

CHAPTER 9: WHY CIRCLES

Breakfast doesn't go down. I move the scrambled eggs around on the plate and stack the square cut potatoes in a tower and knock it down again with my fork. Mom gives me the five-minute warning. I am now taking meds. Meds is Mom's word as in: *These meds should help you focus and feel better*. The little blue pill I swallow leaves a bitter taste on my tongue. I try to wash it away with milk but that tastes worse. I scrape my food into the trash and use the dish towel to scrub the bitter spot from my tongue.

For the first day at the new school, I have a new backpack (black), a lunchbox that has three zippered compartments on the outside and a carabiner attaching it to my backpack. A water bottle with a sport top (BPA free, whatever that means, but Mom thought it was important). New sneakers (with double-knotted laces; I detest hook and loop fasteners). Socks with no seams (also black) and a royal blue shirt with breast pocket and black athletic shorts with pockets, both with no tags. My backpack is heavy with three-ring binders, loose-leaf college ruled paper, mechanical pencils with 7mm lead and a plain white eraser with a zombie face on it that I drew with ballpoint pen. Also, the Rubik's Cube, which I have not yet solved.

When we get to school I want to throw up. I let my hair fall over my eyes as I get out of the car and sling the pack over my shoulder. Tully is holding open the door to the school and greeting everyone as they walk in.

"Good morning, Jeremy!" I hear when I walk through the door. "Everyone to the MPR, that's the multi-purpose room."

I follow the crowd since I have no idea where the MPR is. It turns out to be the cafeteria. I stand in a line to get a first day packet at a table staffed by two upper grade students. Inside the MPR, kids are sitting at tables talking with each other. A few are playing board games. Some are outside jumping on the trampoline or playing tether ball or just standing around talking. Whatever I thought was different about Equator School is lost now. I take a seat in the very back as close to the exit door as I can get but still have full view of the

room. I close the curtain of hair over my eyes. I wish I could remember where the bathroom is in case I need to throw up.

My fingers find the jagged rock in my pocket but today it doesn't help at all. Not even the bottle cap feels right. I open the large white envelope that has my name printed on it and take out a name tag. It says my name, Grade 7, and a symbol "Ru" on it with the number 44. I search my head for the name of the element RU but I can't find it. Then I hear a voice I know. It comes from behind me.

"Hi, Jeremy," says the voice. I turn my head and move my hair to see Miss Emily standing there.

"Hi Dr. Nugent!" A girl, holding a little boy's hand, calls out.

"Good Morning, Bree, welcome back. And good morning to you, Jeremy," Miss Emily says to the little boy.

The girl looks at me and says, "Hey, a new kid."

There's something in her voice that makes me sit up straight. Possibly in surprise. She's tall, almost as tall as Miss Emily, who isn't very tall but still, it's weird to see Miss Emily in a room of kids who aren't all three feet tall. I nod at the girl, who studies me with that look Mom gets when she is about to tell me to do something I don't want to do. Then she walks away.

"Hi, Dr. Nugent," I force out of my mouth. It is hard to call her that.

"Why don't you come closer to the front, so you can hear the presentation," she says. "I'll introduce you to some kids I know."

It's hard to say no to her. I pick up my backpack and the first day packet, even though I don't want to sit closer to the front. I follow Dr. Nugent to a table near the front of the room where several boys are playing a game with dice.

“Good morning,” she says to the boys. All three of them look up and smile at her and say hello. “This is Jeremy. Jeremy this is Ben, David and Trace. You are all in Ruthenium element. Can you boys make sure Jeremy finds his way today?”

“Sure,” they answer. I notice how everyone snaps to attention when she talks.

“Have a great first day,” she says and walks to the platform at the front of the room, where Tully is testing out a microphone.

“All right, settle in and let’s get rolling,” Tully says into the mic. He says “settle in” and not “settle down” or “be still.”

I notice what’s on the tables. Fuzzy pipe cleaners in the school colors, purple and white, heaped on the tables like pick-up sticks. No one has touched them yet. The other kids know a secret about the pipe cleaners that I don’t know. Tully introduces the people on the platform and when he does, the kid named Trace reaches over and picks up a purple and a white and twists them into a moustache shape. He holds it to his face and winks. Ben and David laugh.

