KEEPING PACE

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TEXTS BETWEEN GRACE AND JONAH

Tuesday, June 18th

JONAH, 6:32am: Good luck today. Hope you don't get another "stomach bug"…

GRACE, 6:33am: It WAS a stomach bug!!!!

GRACE, 6:35am: I hope YOU don't screw up multiplying 8 by 7 like in Math Counts last year.

JONAH, 6:36am: You had to go all the way back to 7th grade to remember the last time I made a mistake?

GRACE, 6:39am: No! My brain's just full of things I need to know for the exam. I don't have room for the long list of all your embarrassing errors.

JONAH, 6:40am: Guess my brain's bigger than yours. I have room for everything.

Chapter 1

There's this picture my dad loves. It's from the summer my cousin Bailey and I turned seven, when we had a joint birthday party in my backyard with sprinklers, a slip n' slide, and a soccer ball pinata Bailey begged for.

In the photo, little Bailey is wearing this one-strap turquoise bathing suit I remember she hated, with a ruffle across the top that always slid down on the side with no strap. She's holding a red wiffleball bat, gearing up to smack the pinata, and all our friends are clustered around her, ready to scramble for candy when it bursts.

But I'm by myself, away from the group, sitting cross-legged on the wet grass with my face stuck inside a book someone had given me as a present.

Or—that's not quite true. If you look at the bottom corner of the photo really, really closely, you can see the edge of another book, a patch of blue shorts, and someone else's bare knee, pressed up against mine. Jonah Perkins's knee, to be precise.

I try not to think about Jonah's knee in that picture, though. I try not to think about the old Jonah at all.

Dad keeps the photo in a silver frame on his desk at the college, and my sister, Celia, doesn't understand why.

"You can't even see Grace's face," she pointed out last Thursday, when Dad was working late, so we met him at his office for Chinese takeout instead of going to his condo or a restaurant for dinner. "Everyone else was having so much fun, and she was reading. It's *sad*."

She hit the word “sad” as hard as my friend Jade hits the cymbal at the end of a drum solo, and the impact bruised my heart.

But Dad polished off the last of his spring roll and shook his head. “It’s so *Grace*,” he told Celia. “She was having her own fun. I know tenured professors who’d kill for that Gracie-level focus.”

He winked at me, and just like that—my heart-bruise healed and I sat up straighter in my seat.

“Gracie-level focus,” I whisper to myself now as I walk down the eighth grade hallway on the final morning of middle school. “Here we go.”

I need to tune out the kids who are sprawled on the couches near Dr. Cohen’s office, signing each other’s yearbooks and squealing about summer plans. I need to tune out Casey Exton, who’s sitting on the dirty floor with her long legs blocking my locker, describing her graduation dress in mind-boggling detail to her best friend, Asha.

I even need to tune out Bailey, Eliana, and Jade, who are perched at the edge of the bench near the water fountain, debating how to isolate the variable in question 12 on the exam review sheet Ms. Martin gave out two weeks ago. It’s way too late to be cramming for an exam that starts in twenty minutes, and it’s way too early to act like middle school is over!

Jonah’s across the hall with headphones over his ears, nodding along to his music and oblivious to whatever Owen and Nikhil are laughing about. He’s the only other person who’s behaving as if he understands what’s important right now, but I need to tune *him* out most of all.

“Can I get to my locker, please?” I ask Casey, and she rolls her eyes as if I’m the one inconveniencing her before tucking her legs to the side to make room.

Bailey thinks I dislike Casey because she and Jonah were together for a month and a half in the winter, but I dislike her because she's rude. If anything, I feel sorry for her for dating *Jerk*-ins.

Hope you don't get another "stomach bug."

Ugh!

I enter my locker combination, spinning right, then left, then right again, but my hands are shaking so much that it takes three tries before the lock clicks and the handle gives way.

This is the last time I'll open this locker at the beginning of a school day. The thought makes my throat go tight, but I don't have time to get nostalgic, so I stare at the paint-chipped dent on the locker door and run through the exam day checklist I know by heart.

I've reviewed every concept on the review sheet and correctly answered every practice problem, twice. I drank every drop of my exam-morning smoothie (peanut butter, banana, and yogurt with a touch of chocolate for optimal energy plus deliciousness). I'm wearing my number-one exam day outfit (my flowery purple top and nicest jeans because as Dad says, "If you put loungewear on your body, you're telling your body it's time to lounge").

