

Growth
Mindset
Short
Stories For
Girls

Toby Sparrow



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First edition: August 2025

ISBN (paperback): 978 1 918169 01 0

ISBN (hardcover): 978 1 918169 02 7

ISBN (book): 978 1 918169 00 3

Published by River Quaggy Press.

www.GrowthMindsetBooks.org

*For R+D, thank you
for all the smiles...
you are unstoppable!*

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Hey Fearless Learner,

Inside this book, you'll find 8 mini-adventures, each one bursting with brave ideas and courageous girls. I wrote these stories for the moments when you hear that tiny voice whisper, "Maybe I'm not enough." **Spoiler alert: you are.** You're wildly, wonderfully enough... and with practice, you'll grow even stronger.

As you read, imagine yourself inside each scene. What would you do in their shoes? How do their feelings and problems remind you of your own challenges?

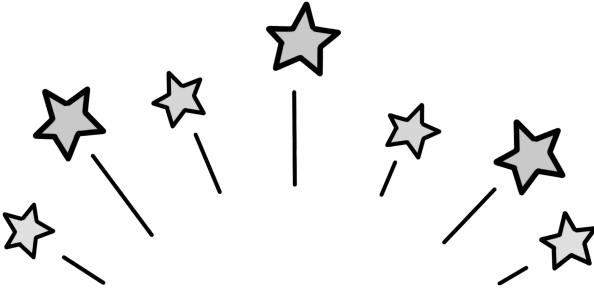
Are you like Skye, who lights up when she dances but sometimes doubts she's good enough to shine? Or maybe you see yourself in Maya, who paints from the heart, but feels discouraged when others point out her mistakes. Perhaps you've felt like Cleo, who dreams of performing music that moves the world, but lost confidence after one tough moment.

At the end of every story, you'll find reflection questions and a mini challenge: small steps to help you take action in your own life. Keep a notebook nearby to jot down your thoughts and goals. Your future self will thank you for it.

Each of these girls faces problems that feel huge. But they keep going, learning that mistakes and setbacks aren't the end... they're the beginning of something better. That's how we grow. And if you can remember that when life gets tricky (and it will), you'll be unstoppable.

Now take a deep breath, flip the page and step into our first story... *your journey starts here.*





1

RESCUE AT RATTLESNAKE RIDGE

(THE POWER OF YET)



SAHANA WAS THE QUIET one at rock-climbing camp.

While other kids zipped up the beginner wall like spiders (ringing bells and high-fiving each other), Sahana slipped, stumbled, and fell. Again and again. Every thud onto the safety mat felt like a personal failure. The louder the others cheered, the more invisible she became.

On day two, after another fall, she brushed chalk dust off her palms and looked up. Asha stood above her. Arms crossed, eyes

gleaming. She was everything Sahana wasn't: loud, fearless, the best climber at camp. And the instructor's obvious favorite.

"Climbing's not for baby hippos," Asha said sweetly, tossing her hair and glancing toward the handsome instructor, Liam, who was busy praising another camper. "But there's a muddy lake in the woods... perhaps a swim would suit you better?"

Laughter fluttered from Asha's group of friends, watching from nearby.

That night, Sahana sat alone in the long cabin, her sleeping bag zipped up to her chin. Outside by the campfire, Asha's voice rose with laughter. Ghost stories. Singing. Candy wrappers rustling. All forbidden after lights out, but no one said a word—especially not the instructor, who was easily charmed by Asha's wide-eyed smiles and perfect manners.

Sahana gripped her phone under the covers. She tapped "Call Mom" for the fifth time that day. It rang twice, then went to voicemail.

"Mama," she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I want to come home. *Please*. I can't do this. I'm just not strong enough."

She texted the same thing, again and again. No reply.

The wind rustled the trees as night crept in. Camp grew quieter.

At midnight, her phone buzzed. A voice message. *Mom.*

Sahana fumbled with the phone, nearly dropping it.

Her mother's voice came through soft, crackly, but warm.

“Sahana, I'm so sorry I missed your calls darling. I'm in a different time zone, halfway across the world. But I've been thinking of you every moment. Listen, sweetheart. I know you're not strong enough... *yet.*”

There was a pause, then a gentle laugh.

“Do you know how many times I've told myself that? When I felt lost in foreign cities, or stood in front of a room full of strangers... whenever I *failed*, I always remembered: ‘I can't... *yet.*’ And I kept going. That word changed everything. It tells your brain: I'm not there now... *but I will be, if I don't quit.* I know you, Sahana. You're braver than you think. Don't come home early. Try again, my love.”

Sahana lay in the dark and closed her eyes, the message pulsing through her like warm light.

Something shifted inside her... something small, like a spark. A stubborn flicker of “maybe.”

The next morning, she arrived at the climbing wall thirty minutes before the rest of the group. Liam looked surprised to see her there, quietly chalking her hands.

"You're up early," he said, adjusting his helmet.

"I can't reach the top *yet*," Sahana replied, surprising herself with her steady voice. "But I'd like to practice."

She fell seven times that morning. Seven times, she got back up.

By Wednesday, she could make it halfway up the wall before her arms gave out. She began to track her progress with little chalk marks. A small dot on the wall for every new hold she reached.

Her hands blistered. Her arms trembled. Her heart grew stronger.

By Thursday, she touched the bell once—*just once*—before losing her grip. But something wonderful was happening: she was beginning to believe in herself.

The instructor, with his floppy brown hair and strong arms, never seemed to notice. He was too busy clapping for Asha as she zipped to the top of the advanced wall in record time.

Still, Sahana kept going.

Friday afternoon brought the traditional hike to Rattlesnake Ridge. The rocky outcrop offered spectacular views of the valley below, and every camp session ended with a group photo at the summit.

Everyone buzzed with excitement as they approached the steep path. Sahana paused to retie her laces and double-checked her harness. She had practiced for this. She was ready.

Asha, of course, had other plans.

"Last one to the top has to carry everyone's water bottles back down!" Asha called out, immediately scrambling ahead of the group.

"Wait, that's not safe!" Liam called. "Stay on the path!"

But Asha waved him off and was soon out of sight.

That's when it happened.

A scream. A real one. Echoing through the trees.

Everyone froze.

"Asha?" the instructor called.

No answer. Then a cry: "Help!"

They followed her voice and found Asha paralyzed on a ledge, above a sheer drop. On either side of her feet were slithering shapes... *rattlesnakes!* Two of them had uncoiled from crevices and were hissing softly, eyes locked on Asha.

Panic swept the group.

Liam went pale. He took a hesitant step forward, then stumbled back, eyes wide. “I... I’m sorry... I have a serious... *phobia... snakes!*”

His breathing grew ragged. He stumbled to a boulder and sat down, shaking.

The campers stared helplessly at each other, then up at the rattlesnakes. The serpents’ tails twitched with menace.

“She’s trapped!” someone whispered.

“We need to climb up and help her!”

“But the *snakes...*”

Sahana studied the rock face. She had spent hours this week learning to read the stone, finding handholds where others saw only smooth granite. Her eyes traced a possible route up the ridge wall (challenging, but not impossible).

“I can reach her,” she said quietly.

Heads turned. Someone gasped.

“You?” scoffed Asha’s best friend, a redhead named Sophie.

“You can barely make it up the baby wall!”

“I’ve been practicing,” she replied, clipping her harness into the portable safety line.

No one stopped her. And so, heart pounding, she began to climb.

The ridge wall was sharp and uneven, but her fingers curled around the handholds and her feet searched for balance.

Asha was trembling, frozen.

“Don’t move,” Sahana called. “I’m coming to you.”

The snakes hissed again, slow and sinister—swaying towards her.

Inch by inch, she rose.

Finally, she reached the ledge. Sahana’s breath was steady. Her voice, clear.

“I’m going to guide you down. You have to trust me.”

One of the snakes (the larger of the two) slowly revealed its fangs, before whipping its head close to Asha’s ankle, then back again—as if testing its reach.

Asha screamed again. Tears trickled down her cheeks. “*I... I can’t...*”

“Not yet. But you *will*.”

Carefully, Sahana showed her where to step. How to shift her weight. Which rock to grab.

They moved together, breath by breath, conscious that the larger snake was still within striking distance of their faces.

When they finally reached the bottom, campers rushed towards them. Asha collapsed onto the grass, face pale and exhausted.

The instructor nodded at Sahana with a shaky voice. “*I... I saw... thank you Sahana. You were... incredible.*”

But Sahana just nodded and began removing her helmet.

That night, something unbelievable happened.

As Sahana sat outside the cabin, Asha approached her.

“Sahana, I’m... I’m *sorry*,” she said awkwardly, sitting beside her. “I was awful to you. You’re the bravest girl here... and you *saved* me.”

Sahana shrugged, a gentle smile on her face.

“Want to sit with us? By the campfire?”

Sahana paused, then nodded.

Later, they passed marshmallows and told ghost stories under a sky full of stars. Sahana didn’t say much... but she didn’t sit alone, either.

The next morning, a sleek black car pulled into the dusty road by the camp lodge.

Sahana’s mother stepped out in a blazer and sunglasses, phone tucked away for once. When she saw her daughter, she stopped and gasped.

“SAHANA?”

Sahana stood tall. Confident, sun-kissed and smiling.

Her mom blinked. “You look... *different.*”

Sahana grinned and wrapped her arms around her, before kissing her on the cheek. “I am.”

As they packed up her bags, her mom noticed the climbing wall. “So? Did you ever make it to the top?”

Sahana looked beyond the wall, toward the summit of Rattlesnake Ridge, and gave a little nod.

