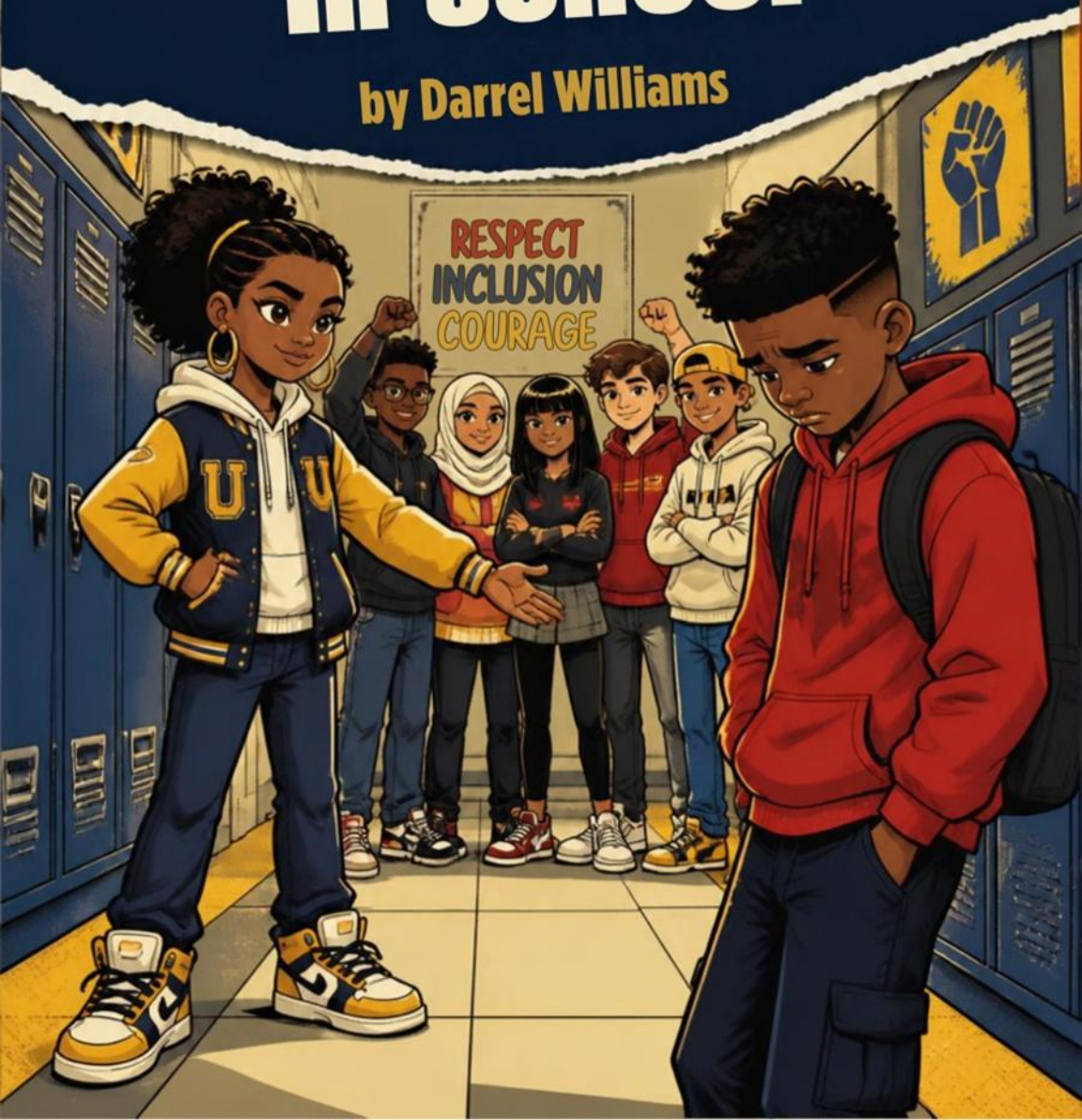


Bully's Aren't Welcome In School

by Darrel Williams



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Dedication

*For every kid who was ever made to feel small — and for the ones
brave enough to stand beside them.*

Chapter 1: The Red Hoodie

The first thing Marcus Thompson noticed about Frederick Douglass Middle School was the noise.

Not classroom noise. Hallway noise — lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking, somebody laughing way too loud three hallways over, a teacher yelling “Walk, don’t run!” like it was going to change anybody’s life.

Marcus pulled his red hoodie tighter around himself and tried to become invisible.

It had worked at his old school. Mostly.

He was twelve, in seventh grade, and brand-new to Douglass because his mom had gotten a better job across town. New apartment. New bus route. New school. Same old Marcus — quiet, skinny, with a sketchbook in his backpack and a head full of comic-book heroes who never had to worry about stuff like this.

The red hoodie was his favorite thing in the world. It used to belong to his dad, who had given it to him on his ninth birthday, two sizes too big, laughing that Marcus would “grow into it, champ.”

Marcus had grown into it. His dad hadn’t lived to see it.

“Move it, new kid!”

Marcus didn’t even see the shoulder coming. One second he was reading locker numbers — 214, 215, 216 — and the next, *wham*, his backpack hit the floor and his sketchbook went skidding across the tiles.

He scrambled after it, cheeks burning.

“Whoa, whoa.” A big voice, laughing. “Watch where you’re going, hoodie boy.”

Marcus looked up.

The kid standing over him was at least a head taller, with a fade haircut and a gold chain and a grin that didn't look friendly at all. Two other boys stood behind him, already smirking like this was the funniest thing they'd seen all week.

"S-sorry," Marcus mumbled, grabbing his sketchbook.

"What's that?" The big kid snatched the sketchbook right out of his hands. "You draw, hoodie boy? Let me see. Ohhh, look at this — little superheroes. You think you're a superhero?"

The hallway was watching now. Marcus could feel twenty pairs of eyes on him, and his face was on fire.

"Give it back," he said quietly.

"What? I can't hear you." The big kid held the sketchbook higher. "Speak up, hoodie boy!"

"I said give it back!"

The big kid stared at him for a long second. Then he dropped the sketchbook on the floor — and stepped on it.

Marcus heard the *crunch* of the pages under the sneaker, and something inside his chest cracked right along with it.

"Oops," the big kid said, and walked away laughing, his friends trailing behind him like a parade.

Marcus knelt down and picked up his sketchbook. There was a footprint across the cover, right over the hero he'd spent three weeks drawing — Captain Comet, cape flying, fist in the air.

A girl's voice said, "Are you okay?"

Marcus looked up. She was about his age, tall, with her hair pulled back and gold hoop earrings and a blue-and-gold varsity jacket. She had the

kind of confident stance that made the whole hallway seem to lean toward her.

"I'm fine," Marcus said quickly, stuffing the sketchbook into his backpack.

"That was Trey Lawson," she said. "Eighth grader. He does that to everybody new. Don't let it get to you."

She held out her hand to help him up.

Marcus stared at the hand for a second. Then he took it.

"I'm Jaz," she said. "Jazmine Powell. And you are?"

"Marcus."

"Well, Marcus — welcome to Douglass." She grinned. "Fair warning: the pizza on Fridays is suspicious, and Trey Lawson is worse. But the art room is amazing, and I'm going to show you where it is before somebody else steps on your stuff."

She started walking, and after a moment, Marcus followed.

Behind them, the bell rang. But Marcus barely heard it.

First period was homeroom with Ms. Alvarez, who made Marcus stand up in front of thirty strangers and say his name and "one interesting thing about yourself."

"I'm Marcus," he mumbled to the floor. "I... draw comics."

"Comics!" Ms. Alvarez beamed. "Wonderful! Class, let's welcome Marcus."

A few kids clapped. Most just stared. And in the back row, Trey Lawson leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, and said just loud enough for everyone to hear: "Great. Another weirdo."

The class laughed. Ms. Alvarez frowned. "Trey, that's enough."

But the damage was done. Marcus sank into his seat, cheeks burning, and kept his eyes on his desk for the rest of the period.

At least, he thought, it couldn't get worse than this.

He had no idea.

That morning, his mom had stood in the doorway holding his lunch bag, trying not to cry.

"My baby's first day of seventh grade," she'd said, smoothing his collar. "At a brand-new school. Look at you."

"I'm not a baby, Mama."

"You'll always be my baby. Even when you're forty with a beard." She'd tucked an extra granola bar into the bag. "You be brave today, you hear me? And if anybody gives you trouble—"

"I'll be fine," Marcus had said quickly. He'd seen the worry in her eyes and wanted to erase it. "It's just school."

Big Mama had pressed a warm hand to his cheek. "Remember who you are, baby. You're a Thompson. Thompsons don't start fights — but Thompsons don't run from them either."

Marcus had nodded, pulled on the red hoodie — his armor — and walked out into the morning.

Now, standing in the noisy hallway with his sketchbook rescued and a strange girl's hand in his, he thought about Big Mama's words.

Thompsons don't run.

He was too busy thinking about the footprint on Captain Comet — and wondering how many more were coming.

On the bus ride home that afternoon, Marcus sat alone by the window, watching the city blur past.

A kid across the aisle was showing his friend the hallway photo on his phone. They were laughing.

Marcus pulled the red hoodie up over his head and made himself as small as possible.

Rule one: Don't stand out, he reminded himself.

But as the bus turned onto his street, he thought about Jaz's hand — how it had felt to take it. Warm. Solid. Like an anchor.

Maybe, he thought, the rules needed updating.

Maybe standing out wasn't the problem.

Maybe standing *alone* was.

Chapter 2: Invisible

Marcus had a system for surviving new schools. He'd perfected it over the years.

Rule one: Don't stand out. Rule two: Don't sit alone where people can see you sitting alone. Rule three: If someone messes with you, don't react. Reacting is what they want.

The system had worked fine at his old school. He'd made it all the way through sixth grade with only minor damage — a nickname he didn't like ("Mouse"), one stolen pencil case, and a permanent seat at the corner table in the cafeteria where nobody bothered him.

But Douglass was different. Bigger. Louder. And Trey Lawson had marked him on day one, like a lion picking out the slowest gazelle.

At home that evening, Marcus sat at the kitchen table doing math homework while his grandma, Big Mama, fried chicken at the stove. The apartment smelled like heaven.