It is *not* time to lounge. It's time to *dominate*. I need to be as amped up as Bailey was before the spring soccer championship, because this is *my* championship.

One last exam. One final showdown with *Jerk*-ins, which I will win, and then *I* will be eighth grade top scholar, and Jonah will not.

I grab my pencil case and calculators and slam my locker door shut.

Casey flinches. "Geez!"

"Gracie!" Bailey sees me and bounds over. "Do you have a couple sharp pencils I could borrow and an extra calculator, please-please-please?" She pushes the front pieces of her light

brown hair out of her eyes and holds up a tiny, chewed on pencil with the eraser worn all the way down. “This is all I’ve got. And I know. You made me a ‘to-bring’ list. It’s just that Mom had to leave early this morning and—”

“It’s okay.” I cut her off. I always have extra stuff for Bailey. Pencils, calculators, paper, period supplies—you name it. “Here.”

I hand over my backup calculator and then open my very full pencil case and give her two sharp number 2 pencils, plus two for Eliana, who’s looking at me with hopeful puppy dog eyes.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Bailey crushes me into a hug. She smells like peaches and vanilla, and her eyelashes are spiky with the dark brown mascara Celia told her was better for her coloring than the black she “borrowed” from Aunt Amy. If she had time to put on makeup, she *should* have had time to bring a calculator, but that’s a useless thought to have when I need to clear my head.

“Good luck out-nerding Jonah once and for all,” she whispers. “I believe in you.”

She heads back to the bench, and Owen Kang, Jonah’s extremely cute friend who knows *exactly* how cute he is, sidles up to me.

“Hey, Grace! Any chance you can show me how to do the last practice problem on the review sheet?” He grins his megawatt grin and nods at someone behind me, and I turn my head.

Jerk-ins. Of course.

He still has those headphones on, but he’s looking at me with a cocky grin on his face and his reddish-blond eyebrows raised sky high. Most of the boys are wearing athletic shorts and T-shirts, but Jonah has on khaki shorts and the royal blue shirt with a collar that looks annoyingly nice with his blue-green eyes. I wonder if he got Dad’s no-loungewear talk, too, way back when.

Jonah knows my policy. No discussing the material on an exam within thirty minutes of test time, because I won't risk freaking myself out. He's using his flirtatious friend to try to get me flustered, but it isn't going to work.

"You can ask your buddy over there to show you if you actually need an explanation," I tell Owen. "I'm going to get some water."

It's a lie—the water bottle inside my backpack is full. But I need quiet, just for a minute. I need to find that Gracie-level focus, fast, and that's impossible with all these people cramming or chatting or attempting to sabotage me.

I round the corner toward the school's front hallway, where tall, dark wood plaques hang on the walls that lead to the auditorium. The science award. The math award. English. Spanish. History. Sportsmanship. And the fanciest plaque of all, with the words "Eighth Grade Top Scholar Award" carved into the top in elegant gold letters. Below the title, names and dates are etched in—the best student in every class dating back more than fifty years.

I wouldn't be surprised if we see your name up on that plaque when you graduate, Gracie.

That's what Dad told me almost three years ago when we walked through this same hallway right before I started sixth grade.

Mom and Dad had brought me to middle school orientation and stuck around for the family tour even though Celia had just finished eighth grade in this same building. They'd been fighting for months by then, but they seemed so relaxed—so *happy*—as the three of us followed a student tour guide through the building, peeking into rooms they'd already seen.

As soon as Dad pointed out that plaque, I knew I would do whatever it took to get my name up there at the end of middle school. The fighting had gotten way worse after Celia's

grades took a nosedive and she didn't get into the honors track for high school. And if Celia's mediocre grades and test scores were wedging them apart because Dad thought she needed consequences and incentives and Mom thought she needed unconditional support, then maybe my excellent grades could bring them back together.

Spoiler alert: they couldn't.

But still. The goal of winning top scholar has been my anchor. The thing that's stayed constant when nothing else has. Every time I look up at the plaque, I can see that expression on Dad's face—hopeful and proud and focused on me and only me. That's how he'll look at me again at graduation, if I win. *When* I win.