Tully introduces Dr. Emily Nugent, the school psychologist and three others on the platform. I forget their names as soon as I hear them. Now Trace makes something that looks like a gear. Then I notice that a few other kids have picked up pipe cleaners and are making things out of them. My own hands are in my pockets when Ben leans over.

“You want some?” He offers me a couple of the pipe cleaners.

“What are they for?” I ask.

“Fidgets,” he says. I take the pipe cleaners and hold them in my lap.

Tully is calling out the names of elements on the periodic table and as he does kids raise their hands if they are part of that group. Other element names like Argon, Copper and Oxygen are called out.

A few seats away I see Bree sitting next to the other Jeremy. She doesn't touch the pipe cleaners in front of her. Instead her hands are folded and her eyes are looking straight down the table -- at me. I look away and hide behind my hair. She also raises her hand when Ruthenium is called.

The room never goes silent when Tully talks. Instead there is a low murmur and the swishy sound of hands moving around on the table tops. But he doesn't rap on the podium or scold anyone. He asks a question.

"If you are returning to Equator School, please stand up."

Two-thirds of the room stands up, including Trace, Ben, David and Bree.

"Welcome back!" He says enthusiastically. "Those of you still seated, meet your trail guides. You'll find that things work a little differently at Equator School than wherever you came from. Every student standing is expected to help you find your way, so look to them for assistance. Their name tags are marked with a purple star so you can recognize them."

Trace, Ben and David all have purple stars. Bree has a purple star.

"There is a science to the way we place you in these groups, so no switching. Your class schedule is in your white packet along with your locker number and combination."

"Also in your packet is a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. Please take those out now," Tully instructs. "Write your name on the top and then draw a circle the approximate circumference of a soda bottle." On a white board, he draws a circle.

"Inside the circle, please write the answer to this question," he says while writing it on the white board in black marker.

"Why are you here?"

Miss Emily's question. Does everyone have to answer it before they can come here? The purple stars are writing already. They know a secret the new kids don't. Trace is done in about one minute. Ben and David finish and resume their dice game. I leave my circle blank. No way am I putting it down on paper so everyone can see. I don't want to read it out loud if I get called on.

Tully says, "If you wrote an answer to the question, raise your hand."

Mostly only purple stars raise their hands.

"Those of you who left it blank did it for one of two reasons. Either you aren't sure, or you don't want anyone else to know. Now, I'm going to tell you why I am here."

Tully writes one word in his circle on the white board.

Truth.

"Truth. What is truth? It's the real thing. It's the real you, the real me, the secrets we keep from everyone about what goes on inside our heads."

"At this school, you are not the weird kid. You are not left behind, pushed away, or punished for being unable to sit in a chair. At this school, you will discover your gifts. You will discover your purpose. There are no handicaps. There are no consequences for being different."

When Tully says the words "consequences" he puts finger quotes in the air. Some kids laugh.

"Truth," Tully says. "I am here to help you discover your own truth. The truth that you will eventually write down inside that empty circle."

"I promise you, every one of you, that before the end of your first year at Equator, you'll know exactly why you are here. The real why, not the why that makes you confused or ashamed."

The purple stars applaud. Except for Bree. She just sits there, looking sideways at me.

CHAPTER 10: SUPERPOWERS

When Tully dismisses us to go to our first classroom of the day, everyone passes their papers, face down, to the end of the table where Dr. Nugent picks them up. I don't. I fold up the paper with the empty circle and stuff it in my backpack. Some kids are more dramatic. They crumple it up and throw it on the floor or in the trash. One girl has folded hers into a triangle and flicks it across the table. Some didn't even draw the circle on the paper. But all the purple stars drew circles. Ben pulled out a compass from his backpack to draw a perfect circle. Compared to Ben's circle, mine was a flop. Egg-shaped and uneven.

I don't know what else to do so I follow Trace, Ben and David out of the MPR and into the hallway. They have a swagger, like kids do when they know each other, and they aren't they new kid anymore.

"Flying," says Trace.

"Rock-crushing," Ben says.

"That's two words," responds David.

"It's hyphenated," Ben argues. They discuss if hyphenated words are one word or two and do not agree. Then Trace turns around and points at me.

"What's your superpower? One word. Go."

I don't know why but it is the first thing that comes to mind.

"Falling?"

Trace smiles. Ben and David laugh. I'm sure they are laughing because it's a stupid answer.

Then David says, "Vomiting," and they all practically collapse on the floor with laughter.