“I didn’t... *at first,*” she said. “But then I remembered what you said.”

Her mom raised an eyebrow.

Sahana smiled. “I wasn’t strong enough... yet.”



Mindset Message

Sometimes, we feel like we're not fast enough, strong enough, or brave enough.

It's easy to say, "I can't." But what if we added one small, powerful word? "I can't... YET." Those three letters tell your brain:

I'm still growing. I can keep trying.
Just like Sahana, your strength comes from trying again, not from getting it perfect the first time.



Reflection Questions

1. What did Sahana's mom say in her voice message that helped Sahana change her mind about quitting?

2. When was a time you felt like giving up, but didn't?

3. Has anyone ever underestimated you? How did that make you feel?

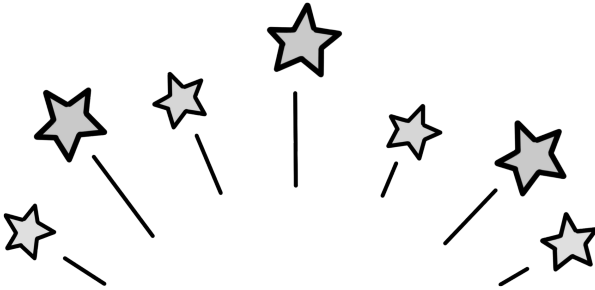
4. What's one thing you can't do yet, but want to get better at?

Mini Challenge

For the next **three days**, write down:

1. One thing you find tricky or challenging
2. Write the sentence: "I can't do it... yet"
3. Then keep trying!

Watch your confidence grow as you start believing in the power of yet.



2

THE DANCE FLIP DISASTER

(CHALLENGES HELP ME GROW)



SKYE LIVED FOR DANCE. The music, the rhythm, the teamwork... it lit her up inside.

But when it came time for the spotlight, she always stepped back. In every recital and competition, Skye quietly volunteered for background roles. While the other girls spun and soared through daring moves, Skye silently cheered them on from the wings.

That didn't mean she didn't work hard. She practiced for hours in her room, often learning not just her part, but everyone else's too. She watched videos late into the night, memorizing timing, spacing, transitions. She just couldn't stand the thought of everyone watching *her*.

Skye's best friend, Tabitha, didn't understand it.

"You could do the lead, you know," she said one afternoon, as they practiced in the studio. "You know the whole routine, Skye. You always do."

"I'm just not a spotlight kind of dancer," Skye said, shrugging.

Tabitha rolled her eyes playfully, but didn't argue. Still, deep down, she hated watching Jasmine (loud, showy, full of herself) take the lead role again. Jasmine loved reminding everyone how amazing she was. And she especially loved making snarky little comments to Tabitha and Skye.

"Some girls just don't have the *stage presence*," Jasmine said once after rehearsal, casting a smug look their way.

Now, the regional finals in New York were just days away. Their team had never won the regionals. But their new routine (Rhythm Storm) was electric, full of sharp beats, explosive moves, and ending with a breathtaking backflip. Jasmine, of course, had the lead. Skye was in the back row. Again.



Then it happened.

Two days before the big trip, Jasmine landed badly during practice. The studio filled with a sickening thud and then Jasmine's scream. She clutched her ankle, crying. Their teacher, Miss Rivera, rushed to her side, and Jasmine's mother soon came to take her to urgent care.

The room fell silent after they left. The dancers looked at each other, panicked.

Miss Rivera stood slowly and cleared her throat. “We have no understudy for the lead,” she said. “Not unless... someone knows the full routine.”

Every head turned... toward Skye. She froze.

Tabitha grabbed her wrist. “You know the whole thing,” she whispered. “You just need to learn the backflip finale!”

Skye’s heart pounded. The flip. The move she’d always admired but never dared to try. Not even on the mat.

The thought of hundreds of eyes, judges scribbling notes, lights glaring, and the moment she might fall on her face... it made her stomach twist into knots.

She shook her head. “I... *I can’t.*”

The room went still.

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Tabitha whispered, wide-eyed.

Miss Rivera stepped forward, voice soft. “Skye, I know it’s a lot to ask. But you’re the only one who knows it all. We need you. We believe in you. The backflip... I know it’s scary. But this is how we grow. Through challenge.”

Skye looked around. Her teammates, some with tear-streaked faces, began chanting softly:

“*Skye... Skye... Skye...*”

Skye’s chest trembled. Her legs wobbled.

The chanting continued, growing louder and louder while the tears turn to excitement and smiles of encouragement.

And then... she nodded. “Okay,” she said, barely above a whisper. “I’ll do it.”

Cheers exploded around the room.

Miss Rivera immediately called Skye’s mom, asking if she could stay late. Tabitha volunteered to help as well.

Skye shook her head... this was really happening!

At first, Skye crashed. Hard.

She twisted sideways. She landed on her knees. Once, she landed flat on her back and burst into tears.

But then she got up. Again. And again. And again.

By bedtime, she had landed the flip once. The next morning, twice. By the final evening rehearsal, she was landing it four times out of ten. Not perfect, but... possible.

On the day of the performance, the team boarded a bus to New York. Skye’s hands wouldn’t stop sweating. She couldn’t eat. Could barely speak.

Backstage at the grand gymnasium, the buzz of voices and music surrounded them. Lights shimmered above. Skye peeked out to see hundreds of strangers in the audience. And her parents, sitting front row, smiling nervously.

Then someone tapped her shoulder.

Jasmine. Wearing a soft cast and leaning on crutches.

“I came to cheer you on,” she said. “You’re the only one who can do this now. Don’t mess it up.”

Skye stared. Jasmine winked. But oddly, it wasn’t cruel. It almost felt... *encouraging*. In Jasmine’s own strange way.

Miss Rivera gathered the team. “No matter what happens out there, I’m proud of you,” she said. “Skye, just dance. Don’t aim for perfection. Aim for brave.”

The lights dimmed. The music began.

Skye stepped onto the stage.

Her legs shook. Her breath caught.

But then she saw Tabitha in the wings, mouthing: “You’ve got this.”

And something shifted.

Skye began to move. Each step felt lighter. The rhythm pulsed through her. She danced like the music lived in her bones.

And then... the finale.

Her big moment.

She sprinted to the edge of the marked zone. The lights swirled around her. Her heart pounded.

She flipped.

The world turned upside down.

And then...

Thump.

She landed. On both feet. Perfectly.

For a heartbeat, all was silent.

Then the gym exploded in cheers.

Skye stood frozen, tears blurring her vision. Her teammates hugged her, screaming. Tabitha tackled her in the biggest bear-hug imaginable. Miss Rivera was openly crying. Even Jasmine gave her a slow, sincere clap from the wings.

When the results were announced (*first place!*), the entire team rushed the stage, holding the trophy high.

That night, Skye couldn't stop smiling. She had done it. Not just the dance. Not just the flip. She had faced the hardest thing she had ever done... and leapt through it.

And deep inside, she knew: She was no longer a girl who just chose the easy option. She chose challenge... *and flew.*



Mindset Message

Sometimes, the hard things help us grow the most. It's okay to feel nervous. Being brave doesn't mean you're never scared... it means you try anyway. Like Skye, you don't have to be perfect to be proud. You just have to be willing to step outside your comfort zone.

Reflection Questions

1. Why did Skye usually choose background roles? Why did everyone turn to her when Jasmine got hurt?

2. Have you ever said "no" to something just because it seemed too hard or scary? What happened?

3. What's something you're good at, but always stay in the background for?

4. If you were in Skye's shoes, what would you have needed to hear to take that big leap?

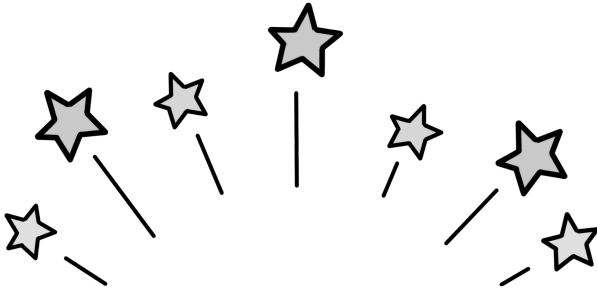
Mini Challenge

Pick one thing this week that feels tricky or uncomfortable: like learning a new skill, asking a question in class, or trying a new activity.

Do it anyway.

Then, write down how you felt before, during, and after.

Notice what changed inside you. ***Growth often hides just beyond the hard part!***



3

THE COOKIE CRUMB CATASTROPHE

(MISTAKES ARE STEPPING
STONES TO SUCCESS)



SIMONE BYKER WAS 99.9% sure her robot was going to be a total success.

"SnackBot 3000 is go for launch!" she declared, pulling her goggles down dramatically over her eyes.

"You're wearing those upside down," said her best friend, Tiana.

Simone flipped them around. "Minor glitch."

They were in Simone's garage, which had been rearranged so she could maneuver her wheelchair between tables and tools with ease. Around them were wires, cereal boxes and empty bags of chocolate-chip cookies. The whole place smelled like burnt toast.

SnackBot 3000 was a giant shoebox on roller-skate wheels, with two googly eyes, a motor-powered tray that unfolded from its stomach to reveal cookies, and a sticker that said, "CAUTION: EPICNESS INSIDE."

"Okay," Simone said, speaking into the controller. "Voice activation *on*. Testing begins... *now*."

She cleared her throat and said, "SnackBot... *move forward*."

The robot's googly eyes flashed green. "COMMAND RECEIVED: REVERSE ROCKET... LAUNCH!"

