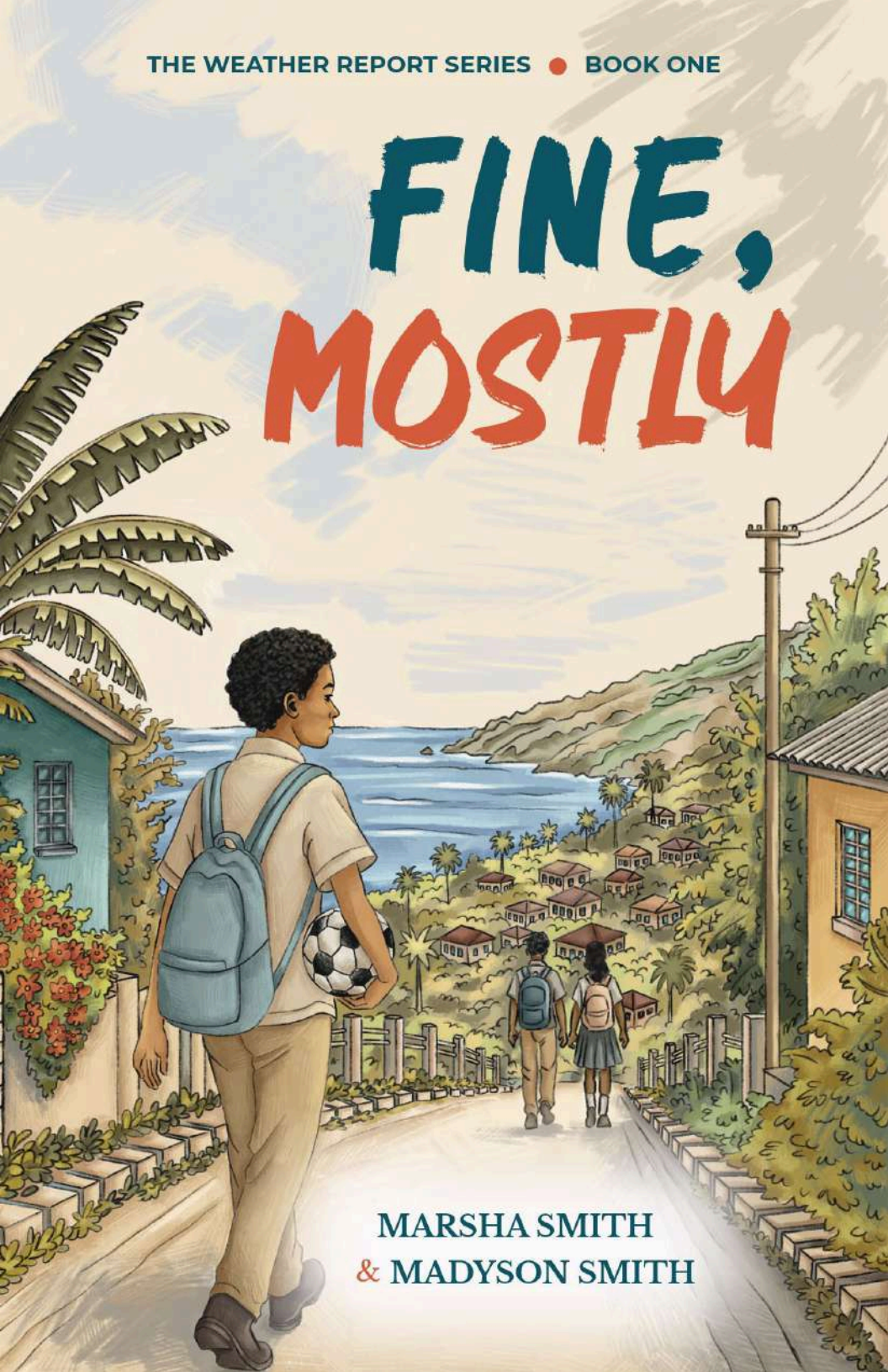
THE WEATHER REPORT SERIES • BOOK ONE

FINE, MOSTLY



MARSHA SMITH
& MADYSON SMITH

Fine, Mostly

Fine, Mostly

A Story About Worry, Courage and Finding Your Calm

Marsha Smith and Madyson Smith

Bahali
because every mind deserves peace

FINE, MOSTLY

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Published by Bahali Press
An imprint of Bahali Inc.
bahali.org
First edition, 2026

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9940253-8-3
Hardback ISBN: 979-8-9940253-9-0
eBook ISBN: 979-8-953303-00-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026926400

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or to actual events is coincidental.

This book is intended to support emotional-wellness education and conversation. It is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological, or mental health care. Children experiencing persistent or significant emotional distress should be supported in speaking with a trusted adult and, when appropriate, a qualified professional.

Cover concept and design by Marsha Smith
Illustrations by Vanessa-Andrea Stupu
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Book design and formatting by Alice Creswell
Chapter design by juicy_fish on Magnific

For every child who has ever said,

"I am fine,"

when there was more to the story.

And for the people who stayed long enough to listen.

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Note from the Authors

Some worries are easy to see.

Others are carried quietly.

You can laugh with your friends, help at home, work hard at school, play the sport you love and still have moments when your thoughts feel louder than you would like them to be.

You can seem fine.

And mostly, you might be.

That does not mean there is not more to the story.

We wrote *Fine, Mostly* for young people who know what it is like to worry, to overthink, to put pressure on themselves or to wonder whether they are the only ones who sometimes feel this way.

Daniel's story takes place in a Caribbean community shaped by family, friendship, football, laughter and the sea. His world may look like yours, or it may be very different.

But perhaps you will recognise something in him.

Perhaps you know what it feels like when a small worry grows bigger.

Perhaps you have tried to look okay when you did not quite feel okay inside.

Or perhaps you have wondered what it really means to be strong.

We hope you will walk alongside Daniel as he begins to figure some of these things out.

There will be stormy days.

There will be better ones.

There will also be plenty of ordinary days in between.

Whatever your weather looks like today, we hope this story reminds you of something important:

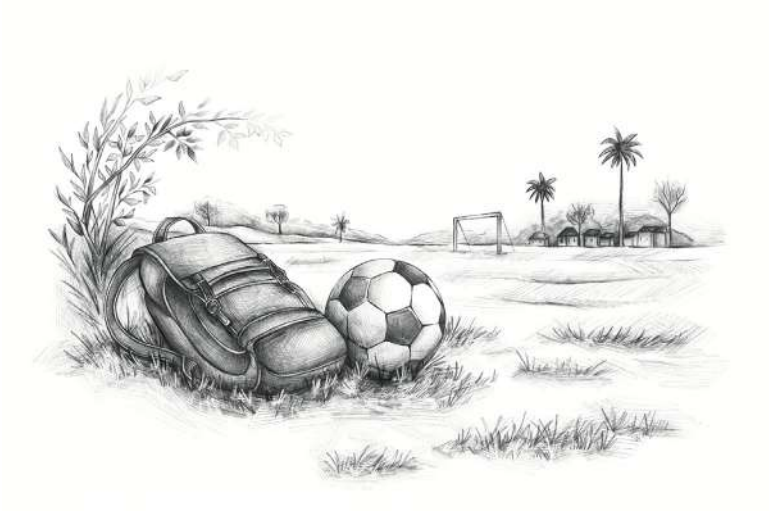
You do not have to pretend the sky is always clear to be strong.

And you do not have to figure everything out alone.

Marsha Smith and Madyson Smith

CHAPTER ONE

The Boy Everyone Thought Was Fine



Daniel Williams had become very good at pretending.

If you asked his teachers, they would tell you he was responsible. If you asked Coach Richards, he would say Daniel worked harder than anyone else on the football

field. If you asked Mama, she would smile proudly and say, "Daniel is my strong boy."

Strong.

People said it so often that Daniel sometimes wondered whether it had become part of his name.

Strong Daniel.

Brave Daniel.

The boy who carried groceries home from the market without being asked. The boy who watched his little sister after school when Mama worked late. The boy who remembered Grandma Ivy's medicine and reminded everyone where they had left their keys.

The boy who never complained.

The boy who always said, "I am okay."

Even when he was not.

Especially when he was not.

Daniel lived in a neighbourhood where people noticed things. Neighbours called greetings from verandas. Someone was always frying something that smelled delicious. Radios drifted through open windows. Children rode bicycles up and down the road until the streetlights flickered on.

It was the kind of place where people looked out for one another.

It was also the kind of place where people admired children who were dependable. Children who helped. Children who did not make trouble.

Children who were strong.

Most days, Daniel liked being that kind of person.

He liked helping Mama unload shopping bags from the car. He liked making Grandma Ivy laugh. He liked reading stories to his little sister, Nia, even when she interrupted every few pages to argue with the characters.

He especially loved football.

On the field, everything made sense. Coach Richards shouted instructions from the sidelines. Teammates called for passes. The ball moved quickly from foot to foot.

Daniel knew where to be and what to do.

When he ran across the field with the warm Caribbean breeze against his face, he felt lighter somehow, as though the worries that followed him everywhere else could not quite keep up.

This year was supposed to be special.

For the first time in years, their school had a real chance at winning the interschool football championship.

The tournament banners had gone up around campus two weeks earlier. Coach Richards had stopped every practice to remind them.

"We are not just participating this year," he had said, pacing in front of the team. "We are competing."

Andre, Daniel's best friend and teammate, had nearly bounced out of his football boots. "We are going to make history," he announced to anyone who would listen.

Daniel had laughed.

But later that night, lying in bed staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars still stuck crookedly across his ceiling from when he was younger, another thought had slipped quietly into his mind.

What if I mess it up?

At first, it was just football.

Then it became everything else.

What if I forget my answers during a test?

What if Mama gets sick?

What if Grandma Ivy falls?

What if something bad happens when nobody is prepared?

What if everyone realises I am not as strong as they think I am?

The questions arrived one after another, crowding his thoughts like waves crashing against the seawall during rough weather.

He tried arguing with them.

You are being ridiculous.

Everything is fine.

Other people have bigger problems.

Go to sleep.

But the thoughts did not seem interested in listening.

Lately, sleep had become harder. Sometimes he lay awake long after the house had gone quiet, listening to the ceiling fan turn overhead while his mind raced ahead into futures that had not happened. By morning, he felt tired before the day had even begun.

He told no one.



At breakfast, Mama moved around the kitchen packing lunches before work. Grandma Ivy sliced mangoes at the counter while humming softly beneath her breath. Nia sat cross-legged on her chair, introducing her stuffed turtle to each piece of fruit before taking a bite.

"This is Mr. Pebbles," she informed the mango slice solemnly. "He enjoys adventures but dislikes unexpected vegetables."

Daniel snorted into his juice. "Mangoes are not vegetables," he said.

"Mr. Pebbles believes in being prepared," Nia replied.

Grandma Ivy chuckled. "A wise turtle."

Mama kissed the top of Daniel's head as she passed behind him. "Big practice after school?" she asked.

Daniel nodded. Coach had promised to announce the starting lineup for the upcoming tournament. "You will do well," Mama said.

She said it easily, without pressure. Simply the way she reminded people to bring umbrellas if clouds gathered overhead.

"You always give your best."

Daniel smiled automatically. "Thanks."

Inside, his stomach twisted.

What if my best is not enough?

By the time students gathered for morning assembly, the sun had already begun warming the courtyard. Teachers directed classes into lines. Students whispered and giggled beside one another. Somebody dropped a water bottle. Someone else laughed loud enough to attract attention.

At the front, Coach Richards stood beside the principal, arms folded across his chest. "The championship tournament begins next month," Coach announced after morning notices. "The team has been working hard."

Andre elbowed Daniel. "This is our year," he whispered.

Daniel nodded.

His mouth had suddenly gone dry.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The sunlight felt brighter. The sounds around him seemed sharper.

A baby from the preschool building cried in the distance. A teacher called someone's name. Students shuffled against the pavement.

Andre kept talking about defensive strategies.

Daniel tried to focus.

Instead, he became aware of his heartbeat.

Fast.

Too fast.

He swallowed.

The air felt different somehow.

Too thick.

He took a breath.

Then another.

His chest tightened. Heat climbed up the back of his neck. His fingers tingled.

The courtyard noises blurred together until they sounded far away.

What is happening?

He looked around quickly.

Everyone else seemed normal.

Andre was grinning. Teachers stood chatting nearby. A girl from grade six braided her friend's hair while they waited.

