

Ripples of Light

--Mia--

Mrs. Rivera nods at me as I walk in, giving me a smile only a teacher could manage this early in the morning. *Ugh*. I used to love art class, but lately, I haven't really loved anything.

I plop my stuff down and set my crocheted Positive Potato in the corner of my desk. It helps to think that *something* cares about me. I slide into my seat next to Noah as our teacher begins her lesson. He gives me a tired smile, and then buries his head in his arms.

Mrs. Rivera asks a question I don't process. When no one answers, she scans the room for volunteers. Unfortunately, her eyes land on Noah. She crosses the room in 3 quick strides and smacks his desk. "NOAH!"

He jerks up, and presses the heels of his hands to his eyes. Our whole class giggles. Except me.

"First you cut my class, now you're *sleeping*?" she huffs.

When she turns away, I give him a pitying glance. "I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing you can do 'bout it," he mutters.

That's when I realize there *is* something I can do. I shield my canvas from Noah and start painting.

--Noah--

I grab my stuff and hurry out of art class. I'd hoped to lay low and not cause trouble today, but that hope continues to be crushed.

"Noah, *try harder*. Your grades are suffering..." my algebra teacher chastises. I had to drive my mom to chemotherapy that week, so studying wasn't a top priority.

"Sorry..."

Later, my physics teacher asks for my homework.

"I didn't get to it," I say quietly. I wasn't exactly thinking about my physics homework while I was holding my little sister as she sobbed, violently gasping for air. Her nightmares intensify every night.

"Noah, get yourself together! You can't just..." I tune her out, staring at the floor. Nobody understands.

When I get to English, I'm ready to snap. Then I find something unexpected on my desk. I inhale sharply, taking in the canvas, my eyes burning with hot, happy tears. Lightning and raindrops streak through the night sky. Two trees stand side by side—one fragile, its branches thin. A stronger tree leans close, supporting it gently. Above them, a promise, in golden script: YOU ARE NOT ALONE

When I get home from my night shift, I run straight into my room and hang the painting above my bed. I glance in the mirror and see my little sister watching from the doorway. Before I can turn around, I hear her feet patter away down the hall.

"Hey, Harper," I call, "come here."

I hear her pause and scuttle back. She tilts her head at me, her blond hair spilling over her shoulder. Then she rushes in and wraps her tiny arms tight around my waist. I pull her fragile body into my arms, supporting her like the trees in the storm.

That night, she doesn't have a single nightmare.

--Harper--

I can't stop thinking about Noah's new painting. I hear him humming as he does the dishes, and I catch him staring at it before school. It made me want to make someone else as happy as it has made Noah.

At school, I'm counting the minutes until I can go home. After class, Mr. Robinson calls me over.

"Harper, are you alright?" he asks kindly, his voice thick with worry, like honey on a biscuit.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I mutter, noticing a sadness behind his eyes, reflecting my own.

"Life can be hard sometimes, but remember, *you are not alone.*"

His words shoot through me like the lightning in the painting, and a small "thank you" is all I can manage.

Mr. Robinson's kindness and the message in Noah's painting merge in my mind. I realize that just a few words can make a difference. I decide to share my words, too.

--Mr. Robinson--

I mark up the last test and add it to my messy pile. *At the end of this year, I'm quitting.* I think gloomily. *I just can't do this anymore. I'm not helping anyone. I'm not changing lives the way I imagined I would.*

I'm about to shut my laptop when I see something appear in my Inbox.

To: Jamal Robinson

From: Harper Lily

dear Mr Robinson,

i want to say i apesheate you! your such a great teacher and helped me so much this year! when i saw that you cared today, it made me so happy, so thanks. :)

love, Harper

P.S. can you help with my art project? i know u used to be a art teacher! its called a mural but idk how to do it exacly...

I press a hand against my heart, a bright smile spreading across my face like a rainbow on the horizon. I was wrong. There's no way I can quit.

I make a few calls and find just the high schooler to help with Harper's project. A week later, she walks in holding a Positive Potato.

--Mia--
2 weeks later

I crane my neck, admiring the mural we'd worked so hard to create. It's painted right at the entrance of the elementary school, designed to greet each student as they enter the building. Vibrant paint covers the faded brick wall in thousands of unique strokes. Figures line the wall, each painted by a different student. They are hand in hand, individually lit with a soft glow. Above them, a rising sun shimmers with gentle strokes. Each figure is separate, but united by the reassuring light.

I see Noah standing on a ladder, a paint palette balanced in his hand. He dips a brush into shimmering gold paint, and begins to write in a large, loopy font over the sun. He meets my gaze and gives me a full and joyful smile.

I tilt my head to see the words he's painted above the sun:

YOU ARE NOT ALONE