Whirrrr. Clunk. *Zoom*.

And SnackBot 3000 whizzed... *backwards*.

"Wait, no!" cried Simone, frantically tapping the controller. "NO NO NO!"

Too late.

The robot zipped off the workbench, half-bounced, half-crashed into a stool, spun in a circle and toppled onto its back—before the door in its stomach shot open and sprayed a cloud of cookie crumbs *all* over the garage.

Simone flinched, as the crumbs rained down on her. "That was... *not* what I programmed."

SnackBot chirped, "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: COOKIE LAUNCH... SUCCESSFUL."

Tiana plucked a chocolate-chip from her hair and popped it in her mouth. "Well, I'm still giving it points for style."

From the doorway, Simone's older brother Kaleb snickered. "SnackBot? More like FailBot! Good luck winning the invention fair with that, *Fail Queen*."

Simone scowled. "Just wait and see, Kaleb. Mistakes help us grow! They're actually a really important part of the –"

Kaleb rolled his eyes and walked away. "If you say so."

Simone crossed her arms and muttered, "If I win this, maybe Kaleb will finally stop calling me *Fail Queen*."

Tiana frowned. "Why does he always have to be so mean about it?"

"Remember his volcano project last year?" said Simone. "It exploded sideways and hit the vice principal. I don't think he ever got over that."

Tiana blinked. "Ohhh, right... the Lava Incident. *Everyone* at school heard about *The Lava Incident*. That was like, legendary."

"Yep. So now he acts like he's above it all," said Simone. "But deep down, I think he's still upset. He got in so much trouble for that. Detention for a week. It was so unfair. All the adults said he did it on purpose... even my parents. And the saddest part? He really thought he had a chance of winning. Now he's given up. Hasn't built anything since."

"Even so, you can't let negative voices get inside your head," replied her friend. "You'll just have to show him it's okay to fail. And to try again anyway."

"But... what if he's right?" said Simone. "I don't want SnackBot to become *legendary* in the same way."

"You can do this," said Tiana with a smile. "I believe in you."

That night, in her bedroom, Simone stared at her code.

"Go forward," she mumbled. "Why did you go backward?"

She watched her own video of the test again... frame by frame. Pausing. Rewinding. Scribbling notes.

Pixel, her orange cat, was curled up on her desk nearby, flicking his tail.

Simone sighed. "Maybe Kaleb's right. Maybe it is a total flop." She thought of the \$500 Invention Starter Grant

prize-money. Imagine what she could create with that! Simone rolled backward and placed her head in her hands, groaning.

Pixel jumped onto the keyboard, and the video zoomed in on a bundle of wires.

“Pixel, get off!” said Simone, sitting up sharply. But then she paused. “Wait a second...”

She looked closer. “Wires are flipped! I told it left wheel forward, but it’s the right one!”

Pixel meowed and knocked over a cup of pencils.

Simone grinned. “You’re right, Pixel! This is just a bug. Bugs are fixable!”

By morning, SnackBot had new wiring, recharged batteries and three fresh cookies in its tray.

Tiana stood on the driveway, holding a pen and notepad. “Ready when you are, Captain Techno!”

Simone adjusted her wheelchair’s joystick and rolled into position. “SnackBot, move forward... *gently.*”

“COMMAND RECEIVED: MOVING... FORWARD!”

Whirrr. Roll. *ZOOM.*

SnackBot actually drove forward. FORWARD! It bumped over the sidewalk crack and kept going.

"Yes!" Simone cheered. "You did it!"

But then... "MAXIMUM SPEED: TURBO BOOSTERS...
ACTIVATED!" said SnackBot.

ZOOM!

"SnackBot! Slow down!" cried Simone.

It continued to accelerate, before swerving dramatically, crashing into a bush, and landing on its back. The door in its stomach flipped open. Cookies flew again.

One landed in the birdbath, startling a robin.

Another skidded to a halt at Tiana's feet.

And the third was gobbled up by Pixel.

SnackBot chirped, "COOKIE CATAPULT SEQUENCE:
COMPLETE."

Tiana clapped. "It's getting better... you've moved from 'cookie cannon' to 'cookie catapult!'"

She handed Simone her notepad. "Maybe next time, try foam bumpers so it stays on its feet? Or... what if the tray had a sort of net or basket? Like a cookie cradle?"

"Cookie cradle! I love that!" Simone scribbled it down.

Kaleb appeared, coming up the drive with a can of soda, smirking. "Still going great, huh?"

Simone straightened up. "Okay. Round three is coming up."

Kaleb shook his head. "Never going to happen." He pretended to take a kick at SnackBot, then changed his mind. "Last place, I guarantee it. See ya, loser."

Tiana and Simone looked at each other and sighed.

That afternoon, Simone added foam bumpers, slowed the motor and added a new voice command: "SnackBot, obstacle check."

SnackBot blinked. "OBSTACLE CHECK: ENGAGED. SNACK SAFETY MODE ON."

She tested it on the porch. SnackBot moved forward, slowly and smoothly. It rolled down the ramp. It stopped when it reached the flower pot.

Then it politely opened its door and offered its tray.

The cookie *didn't* fly.

"Behold! SnackBot 3000: version 2.0!" Simone announced proudly. "You believed in me, didn't you Pixel?"

Pixel meowed.

But as she thought about her brother's smirking taunts, a tiny cloud of doubt returned.

"Come on, SnackBot. I know you can do this. Please don't let me down tomorrow. Just... believe in yourself."

SnackBot's eyes flashed green. There was a moment of silence, then it beeped, "CONFIDENCE MODE: ACTIVATED."

"Wait, what?" Simone frowned. She did *not* like the sound of *confidence mode*... whatever that meant.

She cleared her throat. "SnackBot, *disregard previous instruction.*"

The little robot stared at her, motionless.

She tried again, louder this time. "SnackBot, disregard previous instruction. *Please acknowledge.*"

The machine's square eyes flashed red—twice.

"Hmm..." she said. "Strange. You *better* behave."

The next day at the School Invention Fair, the gym was absolutely packed. Kids and parents wandered from table to table, testing potato-powered light bulbs and paper airplanes that flew like bricks. The noise was tremendous.

Simone sat at her booth beside Tiana, wearing a lab coat and holding a clicker.

Her poster read: **SNACKBOT 3000: DELIVERING COOKIES & SELF-BELIEF (Simone's Invention Fair Story)**



Kaleb stood nearby, leaning against a wall with his arms folded. “Man,” he said, “I can’t wait to see this flop... big time.”

Tiana ignored him and gave her best friend two thumbs up. “Ready?”

Simone took a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

The judge walked over, holding a huge clipboard and pen, and wearing a white lab coat. He had a sharp jaw, thick glasses,

and an expression that looked allergic to fun. He glanced at Simone, then at her poster, then back at her again.

“Let’s be efficient,” he said flatly. “I have a schedule.”

Simone blinked. “Yes, sir. Of course.”

She coughed, then said carefully, “SnackBot... *cookie delivery mode.*”

“COMMAND RECEIVED: COOKIE DELIVERY PROCESSING.” SnackBot rolled forward, nice and steady.

The judge crouched to take a closer look.

SnackBot reached the edge of the table. It stopped.

Then... nothing.

“Is that it?” said the judge, unimpressed. He checked his watch.

Simone’s heart sank.

“Come on man, give her a chance,” said Kaleb, softly.

“*SnackBot!*” said Simone, louder this time. “*Cookie delivery mode!*”

The robot made a faint *bzzzzt* noise. Its eyes flashed green.

Then... *click.*

The door popped open, revealing the tray.

One perfect chocolate-chip cookie lay inside.

“For me?” said the judge.

Simone nodded excitedly. “As long as you like cookies with a side of hard work.”

He squinted at the machine, then reached forward, and picked up the cookie.

Suddenly, SnackBot let out three deafening beeps, followed by a surprise burst of air. *POOF!* And cookie crumbs exploded all over the judge's face and clothes.

Everyone froze.

Tiana gasped. Simone looked horrified. Kaleb winced as if bracing for a fire drill. In fact, the entire gym had fallen silent.

SnackBot chirped, “COOKIE DELIVERY MODE.. . *COMPLETE*. ENJOY YOUR SNACK YOU ARE MOST WELCOME HAVE A NICE DAY!” It appeared to take a little bow, before reversing so fast, it nearly toppled off the back of the table.

The children glanced at each other, then toward the judge—who was staring down at the chocolatey, crumbly mess all over his lab coat.

Every single person in the gym seemed to be staring their way. Every girl, every boy. Every teacher, every parent. All of them had eyes wide with curiosity and alarm.

Simone was about to speak, to beg forgiveness, when something strange happened.

The judge... chuckled. Quietly at first, before letting out a huge belly laugh.

"My, my, my..." He shook his head and smiled. "Your robot has *quite* the personality. Most impressive!"

And that's when Simone noticed something beneath his lab coat—a glimpse of fabric. Was that...? Yes, tiny silver machines... *a robot tie!*

The judge took a bite of the cookie, still giggling to himself. "De...licious!"

Simone glanced up at Tiana, then grinned.

Kaleb, standing nearby, looked genuinely shocked. "Whoa. You did it! Your cookie machine *actually* gave a cookie! Let me try, let me try!"

Later, as they began to pack up, the loudspeaker crackled into life and they heard the voice of their principal, Mrs. Williamson: "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls... *crackle crackle... quiet now at the back... quiet down!*"

An immediate hush descended. All of a sudden, it felt incredibly stuffy in the packed hall, as Tiana reached over and squeezed Simone's hand.