Nobody else looked frightened.

Nobody else looked like they were forgetting how to breathe.

Maybe something is wrong with me.

The thought struck so suddenly that Daniel nearly gasped.

His vision narrowed. His hands trembled.

Do not panic.

Do not cry.

Do not let anyone notice.

Be strong.

"Daniel?"

The voice came softly beside him.

He turned.

Ms. Brown, the school guidance counsellor, stood nearby. She was not frowning. She was not alarmed. She simply looked concerned. "You do not look like yourself today," she said.

Daniel stared at her.

His usual answer waited automatically behind his teeth.

I am fine.

He had said it to teachers. To friends. To family members. To himself.

I am fine.

But the words stuck.

His throat tightened.

Ms. Brown did not rush him. She did not fill the silence.

She simply stayed. "Daniel?" she asked again, her voice gentle.

For a moment, he considered telling her.

I do not know why my heart will not slow down.

I do not know why I keep thinking terrible things might happen.

I do not know why I am scared all the time.

Instead, he managed, "I am okay."

The words sounded small.

Unconvincing.

Ms. Brown studied him for another second before nodding. "If that changes," she said quietly, "you know where to find me."

Daniel blinked.

"You do not have to figure everything out by yourself," she said.

Then the principal resumed speaking, and the moment passed.

Students clapped. Teachers began directing classes back towards their classrooms. Andre adjusted his school bag.

"What was that about?" he asked.

Daniel hesitated.

For the briefest moment, he considered telling the truth.

I think something strange is happening to me.

I think I am scared.

I think I need help.

Instead, he forced a shrug.

"Nothing," he said.

Andre accepted the answer easily enough. "You coming to practice later?" he asked.

Daniel glanced towards the football field stretching beyond the school buildings. The championship banners fluttered lightly in the breeze.

This is our year.

He thought about the version of himself everyone seemed to know.

Strong Daniel.

Reliable Daniel.

The boy who never complained.

Then he thought about the version nobody saw.

The one lying awake at night.

The one whose heart suddenly raced during assembly.

The one who was not sure what was happening anymore.

"Yeah," Daniel said at last. "I am coming."

As they walked towards class, the uneasy feeling inside him lingered. Not as fierce as it had been moments earlier, but present.

Like dark clouds gathering far out at sea.

Daniel glanced back once towards the courtyard.

Ms. Brown still stood beneath the shade of the almond tree near the office building. She caught his eye and offered a small smile.

Not the kind adults sometimes gave when they expected children to move on quickly. A patient smile.

One that seemed to say:

I am still here.

Daniel looked away first.

He was not ready to talk.

He was not even sure what he would say.

But for the first time since the strange feelings had begun, another possibility slipped quietly between all the frightening thoughts.

Maybe being strong did not mean pretending nothing was wrong.

Daniel was not ready to talk.

But he remembered where Ms. Brown had said he could find her.

CHAPTER TWO

When the Storm Gets Loud



Daniel hardly remembered the rest of that school day.

After assembly, he followed his class back to their classroom, opened the correct textbooks when everyone else did and copied notes from the board into his exercise book. He answered two questions during language arts. He remembered to hand in his homework.

From the outside, nothing looked different.

Inside, however, it felt as though someone had turned up the volume on every thought in his head.

What was that?

Why could I not breathe?

What if it happens again?

What if something really is wrong with me?

When the bell finally rang for lunch, Daniel realised he had no memory of what Mr. Clarke had taught during mathematics.

He stared down at the worksheet in front of him.

The answers he had carefully worked out earlier no longer made sense.

"Daniel?"

He looked up.

Mr. Clarke stood beside his desk. "You all right, son?" Mr. Clarke asked.

Daniel forced himself to smile. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Clarke glanced down at the unfinished worksheet. "You usually finish before I collect these."

"I did not sleep very well."

"Hmm." Mr. Clarke nodded thoughtfully. "Well, take your time. No prize for finishing first."

A few students nearby laughed.

Daniel managed a small smile.

Take your time.

If only it were that simple.

By lunchtime, his appetite had disappeared completely.

The canteen smelled like curry chicken, steamed vegetables and freshly baked rolls. Usually, Daniel looked forward to lunch. Today, the thought of eating made his stomach twist.

Andre dropped into the seat across from him, balancing his tray with the confidence of someone who had never once worried about dropping anything. "You are not eating?" he asked.

"I am not really hungry."

Andre raised an eyebrow. "You sick?"

"No."

"You sure?"

Daniel peeled back the corner of his napkin. "I am fine."

Andre frowned. "You have said that three times today."

Daniel shrugged.

What else was he supposed to say?

Actually, my heart started racing during assembly.

Actually, I thought I might faint.

Actually, I cannot stop thinking about it happening again.

Instead, he picked up his box juice.

"You excited about practice?" he asked.

Andre immediately brightened. "Coach is announcing the starting lineup."

"I know."

"You know what this means?"

Daniel could not help smiling a little. "What?"

Andre lowered his voice dramatically. "This is our year."

Daniel looked out the canteen window towards the football field beyond the school buildings. The tournament banners fluttered in the afternoon breeze.

"This is our year," Andre repeated.

Daniel wanted to believe him.

Instead, another thought slipped quietly into place.

What if I let everyone down?

That evening, rain tapped softly against the windows while Mama stirred a pot of rice and peas on the stove. The kitchen smelled of thyme, coconut milk and garlic.

Grandma Ivy sat at the counter peeling mangoes.

Nia lay on the floor nearby, arranging crayons into what she claimed was "a highly organised rainbow system."

"It is not organised," Daniel said automatically.

"It absolutely is," Nia replied without looking up. "Blue has leadership responsibilities."

Grandma Ivy laughed. "You hear that, Danny? Blue is management."

For a moment, Daniel almost forgot the strange feeling that had followed him all day. Almost.

"You are quiet this evening," Grandma Ivy observed.

"Tired," Daniel said.

Mama glanced over her shoulder. "You have been working hard."

Daniel braced himself.

Study harder.

Train harder.

Be grateful.

But Mama only nodded towards the table. "Make sure you give yourself some rest too."

"I will."

Nia looked up from the floor. "Mr. Pebbles thinks resting is important."

Daniel stared at her. "Mr. Pebbles is a stuffed turtle."

"Exactly," Nia replied. "He is very experienced at sitting down."

Even Daniel laughed at that.



Later that evening, Daniel sat at his desk pretending to study.

His science notes remained open to the same page for nearly twenty minutes.

He read the same paragraph again and again.

The words refused to stick.

What if I fail Friday's exam?

What if Coach notices I cannot focus?

What if Grandma gets sick?

What if Mama loses her job?

What if…

Daniel closed his textbook.

His mind seemed to leap from one frightening possibility to another without pausing long enough to rest. He rubbed his eyes.

Maybe something really is wrong with me.

A quiet knock sounded at his door.

"Come in."

Nia appeared holding Mr. Pebbles beneath one arm. "You okay?" she asked.

"I am fine."

She studied him carefully. "You do not look fine."

Daniel looked away. "What do I look like?"

Nia tilted her head. "Like when I accidentally put too much baking soda in the cupcakes and everybody had to pretend they liked them."

"What?"

"You look like you are trying very hard."

Before Daniel could respond, she disappeared down the hallway.

A few moments later, Grandma Ivy appeared.

She settled carefully on the edge of his bed. "When I was little," she said, "my grandmother used to tell me worries are like stray chickens."

Daniel blinked. "Grandma?"

Grandma smiled. "They wander into your yard whether you invite them or not."

Despite himself, Daniel laughed. "Stray chickens?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"You cannot stop them from showing up."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"You do not let them move into the house."

Daniel picked at a loose thread on his blanket. "What if they already have?"

Grandma Ivy looked at him for a moment. "Have they?"

Daniel stopped picking at the thread.

The room seemed very quiet.

"Grandma?"

"Yes?"

"Do grown-ups worry?"

Grandma Ivy looked genuinely surprised. "Oh, sweetheart," she said softly.

She reached over and covered his hand with hers. "Everybody worries."

"Even you?"

"Especially me."

Daniel swallowed. “Sometimes I think something bad is going to happen.”

Grandma waited.

“My heart starts beating really fast.”

Another pause.

“My stomach hurts.”

He stared at the floor. “I cannot stop thinking.”

The words came out in a rush.

“I do not know why.”

Grandma’s hand tightened gently around his. “That sounds frightening.”

Daniel looked up quickly.

He had expected advice.

Instructions.

A reminder to pray more.

Instead, Grandma simply listened.

“Do you think something is wrong with me?” he whispered.

Grandma Ivy shook her head. “I think something is frightening you.”

“Then why does this keep happening?”

“I do not know all the answers,” she admitted.

She waited until he looked at her. "But you do not have to know all the answers tonight either."

Tears stung unexpectedly behind Daniel's eyes.

Grandma squeezed his hand.

Neither of them said anything for a while.

The rain continued tapping against the window.

On Thursday afternoon, as Daniel packed his books after the final bell, someone stopped beside his desk. He looked up.

Ms. Brown held out a folded piece of paper. "This is just for you," she said.

Daniel took it.

Ms. Brown did not ask him to stay.

She did not ask whether he was ready to talk.

She simply gave him a small nod and continued down the corridor.

Daniel slipped the paper into his school bag without opening it.

The next morning, Friday's science exam waited just around the corner.

So did football practice.

So did the championship tournament.

Everything still felt enormous.

As Daniel reached into the front pocket of his school bag for a pencil, his fingers brushed against the folded paper.

He had forgotten about it.

His name appeared neatly across the front.

Daniel.

He unfolded it carefully.

Inside, in Ms. Brown's handwriting, were just a few words.

Daniel,

My door is open whenever you are ready.

Ms. Brown

Daniel read the note twice.

Then a third time.

Friday's test still worried him.

The championship still seemed enormous.

His heart still did things he did not understand.

None of that had changed.

He folded the note carefully and tucked it back into the front pocket of his bag. He was not ready to knock on Ms. Brown's door.

Not yet.

But he kept the note.

CHAPTER THREE

Grandma Ivy's Hurricane Story



By Monday afternoon, the note from Ms. Brown had been folded and unfolded so many times that the corners had begun to soften.

Daniel kept it tucked inside the front pocket of his bag, where he could reach it without looking. Three times that day, he had almost gone to her office.

The first time was after mathematics, when his teacher announced a group project and Daniel suddenly worried that everyone would realise he was not as organised as they thought.

The second time was before lunch, when he noticed the tournament bracket posted in the foyer.

Only three weeks until the championship.

Three weeks until the biggest football match of his life.

Three weeks until everyone would be watching.

The third time was after science class, when Mr. Clarke handed back Friday's exams and Daniel found himself checking his mark twice.

Daniel had walked halfway down the hallway towards Ms. Brown's office before stopping.

Maybe tomorrow.

Maybe next week.

Maybe never.

What if she thought he was overreacting?

What if she asked questions he could not answer?

What if talking about it made everything worse?

By the time he reached home, his shoulders felt stiff beneath the straps of his school bag.

"Danny!"

Nia burst through the front door before he had even reached the steps. "You have been summoned."

Daniel blinked. "By who?"

"Grandma."

Nia lowered her voice dramatically. "There is laundry."

Daniel groaned. "I just got home."

"Grandma says the rain is coming."

Nia looked towards the sky. "I think the clouds look suspicious."

Daniel glanced overhead.

The afternoon light had dimmed slightly, and a thick band of grey hovered above the sea beyond the neighbourhood rooftops.

Grandma Ivy appeared on the veranda carrying an empty laundry basket. "When you have lived long enough on an island," she said, "you learn to pay attention to the sky."

Daniel followed her into the yard.

The clothesline stretched between two posts near the back of the house. Sheets billowed in the breeze like sails.

"You can tell when it is going to rain?" he asked.

"Sometimes."

Grandma unclipped a pillowcase. "You notice the clouds."

Another clothespin snapped free.

"The way the air changes."

She handed Daniel a towel. "The way people start preparing."

Nia held up a sock. "Mr. Pebbles says preparation is important."

Grandma smiled. "Mr. Pebbles sounds wise."

"He is extremely cautious," Nia replied.

They worked quietly for a while.

Someone nearby was frying plantains. A radio drifted through an open window down the street. Children laughed somewhere beyond the neighbouring fence.

Daniel folded another towel.

The familiar sounds settled around him.

Not enough to erase the restlessness inside him.

But enough to soften it.

A little.