"How was the new school, baby?" Big Mama asked.

"It was fine," Marcus said. It was the official answer. The answer that kept everybody from worrying.

His mom came through the door then, still in her work uniform, looking tired but smiling. She worked at the hospital cafeteria during the day and cleaned offices at night. Two jobs. She always said it was temporary, "until we get on our feet, baby," and Marcus always pretended to believe her because the truth was too heavy to carry out loud.

"Fine?" his mom said, kissing the top of his head. "Just fine? No new friends? No cute girls?"

"Mama," Marcus groaned.

Big Mama laughed. “Leave that boy alone. He’s got his drawings. Marcus, you show anybody your comics today?”

Marcus’s hand tightened around his pencil. The footprint on Captain Comet flashed through his mind.

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

Dinner was Big Mama’s fried chicken, collard greens, and cornbread — the kind of meal that made everything feel okay for a little while. His mom told a funny story about a doctor who’d tried to pay for coffee with a banana. Big Mama told them about Mrs. Johnson’s cat getting stuck in the blinds again.

Marcus laughed along, and for a few minutes, he almost forgot about the hallway, the photo, the laughing emojis.

Almost.

After dinner, Marcus went to his room — which was really half of the living room with a curtain — and opened his sketchbook. He stared at the footprint for a long time.

Then he turned to a fresh page and started drawing.

He drew Captain Comet standing in a school hallway, lockers on both sides. He drew a big shadowy figure looming over him. And then, in the last panel, he drew a girl with hoop earrings holding out her hand.

He didn’t know why he drew that part. It just felt right.

Underneath, he wrote in careful letters: *“Every hero needs somebody who sees them.”*

His phone buzzed. It was a text from an unknown number.

He opened it.

It was a photo — of him, on his knees in the hallway that morning, picking up his sketchbook. Somebody had added a caption in big red

letters:

HOODIE BOY EATS FLOOR [laughing]

Underneath, three laughing emojis. And a comment: *“New kid already a joke [laughing]”*

Marcus stared at the screen until his eyes blurred.

Rule one: Don’t stand out.

He’d stood out. And now the whole school was laughing.

He deleted the photo. But he couldn’t delete the feeling — like the hallway was still watching, like the laughter was still echoing, like the footprint was on *him* now, not just the sketchbook.

He pulled the red hoodie over his head, even though it wasn’t cold, and drew until his hand hurt.

Around eleven, he heard his mom’s key in the lock. She tiptoed in, exhausted, and peeked through the curtain.

“You’re still up, baby?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

She sat on the edge of his bed and looked at his sketchbook — at Captain Comet, small in the corner, shadows closing in.

“That doesn’t look like a happy drawing,” she said softly.

“It’s just a story, Mama.”

She studied him for a long moment — that X-ray mom vision again. “You know what your daddy used to say? He said everybody’s the hero of their own story. Even on the days they don’t feel like it.” She kissed his forehead. “Especially on those days.”

After she went to shower, Marcus looked at the drawing again. He picked up his pencil and added something new: a tiny crack of light in

the corner of the panel, with a hand reaching through it.

He didn't know whose hand it was yet.

But he drew it anyway.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would be more invisible than ever.

He'd gotten the nickname "Mouse" in fourth grade, when a boy named Andre started squeaking every time Marcus walked past. *"Eek eek! Here comes Mouse!"* The whole class had picked it up. It followed him for two years, until Andre moved away.

The worst day was in fifth grade, during the science fair. Marcus had built a volcano — a really good one, with real baking-soda lava. He was standing next to it, proud as anything, when Andre walked by and "accidentally" knocked it off the table. It shattered across the floor.

"Oops," Andre had said, grinning. "Clumsy little Mouse."

The whole class laughed. The teacher gave Andre detention, but that didn't un-break the volcano. Marcus had cried in the bathroom for twenty minutes, and then he'd gone home and drawn Captain Comet stopping a volcano from erupting — saving the whole city.

In the drawing, nobody laughed at the hero.

Marcus had never told his mom about the nickname. He'd never told anyone. He'd just gotten quieter and quieter, until quiet became his whole personality.

That volcano drawing was the birth of Captain Comet. Marcus started drawing him in the margins of his math notebook — a hero with a star on his chest and a cape that never tore, who stood up to villains three times his size and never, ever backed down.

"He's who I wish I could be," Marcus had whispered to the drawing.

Big Mama had found the notebook once and studied the drawings for a long time. Then she'd said, "Baby, you know what I see? I see a boy with a hero living inside him. That hero's going to come out one day. You just wait."

Marcus had wanted to believe her.

Tomorrow, Trey Lawson would find somebody else to step on.

Wouldn't he?

Chapter 3: The Hand

The next morning, Marcus got to school early and went straight to the art room.

Jaz had shown him where it was yesterday — a bright room at the end of the hall with big windows and the smell of paint and clay. Ms. Delgado, the art teacher, was already there, setting out supplies.

“You’re the new kid,” she said warmly. “Marcus, right? Jaz told me about you. She said you’re an artist.”

Marcus blinked. “She did?”

“Showed me a photo of your sketchbook, actually. She snapped it yesterday in the hall.” Ms. Delgado smiled. “You’ve got real talent, young man. That hero character — Captain Comet? He’s got heart. I can see it.”

For the first time since the hallway incident, Marcus felt something warm in his chest that wasn’t embarrassment.

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

“Art room’s open every morning before first bell,” Ms. Delgado said. “It’s a safe zone. Anybody gives you trouble in here, they answer to me.”

Marcus looked around — and his breath caught.

One whole wall was covered in student artwork — portraits, landscapes, abstract explosions of color. In the center hung a big banner that read:
EVERYONE’S AN ARTIST.

“That’s our wall of heroes,” Ms. Delgado said proudly. “Every student gets a spot. Yours is waiting, Marcus. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Whoa,” Marcus breathed.

Ms. Delgado pulled out a drawer full of professional markers and colored pencils. “For serious artists only,” she said, handing a set to Marcus. “Welcome to the safe zone, young man.”

Marcus ran his fingers over the markers — the good kind, the kind he'd only ever dreamed about owning. For a moment, his throat got tight.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Marcus nodded, and for a few minutes, he just drew. It felt like breathing after holding his breath all day.

Then the door opened, and Jaz walked in with a boy with glasses and a girl in a white hijab.

“See?” Jaz said to them. “Told you he was real. Marcus, this is Luis and Priya. Guys, this is Marcus — the artist I told you about.”

Luis grinned. “You draw comics? That’s sick. I tried to draw once. It looked like a potato having a bad day.”

Priya laughed. “Luis, everything you draw looks like a potato having a bad day.”

“Rude,” Luis said. “Accurate, but rude.”

Marcus found himself smiling — actually smiling — for the first time in two days.

“So listen,” Jaz said, sitting on the edge of a table. “I saw what Trey did yesterday. And I heard about the photo going around.”

Marcus’s stomach dropped. “You saw the photo?”

“Everybody saw the photo, Marcus. That’s the problem.” Jaz’s voice was serious now. “Trey does this. He finds somebody, and he doesn’t stop until somebody stops him.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Marcus asked quietly. “Fight him? He’s twice my size.”

“No,” Jaz said. “You’re supposed to not go through it alone.” She held out her hand again, just like yesterday in the hallway. “Sit with us at lunch. All three of us. Trey’s crew doesn’t mess with groups.”

Marcus looked at the hand. Then at Luis, who was nodding encouragingly, and Priya, who smiled.

He thought about Rule Two: *Don’t sit alone where people can see you sitting alone.*

Maybe it was time for a new rule.

He took her hand. “Okay.”

At lunch, Marcus carried his tray to the table where Jaz, Luis, and Priya were sitting — right in the middle of the cafeteria, where everybody could see.

He felt every eye in the room. His hands were shaking so bad he almost dropped his milk.

And then, across the cafeteria, he saw Trey Lawson watching him.

Trey wasn’t laughing. He was just... watching. Cold. Like Marcus had done something wrong by finding friends.

Trey leaned over and said something to one of his crew. They all looked over. One of them made a snout with his fingers, like a pig, and they laughed.

Marcus’s appetite vanished.

“He’s just mad his audience got smaller,” Jaz said, not even looking up from her fries. “Eat, Marcus. Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

But Marcus couldn’t eat. Because Trey was still watching — and in Trey’s eyes, Marcus saw something that scared him more than the laughing.

It looked like a promise.

This isn't over, hoodie boy.

Chapter 4: Lunchroom Rules

By the end of the first week, Marcus had learned the unwritten rules of Douglass Middle School.

Rule one: The eighth graders owned the back of the cafeteria. Nobody argued about it. Rule two: Trey Lawson's table was the throne room. You didn't look at it too long. Rule three: If Trey decided you were his project, the whole school knew within a day.

Marcus was Trey's project.

It started small. A shoulder check in the hallway — “oops.” His backpack knocked off the lunch table — “my bad.” Somebody “accidentally” pouring chocolate milk a little too close to his tray.

Little things. Things you couldn't exactly report without sounding crazy.

“Miss, he bumped into me.” “Did he say anything?” “No.” “Then it was probably an accident, Marcus.”

Except it wasn't an accident, and everybody knew it, and nobody did anything.

“That's how it works,” Luis explained one day at lunch, in a low voice. “Trey stays just under the line. Never quite far enough for the teachers to catch him. He's been doing it since fifth grade.”

“Why doesn't anybody stop him?” Marcus asked.

Luis and Priya exchanged a look.

“Somebody tried once,” Priya said quietly. “A kid named Devon. Trey made his life miserable for two months. Devon transferred schools last year.”

Marcus pushed his food around his tray. “So that's it? We just... take it?”

Jaz slammed her milk carton down. “No. We don’t just take it. We just haven’t figured out *how* yet.”

That afternoon, Marcus was at his locker when he heard the voice behind him.

“Hoodie boy.”

He turned. Trey was there with his two crew members — Marcus had learned their names by now. The tall one was Darnell. The one who always filmed things on his phone was Chris.

“What do you want, Trey?” Marcus tried to keep his voice steady.

Trey leaned against the lockers, casual, like they were old friends. “I want to know why you think you can just roll up in here and take my spot.”

“Your spot?”

