves the people who own the basement.

Mia said, Sof. Pittsburgh is not a barrier. I will be here.

Sofia cried, a little.

Sofia said, thank you.

Sofia's mom, upstairs, was listening through the floor. Sofia's mom, in the kitchen with the dishwasher running, was crying too. Sofia's mom had been watching this cohort for twelve years. Sofia's mom had been, in some real way, a kind of secondary parent to all ten of them. Sofia's mom had been watching, that night, the cohort decide to be the cohort forever. Sofia's mom thought — and she would say this to her husband later, when they were going to bed — those kids have figured something out. They have figured out something most adults never figure out. They have figured out that the cohort is a thing you choose, every year, on a specific day, with specific people. They are going to keep choosing. They are going to be okay.

That is what Sofia's mom thought.

That is also what, somewhere in his bedroom in his retirement apartment in Tampa, Mr. Tate would think when he read about the dinner in a long Christmas letter Marcus would send him in December. Mr. Tate had retired the previous spring. Mr. Tate had moved to Tampa to be near his sister. Mr. Tate had been — quietly — keeping in touch with several of the cohort by mail. Kezia had been writing him. Marcus had been writing him. Theo had been writing him. Mr. Tate, in Tampa, would in December receive the Christmas letter and would smile, alone in his apartment, with a small cup of tea, and would say, out loud to nobody: those kids. Those wonderful kids.

That is also what Ms. Calloway would think, when she heard about it. Ms. Calloway had retired. Two years after the cohort graduated, Ms. Calloway retired. She would learn about the August 14 dinner from Sofia, who would write her a long letter the spring of the cohort's sophomore year of college. Ms. Calloway would read the letter twice, and would put it in the small wooden box on her dresser where she kept the most important letters of her career.

Ms. Calloway, in the years after retirement, would tell people about the August 14 dinner.

Ms. Calloway would tell teaching friends, I had a senior class once that decided to keep meeting every August 14, forever, in the basement of one of the kids' parents' houses. They are doing it. They have been doing it for years. They are going to keep doing it.

The teaching friends, listening, would not always quite believe it. Ms. Calloway would say, they are going to keep doing it. I know them. They will.

She was right.

The cohort, at the August 14 dinner of their twentieth year of doing it, would still be doing it. They would be thirty-eight. They would have children. Some of them would have children at the dinner. The children would, in turn, be the cohort's nieces and nephews — small kids who knew nine other adults as a kind of distributed second family. The cohort, at the August 14 dinner of their fortieth year, would still be doing it. Most of them. Some, by then, would have died — life is what life is. Some, by then, would be old. The dinner would have moved, by then, from Sofia's mother's basement to another house — to one of the cohort kids' houses, in some other city. The cohort would have adjusted.

The cohort would have kept going.

The cohort, at the August 14 dinner that took place when they were all seventy, would still be doing some version of it. The ones who were still alive would gather in a smaller room. The sauce would still be the sauce. The going-around-the-room would still happen.

The cohort would do it for the rest of their lives.

This is what twelve years of architecture, plus four years of choosing to keep using it, gives a person.

This is what the cohort is.

This is what the cohort always was.

The basement, on the night of August fourteenth in the year between freshman and sophomore years of college, was the basement.

The cohort was the cohort.

The architecture was holding.

The book has one chapter left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Road

There is one more morning to tell about.

It is the morning of August fifteenth. The cohort dinner ended around midnight. The kids slept in the basement, like they did at seventeen and eight and twelve. In the morning, Sofia's mom made pancakes. The cohort ate pancakes. The cohort, one by one, hugged each other in the kitchen and walked out to their cars, their rides, their buses, their flights. Mia left first. Her flight was at noon. Sofia drove her to the airport. They did not, this time, cry as hard at the airport — they had figured out, the previous summer, that the airport was not actually the hard part. The hard part was the year apart. The airport was just a building. They hugged. They said talk soon. They meant it. Mia walked through security. Sofia waved.

Then Sofia drove back to her parents' house.

She had a few days at home before her own drive back to school. The cohort was, by Sunday afternoon, scattered again.

The scattering looked, the second time, exactly like the scattering had looked the first time. Group chat photos of dorm rooms. Texts about strange roommates. Mia in Pittsburgh, sending photos of her new apartment. Amara at the east-coast college, sending photos of the room she had picked because of the window. Maya at art school, sending a photo of her new studio space.

But the scattering, the second time, was different.

The scattering was different because the cohort now had — in their bones, in their shared calendar, in the experience of having already done it once — the knowledge that August 14 would come again. The year would pass. The dinner would happen. The basement would be there. The sauce would be there. The cohort would be there.

The cohort had, at nineteen, figured out something that some people do not figure out at sixty.

They had figured out that forever is built one August 14th at a time. The architecture, in some real way, is not the building. The building is the visible part. The architecture is the yearly choosing to come back to

the building. The choosing is the structure.