"When I was eleven," Grandma Ivy said suddenly, "we had a hurricane warning."

Daniel looked up. "You were scared?"

Grandma laughed. "Terrified."

"You?"

"You think your grandmother came into this world fearless?"

Daniel smiled despite himself. "No."

Grandma tucked another shirt into the basket. "I remember listening to the grown-ups boarding up windows. Filling containers with water. Checking batteries. Cooking before the electricity went."

"What did you think?"

"I thought the roof would blow away."

"What else?"

"I worried about our goats."

Daniel blinked. "The goats?"

Grandma nodded seriously. "I worried about the sea coming up the road. About whether everybody I loved would be safe."

"Were they?"

"They were."

"You stopped being scared?"

Grandma shook her head. "No."

Daniel frowned. "But you got through it."

"I did."

"How?"

Grandma Ivy looked towards the darkening sky. "We prepared. We stayed together. And we did what needed doing while the storm was still making plenty of noise."

Daniel turned the folded towel over in his hands. "So you were scared the whole time?"

"For plenty of it."

"And you still did things?"

Grandma smiled. "The goats were not going to tie themselves up."

Daniel laughed.

A low rumble of thunder rolled somewhere in the distance.

Grandma stood and reached for the laundry basket. "Come. Let us get these inside before the sky proves Nia right."

From across the yard, Nia lifted both hands triumphantly. "I knew those clouds were suspicious!"

Daniel picked up the other side of the basket.

Together, they carried the laundry towards the house.

The next morning, Daniel stopped outside Ms. Brown's office.

Students passed through the hallway behind him. Someone dropped a pencil case. A teacher reminded a class about homework.

Daniel tightened his grip on the straps of his bag.

He counted his breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

Then, before he could change his mind, he knocked.

"Come in."

Ms. Brown looked up from her desk. "Daniel."

He hovered in the doorway. "You left me a note."

"I did," Ms. Brown said.

"You said I could talk to you."

"I did."

Daniel stepped inside.

His mouth suddenly felt dry.

"I think," he began.

The words disappeared.

Ms. Brown waited.

She did not rush him.

She did not finish his sentences.

She did not look impatient.

"I think something might be wrong with me."

The confession landed between them like something fragile.

Ms. Brown gestured towards the chair beside her desk. "Tell me what has been happening."

Daniel sat.

For a moment, he did not know where to begin.

"My heart beats really fast sometimes," Daniel explained.

Ms. Brown nodded.

"And my stomach hurts."

"When does that happen?"

"I do not know. At school sometimes. Before football. When I think about tests." He rubbed his palms against his trousers.

"And sometimes when nothing is happening at all."

"What are you thinking about when it happens?" Ms. Brown asked.

Daniel hesitated. "Bad things."

"What kind of bad things?"

"Messing up. Somebody getting sick. Something happening to Grandma or Mama." He looked down.

"Letting people down."

Ms. Brown was quiet for a moment. "Our brains are designed to protect us," she said.

Daniel looked up. "Protect us from what?"

"Things they think might be dangerous."

"Like what?"

"Sometimes real danger. But an alarm can also sound when we are worried about something that might happen."

Daniel frowned. "So my brain thinks everything is dangerous?"

"Not everything. But sometimes our alarm systems become extra sensitive."

"Like a smoke detector?"

Ms. Brown smiled. "Exactly."

"What if there is no fire?"

"Sometimes smoke detectors go off when toast burns."

Daniel pictured Nia standing in the kitchen.

Mr. Pebbles says toast is dramatic.

A tiny laugh escaped him.

Ms. Brown smiled. "The alarm is not bad," she said. "It is trying to protect you. Sometimes it just sounds when you are not actually in danger."

Daniel looked down at his hands. "Can it stop?"

"It can learn."

The word surprised him.

"Learn?"

"We cannot always stop worried thoughts from showing up."

Daniel's shoulders slumped. "Oh."

"But we can learn to notice what is happening and decide what to do next." Ms. Brown pulled a blank sheet of paper towards her.

"Tell me what you notice when the alarm goes off."

Daniel thought for a moment. "My stomach hurts."

She wrote it down.

"My heart beats really fast."

Ms. Brown added it to the list.

"I cannot sleep."

Another line.

"I keep imagining bad things happening."

She continued writing.

"I think about messing up at the championship."

He paused. "I do not want people to think I cannot handle things."

Ms. Brown wrote that down too.

Daniel stared at the growing list. "I did not realise there were so many."

"You have been noticing a lot."

His eyes drifted towards the window overlooking the football field. "They are counting on me."

"Who?"

"The team. Coach."

He paused. "Mama."

Another pause.

"Everybody."

Ms. Brown let the silence sit for a moment.

Then she asked, "What if they are not expecting perfection?"

Daniel frowned. "What do you mean?"

But the bell rang before he could ask anything else.

Students spilled into the corridor outside.

Ms. Brown glanced towards the door, then back at him. "We can talk about that another time."

Daniel stood and pulled his school bag onto one shoulder.

At the doorway, he stopped.

"Ms. Brown?"

"Yes?"

"Can I come back?"

"Of course."

Daniel nodded.

Then he stepped into the corridor.



That afternoon, science class brought an unwelcome surprise. "Before we begin," Mr. Clarke announced, "there will be a short quiz."

Several students groaned.

Andre dropped his head dramatically onto his desk. "I have been betrayed," he whispered.

A few classmates laughed.

Daniel's stomach dipped.

The room seemed smaller.

His thoughts accelerated.

What if I fail?

What if I blank?

What if—

His fingers tightened around his pencil.

Then he remembered.

Smoke detector.

His brain was sounding an alarm.

He glanced towards the classroom door.

For one brief moment, he wanted to leave.

Instead, he stayed in his seat.

His hands still trembled.

His thoughts still raced.

He stayed in his seat.

Mr. Clarke placed the quiz face down on Daniel's desk. "Begin."

Daniel turned it over.

The first question was not as difficult as he had feared.

Neither was the second.

By the third, he realised something surprising.

He was still nervous.

And he was still answering questions.

Outside, rain began tapping softly against the classroom windows. Daniel looked down at the paper in front of him. Then he picked up his pencil and kept going.

CHAPTER FOUR

Making Room



By the following Monday, Daniel had developed a new habit.

Every time he walked down the hallway towards Ms. Brown's office, part of him wanted to turn around. The other part kept walking.

He paused outside the guidance office door and adjusted the straps of his bag.

Two weeks until the championship.

The tournament bracket still hung in the foyer, its empty spaces waiting to be filled with winners and losers.

Students stopped in front of it every day.

"Imagine if we make the finals," someone had said that morning.

"We are definitely making the finals," Andre had corrected.

Daniel had smiled.

Then he had imagined tripping over the ball in front of the entire school.

Missing an important pass.

Letting everyone down.

His stomach had immediately flipped.

He knocked before he could change his mind.

"Come in."

Ms. Brown looked up from her desk. "Good morning, Daniel."

"Morning."

He settled into the chair across from her.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Then Daniel sighed. "I still feel anxious."

Ms. Brown nodded. "I thought you might."

"You did?"

"You sound disappointed," Ms. Brown said.

Daniel picked at a loose thread on the sleeve of his uniform shirt. "I thought maybe…" He hesitated. "I thought talking about it would make it go away."

Ms. Brown leaned back slightly in her chair. "If you picked up a football for the first time, would you expect to play like a professional athlete by the end of the day?"

"No."

"If Nia sat down at a steel pan for the first time, would she immediately know every song?"

Daniel smiled despite himself. "She would probably think she did."

Ms. Brown laughed softly. "Learning coping skills works the same way."

"So I am not doing it wrong?" Daniel asked.

"No."

"Even though I still worry?"

"Especially then."

Daniel considered this.

Nobody expected football players to master a skill after one drill.

Coach Richards certainly did not.

Every practice involved repeating the same movements over and over until they became familiar.

Pass.

Run.

Reset.

Again.

Again.

Again.

"Okay," Daniel said cautiously. "Then what do I do?"

Ms. Brown opened a desk drawer and pulled out a brightly coloured pinwheel.

Daniel stared at it. "You have got to be kidding."

"What?"

"A pinwheel?" Daniel asked.

"You look disappointed."

"I thought maybe there would be advanced psychological techniques."

"There are."

She handed him the pinwheel. "This is not one of them."

Daniel laughed. "Then why do you have it?"

"Humour me."

He took it carefully.

"When we become anxious," Ms. Brown explained, "our bodies prepare us to protect ourselves."

"Like the smoke detector."

"Exactly."

"Our breathing sometimes speeds up without us noticing."

Daniel remembered assembly.

The hot courtyard.

The sudden rush of fear.

The desperate feeling that he could not catch his breath.

"That happened to me."

Ms. Brown nodded. "One way we can help our bodies settle is by slowing things down intentionally."

Daniel looked at the pinwheel. "That sounds too simple."

"Simple is not the same thing as easy."

She demonstrated first. "Put one hand on your chest."

Daniel copied her.

"Now one on your stomach."

"Okay."

"Take a normal breath."

He noticed that his chest rose quickly beneath his palm.

"Now let the next breath move a little lower. See if you can feel your stomach move beneath your hand."

Daniel tried.

Nothing happened.

"Again," Ms. Brown encouraged.

The second attempt felt awkward.

The third made him self-conscious.

The fourth made him aware of how strange it felt to pay attention to something he had been doing automatically his entire life.

"This is weird," he announced.

"It is."

"You admit it?"

"Of course."

Daniel looked surprised.

"Most new things feel awkward before they feel familiar."

He tried once more.

Slowly.

One breath.

Then another.

After several attempts, he realised his shoulders were not pressed up near his ears anymore. He had not even noticed they had been.

"I think…" He hesitated. "My body feels a little different."

Ms. Brown nodded. "You noticed."

That afternoon, Daniel attempted belly breathing in his bedroom.

It did not go particularly well.

He had barely settled onto his bed when Nia appeared in the doorway holding Mr. Pebbles. "What are you doing?"

"Belly breathing."

Nia narrowed her eyes. "You look like you are trying not to sneeze."

Daniel threw a pillow at her. "Nia!"

She collapsed into laughter.

Mr. Pebbles landed face-first on the cool tile floor.

"Oh no," she gasped. "The turtle has concerns."

Daniel tried again.

He took one slow breath.

Then Mama called from the kitchen. "Danny! Can you help me bring in the groceries?"

He forgot about practising until later that night.

The next morning, he remembered while brushing his teeth.

He took one breath.

Then toothpaste dripped down the front of his uniform.

By lunchtime, he had forgotten again.

Maybe I am terrible at this.



The thought followed him back into Ms. Brown's office later that week. "I do not think it is working," Daniel said.

"What makes you say that?" Ms. Brown asked.

"I keep forgetting."

Ms. Brown tilted her head. "You remembered enough to notice."

"That is not the same thing."

"What if learning coping skills is not about doing them perfectly?"

Daniel frowned.

"What if it is about returning to them?"

He thought about football practice.

Coach never shouted because someone missed one pass. He corrected their form.

Then made them try again.

"You keep practising," Daniel said.

"Exactly," Ms. Brown replied.

"Today," Ms. Brown said, "I want to show you another skill."

Daniel eyed the pinwheel suspiciously. "Do I need another toy?"

"No."

She looked around the room. "Tell me five things you can see."

Daniel blinked. "Miss?"

"Humour me."

He glanced around. "The bookshelf. The clock. The beach photograph. Your blue mug." He paused. "The plant."

"Good," Ms. Brown said. "Four things you can feel."

"The chair. My socks. My watch." He thought for a moment. "The cool air from the fan."

"Three things you can hear."

Daniel listened. "Birds outside. The children talking. The fan humming."

"Two things you can smell."

Daniel sniffed. "Peppermint tea." Then more slowly, "Markers."

"One thing you can taste."

"The mint I had after lunch."

Ms. Brown smiled. "How do you feel?"

Daniel paused.

The worried thoughts had not disappeared.

The championship still waited.

Friday's practice still mattered.

He still did not know whether anxiety would show up unexpectedly.

But something had shifted.

The room felt clearer somehow.

"More here," he said.

"That is the idea."

Daniel looked around her office again.

He had never noticed the tiny shell resting beside the beach photograph. Or that the plant had started growing towards the sunlight.

Two days later, Daniel stood outside his classroom waiting for another exam. Students shuffled past him.

Someone complained about homework.

Andre bounced nervously beside him. "You studied, right?"