“New kids sit at the edges, hoodie boy. They earn their place. They don’t just waltz into the middle of the cafeteria like they own it.” Trey’s smile was thin. “You got exactly one week to learn how things work here. After that...” He shrugged. “After that, we teach you.”

He walked away. Darnell bumped Marcus’s shoulder on the way past — “oops” — and Chris held up his phone, filming Marcus’s face.

“Smile for the fans,” Chris said.

That night, Marcus found the video online. Fifteen seconds of him looking scared at his locker, with the caption: **“HOODIE BOY’S LAST WARNING [grimacing]”**

It had forty-two views. By morning, it would have four hundred.

Marcus stared at his phone, at his own frightened face, and felt something he’d never felt before — not just fear, but shame. Like the whole world could see how small he was.

Big Mama knocked on the curtain. “Baby? You okay? You’ve been quiet.”

“I’m fine, Big Mama.”

“You keep saying ‘fine,’ but your face keeps saying something else.” She sat on the edge of his bed. “You know you can tell me anything, right? Anything in this world.”

Marcus almost did. The words were right there — *there’s a kid at school, he’s bullying me, everybody’s watching, I don’t know what to do.*

But then he thought about his mom, working two jobs, exhausted every night. He thought about Big Mama’s worried eyes. He thought about being a burden, about making their hard lives harder.

“I’m fine,” he said again. “Just tired.”

Big Mama studied him for a long moment. Then she patted his knee. “Okay, baby. But remember what I always tell you — a problem shared is a problem halved. And a problem hidden? That thing grows teeth.”

After she left, Marcus opened his sketchbook and drew Captain Comet — small, in the corner of the page, with a giant shadow falling over him.

The next day, Marcus saw it happen to someone else.

He was heading to the library when he spotted Trey’s crew surrounding a tiny sixth grader by the water fountain. Darnell was holding the kid’s backpack over his head. Chris was filming. The little kid was jumping for it, near tears.

Marcus froze. His feet wanted to keep walking — *not my business, not my business* — but his chest felt like it was on fire.

Then Jaz appeared out of nowhere. “Darnell! Give it back!”

Darnell hesitated — Jaz had that effect on people — and dropped the backpack. The sixth grader grabbed it and ran.

“You just love ruining fun, don’t you?” Chris muttered.

“I love ruining *cruelty*,” Jaz shot back. “There’s a difference. Look it up.”

As they walked away, Marcus said quietly, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did,” Jaz said. “That’s the thing, Marcus. You always have to. Because next time, that could be you. Or me. Or anybody.”

Marcus thought about Devon — the kid Priya had mentioned, the one who transferred. He wondered where Devon was now. He wondered if anybody had ever stepped in for Devon.

On Saturday, Big Mama took Marcus to the barbershop — “that hair’s starting to look like a science experiment,” she’d declared.

The shop was loud and warm, full of men arguing about basketball and music. Marcus sat in the big chair, a cape around his neck, while the barber, Mr. James, worked the clippers.

Two older teenagers were waiting their turn, talking.

“You hear about Trey Lawson?” one said. “Got suspended. Three days.”

“About time,” the other said. “Boy’s been wild since his brother got locked up. It’s sad, though. Trey used to be the sweetest little kid — used to carry his mama’s groceries and everything.”

Mr. James caught Marcus’s eye in the mirror. “You know Trey?”

“He goes to my school,” Marcus said carefully.

Mr. James nodded slowly. “Trey’s a good kid in a hard situation. His daddy left, his brother’s gone, his mama’s working herself to death. That boy’s angry at the world, and he doesn’t know what to do with it.” He spun Marcus’s chair around. “Remember that, young man. Sometimes the people who act the toughest are the ones hurting the most.”

Marcus thought about that all the way home, the fresh cut feeling cool against his neck.

He didn't want to wonder that about himself.

Underneath he wrote: "*One week.*"

Chapter 5: The Video

The video hit four hundred views by Tuesday morning. By Wednesday, somebody had made a remix.

Marcus found out during second period, when the kid behind him tapped his shoulder and showed him a phone screen, grinning.

It was the locker video — but now with cartoon sound effects. Every time Marcus flinched, a *boing* played. When Trey walked away, triumphant music swelled. The caption read: **“HOODIE BOY: THE MUSICAL [music][skull]”**

The kid behind him was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. “Bro, you’re famous!”

Marcus wanted to disappear. He wanted the floor to open up and swallow him, desk and all.

At lunch, he couldn’t eat. Jaz slid into the seat across from him and said, “Okay. That’s it. We’re doing something.”

“Like what?” Luis asked.

“Like reporting it,” Jaz said. “The video, the photo, all of it. That’s cyberbullying. The school has rules about that.”

Priya shook her head. “Jaz, you know what happens to snitches.”

“I’m not talking about snitching, I’m talking about *reporting*,” Jaz said firmly. “There’s a difference. Snitching is telling to get somebody in trouble. Reporting is telling to get somebody *safe*. Marcus isn’t safe right now.”

All three of them looked at Marcus.

“I don’t want to make it worse,” Marcus said quietly. “You heard what happened to Devon.”

“Devon didn’t have us,” Jaz said. “And Devon didn’t have Ms. Rivera.”

“Who’s Ms. Rivera?”

“The school counselor. She’s different. She actually listens.” Jaz leaned forward. “Marcus, I’m not going to tell you what to do. But I will tell you this — Trey’s not going to stop because you’re quiet. Quiet is his favorite volume.”

That afternoon, walking home from the bus stop, Marcus took the long way so he wouldn’t have to pass the corner where Trey’s crew sometimes hung out.

He was halfway down the block when he heard footsteps behind him.

He turned. Nobody there.

He kept walking, faster now. The footsteps kept pace.

“Hey, hoodie boy.”

Marcus spun around. Trey stepped out from behind a parked car, alone this time. No crew. No phone. Just Trey, with an expression Marcus couldn’t read.

“What do you want?” Marcus’s voice came out smaller than he wanted.

Trey walked closer. Too close. “I want you to know something. That video? That was just the preview.” His voice was low. “You got three days left on your week. And when it’s up...” He smiled. “Let’s just say you’d better learn to run fast.”

He walked away, whistling.

Marcus stood on the sidewalk, shaking, and realized something terrifying:

Trey wasn’t doing this for fun anymore.

It felt personal now. Like Marcus had insulted him just by existing — by sitting with Jaz, by not breaking, by daring to have friends.

Marcus ran the rest of the way home.

In fourth period, Mr. Bell called on Marcus to answer a science question, and Marcus just stared at him blankly.

“Marcus? The water cycle? We talked about it yesterday.”

“I... evaporation?” Marcus guessed weakly. A few kids snickered.

After class, Mr. Bell stopped him at the door. “Everything all right, Marcus? You’ve been somewhere else all period.”

Marcus’s heart hammered. Here it was — a door opening. An adult asking. All he had to do was walk through it.

“I’m fine,” he heard himself say. “Just tired.”

Mr. Bell studied him the way teachers do — like he could see the note crumpled in Marcus’s pocket without looking. “You know my door’s always open. Even for non-science problems.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bell.”

Marcus walked out, hating himself a little. Why was it so hard to just say it?

That night, he drew a full page in his sketchbook: Captain Comet, back against a wall, shadows closing in from every side. No hand reaching out this time. No rescue.

Then he stared at the drawing for a long time, and slowly picked up his eraser. He erased the shadows’ blank faces — and gave each one eyes. Sad eyes. Angry eyes. Tired eyes.

Because Ms. Delgado’s words were echoing in his head: *hurt people hurt people.*

And for the first time, Marcus wondered if behind every shadow was just a kid — scared and angry, who didn't know what else to do.

Underneath, in shaky letters, he wrote: *"Three days."*

Chapter 6: Don't Tell

On Thursday morning, Marcus woke up with a stomachache that had nothing to do with food.

He'd barely slept. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Trey stepping out from behind that parked car. He heard the whistling.

"Mama, I don't feel good," he said at breakfast. "Can I stay home?"

His mom felt his forehead. "No fever. You feel okay to me, baby."

"My stomach hurts."

His mom studied him — the same long look Big Mama had given him. Moms and grandmas, Marcus thought, had some kind of X-ray vision for lies.

"Marcus," she said gently, "is somebody bothering you at school?"

The question hung in the air like a balloon, and Marcus wanted so badly to pop it — to let everything out, the hallway, the videos, the three days, all of it.

But then he thought about her two jobs. Her tired eyes. The way she'd cried quietly in the kitchen last month when she thought nobody could hear, because the rent had gone up again.

"I'm fine, Mama," he said. "Probably just ate too fast yesterday."

She didn't look convinced, but she let it go. "Okay. But if something's wrong, you tell me. Promise?"

"Promise," Marcus lied.

At school, the day crawled by like a wounded animal. Every hallway felt dangerous. Every laugh felt like it was about him. In third period, somebody passed him a folded note. His heart hammered as he opened

it.

It said: **"2 DAYS. TICK TOCK ■"**

No name. But he knew the handwriting was Chris's — he'd seen it on the whiteboard.

Marcus crumpled the note and shoved it in his pocket. His hands were shaking.

At lunch, Jaz took one look at his face and said, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Marcus."

"Nothing, Jaz. Drop it."

She dropped it. But her eyes said she wasn't done.

After school, Marcus went to the art room instead of the bus. Ms. Delgado was there, working on a canvas.

"Rough day?" she asked, without looking up.

"You could say that."

"You know," Ms. Delgado said, mixing paint, "when I was your age, there was a girl who made my life miserable for a whole year. Stole my supplies. Spread rumors. The works."

Marcus looked up. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, for a long time. I was scared it would get worse." She smiled at him. "You know what finally worked?"

"What?"

"I told my art teacher. Just blurted it out one day, crying into a pile of charcoal pencils." Ms. Delgado laughed softly. "Best thing I ever did. Turns out, the girl was going through something awful at home, and the

school got her help. We actually became friends later. Can you believe that?"

Marcus stared at her. "You became *friends*? With your *bully*?"

"People are complicated, Marcus. Hurt people hurt people — but helped people can heal people." She set down her brush. "Whatever's going on, you don't have to carry it alone. That's what the adults here are for. That's literally our job."