Footsteps pound the floor behind me, and an extremely obnoxious voice says, "Owen chased you away, huh?"

Ugh squared.

"You must be pretty desperate, sending your friend to try to get in my head," I tell Jonah without looking at him.

"*You* must be pretty nervous if it worked," he replies.

"It didn't work! I'm not nervous!" I whirl around to face him, then groan.

He's smiling an extra smug smile because he got what he wanted—a reaction. *Ignore, ignore, ignore.* I know this!

"Sure, you're not, Grace Under Pressure."

He's been calling me that since January, when we took the standardized tests to determine who would qualify for the honors track in high school and I got sick.

I'm about to remind him that people get stomach bugs—that is a thing that happens, not some kind of character flaw. And anyway, I aced the test once I recovered. But he nods toward the plaques on the wall and says, "My grandma hates these things."

I blink. "She does? Why?"

Dr. Perkins lives next door to me. She's a retired biology professor who used to be on the faculty at Hempstead—the college in town where my parents both teach. When we were little, Jonah went to a private school a half hour away, in Philadelphia, but he did "Grandma Camp" in the summer, spending every weekday at his grandma's house while his parents were at work. Eventually, Celia had day camps and sports practices and friends, but Mom and Dr. P took turns occupying Jonah and me—and Bailey, too, once she and Aunt Amy moved here.

We used to read in our treehouse, or kick around a soccer ball if Bailey got her way. Sometimes Mom would take us to the pool, and sometimes Dr. P would set up science experiments or let us help in her garden. She still tells me to help myself to her mint leaves and berries any time I want, and she clips articles about books she thinks I'd like from *The New York Times Book Review* and seals them up in an envelope with my name written in neat capital letters.

Jonah shrugs. "She thinks all this attention on awards teaches us that 'what we achieve is more important than who we are.' Direct quote."

"Ah." That sounds like something Mom would say.

"She went off on me the other day—about how sometimes my priorities are messed up," Jonah goes on.

His lightly freckled, always pinkish cheeks flash darker pink. There's no teasing edge to his voice, no smug smile. There's nothing defensive or obnoxious at all . . . and I wish there was.

Because right now, he looks way too much like the boy who was heartbroken when Dr. P bought us a little netted habitat to watch caterpillars turn into butterflies, and one got stuck in its chrysalis and came out with its wings bent and tiny. It couldn't fly—it could barely even hop. But Jonah took care of it for days after we let the other butterflies free, feeding it watermelon slices and sugar-water on cotton balls so at least its short life would be happy.

Jonah isn't that sweet kid now.

He's made it very, *very* clear he's finished with our friendship. When he transferred to Oakview Middle at the beginning of seventh grade, he told me I didn't know him at all anymore and should forget I ever had.

For the last two school years, he's found a way to contradict every point I make in class discussions. He mocks me when I get something wrong, attacks my essays during peer feedback, gloats if he beats me on a test, shines a spotlight on all the things I'm insecure about.

Old Jonah is long gone.

But he clears his throat and says, "It's helped me, though. Having these plaques here with empty spaces at the bottom. It's kept me going." Now he looks me right in the eye. "*You've* kept me going."

The tiny scar above his left eyebrow from when Bailey hit him with a stick when we were six and pretending to swordfight is pale and shiny under the overhead lights, and his hair is darker than it used to be—more reddish brown than strawberry blond—but everything else is so familiar. The color of his eyes. The curve of his earlobes. The line of his nose.

I unzip, re-zip, and unzip my pencil case, watching the plastic teeth split apart, come back together, and separate again.

“Competing with you, I mean. It’s helped,” he says. “So, thank you. I guess. Is what I’m trying to say.”

One of my perfectly sharpened number 2s slides out of my pencil case and hits the ground point down, the tip snapping off before the pencil rolls away. My face burns as I bend down to chase it.

It’s helped.

He didn’t actually mention his dad, but his dad is there behind his words. The reason he needed something to keep him going. How hard and sad everything must have been after his dad died when we were in sixth grade—how hard and sad it must still be now.

I bury my broken-tipped pencil underneath the good ones and stand back up.

Too many words spin around in my head. Things I’ve tried to say and failed, things I wish I could take back, things I don’t have words for even though I’ve earned 100% on every vocabulary quiz all year long.