"Yes."

"You actually know the material?"

"I think so."

Andre lowered his voice. "I would just like the record to show that if I fail, I always appreciated your friendship."

Daniel laughed.

Then the familiar nervous energy arrived.

His palms dampened.

His thoughts rushed forward.

What if I blank?

What if—

He stopped.

Not the thoughts.

Himself.

He adjusted his grip on his bag.

One breath.

Then another.

The anxious feelings did not vanish.

They stayed with him.

Andre nudged him. "You okay?"

Daniel hesitated.

He almost said it.

I am fine.

Instead, he answered honestly.

"I am nervous."

Andre blinked. "Me too."

"You are?"

"It is a test."

Andre shrugged. "I do not think anybody is excited."

Daniel laughed.

The bell rang.

Students filed inside.

Daniel followed Andre to their seats.

His palms were still damp.

He set his school bag beneath his chair and placed his pencil on the desk. Andre leaned towards him.

"We are going to survive this, right?"

Daniel looked at the exam paper being passed down the row. "Ask me again afterwards."

Andre grinned.

Daniel did too.

CHAPTER FIVE

One Question at a Time



Three nights before the end-of-term science exam, Daniel dreamed that he had shown up at school carrying the wrong notebook.

In the dream, Mr. Clarke handed out the test papers while Daniel flipped frantically through pages filled with football plays instead of study notes.

The questions made no sense.

The room grew hotter and hotter.

Everyone else scribbled answers confidently.

Andre finished first.

Even Nia somehow wandered into the classroom wearing a graduation cap and carrying Mr. Pebbles beneath one arm. "I warned you to study with the turtle," she said solemnly.

Then she accepted an award for Academic Excellence.

Daniel woke with a gasp.

Moonlight stretched across his bedroom ceiling.

For a moment, he did not know where he was.

His heart hammered against his ribs.

The house around him remained quiet.

The ceiling fan turned steadily overhead.

Rain tapped softly against the roof.

Slowly, the dream loosened its grip.

He pulled his blanket closer around his shoulders and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars above his bed.

The science exam.

Football practice.

The championship.

Everything felt important.

Everything felt close.

What if I fail?

What if I disappoint everyone?

What if—

Daniel stopped.

Not the thoughts.

Himself.

He placed one hand against his stomach.

He remembered the pinwheel.

The awkward feeling of breathing on purpose.

The way Ms. Brown had said that simple did not mean easy.

He breathed in.

Slowly.

Then out.

Once.

Twice.

The worries still buzzed beneath his skin.

Daniel glanced around his room.

The curtain moving gently in the breeze.

His football boots near the wardrobe.

His school bag resting against the desk.

Grandma Ivy's knitted blanket folded neatly across the chair.

The glow-in-the-dark stars still stuck crookedly across his ceiling, which Nia insisted were "astronomically inaccurate."

Eventually, sleep returned.

Friday morning arrived too quickly.

Daniel burned his toast.

Forgot his water bottle.

Then nearly left home without his homework.

"You all right?" Mama asked.

Daniel stood in the kitchen doorway, school bag half-zipped.

The familiar nervous energy moved through him.

Not as sharply as before.

But enough.

Mama studied him for a moment. "Give me a weather report."

Daniel blinked. "A what?"

"Your weather. Sunny? Cloudy? Stormy?"

Daniel looked at her. "You made that up."

"Just now."

He considered it. "Stormy."

Mama nodded. "What do you need?"

Daniel thought for a moment.

Not reassurance.

Not a speech.

"I think…" He hesitated. "I just need everybody not to ask me too many questions this morning."

Mama smiled. "I can do that."

Nia looked up from her cereal. "My weather is crunchy."

Daniel stared. "That is not weather."

"It is if your cereal is loud."

Grandma Ivy laughed. "Very scientific."

For the first time that morning, Daniel smiled.

By the time he reached school, students clustered outside classrooms comparing study guides and whispering last-minute facts.

The science exam had become the only thing anyone wanted to discuss.

"I did not study enough," someone announced.

"You always say that," another student replied.

"And then you get ninety-eight percent."

Andre jogged towards Daniel. "Quick," he said. "Tell me the difference between evaporation and condensation."

"You do not know?"

"I know emotionally," Andre said. "Not academically."

Daniel laughed.

The tension in his shoulders eased slightly.

Then Mr. Clarke appeared in the doorway. "Please take your seats."

The flutter in Daniel's stomach returned immediately.

He walked to his desk.

Set down his pencil.

Opened his notebook.

Closed it again.

Around him, chairs scraped against the floor.

Papers rustled.

Someone coughed.

Mr. Clarke distributed the exams.

The room settled into silence.

Daniel looked down at the paper in front of him.

His mind went blank.

Every fact he had reviewed the night before seemed to disappear at once. Heat crept up the back of his neck.

His thoughts surged forward.

You are forgetting everything.

You are going to fail.

Everybody else knows what they are doing.

The championship is in two weeks.

If your grades slip—

His fingers tightened around his pencil.

Then he stopped.

Smoke detector.

Daniel placed one hand quietly against his stomach beneath the desk. He breathed in.

Then out.

The nervousness did not disappear.

His heart still beat faster than usual.

But he was still sitting in his chair.

Still holding his pencil.

Still here.

Daniel lowered his eyes to the page again.

Question one.

He knew this.

He answered it.

Question two.

A little harder.

Question three.

He hesitated.

The nervous energy returned.

You are too slow.

Everyone else is ahead.

He glanced around the room.

Several students continued writing.

One student erased an entire paragraph.

Another stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

Even Mr. Clarke had coffee stains on his tie.

Daniel almost smiled.

He returned to the exam.

Not quickly.

Not perfectly.

Steadily.

By the time Mr. Clarke called, "Pencils down," Daniel felt exhausted. He set his pencil on the desk.

The exam was over.

He was not sure how he had done.

Part of him immediately wanted to replay every answer.

What if—

"Daniel."

Andre collapsed dramatically into the desk beside him. "I survived."

Daniel laughed. "Barely."

"If I never hear the word condensation again," Andre declared, "it will be too soon."

"You were the one asking me questions this morning."

"I regret nothing."

Daniel shook his head. "You think we passed?"

Andre shrugged. "I honestly have no idea."

Football practice that afternoon felt different.

Coach Richards blew his whistle sharply. "Move!"

The team sprinted across the field.

Daniel's legs felt heavy from the exam.

Sweat rolled down the back of his neck.

The afternoon sun pressed against the field.

They practised passing drills.

Defensive formations.

Set plays.

Championship preparation.

At one point, Daniel missed an easy pass.

The ball rolled away.

"You all right?" Andre asked quietly.

Daniel paused.

The automatic response rose to the surface.

I am fine.

He caught himself before the words left his mouth.

"I am tired," Daniel admitted instead.

Andre nodded, accepting it without pushing further.

Then he grinned.

"But imagine how good it will feel when we make the finals."

Daniel looked towards the goalposts.

Towards the field where he had always felt most like himself.

Towards the place that lately had become tangled with fear.

"I know," he said softly.

"I have been imagining it."

Coach Richards called them back into formation. "Again!"

The team groaned.

Then reset.

Daniel lined up beside Andre.

Coach blew the whistle.

Daniel received the ball.

He steadied himself.

Then passed it cleanly down the field.



That evening, Daniel sat beside Grandma Ivy on the veranda while the sky shifted from gold to deep blue. The sea beyond the neighbourhood rolled steadily towards shore.

Grandma Ivy handed him a glass of juice. "How was the exam?"

Daniel considered the question carefully. "I do not know."

Grandma smiled. "But?"

Daniel looked down at his hands. "I stayed."

Grandma waited.

"I wanted to leave."

He paused. "But I stayed."

"And?"

"I was scared."

Grandma said nothing.

Daniel looked out towards the sea. "I did it anyway."

The corners of Grandma Ivy's eyes softened. "That sounds important."

Daniel took a sip of his juice.

Beyond the veranda, the sea moved steadily towards shore.

CHAPTER SIX

Strong Doesn't Mean Silent



The Monday after the science exam, the entire school seemed to be operating on two topics of conversation.

The first was grades.

The second was football.

Students clustered in hallways comparing answers they could no longer change.

"I definitely failed," one boy announced dramatically outside the classroom.

"You say that every single time," his friend replied.

"And every single time, you get one of the highest scores."

"I like to manage expectations," the boy said solemnly.

Laughter echoed down the corridor.

At the far end of the hallway, a group of students had gathered around the championship bracket posted in the foyer.

The championship was getting closer.

"Our side of the bracket is harder," someone argued.

"No, it is not."

"Have you seen St. Andrew's defence?"

"They are overrated."

Andre pushed through the crowd and reappeared beside Daniel. "Ignore all of them," Andre said. "We are winning."

Daniel adjusted the strap of his school bag. "You sound very confident."

"I am very confident."

"You were convinced evaporation was a type of precipitation three days ago."

Andre looked offended. "That has absolutely nothing to do with football."

Despite himself, Daniel laughed.

It felt good.

Easy.

Then the flutter returned.

Not the sharp wave of panic he had felt at assembly weeks earlier. This was quieter.

A nervous energy beneath the surface.

He noticed it now in a way he had not before.

His thoughts immediately tried to make sense of it.

What if we lose?

What if Coach realises I am not ready?

What if—

He paused.

The worries had not disappeared.

But he recognised them now.

The way you recognise a familiar song playing faintly in another room.

"Daniel."

Andre studied him. "You okay?"

The automatic answer rose immediately.

I am fine.

He could almost hear the words.

Instead, he hesitated.

Andre waited.

"I am…" Daniel stopped.

The hallway buzzed around them.

Footsteps hurried past.

Students called to one another.

"I do not know," he admitted.

Andre's expression shifted. "About football?"

Daniel glanced towards the bracket. "Can we talk later?"

"Of course."

"You do not even know what it is about."

Andre shrugged. "You asked."

Football practice that afternoon was intense.

Coach Richards stood in the centre of the field with his whistle clenched between his teeth. "Again!"

The team groaned.

"You all move slower than my grandmother carrying groceries," Coach shouted.

Andre looked scandalised. "My grandmother is incredibly athletic."

Several teammates snorted.

Coach ignored them. "Reset!"

The team lined up again.

Daniel wiped sweat from his forehead.

He loved football.

He loved the rhythm of practice.

The calls from teammates.

The steady repetition of drills.

The feeling of improving through effort.

Usually.

Today, his attention kept drifting.

The championship was getting closer.

The entire school expected them to make the finals.

What if I make a mistake?

The ball rolled towards him.

"Danny!"

Too late.

It bounced past.

Coach blew his whistle sharply. "What is going on with you today?"

Heat rushed into Daniel's face. "Sorry, Coach."

Coach studied him for a moment.

Daniel braced himself.

Then Coach sighed. "Everybody has off days."

He tossed the ball back. "Reset. Try again."

Daniel nodded.

He planted his feet.

Focused.

This time, he connected cleanly.

"Better."

Practice resumed.

Not perfect.

Better.

But the missed pass stayed with Daniel longer than it should have.

Every drill after it felt heavier, as though he were dragging something behind him that no one else could see.

Near the end of practice, he mistimed another pass.

Andre had to lunge sideways to reach it, stumbling as he did. "You good?" Andre asked, jogging over.

He was not frustrated. If anything, he looked concerned, the way he had in the hallway that morning. But Daniel did not hear it that way.

All he heard was one more person noticing he was not holding it together.

"Can you just leave me alone?" Daniel snapped.

The words came out sharper than he meant them to.

Sharp enough that a teammate nearby glanced over.

Andre's smile disappeared. "Okay," he said.

He did not say anything else.

He jogged back into position without looking at Daniel again.

For the rest of practice, Andre did not joke around.

He did not call for the ball the way he usually did, with that exaggerated whine that made Daniel laugh no matter how tired he was.

He passed cleanly.

He played well.

But something in the space between them had gone quiet.

Daniel noticed.

He told himself it did not matter.

He told himself Andre would forget about it by tomorrow.

He told himself a lot of things that did not feel true.

When Coach blew the final whistle, players scattered towards the sidelines.

Usually, Daniel and Andre walked to the gate together, arguing about something unimportant: whether pineapple belonged on pizza, whether Coach's whistle counted as a musical instrument. Today, Andre packed up quickly and left with a group of other boys.

He did not wait.

Daniel stood alone near the bench, his bag heavy on his shoulder, and understood, really understood, what he had done.