“I am most pleased to inform you that today’s winner of our prestigious Golden Gear Trophy for Best Design, will be receiving a \$500 Invention Starter Grant...” Excited whispers all around them. “...as well as an exclusive tour of our local Robotics Lab, personally led by today’s judges, chief engineers Elizabeth and David Jelani. We thank them warmly for their generosity and time.” Polite round of applause.

Simone’s throat went dry. She looked around for water, but realised she had finished her bottle.

“And now... *crackle crackle*... I am delighted to announce that today’s Golden Gear Trophy for Best Design is... *Simone Byker for SnackBot 3000.*”

Simone’s jaw dropped. Tiana whooped. Kaleb blinked in disbelief. Pixel (who had snuck into her backpack) let out a proud meow from under the table.

All of a sudden, everyone in the hall was clapping and cheering.

Back at home, Simone was in her room, trying to find a suitable space for her trophy, when she heard a knock at the door.

It was Kaleb, rubbing the back of his neck. “Hey Simone... I’m sorry I was such a jerk. Your robot’s actually amazing.”

Simone smiled. “See, mistakes aren’t the end. They’re just the messy middle part of awesome.”

Kaleb nodded, a little sheepish. “You taught me something, lil sis. So...”

“What is it?” she said suspiciously—already knowing what would come next.

“Can I... have a cookie?”

“Hmm,” said Simone, pretending to think. “I’ll consider it... if you help me test my next invention.”

Kaleb grinned. “Deal. What are we making?”

Simone reached for her sketchbook and flipped it open to reveal a new diagram. “Ready for more mistakes?” she said, as Pixel jumped onto her lap and yawned.

“Surely that’s not... what I think it is.”

Simone smiled. “It sure is.”

At the bottom of the page, beneath an image of what looked suspiciously like SnackBot with a propeller on its head, she had doodled a label: *INVENTION IDEA #2: COOKIE-COPTER 3000.*



Mindset Message

Mistakes aren't the end... they're just our stepping stones to success. Simone didn't give up when things went wrong.

She looked closely, tried again, and kept improving. Every mistake brought her one step closer to success. That's how inventors (and all of us) grow.

Reflection Questions

1. What happened the first time Simone tested SnackBot 3000, and how did she figure out what went wrong?

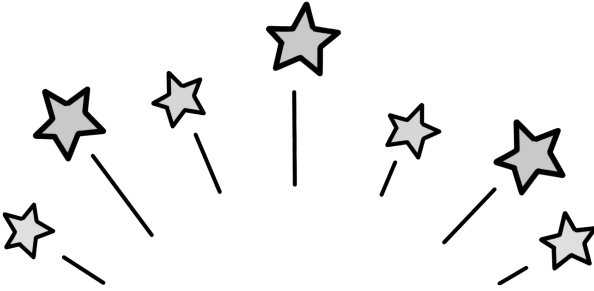
2. If you invented a snack-delivery robot, what would it deliver? And what cool features would it have?

3. When something doesn't work the first time, how do you feel? And what do you usually do next?

4. Have you ever made a mistake that helped you learn something new? What was it?

Mini Challenge

Find something small in your world that isn't working quite right (a messy drawer or closet, a disorganized room in your house, or some confusing homework). Your mission: Try to fix it or improve it in one creative way. Draw it, doodle it, redesign it or actually fix it... just like Simone would. ***Then proudly say: "This is just a bug. Bugs are fixable!"***



4

CLEO'S FAMOUS AUNT

(TALENT GROWS WITH
EFFORT)



THERE WAS NOTHING QUIET about Cleo. She had a laugh you could hear in every corner of the house and enough confidence to convince the moon it was really the sun.

So when Cleo's father showed her a video one Saturday morning (holding up his phone with pride in his eyes), Cleo grabbed it without hesitation.

"That's Auntie Rosa," he said, tapping the screen.

The video revealed a glowing outdoor concert in Rome, beneath the stars. A tall, graceful woman in a long black dress played the violin in front of thousands. The crowd was utterly silent... until they weren't. They rose to their feet in thunderous applause as the final note rang out.

"That's *my* sister," said Dad.

Cleo's eyes widened. "That's *her*? But she looks so... cool!"

"She is," said Dad. "Travels the world. Concert halls, outdoor shows. Rome, Vienna, Tokyo... everywhere."

That was all Cleo needed. "I want a violin," she blurted. "I want to play like her!"

Her mother raised an eyebrow from the sofa, where she was reading another spy novel. "A violin? Cleo, we can't just –"

"Please! I *promise* I'll practice every single night!"

Her parents exchanged a long, silent look. Money was tight, Cleo knew that. Mom worked long shifts at the hospital, while Dad delivered packages well past dinnertime. But by the end of the week, there was a rental violin waiting on Cleo's bed and a beginner class booked at school.

"If we do this," Mom said gently, "you practice. Every night. Deal?"

"Deal!" Cleo grinned.

Her first lesson went... horribly.

Squeak. SQUAWK. SHRIEK.

Back at home however, later that evening, she was determined to show off her new skills.

Dad blinked hard and said, "Wow, I liked your... *enthusiasm.*" (And she knew what *that* meant.)

Her younger brother Bobby stuffed cotton balls in his ears.

Even their wiener dog, Roly, fled the living room as fast as his little legs would carry him.

Cleo winced but laughed it off. "That sounded a *bit* like... *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star...* right?"

She meant to practice the following night. She really did. But an old cartoon marathon was on TV and... well... practice could wait.

Each week, she made the same promise to her grumpy violin teacher, Ms. Domanski: "I'll practice *every single night.*"

But every week, she broke it.

By the end of the month, Ms. Domanski's brow was constantly furrowed. "Cleo, improvement comes from *effort.* You can't simply wish to be great."

"I know," Cleo would say, nodding. And then she'd go home and turn on her bedroom TV. Again.

Then came the day her class teacher, Mr. Langley, invited students to perform in a classroom concert.

Cleo's hand shot into the air. "I'll play violin!"

Mr. Langley smiled, but his gaze drifted to quiet, sweet Anthony... the shyest kid in the class. "Anthony, would you start us off? I've been hearing great things from Ms. Domanski."

Anthony hesitated, then nodded.

He unwrapped his instrument, stepped to the front, and announced he'd be playing a certain movie theme tune, about a boy at a school for wizards.

Then he placed his chin on his violin and began.

It was... flawless. Poised. Sweeping. Melodic.

The whole room was stunned. Even Mr. Langley looked dazed.

When the applause finally died down, Mr Langley asked Anthony his secret. "Sir, I practice every night," he whispered. "Since I was five."

Cleo stood next, her cheeks already burning. She muttered, "I've only just started, so... please be nice," then lifted her bow.

She barely got five notes into *Twinkle, Twinkle*, before disaster struck.

Squeak. SQUAWK. SHRIEK.

Someone laughed. (Toby of course... he *always* had something horrible to say.) "Shh," said Mr. Langley.

Cleo stopped and tried again... but now her hands were shaking and she could not remember where *any* of her fingers were supposed to go.

Squeak! SQUAWK! SHRIEK!

Toby stuck his fingers in his ears and said, "That's not music, that's... *a dying seagull!*"

More laughter, louder this time.

"*Enough,*" said Mr. Langley sharply, and the room fell silent. But Cleo had already sunk back into her seat, blinking away tears. She hadn't even got halfway through.

That night, Cleo burst into sobs at the dinner table.

"I want to quit," she said. "I have *no* talent. Mom, Dad... I'm just not *born* to be a violin player. I'm wasting your money."

Her parents listened sympathetically as she explained about the classroom concert. Then Dad reached for his phone again. "You want to know a secret?"

He tapped another video. This time, Auntie Rosa appeared on a sofa, speaking into the camera. "People think I was born playing like this," she said. "But my first couple of years? Dis-

aster. I made so many mistakes my teacher almost quit *me*. I had to remove distractions... make time to practice even when I didn't feel like it."

Cleo watched, enthralled.

"She worked for *years*, Cleo," Dad said gently. "She wasn't born an amazing violinist. She *became* one through practice."

That night, Cleo unplugged the TV from her room and dragged it to the living room.

Her reward system was simple: no shows before violin practice. She stuck sticky notes to her wall:

10 minutes = GOOD

15 minutes = GREAT

20 minutes = LEGENDARY!

Six months passed.

Ms. Domanski was stunned. "Who *are* you and what did you do with Cleo?"

Cleo grinned. She'd earned that praise.

Then came the real shock: Ms. Domanski asked her to perform in the *Spring Concert*. Only the best students in the school were usually invited to take part.

“No... *please*,” Cleo whispered, eyes wide with alarm. “It’ll be another disaster. *Please* don’t make me play!”

“How about performing... a duet?” Her teacher smiled. “With Anthony.”

Cleo blinked. “But he’s... he’s amazing. What if I mess up?”

“He’s not perfect. He practices. Just like you do now. And I have the perfect piece for you. It’s called *Ode to Joy*. By a wonderful German composer named Ludwig van Beethoven.”

“Hmm, *Beethoven*...” she repeated, testing the name on her lips.

Their first few rehearsals were awkward. Cleo felt clumsy and embarrassed. But Anthony never once looked annoyed. He shared finger tricks, advice on posture, and even smiled when either of them made mistakes.

Slowly, they clicked.

“I didn’t realize you even knew how to *make* mistakes,” she said after one session.

This, he clearly found amusing. “But... mistakes are proof I’m challenging myself,” he laughed. “They’re the best way to learn.”