Marcus thought about that all the way home.

Hurt people hurt people.

He thought about Trey's face — the anger in it, the something-else underneath that Marcus couldn't name. He wondered, for the first time, what Trey's life looked like when the school day ended.

But then he thought about the note in his pocket. *2 DAYS. TICK TOCK.*

And he decided: tomorrow, he would tell someone.

Tomorrow.

That evening, Big Mama found him on the fire escape, sketching the sunset.

"When I was your age," she said, settling beside him with a groan, "there was a girl named Loretta who made my life a living misery. Pulled my braids. Called me names I won't repeat. I was scared to walk to school."

Marcus looked up. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, for a whole year. Until one day my mama — your great-grandma — caught me crying into the dishwater. She dried my hands, looked me dead in the eye, and said, 'Baby, a bully is just a coward with an audience. You take away the silence, you take away their power.'" Big Mama smiled. "Next day I told my teacher. Loretta got

help. Turns out her daddy was mean to her mama, and she was passing it down like a bad recipe.”

“Did you forgive her?”

“Eventually. Forgiveness ain’t for them, baby — it’s for you. Lets you put the heavy thing down.” She kissed his forehead. “Whatever you’re carrying, you don’t have to carry it forever.”

Later, Marcus tiptoed past the living room and saw his mom asleep on the couch, still in her work uniform, one shoe on. He covered her with a blanket and stood there a moment, his chest aching.

Tomorrow, he promised her silently. *Tomorrow I’ll tell someone.*

He just had to survive today first.

Back in his room, Marcus pulled the crumpled note from his pocket — “2 DAYS. TICK TOCK ■” — and smoothed it flat on his desk.

He stared at it for a long time. Then he picked up his pencil and started drawing — right over the words. He drew Captain Comet bursting through the paper, the note’s letters cracking apart around him like broken chains.

When he was done, the threat was gone. In its place was a hero, fist raised, with words Marcus wrote in bold letters across the top:

“MY TIME. MY TERMS.”

He pinned it to his wall where he’d see it first thing in the morning.

Tomorrow, Trey Lawson would learn that Marcus Thompson wasn’t as easy to break as he thought.

Chapter 7: Locker 214

Friday. Day seven.

Marcus woke up before his alarm, stomach already in knots. At breakfast, he could barely swallow his toast.

Big Mama watched him push eggs around his plate. Without a word, she slipped a folded napkin into his hand.

He opened it under the table. In her careful handwriting: *“Be brave today, baby. Brave doesn’t mean not scared. It means scared and doing it anyway. I love you. — Big Mama”*

Marcus folded the napkin and put it in his pocket, next to his heart.

On the bus, he sat by the window and watched the city roll past. He thought about Ms. Rivera’s office — the soft rug, the candy jar, the poster that said YOUR VOICE MATTERS HERE.

Today, he told himself. *Today I tell.*

Marcus had decided to tell Ms. Rivera during lunch. He’d rehearsed it in his head all morning: *“Ms. Rivera, there’s a student who’s been bullying me. His name is Trey Lawson. Here’s what’s been happening.”* Clean. Simple. Done.

But Trey found him first.

It happened between fourth and fifth period, at locker 214 — Marcus’s own locker. He was swapping books when a shadow fell over him.

“Hey, hoodie boy.”

Marcus turned. Trey was there, Darnell and Chris flanking him. Chris had his phone out, already recording.

“Your week’s up,” Trey said.

“Look, Trey, I don’t want any trouble—”

“Too late for that.” Trey stepped closer. “You embarrassed me, you know that? Sitting with your little crew, acting like you’re somebody. Somebody had to remind you what you are.”

“Which is what?” Marcus’s voice shook, but he didn’t back down. He was tired of backing down.

Trey’s eyes narrowed. “Nothing. You’re nothing.”

And then he shoved Marcus — hard — into the lockers.

CLANG.

The hallway went silent. Everybody stopped. Everybody watched.

Marcus’s shoulder throbbed. His books were on the floor. Chris was filming, grinning. Darnell was laughing.

Trey raised his hand for another shove —

“HEY!”

The voice cut through the hallway like a fire alarm.

Jaz came storming down the hall, eyes blazing. Behind her, Luis and Priya. And behind *them* — Mr. Bell, the science teacher, who’d heard the clang from his classroom doorway.

“What’s going on here?” Mr. Bell demanded.

Nobody said anything. Trey’s hand slowly lowered.

“I saw the whole thing,” Jaz said loudly, so the whole hallway could hear. “Trey shoved Marcus into the lockers. For no reason. Chris was filming it.”

“It was just playing around,” Trey said quickly. “Right, hoodie boy? We were just playing.”

Mr. Bell looked at Marcus. “Marcus? Were you playing?”

Every eye in the hallway was on Marcus. Trey was staring at him — and for just a second, Marcus saw something in Trey’s face that wasn’t anger.

It was fear.

Marcus thought about Rule Three: *If someone messes with you, don’t react.*

But he was so tired of the rules. The rules hadn’t protected him. The rules had just made him quiet while Trey got louder.

“No,” Marcus said. His voice was small, but it was steady. “We weren’t playing. He’s been bullying me all week.”

The hallway gasped. Actually gasped, like in a movie.

Mr. Bell’s face went serious. “Trey, Darnell, Chris — principal’s office. Now. Marcus, Jaz — with me. We’re going to Ms. Rivera.”

As they walked down the hall, Jaz squeezed Marcus’s arm. “You did it,” she whispered. “You said it out loud.”

Marcus’s whole body was shaking. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“That’s normal. That’s what courage feels like — like you’re going to throw up, but you do it anyway.”

Behind them, the hallway buzzed like a kicked beehive. Somebody whispered, “Did you see that?” Somebody else said, “Hoodie boy finally snapped.”

But Marcus didn’t care what they called him anymore.

He’d said the words. Out loud. In front of everybody.

In the principal’s outer office, Marcus sat in a plastic chair with his hands folded, trying not to shake. Through the wall, he could hear the

principal's muffled voice — serious, disappointed — and Trey's low replies.

Then a woman's voice, sharp with worry: "What do you mean, suspended? For three days? I can't take off work—"

It was Trey's mom, on speakerphone. She sounded exhausted, not angry. That somehow made Marcus feel worse.

Jaz slipped into the chair next to him. "You okay?"

"I think so. Is Trey... is his mom mad?"

"She sounds tired," Jaz said honestly. "Luis heard Darnell's older sister say Trey's mom works doubles at the warehouse. She's never home."

Marcus thought about his own mom, working two jobs, asleep on the couch. Different families, same tired.

"Do you think I did the right thing?" he whispered.

Jaz looked him dead in the eye. "Somebody had to say it out loud, Marcus. You were just brave enough to be the somebody."

And the world hadn't ended.

Chapter 8: Ms. Rivera's Office

Ms. Rivera's office was nothing like Marcus expected.

He'd imagined something cold and official — a desk, a flag, a poster that said "JUST SAY NO" from 1995. Instead, the office was warm, with a soft rug, a bookshelf full of graphic novels, and a jar of candy on the desk. A poster on the wall read: **"YOUR VOICE MATTERS HERE."**

"Sit wherever you're comfortable," Ms. Rivera said. She was a small woman with kind eyes and a voice like warm tea. "Jaz, thank you for bringing him. Can you give us a few minutes?"

Jaz nodded and left, mouthing *"you got this"* at Marcus.

Ms. Rivera sat across from him — not behind the desk, but in the chair next to his. "Marcus, Mr. Bell told me what happened. Before we talk about that, I want you to know something: you did exactly the right thing by speaking up. That took real courage."

Marcus stared at his shoes. "It didn't feel like courage. It felt like I was going to puke."

Ms. Rivera laughed. "That's usually how courage feels from the inside."

And then, slowly, it all came out. The hallway on day one. The sketchbook. The photo. The videos. The notes. The three days. The sidewalk. All of it — everything he'd been carrying alone for a week.

Ms. Rivera listened. Really listened — not checking her phone, not interrupting, just nodding, her eyes never leaving his face.

When he finished, she said, "Thank you for trusting me with that. I know it wasn't easy."

"Is Trey going to get expelled?" Marcus asked quietly.

“That’s not my call — that’s the principal’s. But I want you to understand something, Marcus. What happens to Trey isn’t the most important part of this conversation.”

“It’s not?”

“No. The most important part is *you*. You told the truth, and now the adults can do our job — which is keeping you safe.” She leaned forward. “And I need you to hear this: none of this is your fault. Not the hoodie, not being new, not being quiet. Bullies don’t pick victims because something’s wrong with the victim. They pick victims because something’s wrong with *them*.”

Marcus frowned. “What’s wrong with Trey?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’d like to find out — because kids who hurt other kids are usually hurting themselves.” She stood up. “Now. Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to talk to Trey, and to his family. There’s going to be consequences — real ones. But there’s also going to be help, for both of you. That’s how we do things at Douglass. We don’t just punish. We try to understand.”

She walked him to the door. “One more thing. That sketchbook of yours — Captain Comet? Ms. Delgado showed me. You’re talented, Marcus. Don’t let anybody step on that. Literally or otherwise.”

Marcus almost smiled.

As he left the office, he saw Trey sitting in the waiting area outside the principal’s office, alone. No crew. No grin. Just a kid, slumped in a plastic chair, staring at the floor.

For a second, their eyes met.

Trey looked away first.

And Marcus felt something unexpected — not triumph, not relief, but something almost like sadness.

Hurt people hurt people, Ms. Delgado had said.

“Here’s my promise to you,” Ms. Rivera said, walking him to the door. “Starting today, you check in with me every morning — just a quick hello, so I know you’re okay. If Trey or anyone bothers you, you tell me or Mr. Bell or Ms. Delgado immediately. And I’m calling your mom tonight, with you, so she hears it from us together. Deal?”

“Deal,” Marcus said. His voice was small, but it was there.

Walking back to class with Jaz, the hallways felt different — like everyone was looking at him through new eyes. Some kids whispered. One girl gave him a thumbs-up. A sixth grader mouthed “thank you.”

Luis fell into step beside them, grinning. “Dude. You’re a legend now. ‘Hoodie Boy’ is officially retired. From this day forward, you shall be known as... Marcus the Locker-Shove Survivor.”