The cohort would choose, every year, for the rest of their lives. The cohort would not be the only group in their lives. Marcus would have a wife someday. Sofia would have a partner and, eventually, a small therapy practice with a few colleagues she would learn to trust. Amara would have a series of coworkers and roommates and, eventually, a wife of her own. Priya would marry — a writer she would meet in graduate school, the cohort would find out years later, who would adore her and would, in the early years, be the new catcher of her Inner Critic in hallways. Darius would marry his college girlfriend, who he would meet in his sophomore year. Maya would not, by twenty-five, be married — Maya would have a long stretch of being single and making art and being very okay with both. Jordan would, eventually, marry another writer. Theo would marry the sophomore he had started dating, eventually. Mia would marry, in her thirties, a colleague in Pittsburgh. Kezia would marry, in her late twenties, a fellow nurse she would meet at the hospital where they both worked.

The cohort would all have other groups.
The cohort would all have the cohort.
The two were not in competition.
The two were the same project.

Closing Words

— J.A.R. —

Hello.

I am back.

I have been gone for almost the whole book. The kids have been telling you the story. I have been letting them.

I want to say a few things, here at the end. About this book. About all five.

I started writing this series because I wanted to take the lessons I had been teaching kids about how to build a kind life inside themselves — through the curriculum some of you may have seen called *The Architecture of Grace* — and put them inside a story. I wanted the lessons to travel further than the curriculum could travel by itself. Curriculum gets used in classrooms. Stories get used in bedrooms, in cars, on planes, at the kitchen table, in waiting rooms. Stories travel.

I wanted the lessons to travel.

The five books, taken together, are not a how-to. They are not a textbook. They are a series of small specific moments — a boy telling his parents the truth about a stolen LEGO at six, a girl drawing a sign for a bench at nine, a kid catching her Inner Critic in a bathroom stall at nine, a cohort writing thank-you notes in February of senior year — that, I hope, add up to something larger than themselves.

What is the something larger?

I will say it as plainly as I can.

The something larger is the room inside you that you can live in for the rest of your life.

We have been building this room across five books.
Foundation. Walls. Windows. Roof.

In Book One, we built the foundation. We laid down the idea that you can be a person who makes mistakes and is loved anyway. We did this in Room 12, with a teacher named Ms. Calloway and a class of first-graders learning each other's names with the right pronunciations. The foundation was laid.

In Book Two, we built the walls. We taught the kids — and you — that the voice inside your head that says cruel things about you is not the only

voice, and not the truest voice, and not the voice you have to live by. We named the Inner Critic. We named the Inner Coach. We started the toolkit. The walls went up.

In Book Three, we built the windows. We taught the kids how to see other people — and themselves — through windows of empathy and forgiveness and the difference between forgiving and trusting. We taught them that other people are full and complicated and almost always more than the worst thing they have done. The windows opened.

In Book Four, we built the roof. We taught the kids that grace — extending it, receiving it, learning the difference — is the roof of the whole structure. Grace is what keeps the building dry in the rain. Grace is what makes the inside livable.

In Book Five, we did not build any new architecture.

We watched the kids — now eighteen, now nineteen — live inside the architecture they had spent twelve years building.

The architecture held.

That is, in some sense, the whole story.



I want to say something to readers who have been with me since Book One.

Thank you.

You have read all five. You have been a kind of cohort, yourself, around this book — the parents reading aloud, the teachers teaching it, the older readers reading it on their own. You have, in some small way, been my cohort. I have been your J.A.R.

I want to say that the work you have been doing while reading is real. Reading these books — really reading them, with care, with attention — has been a kind of practice. The practice is the same practice the cohort has been doing inside the book. Notice. Name. Catch. Build. Forgive. Try again. You have been doing it. You did not know you were doing it. You were.

I am glad you did the work.

I am glad you stuck with the cohort for five books.

I want to say one more thing to readers.

The cohort is fictional. They are not real kids. They are an idealized version of what a cohort could be — what a teacher with thirty years of experience, given the right amount of trust and the right amount of time, could help a group of ten kids build. The idealized version is a target. The target is real. The work toward it is real.

If you are a parent reading this — please remember that your child does not need to be in a cohort like this in order to build the room inside themselves. Your child needs some version of these adults. Some version of these friends. Some version of these practices. The cohort in the book is the maximalist version. The minimalist version — a kid, a parent who tries, one good teacher in their lifetime, one friend who knows them — is enough. The architecture can be built from very little, if the very little is real.

If you are a teacher reading this — please know that you are the most important character in this entire series, and I did not write you as a character in this book on purpose. You are the implied character. The Ms. Calloway in the book is a composite of every teacher who has ever, in any school I have ever known, treated a kid like a real person and built — quietly, without fanfare, often without thanks — the architecture of a kid's life. You are in this book. I did not name you, but you are in here. Thank you.

If you are a young person reading this — please know that the kids in this book are not better than you. They are not smarter. They are not more sensitive. They are just kids who happened to be in the right rooms with the right adults. You can do the work they did. You probably already are doing it, in your own life, with your own people. Keep going. The room inside you is being built. You will be living in it for a long time. Make it a good one.