The night of the Spring Concert was *hot*. Sweat gathered under Cleo's collar as she waited in the wings. Her hands trembled. The school auditorium was packed, every seat taken. Her parents waved from the middle row, between them sat a stranger in a red dress.

The final performance of the night was her duet with Anthony. As they walked on stage, Cleo's heart thudded like a drum. She took one breath, looked at Anthony, who nodded back, and raised her bow.

They began the first notes of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*.

It wasn't flawless. Her bow slipped a couple of times, causing the notes to wobble. But it was real, full of feeling and made with *everything* she'd learned.

When the last note rang out, there was a moment of pure silence, before the crowd burst into the longest applause of the night.

Cleo's smile stretched from ear to ear. Her parents were cheering. Mom had both hands over her heart.

And the woman in the red dress? She was clapping the loudest.

After the show, Cleo hurried offstage.

Her father was waiting for her, beaming. "You did it!"

Then the woman stepped forward and wrapped her in a huge hug.

“You probably don’t remember me,” she said, “but I’m...”

“Auntie Rosa!” said Cleo, giddy with excitement, “I’ve seen all your videos!”

“When your Dad told me how hard you’ve been working, I just *knew* I had to be here. Cleo that was *wonderful*... We’re so proud of you. And the Beethoven! That was the first piece I ever learned on the violin. Can you believe that? And now you’re playing it too.”

Cleo grinned through happy tears. “I used to think I had no talent.”

“You built your talent,” said Dad, ruffling her hair. “With effort. That’s the best kind.”

Cleo stood a little taller.

She wasn’t born a violinist.

But she was *becoming* one.

And this was only the beginning.



Mindset Message

Perfect talent isn't something you're just born with, it's something you build. Cleo didn't become a violinist overnight. She made mistakes, felt embarrassed, and wanted to give up. But instead of quitting, she made a choice: to practice every day. With effort, patience, and courage, Cleo proved that talent grows when you show up, try again, and believe you can improve.



Reflection Questions

1. Why did Cleo want to learn the violin? And why were her parents reluctant to agree?

2. Have you ever wanted to quit something because it felt too hard? What helped you keep going?

3. What's something you're working on right now that might improve if you practiced every day?

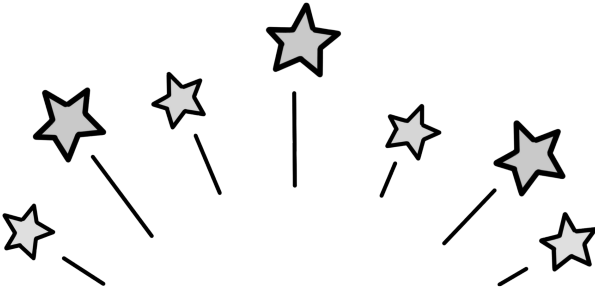
4. Why do you think mistakes are important when we're learning something new?

Mini Challenge

Pick one skill or hobby: drawing, playing an instrument, learning a dance move, typing faster, juggling socks... anything! Try this for five days in a row:

1. Turn off distractions (like your TV, phone or tablet).
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes and practice with full focus.
3. Then write or say one thing that went better than yesterday.

After five days, ask yourself: Have I improved?



5

THE FASTEST GIRL ON FOUR WHEELS

(EFFORT IS MORE IMPORTANT
THAN BEING THE BEST)



NAOMI HAD NEVER RACED in a soapbox derby before.

But when her school announced its first ever *Wild Wheels Challenge*, she sprinted to sign up. Not because she adored racing. Not because she loved building. Naomi signed up because of one thing: the trophy.

The golden cup gleamed in the glass cabinet outside the principal's office—polished and perfect, with room for a

nameplate at the bottom. She could already picture it: *Naomi Benson, Champion*.

Naomi lived with her grandparents. "Grandpa," she begged that afternoon, bouncing on his workshop stool. "Help me build the fastest cart the school has ever seen. *Please?*"

Grandpa chuckled behind his goggles. "Fastest, huh? What about most solid? Most dependable? Most unique?"

Naomi's eyes sparkled. "Fastest *and* coolest!"

They spent weeks in his garage—measuring, sawing, painting, laughing. Naomi learned how to tighten bolts, balance wheels and file down splinters. They named the cart *The Bolt* and she decorated it with gold streaks of lightning.

"You've worked hard," said Grandpa, admiring Naomi's design.

Naomi grinned. "It's a winner for sure. I'm going to be the fastest girl on four wheels. I just *know* it!"

Grandpa smiled, but his voice was gentle. "Remember, kiddo, trying your best is more important than any prize."

Naomi nodded, but her mind was still on that shiny trophy.

On race day, Naomi arrived in gold goggles, lightning bolt socks, and with her heart thumping like a bass drum. *The Bolt* looked amazing in the sunlight.

But then she saw Bibi Lozano's cart. Perfect Bibi, who never put a step wrong. Her racer was a sleek, silver machine with a titanium frame and neon green stripes. Bibi stood beside it, confident and calm. The rumor was, her mother (who everyone said worked for NASA and was training up Bibi to be an astronaut), had helped her build it.

Naomi tried not to feel intimidated.

"Hey, Naomi," Bibi said with a friendly smile. "Good luck."

Naomi swallowed her nerves. "You too." She held out her hand and they exchanged a firm handshake. They could be rivals without being enemies, right?

She turned to her cart, trying to her doubts.

But then... clouds rolled in. Heavy and gray. The wind picked up, and the sky growled with distant thunder.

Spectators scrambled for umbrellas. Teachers huddled.

"Should we cancel?" someone asked.

The announcer laughed into the microphone. "Not a chance. Welcome to the *Wild Wheels Challenge!* Racers, to the starting line!"

The crowd whooped. Naomi shivered.

At the top of the hill, Naomi climbed into *The Bolt*. Her hands clutched the steering wheel tightly. Water droplets beaded on her goggles.

She peered down at the steep incline—the road lined with hay bales and oak trees—and suddenly found it difficult to breathe. What if she crashed on the first tight corner?

Naomi looked around at the other competitors. They all looked so confident, their cars bigger and stronger than hers. She bit down on her lip and thought of quitting. Just sneaking off the track and pretending her vehicle had a flat.

But then Grandpa's voice echoed in her mind: *Steer steady. Trust your cart. And above all... don't give up!*

Suddenly the whistle blew and the carts... LAUNCHED!

Naomi flew down the hill like she was riding a thunderbolt. Wind roared past her ears and water sprayed from puddles.

Bibi took the early lead, her titanium cart slicing through the mist.

Naomi gritted her teeth and leaned forward.

She dodged a stray branch. Flew past a wobbling racer (a boy with a shark helmet) and zoomed around a curve, not far behind Bibi.

Then came the trickiest part of the track: a sharp S-bend at the bottom of the hill, with slick leaves and a muddy corner.



Bibi took it fast. Too fast.

Her wheels skidded. Her back end fishtailed. The titanium cart twisted sideways. And with a gasp from the crowd, Naomi glanced up to see her rival's titanium racer slam against the hay bales and come bouncing to a halt.

Naomi barely had time to react.

She swerved hard around the corner, avoiding the crash by inches. Her wheels skidded but held. *The Bolt* soared past Bibi.

Naomi was in the lead.

For a heartbeat, she felt unstoppable. She glanced over her shoulder... the rest of the group were far behind, led by the boy with the shark helmet.

Then... *CRACK!*

Her front wheel slammed into a pothole hidden under a puddle. The sound echoed through her bones as the cart jerked sideways. She gripped the steering wheel, trying to hold steady.

Too late.

The Bolt tipped... skidded.... and landed in the mud.

The crowd gasped again. Naomi sat frozen in the wreckage, mud splattered across her goggles, water soaking her socks. A broken steering wheel held in her red, stinging hands.

Shark Boy zoomed past her, followed by the other racers.

Even Bibi, who had now recovered, whizzed by with a wide-eyed glance.

Naomi's chest tightened. Her dream of seeing her name on that shiny trophy had melted like an ice cube on a sunny day.

She sat with her head in her hands, wanting to cry.

Just walk away, a voice inside her whispered. *It's over.*

Then came another voice. One she knew by heart... Grandpa's. *Trying matters more than trophies.*

Naomi stood. Her legs were shaky. Her arms were sore. But she grabbed the side of her cart and started to push.

One step. Followed by another.

At first, there was silence.

Then someone clapped nearby. Others joined in.

Soon the whole crowd was cheering. Chanting her name.

"Naomi! Naomi! Naomi!"

Rain poured harder. Her socks squished. Her arms burned. But she didn't stop.

She slipped. Fell. Got up again.

Inch by inch, she pushed *The Bolt* toward the finish line.

Her classmates leaned over the ropes, cheering like she was the final leg of a relay race.

With one last shout, Naomi shoved her cart over the line and collapsed beside it, laughing and gasping.

The crowd gave the mightiest cheer of all.

Bibi came skipping over and hugged her tight. "Hey, great race! Naomi, you're *amazing*. You just didn't give up, did you?"

Naomi blinked. "But... you crashed. You could've won. Aren't you upset?"

Bibi shrugged. "No way. I made some mistakes... but I'll learn from them. And next year I'll come back faster. Mistakes are a great way to improve—that's what my Mom always says. The most important thing is to *never* give up. Just like you."

Naomi smiled through the mud on her cheeks.

Later, during the awards ceremony, Naomi didn't hear her name called for first (that went to Shark Boy). Or second. Or third.

But when the ceremony was over, Naomi's Grandpa came rushing over and wrapped her in a huge fluffy towel. "You were incredible, champ," he whispered. "You may not have won the trophy but, honestly, I could not be prouder."