Not the missed pass.

This.



That evening, Daniel found Grandma Ivy on the veranda, mending the hem of one of Nia's dresses by lamplight.

He sat beside her without saying anything for a while.

"You are quiet," she said eventually.

"I did something today."

He picked at a thread on his shorts. "Andre asked if I was okay, and I told him to leave me alone. I said it mean."

Grandma waited. "Was he trying to hurt you?"

"No. He was just checking on me. Like he always does."

"How do you feel now?"

"Bad," he admitted. "Really bad."

"What do you think you should do?"

Daniel already knew the answer.

He just did not want it to be true.

"Apologise."

Grandma nodded. "Then you know what comes next."



The next morning, Daniel found Andre under the almond tree.

"Hey," Daniel said.

"Hey."

Not unfriendly.

Just careful.

"I wanted to say sorry. For yesterday."

Daniel took a breath. "You did not do anything wrong. You were just checking on me, and I snapped at you like you had done something. That was not fair."

Andre leaned against the tree trunk, studying him. "You were pretty harsh."

"I know."

"I was not trying to bother you."

"I know. I was frustrated about the championship, and a lot of things, and I took it out on you because you were standing there."

He paused. "That is not an excuse. I just wanted you to know it was not about you."

Something in Andre's shoulders loosened. "Okay."

It sounded different than it had the day before.

"We good?"

Andre considered this with theatrical seriousness. "You owe me a box juice."

Daniel laughed, relief rushing through him. "Deal."

After practice that afternoon, Daniel and Andre sat beneath the old almond tree near the edge of the field. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the grass.

Students drifted towards waiting cars and buses.

For several moments, neither of them spoke.

Then Andre handed Daniel a bottle of water. "So," Andre said. "You said you wanted to talk. Before, I mean. Before everything."

Daniel twisted the cap in his hands.

Immediately, he wished he had not said anything earlier.

Maybe this was unnecessary.

Maybe—

"You know," Andre interrupted, "you do not have to tell me."

Daniel looked up. "What?"

"If you are not ready."

Andre shrugged. "I mean, you do not owe me your business."

Something loosened in Daniel's chest. "You would not be upset?"

"Why would I be upset?"

Daniel stared down at the bottle in his hands.

He worried Andre would think differently about him.

That he would seem weak.

Dramatic.

Broken.

Silence settled again.

Then Daniel said quietly, "Do you ever feel like your brain will not stop?"

Andre glanced sideways. "What do you mean?"

Daniel searched for words. "Like…" He frowned. "You know when you are worried about something?"

"Sure."

"What if it does not stop?"

Andre remained quiet.

Daniel kept going. "What if your stomach hurts before tests?" His fingers tightened around the water bottle. "What if your chest feels weird? What if you cannot sleep because your brain keeps showing you terrible things that have not even happened?"

Andre did not look away.

Daniel looked down. "I thought something was wrong with me."

The words hung between them.

Daniel's heart hammered.

This was it.

Andre would laugh.

Or tell him everybody worried.

Or change the subject.

Instead, Andre spoke softly. "You thought you were the only one?"

Daniel blinked. "Am I not?"

Andre looked out across the field.

Before he answered, he picked at a loose thread near the knee of his shorts. "Before matches," Andre admitted, "I feel sick."

Daniel stared at him. "What?"

"I think I am going to mess up."

"You?"

"I worry everybody is watching me."

Andre laughed nervously. "Sometimes I pretend I need the bathroom."

Daniel's eyes widened. "You do?"

"I stand in there taking deep breaths."

He glanced sideways. "I have never told anyone that before."

Daniel stared. "You always look confident."

Andre barked out a laugh. "Daniel."

"What?"

"I have perfected the art of pretending."

The words landed somewhere deep inside him.

"I thought talking about it meant I was not strong," Andre continued. "My uncle always says, 'Men handle their business.'"

Daniel had heard words like those too.

Strong boys.

Handle it.

Push through.

"Me too," Daniel admitted.

Neither of them spoke.

A breeze moved through the almond tree overhead.

Children streamed out through the school gate towards the road.

Finally, Andre nudged Daniel's shoulder. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think dealing with it by yourself is harder."

Daniel turned the water bottle slowly between his hands. "Yeah," he said.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

The field was almost empty now.

A groundskeeper dragged a hose towards the far goal while the last few children trickled out through the gate.

Andre stood and slung his bag over one shoulder. "Come on."

"Where?"

"You still owe me a box juice."

Daniel looked at him. "You were serious about that?"

Andre was already walking. "Apologies have consequences."

Daniel laughed and followed him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ocean Doesn't Move in a Straight Line



For a little while, Daniel thought he had figured it out. Not completely.

He still worried before quizzes. He still checked his football bag twice before practice. Some nights, his thoughts kept him awake longer than he wanted.

But lately, the difficult moments seemed to pass more quickly.

Even Mama's weather reports were becoming easier to answer.

Daniel began to wonder if maybe this was what getting better felt like.

Then, one morning, Grandma Ivy did not come downstairs for breakfast.

At first, nobody said anything.

Mama moved around the kitchen packing lunches.

Nia lined up cherries beside her cereal bowl and announced that Mr. Pebbles had decided they were "tiny edible marbles."

Daniel checked the clock.

Grandma Ivy was always awake before everyone else.

Always.

Daniel set down his spoon. "Mama?"

Mama looked up. "Can you see if Grandma needs anything?"

Daniel climbed the stairs two at a time.

He knocked softly on Grandma's bedroom door. "Grandma?"

"Come in, sweetheart."

He stepped inside.

Grandma Ivy sat on the edge of her bed, one hand resting against her knee. Her smile appeared quickly.

Too quickly.

"You all right?" Daniel asked.

"My arthritis is being stubborn today."

She tried to stand.

Then winced.

Daniel's stomach dropped. "I will get Mama."

By the time he returned downstairs, the familiar rush had already begun.

Noticing.

Predicting.

Imagining.

Mama listened carefully as Daniel explained. "I will call the doctor," she said calmly.

The doctor.

The words landed heavily.

Daniel's thoughts immediately leapt forward.

What if something is seriously wrong?

What if they missed something?

What if—

His breathing shortened.

His hands felt cold.

What if Grandma dies?

"Danny?"

Mama's voice sounded far away. "Danny."

He blinked. "Yes, Mama?"

"Can you help Nia get ready while I make the call?"

He nodded automatically.

Inside, however, panic had already started building stories he could not prove.



School felt impossible.

Mr. Clarke's voice drifted in and out as though carried on ocean waves.

Words appeared on the board.

Disappeared.

Reappeared.

Daniel checked the clock.

Then checked it again.

Maybe Mama had called.

Maybe something had happened.

Maybe—

His pencil snapped in half.

"Daniel?"

Mr. Clarke paused beside his desk. "You all right?"

The answer came automatically. "I am fine."

The lie surprised him.

He knew it was not true.

Mr. Clarke hesitated. "If you need a moment outside, that is okay."

Daniel glanced towards the classroom door.

Part of him wanted to leave.

Part of him wanted to run all the way home.

"No, sir. Thank you," he said quietly.

Mr. Clarke nodded. "All right."

The lesson continued.

Daniel stared at the broken pencil in his hands.

He had been practising.

Breathing.

Grounding.

Talking.

So why did this feel just as frightening as before?

By lunchtime, Daniel had convinced himself that Grandma Ivy was gravely ill. He imagined hospitals.

Funeral clothes.

Empty chairs at family dinners.

His appetite disappeared completely.

"Danny."

Andre sat across from him. "You have not touched your food."

"I am not hungry."

Andre studied him. "You okay?"

Daniel stared down at his tray.

The canteen noise blurred around him.

"No."

The honesty surprised both of them.

"No," he repeated.

Andre leaned forward slightly.

"My grandma is not feeling well," Daniel said.

"Oh."

"And I cannot stop thinking something terrible is going to happen."

Andre nodded. "Have you talked to Ms. Brown?"

Frustration rose unexpectedly.

"What is the point?"

Andre blinked. "What?"

"I have been doing everything."

Daniel lowered his voice, aware of nearby students. "Breathing. Grounding. Talking about it."

His eyes burned.

"I thought I was getting better."

Andre did not interrupt.

Finally, Andre said softly, "Maybe you still are."

"It does not feel like it."

"I know."

Andre paused. "But one bad match does not mean you have forgotten how to play football."

Daniel looked up. "What?"

"You have had bad practices before. You still show up."

He shrugged. "Maybe this is like that."

Ms. Brown found Daniel sitting beneath the almond tree after school.

"I thought I was getting better," he said.

She sat beside him. "And now?"

"It feels like I am back where I started."

Ms. Brown was quiet for a moment. "Are you?"

Daniel frowned.

He thought about the broken pencil.

I am fine.

Then lunch.

No.

Andre sitting across from him.

Maybe you still are.

Daniel rubbed his palms against his trousers. "I do not know."

"That might be worth thinking about," Ms. Brown said.



Mama waited on the veranda when Daniel arrived home.

"How is Grandma?" he asked immediately.

Mama smiled. "The doctor adjusted her medication."

Daniel stared. "That is it?"

"That is it."

Relief rushed through him so suddenly that he nearly laughed.

Grandma Ivy sat wrapped in a blanket nearby. "You look exhausted," she observed.

Daniel sat beside her. "I thought something awful had happened."

Grandma squeezed his hand. "I know."



Later, when the afternoon had begun to cool, Grandma Ivy put on her sandals. "Come walk with me."

The beach stretched quietly beneath the late afternoon sun.

Waves rolled steadily towards shore.

Grandma Ivy kicked off her sandals and stepped into the wet sand. Daniel walked beside her.

A wave curled around their ankles, then slipped back towards the sea. Daniel watched it disappear.

Another came farther up the sand.

"It keeps going backwards," he said.

Grandma looked towards the water. "Does it?"

Daniel frowned.

Another wave reached them.

Then another.

He looked back along the shoreline.

They had walked farther than he realised.

The waves kept slipping back.

But he had still moved forward.

Grandma kept walking.

Daniel followed.

That evening, Daniel opened his notebook.

The same notebook that had once collected only worries.

He wrote:

Today was hard.

I got scared.

I imagined terrible things.

I cried.

I thought I was failing.

He stopped.

Read the words again.

Then continued.

I still went to school.

I told Andre the truth.

I asked for help.

Grandma is okay.

I kept going.

Nia appeared in the doorway holding Mr. Pebbles. "What are you writing?"

"My thoughts."

Nia nodded seriously. "Mr. Pebbles thinks progress should come with stickers."

Daniel laughed. "What kind of stickers?"

"Shiny turtles."

She considered this. "And maybe snacks."

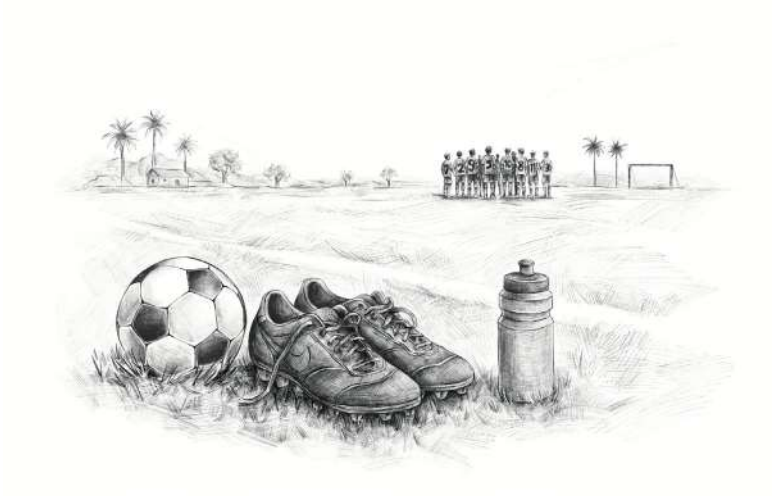
After she disappeared down the hallway, Daniel looked at the page again.

I kept going.

Daniel closed the notebook and switched off the lamp.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Championship Match



By the morning of the championship, Daniel had already checked his football bag four times.

His boots.

Shin guards.

Water bottle.

Extra socks.

Jersey.

Then, just to be safe, he checked again.

"You planning to play football," Nia asked from the kitchen table, "or move into the field permanently?"

Daniel zipped his bag. "I am being prepared."

"You have been 'prepared' for twenty minutes."

"I am making sure I have everything."