“That’s terrible,” Priya said.

“It’s a work in progress,” Luis admitted.

Marcus laughed — a real laugh, the first one that had come easy all week. And as they turned the corner toward class, he realized his shoulders weren’t up around his ears anymore.

He was walking tall. Maybe for the first time since he’d arrived at Douglass.

Marcus wondered, as he walked back to class, what was hurting Trey Lawson.

That evening, Ms. Rivera called Marcus’s mom — with Marcus sitting right there on the couch, just like she’d promised.

Mrs. Thompson listened quietly while Ms. Rivera explained everything: the hallway, the videos, the locker, and how brave Marcus had been to

Speak up.

When Ms. Rivera hung up, the apartment was silent.

Marcus braced himself. He'd broken the rule — he'd made his mom worry, added to her load, become a problem.

His mom crossed the room, sat beside him, and pulled him into the tightest hug she'd given him in years.

"Why didn't you tell me, baby?" she whispered, and he could hear the tears in her voice.

"I didn't want you to worry. You already work so hard—"

"Listen to me." She held his face in her hands. "You are not my burden. You are my *heart*. There is nothing — no job, no bill, no tired — more important than you. If someone is hurting you, I need to know. That's not worry, baby. That's love. Promise me."

"I promise, Mama," Marcus said, crying now. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." She wiped his tears with her thumbs. "You were brave today. Your daddy would be so proud."

Big Mama appeared with three bowls of ice cream. "This family," she declared, "is having dessert. Doctor's orders."

They ate ice cream on the couch, and Marcus told them everything — the whole story, start to finish. And for the first time in weeks, the heavy thing in his chest felt a little lighter.

A problem shared is a problem halved, Big Mama always said.

She was right.

Chapter 9: Why Trey?

Trey Lawson didn't go home after school that day. He went to the basketball court behind the rec center and shot hoops until his arms gave out.

He'd been suspended for three days. Three days. His mom was going to kill him — if she noticed. She worked double shifts at the warehouse and slept during the day, and most of the time Trey felt like a ghost in his own house.

You embarrassed me.

That's what the principal had said. *You've embarrassed this school, young man.*

Like Trey cared about the school. Like the school had ever cared about him.

He thought about Marcus — hoodie boy — standing in the hallway, saying "He's been bullying me all week" in front of everybody. The look on Marcus's face. Not scared, for once. Just... done.

Trey had felt something twist in his stomach when Marcus said it. Not anger. Something worse.

Shame.

He shot the ball. Missed. Chased it down.

"You play like that on purpose, or...?"

Trey spun around. It was Marcus.

Standing at the edge of the court. Alone. Holding his sketchbook.

Trey's first instinct was to say something mean. It was always his first instinct — mean words were armor, and he'd been wearing that armor

so long he'd forgotten what it felt like to take it off.

"What do *you* want?" he said instead.

"I wanted to see if you were okay," Marcus said.

Trey laughed — a short, bitter sound. "Are you serious right now?"

"Ms. Rivera told me you got suspended. I just..." Marcus shifted his weight. "I know what it's like to have everybody staring at you. It stinks."

Trey stared at him. "Why are you being nice to me? I stepped on your drawings. I posted your face all over the internet. I shoved you into a locker."

"I know."

"So why?"

Marcus sat down on the bleachers. After a moment, Trey sat down too — at the far end, like Marcus might be contagious.

"Ms. Delgado told me something," Marcus said. "She said hurt people hurt people. So I keep wondering... who's hurting you, Trey?"

The question hung in the air between them, and Trey felt his armor crack — just a hairline fracture, but he felt it.

"Nobody's hurting me," he said quickly. Too quickly.

"Okay."

"My life is fine."

"Okay."

"My dad left when I was seven, my mom works all the time, my brother got locked up last year, and everybody at school thinks I'm just some dumb bully, but I'm *fine*, okay?"

The words came out in a rush, and the moment they were out, Trey wanted to pull them back. He stared at the ground, jaw clenched, waiting for Marcus to laugh or to look scared or to run.

Marcus didn't do any of those things.

"My dad died when I was nine," Marcus said quietly. "The red hoodie was his. That's why I wear it every day."

Trey looked up.

"When you stepped on my sketchbook," Marcus continued, "that hurt. But when you made fun of the hoodie... that felt like you were stepping on *him*."

Trey felt the shame twist again, sharper this time. "I didn't know."

"I know. That's the thing — you didn't know, and I didn't know about your brother, and we were both just... hurting each other without knowing why."

They sat in silence for a while. A breeze moved through the court. Somewhere, a dog barked.

"I'm not saying it's okay," Marcus said. "What you did. It's not okay. But Ms. Rivera says you can make it right. If you want to."

Trey picked at a thread on his shorts. "What if I don't know how?"

"Then we figure it out," Marcus said. "That's what Jaz says. Nobody has to do the hard stuff alone."

Trey looked at Marcus — really looked at him — and saw not a victim, not "hoodie boy," but a kid. Just a kid, like him, trying to survive the same hallways.

"Your drawings," Trey said gruffly. "The superhero ones. They're actually... pretty good."

Marcus smiled — the first real smile Trey had ever seen on his face.

“Thanks, Trey.”

“Can I see it?” Trey asked suddenly. “The sketchbook. The one I stepped on.”

Marcus hesitated, then handed it over. Trey turned the pages slowly — Captain Comet soaring over the city, battling shadow monsters, standing on top of the school.

“You made all this up?” Trey asked.

“Yeah. He’s... he’s kind of me. The me I want to be.”

Trey traced the footprint on the cover with his finger. “I’m really sorry about this. I can’t fix the cover, but...” He looked up. “Could you teach me to draw? Not like, good. Just... enough to not embarrass myself?”

Marcus blinked. “You want drawing lessons? From me?”

“My brother used to draw,” Trey said quietly. “Before everything went bad. He’d draw these crazy sneakers — like, designs for shoes that didn’t exist yet. Said he was going to be a designer.” Trey’s voice got rough. “I threw all his sketchbooks away when he got locked up. I was so mad at him. Now I wish I hadn’t.”

Marcus didn’t know what to say to that. So he just said, “Yeah. I’ll teach you. First lesson’s free. After that, you owe me fries.”

Trey laughed — a real laugh, rusty from disuse. “Deal.”

And on the basketball court behind the rec center, with the sun going down and nobody watching, the bully and the bullied sat side by side on the bleachers — and for the first time all week, neither of them felt alone.

They walked home together as the streetlights flickered on — not quite friends yet, but something better than enemies. Something like the beginning of friends.

“Hey,” Trey said, as they reached Marcus’s corner. “Tomorrow, after school... want to shoot around again? You still owe me drawing lessons, but I figure I should keep up my end too.”

“You’re on,” Marcus said. “But I’m warning you — I’m going to be terrible for a while.”

“Everybody’s terrible at first,” Trey said. “The trick is showing up anyway.”

Marcus watched him walk away, hands in his pockets, head a little higher than it had been a week ago — and thought about how the hardest person to see is sometimes the one standing right in front of you.

Chapter 10: The Circle

On Monday morning, Trey Lawson walked back into Douglass Middle School with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

He'd expected whispers. He'd expected stares. He got both — but he also got something he didn't expect.

Jaz was waiting by his locker.

"Before you say anything," she said, holding up a hand, "I'm not here to yell at you. I'm here to invite you to something."

Trey blinked. "Invite me?"

"Ms. Rivera's doing a restorative circle today after school. You, Marcus, me, Luis, Priya. It's not a punishment thing. It's a... talking thing." Jaz shrugged. "You don't have to come. But Marcus asked for you to be invited, so."

Trey stared at her. "Marcus asked for me?"

"He said everybody deserves a chance to make things right." She started walking away, then turned back. "For what it's worth? That took guts, what you told him on the court. My cousin told me about your brother. I'm sorry."

And then she was gone, leaving Trey standing in the hallway with his mouth open.

The circle was in Ms. Rivera's office — five chairs in a ring, the candy jar in the middle like a peace offering.

Ms. Rivera explained the rules: "Everyone gets to speak. No interrupting. We talk about what happened, how it affected us, and what we need to move forward. This isn't about punishment — Trey's already

facing consequences for that. This is about repair.”

She placed a small wooden talking stick in the center. “Whoever holds this speaks. Let’s begin. Marcus?”

Marcus picked up the stick. His hands were shaking, but his voice was clear.

“When Trey stepped on my sketchbook, I felt like I didn’t matter. Like I was so small that somebody could just... crush the thing I loved most, and nobody would care.” He looked at Trey. “The videos were worse. Seeing my own scared face with laughing emojis — I started believing it. That I was a joke.”

He passed the stick to Jaz.

“I watched it happen and I didn’t act fast enough,” Jaz said. “I saw the first video and I told myself it wasn’t my business. But it *was* my business. We all go to the same school. When one of us isn’t safe, none of us are.” She looked at Trey. “I was a bystander, and bystanders have power. I should’ve used mine sooner.”

Luis went next. “I laughed at the remix video before I knew how bad it was. I’m sorry, Marcus. That’s on me.”

Priya: “I was scared to speak up because of what happened to Devon. But being scared doesn’t make it okay to stay quiet.”

Then the stick reached Trey.

He held it for a long time without speaking. The room was so quiet Marcus could hear the clock ticking.

“I don’t really know how to do this,” Trey said finally. “Nobody ever asked me how I feel about anything. They just... punish me and move on.”

“Then let’s start now,” Ms. Rivera said gently. “How do you feel?”

Trey took a breath. “I feel angry. All the time. My brother’s locked up, my mom’s never home, and everybody looks at me like I’m already a lost cause — teachers, kids, everybody. So I figured... if they’re going to look at me like a bully anyway, I might as well be good at it. At least then somebody’s paying attention to me.”

He looked at Marcus. “You were just... there. New. Quiet. Easy. And I’m sorry. Not the fake sorry, the real one. I stepped on your dad’s hoodie — I mean, I made fun of it, and I didn’t know, but that doesn’t matter. It was cruel. You didn’t deserve any of it.”

Marcus felt tears stinging his eyes, and he didn’t bother hiding them.

“What do you need, Marcus?” Ms. Rivera asked. “To move forward.”