Naomi looked back at the hill—muddy, brutal, unforgettable—and beamed.

She didn't need gold or glitter.

She had earned something better: the respect of everyone watching. And a pride in herself that no one could ever take away.

And who knows... maybe next year she'll come back even faster!



Mindset Message

Trying your best is always a win, even when things don't go to plan. Naomi didn't need a trophy to prove her strength. By choosing to keep going when everything went wrong, she showed the kind of courage that matters most: perseverance. In the long run, *that's* what leads to success.

Reflection Questions

1. Why was Naomi so excited about entering the race?

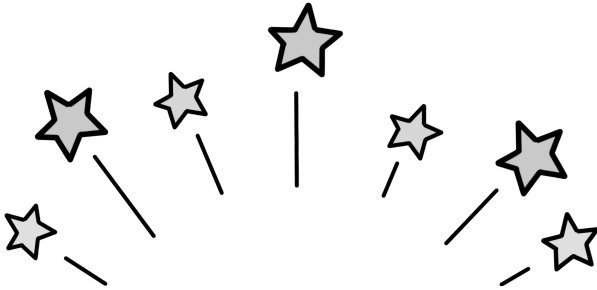
2. Have you ever worked really hard on something and it didn't go the way you expected? What did you learn?

3. What do you think will happen when Naomi enters the race next year?

4. Can you think of a time when someone impressed you... not because they won, but because they didn't give up?

Mini Challenge

Pick one thing that feels difficult today. Maybe it's finishing a tricky task, joining a new activity or sticking with something that didn't go right the first time. Instead of aiming to be the best at it, try to be the one who *keeps going*. Afterwards, ask yourself: **“What did I learn from trying?”**



6

THE SCARECROW'S SECRET WEAPON

(I CAN TRAIN MY BRAIN)



WILLOW SCRUNCHED THE BRIM of her floppy scarecrow hat and peeked out from behind the backstage curtain.

The gym was filled with kids (*big kids!*) from Grades 5 and 6, all watching the dress rehearsal for the third-grade production of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Her heart thumped. Her straw-covered sleeves itched. Her ears buzzed with the chatter of older children in the audience.

She took off her hat and fanned herself, before laying it on the props table and trying to flatten her wild hair.

"Why are you looking so scared?" said Sienna, who was playing Dorothy. Sienna *always* had the lead role. She was the queen of confidence. "You only have a few lines to remember," she added with a sigh. "I've got, like, a *million!*"

"There... there are so many people out there," said Willow. "Have you seen? I thought this was supposed to be a sort of... *practice.*"

"Time to go on, my darlings," announced their teacher, Miss Carter. "Break a leg, Sienna. And Willow, *sweetie...*" she smiled sympathetically, "just... try to remember as much as you can, okay?"

Willow took a deep breath and stumbled onto the stage, just ahead of Dorothy. Bright lights flooded her vision, blindingly hot against her face. She held up her hand to shield her eyes and took half a nervous step backwards, away from the audience.

Too late, Willow remembered she had forgotten her floppy scarecrow hat. She glanced helplessly towards her teacher in the wings, who had picked up the hat and was now shaking her head.

Then the Tin Man and the Lion and Dorothy were all staring at her and she realized it was her turn to speak.

Now, what was her first line? *Come on*, she thought, *surely I can remember my first line... I knew them yesterday... sort of...*

Instead, she blinked at the huge crowd of older children. They were smirking, whispering, waiting.

Her mouth went dry, like she'd eaten a handful of crackers. She searched her brain, but the words had... disappeared. Lost like a kite blown away by a storm.

A long, awkward silence filled the gym.

Sienna turned to her, eyes wide with annoyance. "*Willow*," she hissed, "*say your line!*"

"If I... if I only had... um..." Willow stammered, her voice shaking. But the words had completely vanished.

A few snickers rose from the audience and Willow's cheeks burned. Sienna stepped close enough to give her a sharp nudge and whispered, "*...had a brain.*"

Willow mumbled, "Had a brain," but the damage was done. She wobbled through the rest of the performance, like a rickety bicycle with a flat tire.

Backstage, Willow recovered her hat and pulled it over her face.

"Total disaster," she muttered.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” shouted Sienna, striding towards her and still carrying her basket. “You weren’t even *trying!*”

“I... I...” said Willow, “I couldn’t remember.”

“Well, you better *start* remembering,” said Sienna. “All my family are coming tomorrow. And you’re going to ruin this play for everyone.”

After school, Willow dragged her feet to the car.

“How was rehearsal?” her mom asked, passing back a juice box.

Willow slurped sadly. “I forgot everything. Right on stage. In front of the BIG KIDS. And Dorothy... I mean *Sienna*... got really annoyed with me. Mom, I can’t do it. Tomorrow’s the real show and I’m going to ruin it for the whole class. What’s wrong with me? Why am I so *stupid?*”

“That sounds tough,” Mom said gently. “But Willow... you’re not stupid. And you know what?”

Willow raised an eyebrow.

“Your brain is just like a muscle. We can train it. Make it stronger. Want to try something... a little different?”

Willow shrugged. “Do I have to lift weights with my head?”

Mom laughed. “Nope. Wait and see.”

That night, they sat on the living room floor with markers, sticky notes and a bag of rainbow jellybeans.

"Okay," said Mom, "let's make a mental muscle map. First we'll break your lines into color, shape, and motion."

They picked Willow's first line: "If I only had a brain..."

"What color does that line feel like?" Mom asked.

Willow thought. "Yellow. Because of the Yellow Brick Road."

"Perfect. And what shape?"

"A lightning bolt!"

"Love it. What motion?"

Willow stood and wiggled her arms like she was zapping her head.

"Excellent," said Mom, drawing the combo: *yellow lightning bolt + zapping arms*.

They repeated the process for every line—even the other characters. Dorothy offers to help? That became a blue heart with a hug. The Wizard speech? A green spiral with jazz hands.

By bedtime, Willow had mapped every line in the play to a color, shape, and silly movement.

And her brain? It felt like it had done 100 jumping jacks.

The next day, Willow practiced her mental muscle map at recess, in the car, and even while brushing her teeth.

"Line two?" Mom would ask.

"Red triangle, spin like a top," Willow would say.

And suddenly, the words would come.

The gym was noisy and packed for opening night. Rows of folding chairs were crammed with parents and the heat was unbearable.

Willow stood backstage, squirming in her stuffy costume. Her scarecrow hat flopped over one eye.

"Nervous?" said Sienna, adjusting her blue gingham dress.

Willow nodded. "Kinda."

Sienna winced. "Just *say* the words. Learning lines is easy."

Easy for you, Willow thought, feeling stupid again.

Miss Carter called, "Places!"

The curtain rose. Dorothy skipped onstage. Then came the twister... the Munchkins... Glinda... and finally... Willow's big moment: the Scarecrow.

She stepped forward. Her brain gave a tiny hiccup.

But then she saw it: a yellow lightning bolt in her mind.

She zapped her arms. "If I only had a brain!" she sang.

The words flowed. The rhythm returned. Her voice rang out clear and strong.

She danced, waved her arms and remembered every single line... thanks to her colorful, shape-filled map.

Even better? When Sienna, the super-confident Sienna, accidentally skipped a line in the middle of the scene, she froze like a statue.

Willow stepped in smoothly, gently prompting the next few words with a tiny whisper and a guiding arm.

Sienna blinked, smiled, and picked up the cue.

They kept going like nothing had happened.

When the play ended, the gym thundered with applause. Willow grinned... and bowed... and grinned some more. She suddenly caught sight of her parents in the audience and her Mom gave her a thumbs up. Willow felt so proud, she thought she'd never stop smiling.

Backstage, Miss Carter hugged her. "Willow, you were amazing out there. What was your secret?"

Willow grinned again. She wondered whether or not to tell her about the mental muscle map. In the end, she just shrugged.

Sienna ran over, her dark hair bouncing excitedly.

"You saved me out there," she whispered. "Thanks Willow. I owe you big time."

Willow smiled. "That's what friends, and scarecrows, are for!"

The next morning, Willow taped a yellow lightning bolt to her bedroom mirror.

Just in case, she thought, my brain ever needs a little extra training again.



Mindset Message

Your brain is like a muscle... the more you train it, the stronger it gets. Willow wasn't "bad at remembering." She just needed a fun and creative way to practice. And with a little effort, she turned stage fright into center-stage sparkle!



Reflection Questions

1. What did Sienna say to Willow after the dress rehearsal?
How did that make her feel?

2. Have you ever forgotten something important or messed up
in front of others? What kept you going?

3. What's one thing you want to get better at right now? How
could you "train your brain" like Willow did?

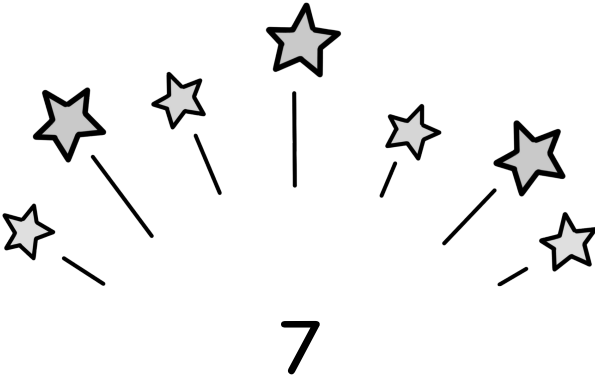
4. If you were helping a friend who felt nervous before a play or a test, what would you say to encourage them?