In every class, there is something on the desk when we get there, not just a textbook. In Chemistry, we are given our own white boards and dry-erase markers. In Language, there are granola bars and grapes. In History, with Mr. Anderson who speaks with an Australian accent and wears a battered leather outback hat, there are rocks on the table.

“See, rock-crushing!” Ben declares, triumphant.

“What does a rock have to do with history?” Mr. Anderson’s voice booms over the class and the sound of rocks clunking on the desktops. “To answer that question, let’s talk about the properties of rocks. Trace,” he levels a pen at Trace like a magic wand.

“Three properties of rock. Go.”

Trace doesn’t hesitate. He turns the rock in his hand and talks as he looks it over.

“Gray in color, hard to break,” he pauses and then says a third. “Smooth.”

“Yes!” Mr. Anderson explodes. He points the pen at another kid who has been chipping at his rock with his mechanical pencil. “Brittle,” the kid says as a piece of it flakes off. “Layered. Black.”

“Extraordinary!” He points then pen again and says, “Bree, three properties of the rock in your hand.”

Bree doesn’t answer right away. She waits until everyone is turned around to look at the her. She takes her time. She turns the rock over and holds it in the palm of her hand, peering at it.

“Well, it’s not breathing, so it must be dead. Also, it doesn’t speak, so it’s dumb. And,” she licks the rock, “it’s salty.”

Mr. Anderson puts his pen to temple and says, “Delightful.”

Bree lets the rock fall from her hand and it clatters loudly on the table. Mr. Anderson doesn’t even jump.

He says, “This is History class. Those are rocks. How is history like rocks?” He picks up Trace’s rock and holds it up.

“It’s all of those things you said, and more. It different for every one of us, yet it is always there. It creates the solid surface that we stand on, influencing our every decision, even when we don’t know it.”

Except when it melts into lava and your own history drags you down and burns you alive, I think, trying not to notice that Bree is staring like she wants to throw her rock at me.

After History, I follow Trace, Ben and David out to the hallway. Ben and David go in separate directions. Trace points down a hall.

“I gotta take care of something. Your next class is down that way on the left.”

My schedule lists “Room 3.14.” The hallway is emptying fast and Room 3.14 sounds like a joke. It must be a mistake, but Trace is already gone so I can’t ask him. I am not going to ask someone else. I busy myself studying the inside of my locker and when I look up again, I am alone in the hall.

Panic floods my brain. Now I’ll be walking in with everyone staring at me. I suspect I am going to throw up so I shove my pack in my locker and head into the nearby bathroom. I hunch down in a stall, my arms wrapped around my knees, waiting for the nausea to pass. I take out the Rubik’s Cube. My hands are busy. My mind relaxes.

I don’t know how long I am like this when a pair of shoes appears outside the stall and a girl’s voice says, “Hey, new kid. You’re in the wrong place.”

CHAPTER 11: ROOM 3.14

Bree stomps around the boys' bathroom muttering and kicking the paper towels on the floor.

"Boys. Are. Pigs."

I consider staying put in the stall but she bangs on the door.

"Let's move it cube-head, it stinks in here."

I see her face peering through the open space between the door and frame. I shove the Rubik's Cube in my pack and stand up.

"How in the world did you confuse the boys' bathroom with Room 3.14?" She muses as I follow her down the hallway the wraps around the building. We come to a double door that she throws open with a flourish.

"I found one!"

I freeze, flooded with that hot, sick feeling in my gut. Bree strides through the door like a queen entering her castle. I take a small step back, ready to retreat to the boys' bathroom again. But this is not a classroom. There are no desks and chairs. It's a gymnasium but not like any gym I've ever seen before. Tully didn't show Room 3.14 on the tour.

It's a small city inside. Geometric shapes – pyramids and rectangles, with a circuit board of bars connecting everything together. A wall of cement snakes through the center creating a maze and stopping at a huge pit full of blue foam blocks the size of shoe boxes.

Bree breaks into a run towards the other side of the gym and leaps at the wall that connects the pit of foam blocks on one side to the gym wall. Her fingers grasp the top edge and her feet curl up under her

knees and she hangs there for a millisecond. She pushes herself up the wall and then over. She spins around and sits, dangling her legs.

“That,” says Tully from across the gym, “is called a cat-hang. That is just one way you can enter Room 3.14. But for today, you may walk.”