Nia held up Mr. Pebbles. "Mr. Pebbles thinks you are pacing."

"I am not pacing."

"You absolutely are."

Grandma Ivy glanced up from peeling oranges. "It sounds like someone has a very important day ahead."

The flutter in Daniel's stomach immediately intensified.

For weeks, the championship had been something Daniel could worry about later. Now there was no later.

It was here.

His stomach dipped.

What if I mess up?

What if everyone is counting on me?

What if I let the team down?

The familiar nervous energy moved through him.

Mama crossed the kitchen carrying a container of sliced fruit. "Daniel."

He looked up. "Yes, Mama?"

"What is one thing you are looking forward to today?"

The question caught him off guard. "Looking forward to?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Daniel thought for a moment.

Andre's ridiculous jokes during warm-ups.

The feeling of the ball connecting cleanly with his foot.

The way the team celebrated one another's successes.

"I like playing with them," he said.

Mama smiled. "Then remember that."

Nia, not wanting to be left out, raised her spoon. "My weather report is excited with a seventy percent chance of snacks."

Grandma Ivy laughed. "Very specific."

"It is important to be accurate," Nia replied.

Daniel smiled.

Then picked up his bag.

The school field buzzed with energy.

Portable speakers played music.

Families crowded along the sidelines.

Somewhere among them were Mama, Grandma Ivy and Nia, who had insisted on bringing Mr. Pebbles.

Younger children squeezed to the front for a better view.

Teachers held up handmade signs.

Students waved flags in the school colours and chanted the school song.

The championship banner stretched across the entrance to the field.

Andre jogged over. "You look like you are going to throw up."

"Thank you," Daniel said dryly. "That is exactly what I needed to hear."

Andre grinned. "Anytime."

Coach Richards blew his whistle. "Team huddle!"

The players gathered around him.

For once, Coach seemed quieter than usual.

He looked around at each of them. "I know some of you are nervous."

Several players shifted.

Coach nodded. “Good. It means this matters.”

He pointed towards the field. “Trust your training. Trust each other. Play football.”

Then he clapped his hands. “Let’s go.”

The whistle blew.

The championship began.

At first, Daniel settled into familiar rhythms.

Pass.

Move.

Call for the ball.

Support your teammates.

The crowd’s cheers faded into the background.

Then, midway through the first half, everything changed. The opposing team intercepted a pass.

Daniel lunged.

Too late.

The striker broke past him.

A shot flew towards the corner of the goal.

Their goalkeeper stretched.

Not far enough.

The ball hit the net.

The crowd groaned.

Heat flooded Daniel’s face.

The field suddenly felt enormous.

It was my fault.

The thoughts rushed in immediately.

Everyone saw that.

Coach is disappointed.

You ruined everything.

His breathing quickened.

The familiar wave threatened to pull him under.

"Daniel!" Andre's voice cut through the noise. "Reset!"

Daniel looked up.

Andre tapped his chest. "Breathe."

For a second, Daniel hesitated.

Then he inhaled slowly.

Exhaled.

Once.

Twice.

The nervousness stayed.

"Back in position!" Coach shouted.

Daniel moved.

The rest of the first half was messy.

Daniel mistimed a tackle.

Andre sent a shot wide.

One of their midfielders slipped while chasing a loose ball and came up with grass stuck to the side of his shorts.

Nobody played perfectly.

They kept playing.

Just before halftime, one of Daniel's teammates found space near the box and drove the ball low towards goal.

The goalkeeper blocked it.

Andre reached the rebound first.

He knocked it across the face of the goal.

Another teammate met it.

The ball went in.

The score was level.

The halftime whistle blew soon after.

During the break, Coach crouched in front of the team. "Drink."

Nobody needed telling twice.

Daniel tipped water over his head.

Andre stared at him. "You know that is supposed to go in your mouth."

"I know."

"Just checking."

Daniel laughed.

His heart was still beating hard.

But he was laughing.

Coach stood. "Same game. Trust each other."

The second half was harder.

The other team attacked again and again.

The score stayed level.

Sweat dripped into Daniel's eyes.

His legs ached.

Every loose ball seemed to matter.

Every tackle brought the crowd to its feet.

Minutes slipped away.

Then Daniel received the ball near the edge of the box. A defender closed from his left.

Daniel pushed the ball forward.

Another step and he could shoot.

The crowd rose.

Do not miss.

His chest tightened.

The defender moved closer.

Daniel looked up.

Andre was running into space. "Daniel!"

For one instant, everything seemed to hold.

The defender.

The goal.

Andre.

The ball at Daniel's feet.

Daniel saw him.

He passed.



The ball travelled across the open grass.

Andre met it in stride.

One touch.

Then another.

He struck.

Goal.

The crowd exploded.

Andre tore across the field towards Daniel. "You saw me!"

Daniel laughed breathlessly. "You were impossible to miss."

Andre crashed into him, wrapping both arms around his shoulders. "We did it!"

Their teammates surrounded them.

Someone shouted directly into Daniel's ear.

Someone else nearly knocked Andre over.

Coach Richards was yelling something from the sideline that nobody could hear. Daniel laughed until his stomach hurt.

There were still a few minutes left.

The other team attacked again.

Daniel raced back to defend.

Blocked a pass.

Cleared another.

When the final whistle sounded, for half a second Daniel did not move. Then Andre screamed. "We are champions!"

The field erupted.

Students rushed towards the edge of the field.

Teachers held up their signs.

Parents cheered.

Someone started singing the school song entirely off-key.

Daniel's teammates piled together near midfield.

Andre raised both arms towards the sky. "We are champions!" he shouted again, apparently in case anyone had missed it the first time.

Daniel searched the sidelines.

Mama was waving with both arms. Beside her, Grandma Ivy was clapping, and Nia was holding Mr. Pebbles high above her head.

Coach Richards gathered the team together.

He was smiling so broadly that Daniel barely recognised him. "I told you to trust each other."

Andre pointed at Daniel. "He did!"

"Andre," Daniel groaned.

Coach laughed. "Enjoy this one, boys. You earned it."

And they did.



That evening, after the championship, Daniel found Grandma Ivy on the veranda.

Nia had claimed his medal before they had even left the field. Through the open doorway, he could see it hanging crookedly around her neck.

"She refuses to give it back," Grandma said.

From inside the house, Nia called, "I am the assistant champion!"

Daniel laughed. "That is not a thing."

"It is now!"

He sat beside Grandma.

For a while, they watched the last light settle over the sea.

"Big day," Grandma said.

Daniel nodded. "Yes, Grandma."

"How are you feeling?"

Daniel thought about it. "Tired."

Grandma smiled. "Anything else?"

Daniel glanced back into the house.

Nia was explaining the medal to Mr. Pebbles.

He thought about Andre running into space.

The pass leaving his foot.

The roar that came afterwards.

"Good," he said.

And this time, he meant it.

CHAPTER NINE

Sharing the Weather Report



A few days after the championship, rain clouds drifted across the island.

Not the kind that sent people rushing for batteries and bottled water.

Just steady rain that softened the afternoon heat and made the house feel quieter than usual.

Grandma Ivy sat in her favourite chair near the window, knitting.

Nia lay on the living room floor, attempting to teach Mr. Pebbles how to play dominoes. "The turtle lacks strategic vision," she announced.

"He also lacks opposable thumbs," Daniel said.

Nia sniffed. "Excuses."

The championship medal rested on the bookshelf beside Daniel's homework.

Mama stood at the kitchen counter chopping vegetables.

Daniel watched her for a moment. "What were you like when you were my age?"

Mama glanced up. "What kind of question is that?"

Daniel shrugged. "I do not know."

Nia looked horrified. "Mama was definitely born as a grown-up."

Grandma Ivy chuckled. "I can assure you otherwise."

Mama laughed. "I was not born old."

Daniel hesitated. "Were you worried a lot?"

The kitchen grew quiet.

Mama set down the knife. "I do not think anyone ever asked me that before."

"You never worried?"

Mama let out a soft laugh. "Oh, sweetheart. I worried all the time," she said.

Daniel blinked. "You did?"

"When I was your age, life was busy," Mama said. "Grandma worked hard. Everybody did."

Grandma Ivy's knitting needles slowed.

"We helped where we could," Mama continued. "There were always things that needed doing."

Daniel looked at her. "What happened if you were scared?"

Mama looked down at her hands. "Mostly, you kept going."

"Did it help?"

She considered the question. "Sometimes."

"And sometimes?"

Mama was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes I think I got very good at keeping things to myself."

Grandma Ivy lowered her knitting. "We all did some of that," she said softly.

Mama glanced towards her.

Grandma Ivy gave a small nod.

Daniel looked between them. "Why?"

Mama pulled out a chair and sat across from him. "I think we believed that if you could keep going, you were doing all right."

"But what if you were not?"

Mama's expression softened. "Then sometimes people did not know."

Daniel sat very still. "I did not want to disappoint you."

Mama looked genuinely surprised. "Oh, Daniel."

"You work so hard," he said. "You take care of everybody."

He looked down at his hands. "I thought if I told you I was struggling, you would think I could not handle things."

Mama reached across the table and took his hand. "My sweet boy."

Daniel swallowed. "But you always told me to be strong."

Mama was quiet. "I did," she said.

Daniel waited.

"Maybe I should have explained what I meant," she said softly.

"What did you mean?"

Mama squeezed his hand. "I meant that I believed in you."

She looked down for a moment. "I never meant that you had to hide from me."

Daniel's throat tightened.

"I never wanted you to believe you had to earn my love by pretending," Mama said.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Rain whispered against the windows.

"What if I forget?" Daniel asked quietly.

Mama smiled. "Then we will remind each other."



Later that evening, they sat together on the covered veranda.

The rain had settled into a light, steady tapping on the zinc roof.

Mama held a mug between both hands.

Grandma Ivy sat in her wicker chair with her own mug resting near her lap.

Daniel sat close enough to hear the rain dripping from the edge of the roof.

Nia had curled herself beneath a blanket, with Mr. Pebbles tucked under one arm.

For a while, nobody said much.

They did not need to.

A car passed slowly along the wet road.

Somewhere nearby, a radio played behind an open window.

Nia yawned.

Mama looked towards Daniel. "Weather report?"

Daniel considered it. "Partly sunny." He paused. "Chance of overthinking."

Mama smiled. "Sounds familiar."

Daniel looked at her. "What about you?"

Mama blinked. "My weather report?"

He nodded.

She looked down into her mug. "Tired."

Daniel waited.

Mama thought for another moment. "And a little worried about work tomorrow."

"What do you need?"

This time, Mama looked surprised.

Then she smiled. "Maybe ten quiet minutes."

Daniel nodded seriously. "I can do that."

From beneath the blanket, Nia raised one hand. "My weather is mostly optimistic with isolated snack opportunities."

Daniel laughed. "That is not weather."

"It is in my system."

Grandma Ivy lifted her mug. "Sounds accurate to me."

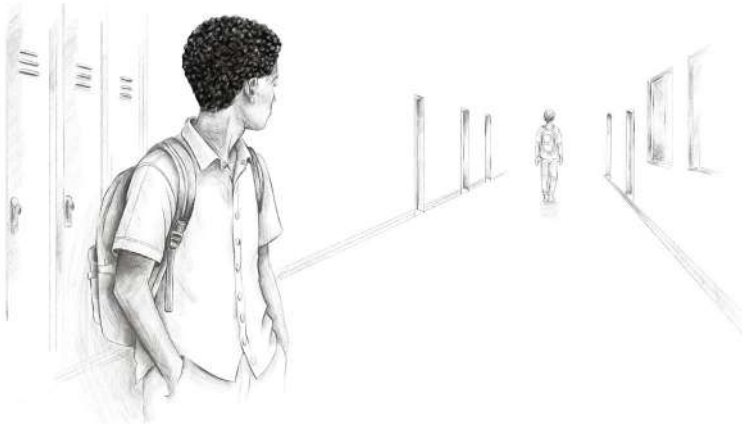
Nia tucked Mr. Pebbles farther under her arm.

The rain tapped softly against the zinc roof.

Nobody hurried inside.

CHAPTER TEN

Tomorrow's Weather



The first day back after the school holiday felt different.

Not because the school had changed.

The same almond trees lined the courtyard. The same teachers stood outside classroom doors greeting students. The same younger children chased one another across the play area as if recess were an Olympic event.

Even the championship banner still hung in the foyer.

Only now, a new sign stretched beneath it:

Congratulations, Champions!