Marcus thought for a moment. “I need the videos taken down. All of them.”

“Done,” Trey said immediately. “I’ll delete everything tonight. And I’ll tell Chris to delete his copies.”

“I need you to not do this to the next new kid,” Marcus said.

“I won’t,” Trey said. And he meant it.

“And...” Marcus hesitated. “I need my sketchbook fixed. The cover’s still got your footprint on it.”

Trey almost smiled. “I can’t un-step on it. But maybe...” He glanced at Ms. Rivera. “Could I do something else? Like, I don’t know, carry your books for a week? That’s what they do in movies.”

Everybody laughed — even Trey.

“How about this,” Ms. Delgado’s voice said from the doorway — she’d been invited too. “Trey, you’re going to help Marcus with the spring art showcase. He’s designing a mural for the main hallway, and he needs strong arms to move supplies.”

Trey looked at Marcus. “You doing a mural? For real?”

“For real,” Marcus said. “It’s going to say ‘Respect, Inclusion, Courage.’ Big letters. With heroes.”

“Heroes,” Trey repeated. Then, quietly: “Can I be in it? Not as the villain. Just... as somebody trying to do better?”

Marcus nodded. “Everybody gets to be in it. That’s the whole point.”

Ms. Rivera smiled and reached for the candy jar. “I think this calls for chocolate.”

And as the five of them sat in that little circle, passing candy and talking like actual people, Marcus realized something:

The hallway didn’t feel dangerous anymore.

That night, Trey sat on his bed and opened his phone.

The videos were all there — the locker clip, the remix, the “last warning.” Dozens of shares. Hundreds of views. Evidence of everything he’d done, glowing on the little screen.

His thumb hovered over delete.

It’s just a few videos, a voice in his head said. Everybody’s already seen them. Deleting them doesn’t change anything.

But then he heard Marcus’s voice: *“I need the videos taken down. All of them.”*

And Ms. Rivera’s: *“This is about repair.”*

Trey deleted them. Every single one. Then he texted Chris: **“Delete the vids. All of them. I’m serious.”**

Chris replied: **“bro why”**

Trey stared at the screen for a long time. Then he typed: **“Because I’m done being that guy.”**

Three dots. Then: **“ok. deleted.”**

Trey set the phone down and felt something loosen in his chest — like he'd been holding his breath for years and finally exhaled.

His mom knocked and peeked in. “You decent? I made sandwiches. You want one?”

It was almost midnight. She'd just gotten home from her shift.

“Yeah, Ma,” Trey said. “I'd like that.”

They ate in silence for a while. Then his mom said, “That counselor called me. Said you're trying to make things right with that boy.”

Trey nodded, not looking up.

His mom was quiet for a moment. Then she put her hand on his — rough from warehouse work, warm. “I'm proud of you, baby. I don't say it enough. I'm proud.”

Trey had to blink hard. “Thanks, Ma.”

It felt like the beginning of something.

On Monday, the hallways felt different.

Marcus braced for the stares — but the stares had changed. Kids nodded at him. A girl from his science class said, “Hey, Marcus,” like they'd been friends for years. Somebody had drawn a tiny Captain Comet on the whiteboard in homeroom, with a speech bubble that said *“Be the one!”*

At his locker, Darnell walked past — and nodded. Just a nod. But it felt like an apology.

Chris caught up with him after second period. “Hey,” he said awkwardly, not quite meeting Marcus's eyes. “I deleted everything. The videos, the

photos. And I... I'm sorry. Trey told us to jump, and we jumped. That wasn't right."

"Thanks for saying that," Marcus said. And he meant it.

"You still draw?" Chris asked.

"Every day."

"Cool." Chris hesitated. "Maybe... could you draw me sometime? Like, as a superhero?"

Marcus grinned. "Everybody gets to be a hero, Chris. That's the rule now."

Chapter 11: Respect Week

The idea started with Priya.

“What if we did something big?” she said at lunch the next day. “Not just for us — for the whole school. Like a whole week about... you know. Not being terrible to each other.”

“Respect Week,” Jaz said immediately, eyes lighting up. “Douglass already has the posters — Respect, Inclusion, Courage. Let’s make it real.”

Luis grinned. “Can we make T-shirts? I want a T-shirt.”

And just like that, Respect Week was born.

Ms. Rivera loved it. The principal loved it. By Friday, there were sign-up sheets in every homeroom, and the whole school was buzzing.

Monday: Mix-It-Up Lunch. Everybody sat with somebody new. Marcus ended up at a table with two sixth graders, a girl from the chess club, and a boy who only spoke Spanish — and they spent the whole lunch teaching each other words. “*Amigo.*” “*Friend.*” “*Dost.*” By the end, they were all laughing.

The best part was watching Trey. He’d been assigned to a table with a shy sixth-grade girl who barely whispered, and at first he just sat there, huge and awkward, like a bear at a tea party. But then the girl mentioned she liked basketball, and Trey lit up.

“You play?” he asked.

“I’m too short,” she mumbled.

“Short is good! Short means quick. Quick means unguardable.” Trey spent the whole lunch teaching her a crossover move with an imaginary ball, right there at the table. By the end, she was laughing — actually

laughing — and Marcus thought: *that's the Trey nobody ever gets to see.*

Tuesday: Compliment Day. Everyone had to give three genuine compliments. Trey stood in the hallway, awkward as anything, and told Mr. Bell he liked his tie. Mr. Bell wore that tie every day for a month.

Wednesday: Bystander Training. Ms. Rivera taught the whole seventh grade what to do when you see bullying — the 3 D's: *Direct* (speak up if it's safe), *Distract* (change the subject, break the moment), and *Delegate* (get an adult). "You don't have to be a hero," she said. "You just have to not be silent."

Then she did something nobody expected — she invited Trey up front.

"I asked Trey to be here," she said, "because he's lived on both sides of this. Trey?"

Trey stood in front of two hundred seventh graders, hands in his pockets, and said, "When people watched me mess with Marcus and didn't do anything... it made me feel like I could keep going. Like it was okay." He swallowed. "It wasn't okay. And if one person had stepped in early — just one — maybe it would've stopped sooner. So... be the one. Even if your voice shakes."

The room was so quiet you could hear the air conditioning. Then somebody started clapping, and the whole grade joined in.

Marcus, sitting in the third row, clapped until his hands hurt.

Thursday: Story Day. Students shared stories — anonymously, on cards pinned to a big board — about times they'd been bullied or times they'd stood up. By afternoon, the board was covered in hundreds of cards. Marcus stood in front of it for a long time, reading.

Someone spread a rumor about me in 5th grade. I cried every day for a month. — Anonymous

I saw a kid getting picked on and I walked away. I've felt bad about it for two years. I'm sorry. — Anonymous

My brother taught me to be brave. He's my hero. — Anonymous

Marcus added his own card: *"I was the new kid. Somebody stepped on my drawings. But then somebody reached out her hand. That changed everything. — M."*

Friday: The Assembly.

Backstage, Jaz was a wreck.

"What if I freeze?" she whispered to Marcus, bouncing on her toes. "What if I forget everything? What if everybody laughs?"

"Then I'll laugh with you," Marcus said. "But you won't freeze. You're Jaz. You were born for microphones."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she said, but she stood a little taller. Then the principal called her name, and she walked out into the lights.

The whole school packed into the gym. The principal spoke. Ms. Rivera spoke. Then Jaz walked up to the microphone — because of course she did — and said:

"A month ago, a kid got shoved into a locker in our hallway, and everybody just watched. Including me, at first. I want to talk about what it means to watch."

The gym was silent.

"Watching feels safe. But watching is a choice too. Every time we watch and do nothing, we're telling the bully it's okay, and we're telling the victim they're alone." Jaz looked out at the crowd. "But here's the thing I learned: it only takes one person to change the story. One person who reaches out a hand. One person who says 'that's not okay.' One person who tells the truth out loud."

She looked at Marcus in the front row and smiled.

“So here’s my challenge: be the one. This week, next week, every week. Be the one.”

The applause started slow — then built and built until the bleachers were shaking.

And in the back row, Trey Lawson clapped the loudest of all.

After the assembly, something amazing happened. Kids came up to Marcus — kids he’d never spoken to — and said things like “I liked your card” and “That took guts” and “Can you draw me as a superhero?”

Marcus didn’t feel invisible anymore.

He felt *seen*.

On Compliment Day, Trey’s moment became school legend.

He’d been dreading it all morning — walking up to people and saying nice things felt about as natural as doing ballet. But he’d promised Marcus he’d participate, so there he was, lurking outside Mr. Bell’s classroom, sweating.

“Mr. Bell?” he said, poking his head in. “I... uh. I like your tie.”

Mr. Bell looked down at his tie — a loud, paisley monstrosity in shades of orange. “You do?”

“Yeah. It takes confidence to wear that. I respect it.”

Mr. Bell beamed. “Trey Lawson, that is the nicest thing anyone’s said to me all year.” He wore that tie every single day for the rest of the semester — and told the story at every faculty meeting.

And it turned out, being seen wasn’t scary at all.

It was the best feeling in the world.

Chapter 12: The Mural

The mural took three weeks.

Ms. Delgado gave Marcus the whole wall — the big one in the main hallway, right across from the front office, where every student, teacher, and visitor would see it.

“Make it count,” she said.

Marcus sketched for days. He drew heroes of every shade and shape — a girl with hoop earrings holding out her hand, a boy with glasses laughing, a girl in a hijab with a paintbrush, a tall kid with a fade shooting a basketball. In the center, he drew Captain Comet — bigger than ever, cape flying.

And across the top, in letters three feet tall: **RESPECT. INCLUSION. COURAGE.**

Trey showed up every day after school to help. He carried supplies. He held ladders. He mixed paint. He was terrible at painting straight lines, and Marcus teased him mercilessly about it.

“Dude, that’s supposed to be a straight edge,” Marcus said one afternoon, looking at Trey’s wobbly lettering.

“It’s *artistic*,” Trey said with dignity. “It’s got character.”

“It’s got problems.”

“You’re the artist. Fix it.”