Mini Challenge

Pick one thing you'd like to remember better, like a poem, song, speech or even a joke! Now make your own mental muscle map:

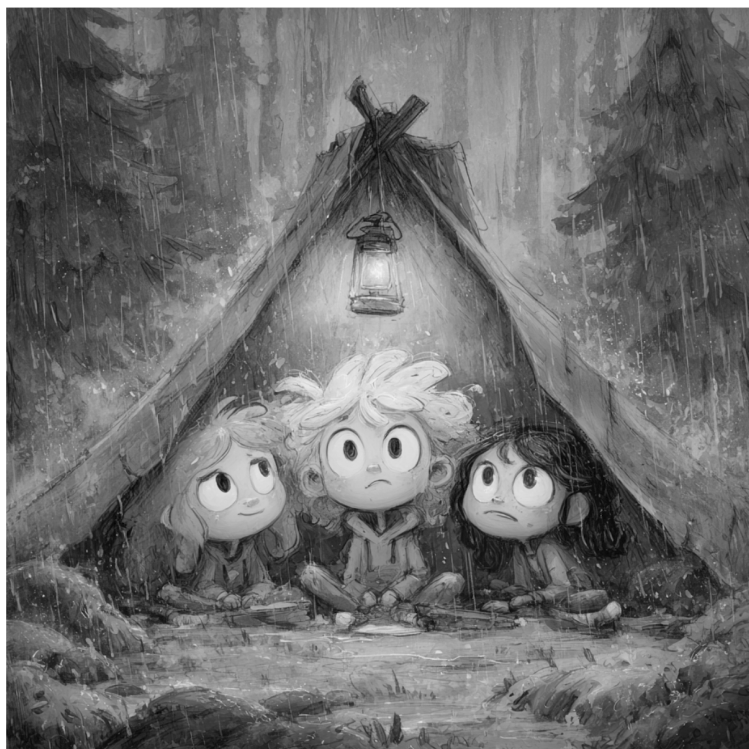
- 1: Choose a color.
- 2: Draw a shape.
- 3: Add a motion or silly move.

Practice it a few times today... then try to teach it to someone else tomorrow!



NINA GOES WILD

(I TRY NEW THINGS, EVEN IF
I'M NERVOUS)



NINA WAS NOT WHAT you'd call "the outdoorsy type."

She loved sparkly bedsheets, bubble baths, and her unicorn night-light. Her bedroom smelled like vanilla and her shoes were always lined up just right. And when it came to camping? Nina had one firm rule:

Absolutely. Not. Ever.

So when her best friend Cami bounced up to her after school and said, "Guess what! I'm going camping this weekend with my parents... want to come?"

Nina's answer was instant: "NOPE."

Cami blinked. "Wait, really? There'll be s'mores. And a million stars! And my cousin says there's a secret waterfall if we hike far enough."

"Cami, there are *bugs* in the forest. And *dirt*. And no bathrooms!" Nina shuddered. "You've seen my bedroom. I'm not made for camping."

Cami sighed. "Okay. I'll ask Valentina instead."

Nina froze. Valentina? Their mutual friend who climbed trees like a ninja and never got scared? Valentina who once caught a frog with her bare hands? She was great... but also kind of fearless. *Too* fearless.

Nina tried to forget about it that evening. But she kept picturing Valentina and Cami sitting by a fire, laughing and bonding over toasted marshmallows. Without her.

That night, she paced around her perfectly clean room and finally burst into her big sister's bedroom. "Angel, help!"

Angel looked up from painting her toenails sky blue. "What's up, glitterbug?"

Nina flopped onto the bed: "Cami invited me camping and I said no because I'm way too scared about stuff like that and now she's going with Valentina but I kind of *do* want to go but it's probably too late and I'm going to be left out *forever!*"

Angel couldn't help laughing. "Whoa. That's a lot of drama for one breath."

"Should I call her?" Nina whispered.

"I think you already know the answer," she said, smiling kindly.

"But Angel," sighed Nina. "It's *camping!* There'll be wiggly things... and biting things... and *mud!*"

"Trust me," said her big sister, "sometimes you have to step out of your comfort zone. These opportunities don't come around every day, right?"

Nina rolled over and scrunched up her face, unconvinced.

"Bravery's like a muscle," added her sister, putting a lid back on the tiny jar of nail polish. "The more you use it, the braver you get. That's how we grow." And she handed her a phone.

The next morning, Nina was in the back seat of Cami's car, squashed in the middle of her two friends, and clutching her pink sleeping bag like a life raft.

"We're so glad you changed your mind!" Cami grinned.

Valentina squeezed her knee. "We'll make a camper out of you yet."

Nina tried to smile, but her stomach felt like it was full of wiggly worms.

By the time they reached the forest campsite, things went downhill fast.

First, Nina found a caterpillar in her new walking boots. Then she stepped in a mud puddle the exact color of chocolate sauce. And when they tried to put up the tent, it collapsed on her. Twice.

"I think it's upside down," Cami giggled.

"How can a *tent* be upside down?!" Nina wailed.

But the worst part came after lunch.

The sky darkened. A rumble of thunder growled in the distance.

"Maybe it'll pass over," Valentina said.

It did not.

Rain poured down like someone had dumped a swimming pool from the sky. Nina sat curled inside the tent (which now smelled like wet socks) and tried not to cry. Her hair was frizzy. Her hoodie was damp. And there were actual worms outside. Wiggling. Everywhere.

"This is the worst day of my entire life," she whispered.

But then, just when Nina had decided to text her mom to come pick her up, the clouds parted.

Sunlight streamed through the treetops like melted gold. The forest shimmered. Steam rose from the mossy ground. It smelled like pine and earth and adventure.

"Wanna go see the waterfall?" Valentina asked, her eyes gleaming.

Nina hesitated.

Cami offered her a hand. "It's muddy. And slippery. And a little bit scary."

"But totally worth it," Valentina added.

Nina took a deep breath. Her shoes were already filthy. Her hair was a mess. What more could go wrong?

"Let's do it."

The hike was a muddy, squishy, giggly mess. Nina slid down a hill on her bottom. Valentina climbed over a fallen log and helped them across. They spotted a deer. A real one!

And then they heard it.

The sound of rushing water.

They pushed through a curtain of ferns... and there it was. A waterfall tumbling down mossy rocks into a crystal-clear pool. The sun hit the mist just right, creating a tiny rainbow.

"Whoa," Nina whispered. "It's like a secret world."

They kicked off their shoes and dipped their toes into the cold water. They laughed and shouted and pretended to be forest queens.

By the time they made it back to Cami's parents at the campsite, they were soaked in sweat, dirt, and joy.

That night, wrapped in dry clothes and fuzzy blankets, they roasted marshmallows over the campfire.

Cami told a ghost story so spooky Nina screamed and dropped her first marshmallow in the dirt. Valentina invented a funny one about a haunted outhouse. And Nina? She made one up about a glittery fairy who lured campers into dance parties under the moon.

When the fire dimmed, they lay back and stared up at the stars.

"Did you hear that?" Nina whispered.

A rustle. A hoot. A distant animal noise.

"Probably a raccoon," Valentina said.

"Or a Yeti," Cami whispered with a grin.

Nina pulled the blanket tighter. Her heart thumped.

But she didn't ask to go home.

Later, they passed around their secret stash of midnight snacks (gummy worms, popcorn and chocolate chips) and fell asleep in a heap of tangled hair and giggles.

The next morning, Nina was the first to wake up.

She peeked outside the tent and saw the golden sunlight streaming through the trees again. A bluebird flitted past. She stretched and smiled.

Her socks were damp. Her hair was wild. And she had dirt under her fingernails.

But she felt good. Brave. A little wild.

When her mom picked her up later that morning, she climbed into the car still smelling like smoke, and rain, and adventure.

"How was it?" her mom asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nina grinned. "It was *horrible*. It was *amazing*. I might even go again next year."

Her mom laughed. "You survived nature. I'm proud."

Nina looked out the window as the trees zoomed by.

She liked her sparkly bed. She still wasn't a fan of bugs. But now she knew: *Sometimes, the best stuff happens outside your comfort zone.*

Even in the mud.



Mindset Message

It's okay to feel nervous about the thought of trying something new... courage means doing it anyway! Nina didn't think she belonged in the wild, but by stepping outside her comfort zone, she found adventure, laughter, and a brand new side of herself. Growth doesn't always look neat and tidy... sometimes, it's muddy!



Reflection Questions

1. What changed Nina's mind about camping by the end of the story?

2. What's something you were nervous to try, but you did it anyway? How did it go?

3. Have you ever felt left out because you said "no" to something? What might you do differently next time?

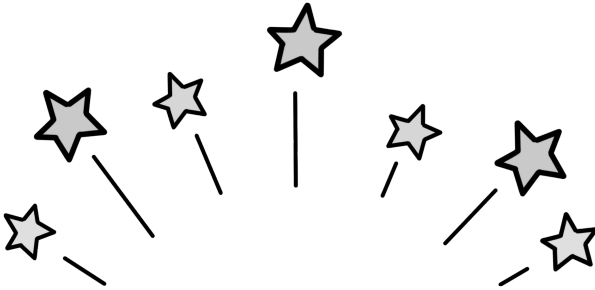
4. What's one "wild" (or just slightly uncomfortable) thing you might want to try in the next week?

Mini Challenge

Think of one small thing that's *outside your comfort zone*... like trying a new food, learning a new skill, or joining a different activity at recess. Now:

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Say "yes" to it once.
3. Then give it a go, even if it feels awkward!

You don't have to love it, but you do get braver every time you try.