Students touched the display as they passed.

Some pointed towards Daniel and his teammates. "You scored, right?"

"No," Daniel answered for what felt like the hundredth time. "Andre did."

"You won, though."

Daniel smiled.

The medal on his bookshelf reminded him of that.

So did the photographs posted outside the principal's office.

Daniel had imagined winning the championship for weeks.

He had thought it would feel like arriving somewhere.

Instead, life kept moving.

There were new assignments.

New practices.

New things to worry about.

The night before school started, Daniel had lain awake thinking about an upcoming project. The familiar flutter had returned.

He noticed it.

Eventually, he slept.

The next morning, as Daniel slipped into his seat, Andre dropped into the chair beside him. "Weather report?" Andre asked.

Daniel grinned. "Partly sunny. Chance of overthinking."

Andre nodded thoughtfully. "Mostly hungry."

Daniel laughed. "I do not think that is weather."

"It absolutely is if you skipped breakfast."

Before Daniel could argue, Mr. Clarke clapped his hands. "Good morning, everyone."

The room quieted.

"We have a new student joining us today."

A boy stepped hesitantly through the classroom doorway.

He looked about Daniel's age.

His backpack straps were pulled tight between his fists.

His eyes moved quickly around the unfamiliar classroom.

"This is Malik," Mr. Clarke said. "His family recently moved here." He looked around the room. "Let us make him feel welcome."

A few students waved.

Others smiled.

Malik nodded and took an empty seat near the back. One knee bounced beneath his desk.

Daniel noticed.

At lunchtime, Daniel spotted Malik sitting alone. Malik pushed food around his tray without eating much of it.

Andre followed Daniel's gaze. "You thinking what I am thinking?"

Daniel looked at him. "I have no idea what you are thinking."

"Fair."

Andre picked up his tray. "We could just say hello."

Daniel looked back towards Malik.

Then he picked up his own tray. "Okay."

They crossed the canteen.

"Mind if we sit here?" Andre asked.

Malik looked startled. "Oh."

He glanced at the empty seats. "Sure."

Daniel sat down.

For a moment, silence settled awkwardly between them. Andre pointed towards Malik's cassava pone.

"You planning to eat that?"

Malik blinked. "What?"

"Because if not," Andre said solemnly, "I am happy to take care of it for you."

Malik stared at him.

Then a small smile appeared.

"You really like cassava pone that much?"

Andre looked offended. "It is one of life's greatest achievements."

Daniel laughed.

Malik did too.

"What school did you go to before this?" Daniel asked. Malik looked down at his tray. "We moved around a lot."

"Oh."

"My mom got a new job," Malik continued.

He shrugged. "I do not really know anybody."

"That can be hard," Daniel said.

Malik nodded. Then he quickly added, "It is fine."

Daniel almost said *okay*.

Instead, he nodded towards Andre. "Well, you know us now."

Andre raised his spoon. "Unfortunately."

Malik laughed.

This time, he took a bite of his lunch.



After school, Daniel and Andre walked towards the gate. Malik was a few steps ahead of them.

Daniel thought he would keep going.

Instead, Malik slowed. "You guys always sit together?"

"Pretty much," Daniel said.

Andre shook his head. "He follows me everywhere."

Daniel stared at him. "You followed me here."

"Details."

Malik smiled.

They reached the gate. Malik headed towards the bus stop across the road.

"See you tomorrow?" Daniel asked.

He said it casually.

Malik looked at him. Then he nodded. "Yeah."

He adjusted his backpack. "Tomorrow."

Andre waited until Malik had walked away. "So."

Daniel looked at him. "So what?"

"Are you going to admit the cassava pone thing worked?"

"No."

"It absolutely worked."

"You tried to steal his dessert."

"I built community."

Daniel laughed. "You are ridiculous."

"And yet, effective."

They headed towards the road.



That evening, Daniel found Grandma Ivy in the kitchen, humming as she stirred a pot on the stove.

"We got a new boy in class today," Daniel said, settling onto a stool.

"Oh?"

"His name is Malik."

Grandma tasted the sauce from the end of the wooden spoon. "You talk to him?"

"Andre and I sat with him at lunch."

Grandma nodded. "Good."

From the living room, Nia's voice drifted towards them. "Mr. Pebbles says new friends should always be offered snacks."

Grandma raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Pebbles has a point."

"I think Andre agrees with him."

"Smart boy."

"Andre or Mr. Pebbles?"

Grandma smiled. "I will let you decide."

Daniel laughed.

Later, in his bedroom, Daniel opened his notebook.

He turned through the pages.

Some were crowded with questions.

What if I fail?

What if something bad happens?

What if everyone realises I am not as strong as they think I am?

Other pages held things he had learned to notice.

Things that frightened him.

Things that helped.

Things he had done even when he was afraid.

Daniel ran his thumb along the edge of the paper.

Then he turned to a clean page.

He picked up his pencil.

Malik sat with us at lunch today.

Daniel looked at the sentence.

He thought about Malik standing at the classroom door, gripping his backpack straps.

About the untouched cassava pone.

About the small smile that had appeared when Andre started talking nonsense.

About one word at the school gate.

Tomorrow.

Daniel lowered his pencil to the page again.

I think he will sit with us tomorrow too.

He closed the notebook.

Outside his window, clouds were gathering over the sea.

Daniel noticed them.

Then he switched off the light.

Daniel's Storm Toolkit

The storms did not disappear.

But Daniel learned how to face them.

Along the way, he discovered a few things that helped when his storms got loud. You can try them too.

Some might help you. Some might not. You do not have to use them perfectly.

The important thing is discovering what helps you.

Notice Your Weather

Sometimes Daniel's worries showed up in his thoughts.

Sometimes he noticed them in his body.

And sometimes they changed what he felt like doing.

Learning to notice your weather can help you understand what is happening before the storm gets too loud.

What is your weather like right now?

Sunny	**Partly Cloudy**
I feel calm, comfortable or ready for what is ahead.	Something is bothering me, but I can still do what I need or want to do.
Stormy	**Changing**
My worries feel loud or my body feels overwhelmed.	I am not quite sure how I feel yet, or my feelings keep shifting.

Take a moment to notice:

My Thoughts

What is my mind saying right now?

_____

_____

My Body

What do I notice in my body?

_____

_____

What I Feel Like Doing

Do I want to avoid something, leave, ask for help, keep trying or do something else?

_____

_____

There is no wrong weather.

You do not have to change how you feel right away. Start by noticing what is there.

Make a Little Room

When Daniel's worries got loud, his breathing sometimes became faster without him noticing. Ms. Brown showed him something simple he could try.

Slow down.

Notice his breathing.

Give his body a moment to catch up.

It did not make every worry disappear.

It made a little more room.

Try It

1. Get Comfortable.

Sit, stand or lie somewhere you feel comfortable.

2. Notice Your Breathing.

You do not need to change anything yet. Just notice the air moving in and out.

3. Breathe In Gently.

If you would like, place a hand on your belly. Let your breath travel low and comfortably, without forcing it.

4. Let Your Breath Out Slowly.

No need to push. Just let the air leave gently.

5. Do It Again If It Feels Helpful.

Take a few comfortable breaths at your own pace.

What Do You Notice?

There is nothing you are supposed to feel. Just notice whether anything has changed.

My Body Feels:

_____

My Thoughts Feel:

_____

Something Else I Notice:

_____

Remember

You are not trying to make every uncomfortable feeling disappear.

Sometimes slowing your breathing may help.

Sometimes another tool may help more.

The goal is not perfect calm.

The goal is a little more room for what comes next.

Come Back to Right Now

Sometimes Daniel's worries carried him far into the future, imagining things that had not happened yet.

Ms. Brown showed him a way to bring his attention back to where he was.

She asked him to notice what his senses were telling him.

You can try it too.

You can say the answers quietly to yourself, count them on your fingers or write them down.

Look Around. Take Your Time.

5 THINGS YOU CAN SEE

Look around slowly. What catches your eye?

5 · 4 · 3 · 2 · 1

4 THINGS YOU CAN FEEL

Maybe your feet inside your shoes, the chair beneath you, your clothes against your skin or the air around you.

4 · 3 · 2 · 1

3 THINGS YOU CAN HEAR

Listen for sounds nearby and farther away.

3 · 2 · 1

2 THINGS YOU CAN SMELL

Notice any scents around you.

If you cannot smell anything right now, that is okay.

2 · 1

1 THING YOU CAN TASTE

Notice a taste already in your mouth.

If you cannot notice one, that is okay too.

1

Now Pause

Take another look around.

Notice where you are.

Notice what your body is touching.

Notice one sound you can hear.

You are here.

Remember

Worry can pull your attention towards things that might happen.

Your senses can help you return to what is happening right now.

You do not have to make every worried thought disappear.

Just come back to this moment, one thing at a time.

One Thing at a Time

When Daniel first looked at his science exam, his mind tried to handle everything at once.

What if I forget everything?
What if I fail?
What if everyone else is doing better than me?

The whole test suddenly felt enormous.

Then Daniel brought his attention back to what was in front of him.

Question One.

He did not have to finish the whole test at once.

He only had to begin.

When Something Feels Too Big

Worry can make your mind jump ahead to everything that might happen or everything you think you have to do.

You can bring yourself back by asking:

What Is the Next Thing I Can Do?

Not every step.

Just the next one.

Make It Small

"I have to finish this whole project."

becomes

"I can read the first question."

"I have to stop being nervous about the match."

becomes

"I can get ready for warm-up."

"I do not know how to tell someone what is wrong."

becomes

"I can decide who I want to talk to."

Your Turn

Think of something that feels big right now.

What feels big?

_____

Now make it smaller.

What Is One Thing You Can Do Next?

Remember

You do not have to solve everything right now.

You do not have to know every step that comes next.

Just find the next one.

One question. One conversation. One practice.

One small step at a time.

Share Your Weather Report

In Daniel's family, a weather report became a simple way to say:

This is how I am feeling.

This is what I need.

Sometimes Daniel's weather was stormy.

Sometimes it was partly sunny with a chance of overthinking.

And sometimes he was not quite sure what his weather was yet.

All of those answers were okay.

What Is Your Weather Today?

Think about what you noticed on your own weather report.

Sunny? Partly cloudy? Stormy? Changing?

Or maybe you have your own words for it.

My Weather Is:

_____

_____

What Do You Need?

Sometimes knowing how you feel is only the beginning. The next question can be:

What Might Help Me Right Now?

Someone to listen	A little space
A hug or some company	Help with a problem
A break	Extra patience
Something else	I am not sure yet

Right now, I think I need:

_____

_____

Share It

Choose someone you trust. Then keep it simple:

"My weather is _____, and I think I need _____."

If you do not know what you need yet:

"I am not sure what I need. Can you stay with me while I figure it out?"

And if you are not ready to talk:

"I do not want to talk about it yet, but I wanted you to know I am having a hard day."

Remember

You do not have to explain everything before you are ready.

You do not have to have all the right words.

And you do not have to know exactly what you need.

Sharing your weather is one way to let someone you trust know what it is like inside.

Sometimes that is enough to begin.

Who Is on Your Team?

Daniel learned that he did not have to handle every storm by himself.

Andre listened.

Ms. Brown helped him understand what was happening.

Mama asked what he needed.

Grandma Ivy reminded him that being afraid did not mean he had to face things alone.

Daniel did not need one person to do everything.

He needed people he could turn to.

Think About Your People

Who helps you feel safe, heard or supported?

It might be someone in your family. A teacher or school counsellor. A coach. A trusted family friend. Or another adult you trust.

Your team does not have to be big.

One trusted person is a place to begin.

Build Your Team

Someone I can talk to when I am worried:

_____

Someone I can ask for help:

_____

Someone who helps me feel safe or understood:

_____

It is okay if the same person's name appears more than once.

When You Do Not Know What to Say

You do not need a perfect explanation. You can start small.

"Can I talk to you?"

"I am having a hard day."

"Something has been worrying me."

"I think I need some help."

If Someone Does Not Help

Sometimes the first person you tell may not understand or realise how much you need their help.

Keep telling trusted adults until someone listens and helps.

You deserve to be taken seriously when something is worrying you or you do not feel safe.

Remember

Being strong does not mean handling everything alone.

You do not need everyone. You just need to know who you can turn to.

When the Waves Come Back

For a little while, Daniel thought getting better meant the storms would stop coming.

Then he had a hard day.

His worries got loud again.

He imagined terrible things.