They’d fallen into an easy rhythm — the kind Marcus had never expected to have with Trey Lawson. They talked about basketball, about comics, about Trey’s brother (who was doing better, taking classes inside), about Marcus’s dad (whose hoodie Marcus still wore every day, now with the sleeves rolled up because he’d grown again).

One afternoon, Trey went quiet while they were painting.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Shoot.”

“Why did you come to the court that day? After the suspension. You could’ve just... let me rot.”

Marcus thought about it, brush in hand. “Because Ms. Delgado said hurt people hurt people. And I figured — if that’s true, then helped people help people. Somebody helped me.” He nodded toward the hallway. “Jaz. Ms. Rivera. You can’t just *receive* that and not pass it on. That’s not how it works.”

Trey was quiet for a long time. Then he said, “When I get out of here — I mean, after school, after all of it — I want to work with kids. Like, kids who are going through what I went through. Maybe be a counselor or something.”

Marcus grinned. “Trey Lawson, school counselor. The kids would be terrified.”

“Hey!” Trey threw a paint rag at him. “I’d be a *great* counselor. I’d be like, ‘Listen, kid, I used to be the worst, and look at me now — painting murals and feeling feelings.’”

They both laughed so hard Marcus got paint on his hoodie — the red hoodie — and for a split second, his heart stopped.

Then Trey said, quietly, “It’s just paint, man. It’ll wash out. The important stuff doesn’t wash out.”

Marcus looked at him — this kid who’d stepped on his dreams and was now helping him paint them ten feet tall — and realized that people really could change.

Not all at once. Not perfectly. But truly.

On the last day of painting, the whole school gathered in the hallway for the unveiling. The principal pulled the cover sheet down, and everybody gasped.

It was beautiful. The heroes, the colors, the words blazing across the top like a promise.

The principal stepped forward, visibly moved. “Students,” she said, “this wall used to be blank. Now it tells our story — who we were, who we are, and who we’re becoming. I want every student who walks past this mural to remember: at Douglass, bullies aren’t welcome. But *everybody else* — everybody else belongs.”

Somebody started clapping. Then everybody was clapping. A sixth grader started a chant — “RES-PECT! RES-PECT!” — and the whole hallway joined in until the walls shook.

Through the crowd, Marcus spotted Trey’s mom — still in her warehouse vest, having come straight from her shift. She was crying, smiling at the same time, and when she caught Marcus’s eye, she mouthed “*thank you.*”

Marcus mouthed back: “*He did it himself.*”

And it was true. The mural was Marcus’s art, but the change in Trey — that belonged to Trey. Nobody could paint that for him. He’d had to pick up the brush himself.

Marcus stood next to Trey, paint on both their hands, and Jaz threw her arms around both of them — which was awkward and perfect.

“Look at you two,” she said. “From locker shove to mural bros.”

“We’re not mural bros,” Trey protested.

“We’re mural *brothers*,” Marcus corrected, and Trey shoved him playfully — the good kind of shove, the kind between friends.

On the second Saturday of painting, Ms. Delgado declared it Community Paint Day — and half the neighborhood showed up.

Big Mama arrived with a giant jug of lemonade and a tray of sandwiches. “Somebody’s got to feed these artists,” she announced, setting up a table like she owned the place. Within minutes, she knew everyone’s name and life story.

A little girl, maybe six, tugged on Marcus’s sleeve. “Are you the drawer?”

“I’m one of them,” Marcus said, smiling.

“Can you draw me as a superhero?”

Marcus knelt down and sketched her right there on a scrap of paper — cape, mask, fists on hips. She gasped. “That’s ME!”

“That’s you,” Marcus said. “Super-You.”

Luis’s abuela came and painted flowers in the corner of the mural. Priya’s dad, an engineer, helped build the scaffolding. Even Coach Dunn stopped by, looked at the wall, and said, “Thompson, you keep this up and I’ll have to recruit you for the art team instead of basketball.”

“Can’t I do both, Coach?”

“We’ll see about that.”

Trey’s mom came too — straight from her shift, still in her warehouse vest. She stood in front of the mural for a long time, then found Marcus and hugged him so tight he couldn’t breathe.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For seeing my boy when nobody else did.”

Marcus didn’t know what to say. So he just hugged her back.

That night, paint-spattered and exhausted, Marcus added a small figure to the corner of the mural — a boy in a red hoodie, holding out his hand to someone just outside the frame.

"You left someone out," Trey said, peering over his shoulder.

"No," Marcus said. "I left someone *in*. That's for whoever needs it next."

Ms. Rivera caught Marcus's eye from across the hall and mouthed: "*You did this.*"

Marcus shook his head and mouthed back: "*We did this.*"

And he meant it. Every word.

Chapter 13: Tryouts

“You’re trying out for basketball?” Luis nearly choked on his apple.

“Marcus, I’ve seen you run. You run like a baby giraffe on ice.”

“I do not!” Marcus protested, laughing. “I’m... athletically developing.”

It was two weeks after the mural unveiling, and Trey had been begging Marcus to try out for the school team for days.

“Come on,” Trey had said. “You’re tall, you’re fast enough, and Coach Dunn needs bodies. Besides — it’ll be fun. I’ll teach you everything I know.”

“Which is what, exactly? How to foul people?”

“Ha. Ha. Just show up, all right?”

So Marcus showed up — in his red hoodie and borrowed gym shoes, stomach full of butterflies.

The gym was packed. Dozens of kids running drills, Coach Dunn blowing his whistle like it was a language. Marcus felt wildly out of place.

Then he saw Trey across the court, and Trey jogged over, grinning.

“You came! Okay, listen — just do what I do. And whatever happens, don’t think about everybody watching.”

“How do I not think about everybody watching when everybody’s watching?”

“Imagine they’re all potatoes,” Trey said solemnly. “Works for Luis.”

Marcus laughed — and just like that, the butterflies settled.

The tryout was brutal. Sprints. Layups. Defense drills. Marcus missed more shots than he made, tripped over his own feet twice, and at one point passed the ball directly to Coach Dunn’s face.

“Sorry, Coach!”

Coach Dunn just laughed. “It’s all right, Thompson. At least you’ve got spirit.”

But Marcus kept going. He ran every sprint. He chased every rebound. And in the last scrimmage, Trey passed him the ball — a perfect pass, right in his hands — and Marcus drove to the hoop and scored.

The gym erupted. Jaz, Luis, and Priya were on their feet in the bleachers, screaming like it was the championship.

Trey ran over and lifted Marcus clean off the ground. “THAT’S WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT!”

“I scored!” Marcus yelled. “I actually scored!”

“You sure did, hoodie boy,” Trey said — and then caught himself. “I mean — Marcus. Sorry. Old habits.”

Marcus grinned. “It’s okay. I kind of like ‘hoodie boy’ now. It feels like... mine.”

After tryouts, Coach Dunn posted the list. Marcus scanned it, heart pounding —

THOMPSON, MARCUS — TEAM B

He’d made it. Not the A team, but a team. *His* team.

Trey made Team A, of course. He found Marcus after and said, “Team B’s going down when we scrimmage.”

“Bring it on,” Marcus said.

The scrimmage was the following Tuesday, and the whole school seemed to show up. Jaz made signs. Luis brought an air horn that Coach Dunn immediately confiscated. Priya kept the scorebook.

Marcus was nervous — until the game started. Then something clicked. All those afternoons with Trey at the rec center came flooding back: *bend your knees, follow through, play through the nerves.*

In the third quarter, with Team B down by four, Marcus stole a pass — actually stole it, clean — and drove the length of the court for a layup. The gym went wild.

Team A still won, 34-30. But afterward, Trey found Marcus in the handshake line and said, “You almost had us, hoodie boy.”

“Almost doesn’t count,” Marcus said, grinning through his exhaustion.

“Almost means *next time*,” Trey said. “And there will be a next time.”

They bumped fists — and Marcus realized that the kid who’d once shoved him into a locker was now the person he most wanted to celebrate with.

Funny how life worked.

Two weeks later, Team B played their first real game — against Carver Middle, on their home court.

Marcus’s mom took off work early. Big Mama wore her Sunday best and brought a cowbell. Jaz, Luis, and Priya painted their faces blue and gold. Even Ms. Rivera showed up, sitting with Ms. Delgado in the third row.

Marcus was so nervous he thought his knees might give out during warm-ups. But then he looked into the stands and saw his mom waving, Big Mama ringing that cowbell like her life depended on it, and Trey — on the bench with Team A, which had the night off — standing up and cupping his hands around his mouth:

“LET’S GO, HOODIE BOY!”

The whole gym laughed. Marcus laughed. And just like that, the nerves melted.

He didn't score twenty points. He didn't become a star. He played hard, passed well, and tried to remember what Coach Dunn had told him at halftime.

"You don't have to be perfect. You just have to stay in the game."

At halftime, Team B had been down by six, and Marcus had sat on the bench with his head in his hands.

"I can't do this," he'd muttered. "These guys are too good."

Coach Dunn had crouched in front of him. "Thompson. Look at me." Marcus had looked up. "You know what I see? A kid who's afraid of messing up. Let me tell you a secret — every player on this court is afraid of messing up. The good ones just play anyway."

"But what if I miss?"

"Then you miss, and you run back on defense." Coach Dunn had grinned. "Basketball's like life, son. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to stay in the game."

Marcus had thought about the hallway. The videos. The locker. Every time he'd wanted to quit — and every time he'd stayed in the game.

He'd stood up. "Okay, Coach. I'm staying in."

And in the fourth quarter, with the game tied, he hit a free throw that put Team B ahead for good.

They won by three.

Afterward, his mom hugged him so tight he couldn't breathe. "My baby!" she kept saying. "My baby!"

Big Mama rang the cowbell right in Trey's ear. "That's for believing in him!" she declared.

Trey just grinned. “Somebody had to teach him everything he knows.”

On the bus home, Marcus opened his sketchbook and drew the whole night — the cowbell, the free throw, his mom’s proud face. In the last panel, he drew himself walking off the court, head high, cape flowing behind him.

Not Captain Comet.

Just Marcus.

He tucked the sketchbook into his gym bag, right next to his sneakers — artist and athlete, both. Big Mama always said a Thompson could be more than one thing at a time. Tonight, walking home under the streetlights with paint still under his fingernails and a game ball under his arm, Marcus finally believed her.