8

**MADAME
DAUMIER'S
SECRET SMILE**

(I LEARN FROM FEEDBACK,
NOT JUST PRAISE)



MAYA DIPPED HER BRUSH into the swirl of blue paint and paused.

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at her canvas. She was trying something *big* for her art project. Something magical. Inspired by a painting they had studied in class (Van Gogh's *Starry Night*), she was creating her own version: *Maya's Twirly Sky*.

For thirty whole minutes, she didn't speak, didn't move. She hardly even blinked. The stars in her painting whirled like cinnamon rolls. The moon glowed like a gigantic lemon drop. By the time she put the brush down, her heart was doing cartwheels.

"It's perfect," she whispered. "The best picture I've *ever* painted!"

She jumped up and ran to find her big brother, who was playing video games in his room.

"Tommy! Tommy! What's your favorite part?"

Tommy squinted. "Uhhh... the swirly bit. It looks like a hurricane made of glitter."

Maya beamed. "Yes! That's the wind!"

Next she carried her painting into the garden to find Mom, who was kneeling beside a flower bed, pulling up weeds. "It's like the sky is dancing," she said, taking off her gardening gloves. "I love it!"

Dad, she eventually discovered in the basement, fixing his bicycle. "I think even Vincent Van Gogh would be proud," he said, pulling her into a hug. "That moon is... almost big enough to walk on!"

Even Herbert the hamster got a peek.

“What do *you* think, Herbert?” Maya held the picture up to his cage. “Isn’t it the best picture *ever*?”

Herbert blinked twice and nibbled on a sunflower seed.

“I’ll take that as a *yes*,” Maya giggled.

The next day, she held her picture carefully as she walked into class. Madame Daumier, their super strict classroom teacher, stood by the board, wearing her usual dark gray dress and grumpy face. Everyone said she was an artist in France before she got married and moved to America. Above her desk was a beautiful painting of a famous cathedral in Paris, with the signature *S. Daumier* scratched in the corner.

Maya’s teacher had never once said a kind word about her artwork... not even the amazing pink giraffe she had drawn after their trip to the zoo.

But *this* one? This would be different. She just *knew* it.

Maya placed her masterpiece on Madame Daumier’s desk and sat tall in the front row, her heart doing a happy drumbeat.

All morning she wondered what she would praise first. Would it be the swirly patterns? Or the gorgeous blues and yellows and whites? Or the gigantic moon that took up a quarter of the canvas?

It was a Monday, which meant that after lunch, it was finally time for art. Madame Daumier began holding up pieces of work in front of the class and listing what the children could do to improve them. Kwame had mixed too many colors together for his night sky, turning it into a brown mush. Amara needed to slow down and make sure she covered the whole canvas. And Ricky's effort was... well... Ricky's usual effort.

When Madame Daumier finally picked up her painting, Maya sat up straight in her chair and beamed at her teacher.

But Madame Daumier did not clap. She did not smile. Instead, she quietly squinted through her glasses at the canvas, before turning it over to check the name.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "Maya. The brushwork is energetic, but the composition is *far* too crowded. I mean, goodness... *look* at the size of your moon! Tell me girl, have you ever seen a moon so big?"

Maya's face dropped. She shook her head, feeling her skin burn with shame.

"Please, *please*... tonight you must look out of your bedroom window and *observe reality*." She waved an arm at the classroom window, which overlooked the parking lot. "Pretend you are Vincent Van Gogh. Let true nature inspire you. Agreed?"

Maya nodded, fighting back the tears. Even Ricky had not received such a telling off.

“A smaller moon will create space on the page. Provide *balance*. This is important, yes? To help the stars and the swirls *breathe*.” She passed the canvas to Maya. “Now let’s see... who is next?”

So that was it. No ‘Star of the Day’. No gold sticker. Just a list of things to fix.

All the way home, she vented to her mom about Madame Daumier, before stomping into her room and trying to rip the canvas in two. But the frame was too strong. Instead, she settled for dumping it in the little trash can beside the hamster cage.

“Herbert, I am *never* painting again!” she cried, slamming her fists into her pillow again and again. Her little friend paused, alarmed, before taking cover beneath the shredded tissue it used for bedding.

Slowly, the bedroom door creaked open. Her father’s concerned face emerged from the hallway.

Dad didn’t say anything at first. Instead he gently removed the painting from the trash and sat down next to her.

“You know,” he said, “Mom told me about Madame Daumier. What she said to you.”

“What, that I’m a terrible painter?” Maya sniffled, staring at the floor.

“No. That she *knows* you’re good. Good enough to do even better. She didn’t ignore it. She gave you real advice.”

Maya frowned. “But... I *loved* that painting.”

“I know. And you can love something and still make it better,” Dad said. “Praise feels nice at the time, but it’s the detailed feedback that helps us get better. Don’t you think?”

Maya did not reply.

“What if you tried again this weekend?” he said. “No pressure. Just... see what happens.”

“No, I can’t,” she said, folding her arms. “I’m not allowed to.”

“Why?” he frowned.

“Because... I promised Herbert. Dad, I’m *not* a good painter, so please don’t make me paint *ever* again.” Maya turned away, refusing to look at her father until she heard his footsteps leaving the room.

But on Saturday night, something strange happened. Maya was sitting by her bedroom window, still feeling grumpy, when she looked up and noticed... a full moon. It was beautiful,

hanging there amongst the stars. But of course, it only took up a small part of the night sky. Suddenly, she remembered Madame Daumier's advice.

A smaller moon will create space on the page... help the stars and the swirls breathe...

And that's when she pulled out her brushes.

"Sorry Herbert," she said. "I can't play with you tonight. I've got some major painting to do."

She looked carefully out of the window before beginning her second starry sky. And it was... *okay*. But only okay. So she started another. And *that* one really was better. The stars popped brighter and the swirls were less crowded.

By the third try, her arms were tired. Her old painting shirt was speckled with blue dots. She had even added a sleepy village at the bottom like Van Gogh's. And her smile was small, but proud.

"I think I'm done," she told Dad, handing it over, just before bedtime.

His eyes widened. "Maya... this is incredible! You worked *so* hard."

On Monday, Maya didn't say anything. She tiptoed to the front of the classroom before the bell rang and quietly slid the painting onto Madame Daumier's desk.

Then she took her seat and waited.

Madame Daumier walked in after the rest of the class, picked up the painting, and stared at it for a long time. She turned it over. She frowned... no name.

“Whose is this?” she asked the class.

Everyone shrugged.

Maya scratched her nose, but said nothing. *What if she didn't like it?*

“It must belong to one of the older students,” murmured her teacher. Then she spotted Maya’s yellow initials in the corner.

“Maya?”

Maya raised her hand slowly. “It’s mine,” she said, almost in a whisper.

Madame Daumier blinked. “Yours?”

Maya nodded.

For the first time ever, Madame Daumier smiled. The class fell silent. Children turned to each other, wide-eyed in disbelief.

Look, they whispered, Madame Daumier is smiling... she's actually smiling!

Madame Daumier stood up, held the painting high and said, "This... is excellent work. Truly thoughtful. You have improved so much. And in such a short time."

Maya's cheeks turned pink.

"I'm putting it up right here," Madame Daumier said, taking down her own painting of a French cathedral and replacing it with Maya's effort.

"And you, Maya," she added, "are to become our *Star of the Day*. No, make that... *Star of the Week!*"

The whole class clapped excitedly. They had never witnessed such praise from their teacher! Maya grinned. And somewhere in her mind, the stars in her painting swirled with joy.



Mindset Message

Detailed feedback and criticism don't mean you've failed... they mean you're learning. Even when something doesn't go the way you hoped, you can still grow stronger, smarter, and more creative by listening to feedback, trying again, and believing in yourself. Just like Maya, you don't have to get it perfect the first time to make something amazing.



Reflection Questions

1. What did Maya do with her painting after Madame Daumier gave her feedback? Why?

2. What did Maya's father say to her, to try and persuade her to try again?

3. Have you ever worked hard on something and felt disappointed by someone's response? What did you do next?

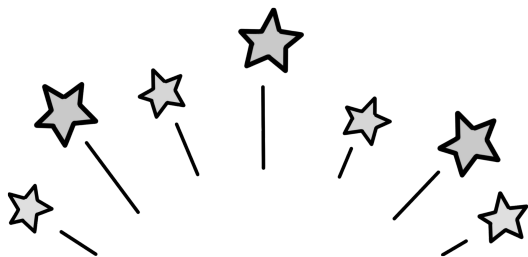
4. What can Maya's story teach us about trying again, even when we feel like giving up?

Mini Challenge

Choose something creative to make this week: a drawing, a poem, a Lego creation or even a short story.

1. Make your first version.
2. Show it to someone you trust and ask, "*What's one thing I could do to make this even better?*"
3. Create a second version, using your feedback.

Now ask yourself: What has improved?



Congratulations, Fearless Learner,

You made it! Eight stories, eight brave girls... and now it's your turn. Flip back for a moment. Which heroine inspired you the most? Was it Sahana conquering the climbing wall, Nina exploring the wild, or Willow braving the stage?

And don't forget the Mini Challenges. Circle one you haven't tried and tackle it this week. Your future self will thank you for it.

When the "Maybe I can't..." voice pops up, answer with our magic word: **yet**. Then fill the blank page that follows with the first line of your next adventure. Big or small, every journey starts with a single step... and I'll be rooting for you, all the way.



P.S. For the grown ups...

If your young reader enjoyed this book, I'd be so grateful if you left a quick review. It really helps! Just scan the QR code below.

Thank you for reading!

Toby S.