If you are an older reader — sixty, eighty, somewhere in the middle of a long life — please know that the architecture is buildable at every age. It is easier to build when you are young. It can be added to forever. The Mistake Wall is open to you at seventy. The toolkit is open to you at eighty-five. It is never too late to learn how to catch the Inner Critic. It is never too late to forgive somebody, or to write a letter, or to ask somebody to see you. The work is always available.



I want to say one more thing about Ms. Calloway.

Ms. Calloway is, in this book, retired by the end. She is, in the cohort's future, an older woman in a kitchen, reading letters from former students, knowing that she did her work well. She is going to live a long good life, after this book. She is

going to keep getting letters. She is going to read all of them. She is going to keep, in the small wooden box on her dresser, the ones that matter most.

Ms. Calloway is, in some real way, the teacher I most wanted to write into existence. Not because she is unusual. Because she is what every teacher could be, if every teacher were given the time and the trust and the support to do the work the way she did it.

We owe our teachers more than we have given them.

We owe our teachers more than thank-you notes in February.

We owe them the structures inside our schools that let them be Ms. Calloway. We owe them the time. We owe them the small classes. We owe them the pay. We owe them the public defense of their work, when their work is questioned. We owe them the trust.

I am, in some real way, asking you — reader, at the end of five books — to take this with you. To be, in your own life, a person who advocates for the teachers in your community. Not in a vague way. In a specific way. Vote. Write letters. Show up. Defend them.

The cohort is what teachers like Ms. Calloway can build.

The cohort exists because the system, in the version of America I have been writing about, allowed Ms. Calloway to do her work.

The system can be defended. The system can be built. The system can be replicated.

I am asking you to help.



I want to say something to the cohort.

I am writing this as if they were real.

In some way they are real. The kids you read about in this book are composites of dozens of real kids I have known across thirty years of running a program like the one Ms. Calloway runs. Their stories are real. Their voices are real. The specific events have been combined and rearranged and renamed. The truth of them is real.

Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Mia, Kezia.

You are real to me.

You have been my cohort across five years of writing.

I am going to miss you.

I am going to think about you.

I am going to picture you, on August 14 every year, in a basement somewhere, eating the sauce.

You are going to keep going without me.

That is the right shape.

That is, in fact, what teachers and writers do. We hand the kids over to themselves. We step back. We let the kids carry the work. The kids carry the work.

You — the cohort — carry the work now.

I trust you with it.



A final word.

To you, reader.

You have built, with me, a room over the course of five books. The room is inside you.

The room has a foundation that says you can be loved while you are still angry, you can be loved while you are still figuring it out, you can be loved while you are still wrong.

The room has walls that say the loudest voice in your head is not the truest voice. There are other voices. You can learn

them.

The room has windows that say the people who hurt you are bigger than the hurt. The people you love are bigger than the love. The world outside the window is more complicated and more kind than it sometimes looks.

The room has a roof that says grace covers all of it. Grace is what makes the inside of the room livable. Grace is the gift you give and the gift you receive and the air the room breathes.

You have built the room.

I am going to leave you in it now.

You will live in this room for the rest of your life.

You will, on hard days, come back to it. You will, on good days, invite people into it. You will, eventually, build small versions of it for the people you love — for your children, if you have them, for your students, if you teach, for your patients, if you doctor, for your readers, if you write, for your colleagues, if you build organizations.

You will pass the architecture forward.

That is the work.

That is, in some way, the only work.

I am glad you are doing it.

I am glad I got to walk part of the road with you.

The cohort is in a basement somewhere, eating sauce. Marcus is forty now, in some future. Or twenty-six, in some other. Or eighty, in some other. The architecture is holding.

You are reading this book.

The architecture is being built, inside you, while you read. Go live in it.

Go build small versions of it for everyone you love.

Go.

With all the grace I have to give — — J.A.R.



Room 207: The Year We Walked Out is the fifth and final book in The Architecture of Grace series. Thank you for walking the road. The school is, somewhere, ringing its September bell. Other cohorts are arriving. The work continues.

— J.A.R.



END OF BOOK FIVE

END OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE NOVEL SERIES



the last book

The conclusion to a five-book series about how a person becomes — quietly, over twelve years — someone who can walk out into the world.

They are eighteen.

Most of them. A few are still seventeen. By June, all of them will be eighteen. By August, they will be scattered.

Senior year. Lincoln Park High School. Room 207 is the senior English classroom on the second floor — tall windows, a long table the seniors sit around instead of desks, and Ms. Calloway once a week, the way she has been once a week for twelve years now. In the hallway outside Room 207, the Mistake Wall is permanently mounted, and every senior in the school walks past it every day.

In this book the narrator steps almost all the way out. The kids carry it themselves — in their own voices, in first person, with the *I* that has been gathering inside them since they were six. Marcus. Amara. Sofia. Priya. Darius. Jordan. Maya. Theo. Mia. Kezia. Ten of them. Twenty-eight chapters. One year, and then the scattering.

The architecture is finished. By the end of this book, the room the series has been building — inside the kids, inside the reader — is complete. The author hands it to you on the last page. You take it with you.



BOOK FIVE OF FIVE