On the bus home, Marcus sketched a new comic panel: Captain Comet on a basketball court, sinking a game-winning shot, with a tall kid cheering in the background.

The week before tryouts, Trey turned into Coach Trey.

Every afternoon, they met at the rec center court. Trey ran Marcus through drills — dribbling between cones, layup lines, defensive slides.

“Lower!” Trey shouted, as Marcus shuffled sideways. “Bend your knees! You look like a folding chair!”

“I’m trying!”

“Trying’s good. Trying again is better.” Trey tossed him the ball. “One more time. From the top.”

By Friday, Marcus’s legs felt like jelly, his hands were raw, and he could actually make a layup three times out of five — which, for Marcus Thompson, was basically a miracle.

“You’re ready,” Trey said, as they walked home in the orange evening light. “Just remember — the first time you touch the ball, everybody’s nervous. Even me. Especially me.”

“You get nervous?” Marcus asked, surprised.

“Every single game. I just learned to play through it.” Trey grinned. “Being scared and doing it anyway — that’s the whole secret. Works for basketball. Works for everything.”

Marcus thought about the hallway at Douglass, about saying “He’s been bullying me” out loud in front of everybody. About reaching out his hand.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m learning that.”

Underneath, he wrote: *“Heroes aren’t born. They’re built — one brave choice at a time.”*

Chapter 14: The New Kid

It was a Tuesday in late spring — warm, bright, the kind of day that made the whole school feel alive.

Marcus was at his locker, swapping books, when he heard it.

The unmistakable sound of a backpack hitting the floor.

He turned. Down the hall, a small kid — sixth grade, maybe — was scrambling to pick up his stuff. His glasses were crooked. His face was red.

And standing over him, laughing, was a big eighth grader Marcus didn't know.

"Watch where you're going, four-eyes!"

The hallway did what hallways do. Everybody watched. Nobody moved.

Marcus felt something hot rise in his chest — not fear, but anger. The good kind. The kind that says *this isn't right*.

He started walking.

"Marcus, don't," Luis whispered, appearing at his elbow. "That's Big Rob. He's—"

"I know who he is," Marcus said. And kept walking.

He knelt down next to the kid and started picking up books. "Hey," he said quietly. "You okay?"

The kid nodded, eyes wide.

Marcus stood up and looked at Big Rob. "He said he's fine. We're good here."

Big Rob stared at him. "Who are you supposed to be?"

“Somebody who remembers what this feels like.” Marcus’s voice was steady. He couldn’t believe how steady. “Walk away, man.”

For a long second, nobody breathed.

Then Big Rob scoffed, shook his head, and walked off.

The hallway exhaled.

Marcus turned back to the kid and held out his hand — just like Jaz had done for him, what felt like a lifetime ago.

“I’m Marcus,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Devon,” the kid said, taking his hand. “Devon Carter.”

Marcus smiled. “Well, Devon Carter — welcome to Douglass.”

And as they walked down the hall together, Marcus saw Jaz watching from her locker, grinning like the sun.

She mouthed: “*Be the one.*”

Marcus nodded, and kept walking — Devon beside him, the hallway ahead of them, wide open.

They walked to the cafeteria together, and Devon talked the whole way — about his old school, about how he liked to build model rockets, about how his glasses were new and he was still getting used to them.

“Do people here...” Devon hesitated. “Are they nice?”

Marcus thought about everything — the footprint, the videos, the locker, the circle, the mural. The whole journey from invisible to seen.

“Most people are,” he said honestly. “And the ones who aren’t yet? They’re usually fighting something you can’t see. Just remember — if anyone ever makes you feel small, you come find me. Or Jaz. Or Ms. Rivera. Deal?”

“Deal,” Devon said, and smiled — the first real smile Marcus had seen on him.

“You draw?” Devon asked suddenly, pointing at the sketchbook peeking out of Marcus’s backpack.

“Yeah. Comics, mostly.”

“Could you...” Devon hesitated. “Could you teach me sometime? I can’t even draw a stick figure right.”

Marcus laughed. “First lesson’s free. After that, you owe me fries.”

“Hey!” Luis protested. “That’s my line! He stole my line!”

“It’s a classic,” Marcus said. “Classics get repeated.”

As they headed into the cafeteria — Devon between Marcus and Jaz, chattering now about model rockets — Marcus felt the napkin in his pocket. Big Mama’s napkin. *“Brave doesn’t mean not scared. It means scared and doing it anyway.”*

He’d been scared every single day since he’d arrived at Douglass.

And he’d done it anyway.

At lunch, Devon sat with their table — right in the middle of the cafeteria, where everybody could see. Luis immediately started telling him about the potato sculpture. Priya offered him half her sandwich. Jaz declared him “one of us now.”

And across the room, Marcus saw Trey give Devon a nod — a small, respectful nod that said *you’re safe here*.

Later, Ms. Delgado hung Marcus’s spring art showcase piece in the main hallway — a full comic spread titled “THE HAND,” telling the whole story: the hallway, the footprint, the girl with hoop earrings, the circle, the mural. In the final panel, a boy in a red hoodie reached out his hand to someone new.

Underneath, the caption read: *“Every hero needs somebody who sees them. Be the one who sees.”*

Jaz stood in front of it for a long time, arms crossed, nodding slowly. “You know what the best part is?” she said. “It’s true. All of it.”

Devon tugged Marcus’s sleeve and pointed at the final panel — at the small figure just outside the frame, the one the boy in the red hoodie was reaching toward. “Is that... is that supposed to be me?”

Marcus crouched down so they were eye to eye. “It’s supposed to be whoever needs it next,” he said. “Today, that’s you. Tomorrow, it’ll be somebody else. That’s how it works — the hand keeps reaching.”

Marcus stood in front of it with Big Mama, who cried happy tears, and his mom, who took seventeen photos, and Trey, who said, “You made me look good in panel four. I appreciate that.”

“You *are* good in panel four,” Marcus said. “That’s the point.”

Jaz threw her arms around both of them — which was awkward and perfect, like always.

She mouthed: *“Be the one.”*

Marcus nodded.

He’d been the new kid. He’d been the scared kid. He’d been the kid on his knees in the hallway while everybody watched.

And now he was the hand reaching out.

The circle was complete.

Bullies aren’t welcome in this school.

But everybody else? Everybody else belongs.

THE END

A Note from Noah Sanders Advocacy

We published this book free because we believe every child deserves a school where they feel safe — and every child deserves to know they have the power to make their school that place.

Bullying is not “just kids being kids.” It leaves marks you can’t see, and those marks can last a lifetime. But here’s what we’ve learned from years of working with young people: courage is contagious. When one kid stands up, it gives the next kid permission to stand up too. And when a whole school decides that respect, inclusion, and courage are the rules — not the exceptions — everything changes.

If this book found its way to you, it was meant for you. Maybe you’re the kid being bullied. Maybe you’re the friend who doesn’t know what to do. Maybe you’re the one doing the bullying and you don’t know how to stop. Whoever you are: this story is for you. Change is possible. Help is real. And you are never as alone as you feel.

Print this book. Share it. Read it in classrooms, churches, and living rooms. It’s free because hope should never have a price tag.

— *Noah Sanders Advocacy, Atlanta, Georgia*
noahsandersadvocacy.com

Talk About It: Discussion Questions

For classrooms, youth groups, and families reading together.

1. Why do you think Marcus didn't tell an adult right away? Have you ever kept a problem to yourself because you didn't want to worry someone?
2. Jaz reaches out her hand to Marcus twice in the story. Why is that moment so important? Who has reached out a hand to you?
3. Trey isn't just a "bad guy" — we learn about his life at home. Does understanding why someone bullies change how you feel about them? Does it excuse what they did?
4. What's the difference Jaz describes between "snitching" and "reporting"? Why does that difference matter?
5. Luis laughed at the remix video before he knew how bad it was. Have you ever laughed at something and regretted it later? What did you do?
6. Ms. Rivera says, "Hurt people hurt people." What do you think she means? Can you think of a time when someone's bad mood wasn't really about you?
7. In the restorative circle, everyone gets to speak — including Trey. Why do you think the story gives Trey a voice instead of just punishing him?
8. What are the 3 D's of bystander power (Direct, Distract, Delegate)? Which one would you feel most comfortable using, and why?
9. Marcus's red hoodie is important to him because it was his dad's. What's something you own that has a special story? How would you feel if someone made fun of it?
10. At the end, Marcus becomes the one reaching out his hand to a new kid. What changed in him? What does "be the one" mean to

you?

11. If you could add a chapter to this book, what would happen in it?
 12. What's one thing you can do this week to make your school feel safer for someone else?
-

What To Do If You're Being Bullied

You don't have to handle this alone. Here's your playbook:

1. Tell a trusted adult. This is the single most important step. Tell a parent, teacher, counselor, coach, or another adult you trust. Telling isn't snitching — it's how you get safe. If the first adult doesn't help, tell another one. Keep telling until someone listens.

2. Don't try to handle it alone — and don't fight back physically. Fighting usually makes things worse and can get *you* in trouble. You don't have to face a bully by yourself. Bring friends, bring adults, bring backup.

3. Stay in groups. Bullies look for kids who are alone. Walk with friends, sit with people at lunch, take busy hallways. There's safety in numbers.

4. Save the evidence. If the bullying happens online — texts, photos, videos, comments — take screenshots and save them. Don't delete them. Show them to a trusted adult. This is proof, and it matters.

5. Don't reply to cyberbullying. Don't respond to mean messages or comments. Block the accounts. Report them on the app. Responding is what the bully wants.

6. Take care of yourself. Being bullied can make you feel sad, angry, or scared — all of that is normal. Talk about your feelings. Draw, write, play, move your body. You matter, and what someone says about you doesn't decide your worth.

7. Know that it can get better. It doesn't feel like it right now, but bullying situations *do* change — especially when you speak up. Marcus's story started in a hallway and ended with a mural. Your story can change too.

If you ever feel unsafe or feel like hurting yourself, reach out right now: - Call or text 988 — Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, free, 24/7 - Text HOME to 741741 — Crisis Text Line, free, 24/7 - Visit [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) — resources for kids, teens, and parents

You are not alone. You are not the problem. And you deserve to feel safe — at school and everywhere else.