He tried what he had learned, and he was still scared.

For a moment, Daniel thought he had lost all his progress.

But Grandma Ivy showed him something important.

The ocean does not move in a straight line.

It advances.

It pulls back.

It changes.

But it keeps moving.

Progress can be like that too.

A Hard Day Does Not Erase Your Progress

Worry may return. You may have a day when something that felt easier suddenly feels hard again.

That does not mean you are back where you started.

Instead of asking:

"Why am I worried again?"

try asking:

"What can I do now that the worry is here?"

Maybe you notice what is happening sooner.

Maybe you remember a tool you can try.

Maybe you tell someone the truth instead of pretending you are fine.

Maybe you ask for help.

Maybe you simply keep going.

Those things count too.

Look Back

What helped you keep going?

_____

Who or what helped you?

_____

What do you know now that you did not know before?

_____

When Another Wave Comes

Pause. Notice what is happening.

What might help me right now?

Then try one thing. If it does not help, you can try something else.

And if the wave feels too big to handle alone, reach for someone on your team.

Remember

Some days may feel easier. Some days may feel harder.

Both can be part of moving forward.

A difficult day does not erase the progress you have already made.

Forward. Back. Forward. Back.

Still moving.

A Reminder for Me

Daniel discovered that there was no single way to handle every storm.

Some things helped sometimes.

Other things helped at other times.

And sometimes he needed someone beside him.

You can keep discovering what helps you too.

What Do I Want to Remember?

When things feel hard, what is something you want to remember?

_____

_____

_____

It might be something you learned from Daniel, something someone you trust has told you or words that belong completely to you.

Your Weather Will Keep Changing

You do not have to know exactly what to do every time.

You can notice.

You can try.

You can reach out.

You can keep going.

One moment at a time.

A Note for Grown-Ups

Children do not always say, **"I am worried."**

Worry may show up as difficulty sleeping, stomach aches, irritability, repeated questions, perfectionism, avoidance or needing more reassurance than usual.

Sometimes it sounds like **"I am fine,"** even when something inside does not feel fine at all.

Daniel's story reminds us that worry itself is not the enemy. Fear and uncertainty are part of being human. The goal is not to raise children who never feel afraid, but to help them learn that difficult feelings can be noticed, understood and shared, and that they do not have to face them alone.

When a child shares a worry, our instinct may be to reassure or fix it:

"Do not worry."
"Everything will be fine."

Those words often come from love. But sometimes the most helpful first response is simply:

"That sounds hard."
"I am glad you told me."
"What do you need from me right now?"

The skills in Daniel's Storm Toolkit can help children respond to worry, but children should not be expected to manage difficult emotions alone.

Skills matter. Relationships matter too.

Many of us grew up learning that strength meant carrying on, pushing through or keeping difficult feelings to ourselves. There can be real strength in perseverance. We can honour that strength while also teaching children that asking for help is not the opposite of resilience.

Strength and silence are not the same thing.

If worry becomes persistent, causes significant distress or begins interfering with sleep, school, relationships,

family life or activities a child usually enjoys, consider speaking with a qualified health or mental health professional.

You do not need to wait for a crisis to ask for guidance.

Throughout Daniel's story, the weather changes.

So does Daniel.

Not because the storms disappear, but because he learns to recognise what is happening, use what he has learned and reach towards people he trusts.

The adults around him learn too.

Perhaps that is one of the most important things we can offer children: not a promise of permanently clear skies, but the confidence that, whatever the weather, **they do not have to face it alone.**

Conversation & Reflection Questions

Stories can help us talk about things that are sometimes difficult to put into words.

There are no right or wrong answers here. Choose the questions that feel useful. Talk about them together, think about them quietly or come back to them another day.

1. Daniel said, **"I am fine,"** even when he was having a hard time. What helped you realise he was not really fine?

2. Daniel's worry showed up in different ways. What did you notice in his thoughts, his body or the things he did?

3. Who helped Daniel when things felt difficult? What did they do that seemed to help?

4. Daniel worried that talking about his feelings might make him seem weak. By the end of the story, what do you think he understands about being strong?

5. During the science exam, Daniel stopped trying to handle everything at once and focused on the next question. When might **"one thing at a time"** help you?

6. Grandma Ivy showed Daniel that the ocean moves forward and back but keeps moving. What do you think the waves helped Daniel understand about having hard days?

7. Daniel's family began sharing their weather reports. What would your weather report be today? Is there anything you might need?

8. Daniel still worries at the end of the story. What has changed about the way he responds when worry shows up?

One More Question

If Daniel were sitting beside you now, what would you want him to know?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

About the Authors



Marsha Smith

Marsha Smith, PsyD, LCSW, is an author, psychologist and founder of Bahali Inc., a Caribbean-focused nonprofit dedicated to emotional wellness.

Born and raised in Jamaica, Marsha brings her island roots and professional experience to stories that are honest about the complicated parts of growing up, while still making room for humour, hope and joy. She hopes young readers will see themselves in her stories and discover that there is more than one way to be strong.



Madyson Smith

Madyson Smith is a college student, writer and co-author who brings a younger perspective, warmth and humour to stories about the complicated parts of growing up.

Her creative voice helps shape characters and stories that make room for uncertainty, courage and hope.

She hopes readers will see that it is okay not to have everything figured out, and that asking for help can be a brave thing to do.

Writing Together

Together, Marsha and Madyson Smith created the *Weather Report* series to tell honest, hopeful stories about growing up, difficult feelings and the people who help us find our way. *Fine, Mostly* is the first book in the series.

Because sometimes one of the most important things a story can say is:

You are not the only one who feels this way.

About Bahali Press

Bahali Press creates stories and resources that help make difficult feelings easier to understand and talk about.

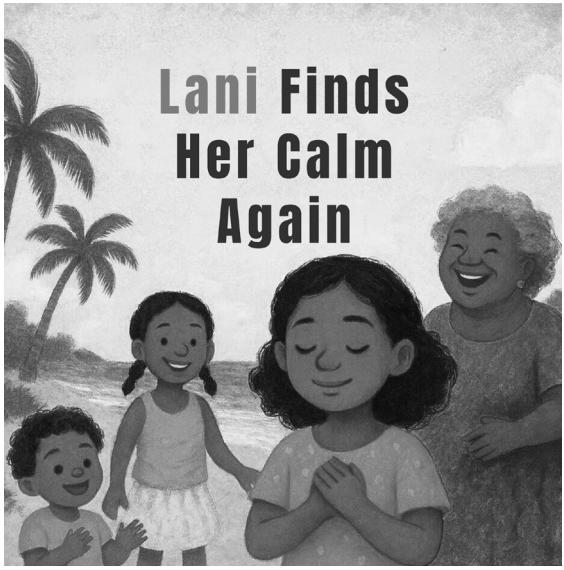
Rooted in Caribbean communities and written for readers everywhere, our books bring together culturally grounded storytelling, emotional honesty and practical support for navigating the complicated parts of life.

We create for children, families and the people who support them, guided by a simple belief:

Every mind deserves peace.

Bahali Press is the publishing imprint of Bahali Inc.

Also from Bahali Press



After a hurricane leaves Lani feeling unsettled, she begins to understand what is happening inside her body and discovers simple ways to feel safe, steady and connected again.

Lani Finds Her Calm Again is a gentle, reassuring story about finding your footing after something frightening and learning that calm can return, little by little.

A picture book for younger readers, ages 4–8.

Discover More from Bahali Press



Explore more books and resources at:

bahali.org

Acknowledgements

This book was created with gratitude for the people who make room for children to be honest about how they feel.

To the parents, grandparents, teachers, counsellors, coaches and other caring adults who notice, listen and stay: thank you.

To the young people finding the courage to say when something is not fine: we hope you always find someone willing to listen.

And to our family, whose love, humour and encouragement continue to shape the stories we tell: thank you for always being beside us.

To every reader who sees a little of themselves in Daniel: **may you remember that courage does not require you to be fearless, and that you do not have to weather every storm alone.**

With gratitude,

Marsha & Madyson

Everyone thinks Daniel is fine. Mostly, he does, too.

In his seaside Caribbean community, Daniel is the boy people count on. He does well in school, looks after his little sister, and is determined to help his football team reach the championship.

But lately, his thoughts will not slow down. His stomach twists before tests. Sleep is harder to find. Then, during morning assembly, something happens that he cannot explain.

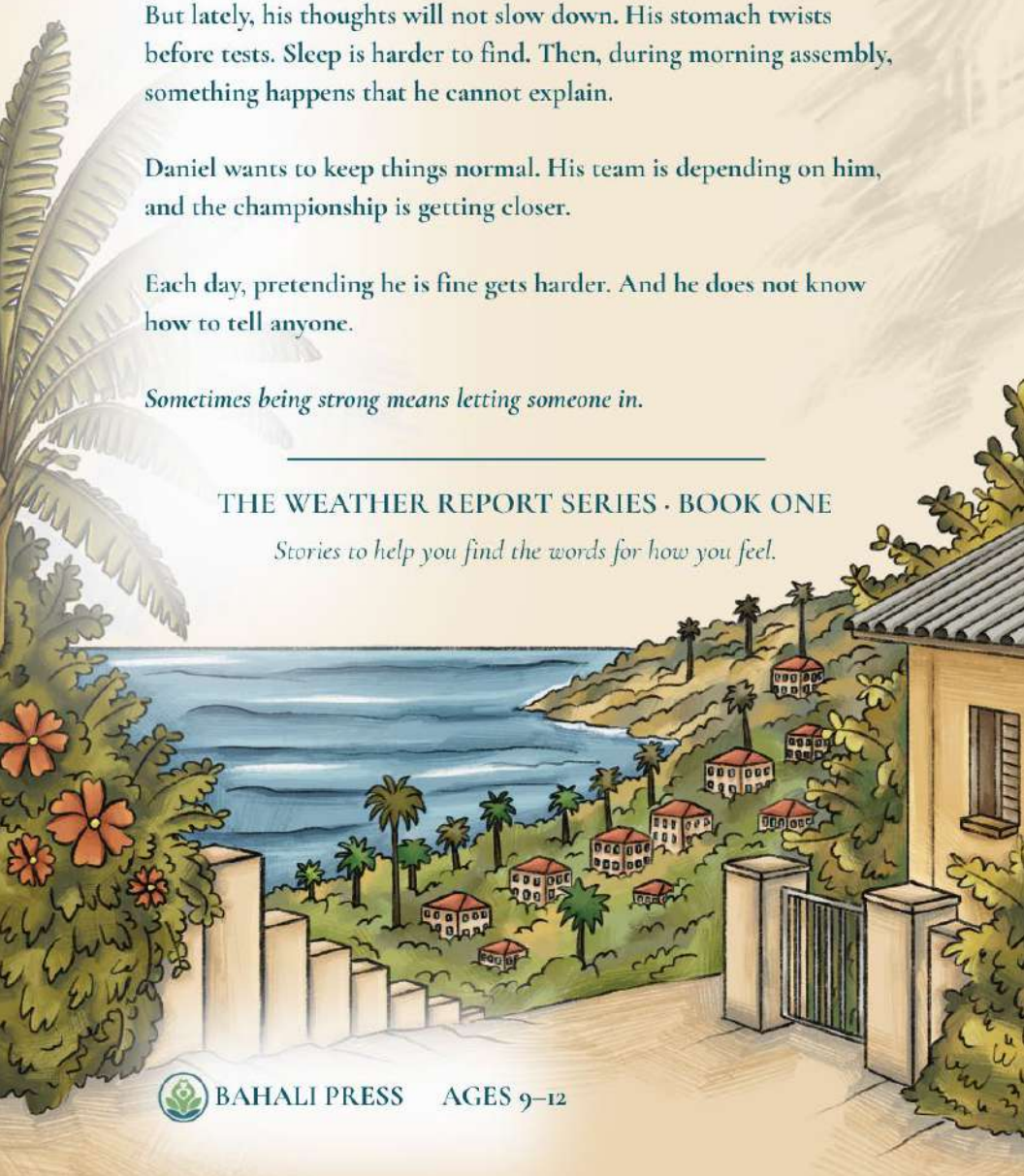
Daniel wants to keep things normal. His team is depending on him, and the championship is getting closer.

Each day, pretending he is fine gets harder. And he does not know how to tell anyone.

Sometimes being strong means letting someone in.

THE WEATHER REPORT SERIES · BOOK ONE

Stories to help you find the words for how you feel.



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