“All right, people!” Dr. Cohen’s voice booms from down the hall. “Last exam of middle school. This is it, friends!”

This is it.

The math exam. My championship. *Now.*

For somebody so smart, you can really be clueless.

That’s what my sister Celia tells me sometimes, in this way that’s joking but not.

All at once, I understand: Jonah’s *messing* with me. This whole interaction is another mind game—no different than sticking Owen on me or those texts he sent this morning.

I may be clueless about stuff like how to manage my curly hair or what kind of jeans to wear or the steps to the TikTok dance Bailey, Eliana, and Jade all know. But I'm not clueless when it comes to Jonah. Not anymore.

I mumble a "bye, Jonah" and take off back down the hallway to where the math teachers are ushering people into exam rooms. Kids are still quizzing each other and chattering about their graduation outfits, but I don't care because my brain is as sharp as the pencils that didn't tumble out of my pencil case, and my stomach is settling.

Ms. Martin passes out the exams and smiles as she places mine face-down on my desk. She's rooting for me, I think. She always goes out of her way to encourage the girls in Math Counts—telling us about inspiring female mathematicians and urging us to have confidence in our skills and trust our preparation.

As soon as Ms. Martin tells us to begin, I attack each problem, one after the other. There are no surprises. No questions I'm not prepared for. No concepts I didn't review.

After I finish the last problem, I go back through the whole test, making sure every calculation is correct, every answer is easy to read. I stand up as soon as I'm done, but the legs of someone else's chair scrape against the ground first.

Jonah's.

He flashes an obnoxious grin and then bolts up one aisle toward the front of the room. I hustle up the other aisle, and we slap our tests down on Ms. Martin's desk at the exact same time.

Ms. Martin jumps. "It isn't a race, you two," she tells us, but she doesn't seem mad. "Head back to your seats and don't distract your classmates, okay?"

On the way back to my desk, I pass Casey, who gives me the stink-eye, and Eliana, who's only on the third page of the test, erasing her calculations on a two-variable equation. I feel a little bad for not stopping to explain number 12 on the review sheet this morning.

I reach under my chair for Dad's new novel, *The Promise of After*, which I brought in case I finished the test early event though Dad says I should wait to read it until I'm at least sixteen. I open to the first chapter, but it's impossible to concentrate. Ms. Martin's flipping through the pages of someone's exam—mine? Jonah's—with her red pen poised. Jonah taps his foot against the floor.

I flip to the back of the book—the inside of the jacket, where his author photo looks back at me—hair curly like mine, thin-rimmed glasses, serious expression. I torture myself by re-reading the last sentence of his bio.

He lives in the Philadelphia suburbs. That's the whole sentence.

The bio on his other two books—one based on his grad school dissertation and one short story collection—says, "He lives with his wife and two daughters in the Philadelphia suburbs." But now that Mom's not his wife and he lives alone, Celia and I got erased.

I close the book too hard, and Jonah scribbles a note and holds it up.

Too many words on the page for you?

Ugh, ugh, ugh.

I read more books than he did this year, so I'm number one on the library wall of fame, but Jonah claims I cheated since some of my books were verse novels with so few words on each page.

It is *impossible* to believe I ever enjoyed Jonah's company. I want to throw Dad's book at his head. I want to erase *him*.

Excerpt from the editorial letter:

The beginning

I love that Grace and Jonah and their families have gone through so much and that all of these characters have a really lived-in, realistic feel. However, I did feel like we were getting a *lot* of backstory all at once at the beginning, and there's a lot of referencing characters who aren't actually present and so are hard to remember. It took me a couple of chapters to remember that Bailey was Grace's cousin, for example… Or to remember when/why Jonah moved away, or what the timeline of divorce/death/middle school was.

I wonder if starting with Grace remembering the picture is the right thing? Perhaps there's a scene with Bailey and Celia instead, that could get across some of the same feeling but with more action? It's much easier to remember characters if we've seen them doing stuff. The picture feels like it *should* explain a lot about Grace and her family, but it's not an image that sticks in my mind when the book is over. Is there a scene to focus on instead? Or a more meaningful object?

Consider:

What changed and what stayed the same between this version of chapter 1 and the published version?

Which version do you like better and why?

Based on the revisions and editorial suggestions, what can you infer about what a first chapter should (and shouldn't) do?