I wonder for a minute if this is some crazy circus performer class. Kids are sitting atop a balance beam like birds on a wire, others sitting on the blue floor. Trace is on the opposite side of the gym from Bree, on top of a pyramid with a flat top, like a huge triangle-shaped cake with the tip sliced off.

“Grab a spot, anywhere you like, Jeremy,” Tully says.

I step up onto a padded blue surface that is raised up off the floor. Tully explains that the platform is spring-loaded. The whole floor rests on springs that absorb shock. This is definitely circus class.

“Welcome everyone to Room 3.14. This is your most important class of the day. This is Parkour.”
Tully writes PARKOUR on a white board.

“For you literal types, the French word *Parkour* literally means, *the way through*. What we call Parkour is the sport of moving from one point to another with speed and efficiency, using the natural abilities of the human body.”

While Tully is talking, Bree and Trace are in motion. Or, more accurately, in flight. Their feet touch down for barely a second and they’re in the air again, moving from building to bar to wall like jumping frogs.

“Parkour movements help overcome obstacles, such as those you see on the course that Bree and Trace are demonstrating.”

“Parkour is where you will make connections, overcome obstacles and see the way through difficult tasks. You’ll mark your study of Parkour as a beginning,” Tully says.

Beginning of what? I wonder.

“Give us another run through, please,” Tully calls to Bree and Trace.

Trace goes first, running across the platform floor toward one of the cushions that is four feet high and looks like a huge blue vinyl mattress. At the edge of the cushion is a small trampoline tilted at a slight angle. On the wall behind the cushion are horizontal bars, like a wide ladder. Trace runs across the floor, leaps and touches the edge of trampoline which barely quivers, flips forward heels over head onto the mattress where he lands on his feet. He jumps onto the ladder, climbing to the very top rung. He spins in the air; does another flip forward and lands on his feet.

A girl sitting next to me mumbles under her breath, “I am not doing that.”

I recognize her from the MPR as the girl that had folded her paper into a triangle football and launched it across the table.

“Hot lava!” shouts Tully. “The floor is hot lava. Your goal is to stay off the floor, move across it without burning your toes. Let’s go, first up.”

The girl next to me crosses her arms defiantly. A boy pushes himself off the beam and walks to the mark on the floor where Bree and Trace launched.

“Hot Lava,” Tully repeats. “Go!” The boy takes off but doesn’t leave enough room to get a solid landing on the trampoline so he stops just short of it, jumps on it, does a clumsy roll onto the mat, then struggles to push himself up again. He takes two steps across the mattress, grasps the bars and climbs up three rungs. He hesitates before letting go and when he falls, his arms splay out to the sides.

Tully yells, “Next up!” and motions to the kid on the other end of the beam to go.

“Hot lava! Feet off the ground,” Tully reminds us. I watch every kid hit the trampoline and misjudge the distance needed to get a boost out of it. Doesn’t anyone here know how energy works? When the girl

next to me goes, she doesn't run. She walks. She walks all the way to the trampoline, steps on it, does a lazy somersault, stands up, touches the ladder with one finger and then just steps off the mattress.

Tully doesn't acknowledge her defiance. He signals me to go. I land on the tramp with both feet but I'm disappointed in how little bounce it gives me. I try the front flip the way Trace did it and land flat on my back. I pop up to grab the ladder. I climb all the way to the top. Higher than anyone else did it.

I let go and fall. I am confident for this part because falling is my superpower.

Next Tully instructs us climb up the side of a pyramid, jump feet first into the pit of foam, then climb out, shimmy up another ladder and sit on the wall, where Bree first sat dangling her legs. Bree, who is now skipping across the bars with light feet and crossing the room, shows off while Trace and Tully shout encouragement and push the next kid in line to run.

All of us make it to the wall. From up here the gym looks like a Minecraft scene, with trenches and walls and bars and angular obstacles. We are the little miner dwarves doing our jobs, scurrying through another day in search of food and elements to build our cabins.

"Well done!" Tully exclaims. "You have each just demonstrated many of the principles of *physics*. Linear motion and rotational motion. From moment of inertia, to conservation of energy."

Next to me the girl draws in her breath and whispers, "Oh! I get it! This is like science class."

When Tully calls for a volunteer, she is the first one to leap down from the wall.

CHAPTER 12: THE GOD OF ROOFTOPS

When I was four I fell off the roof. Specifically, I fell *through* the roof, by way of a skylight.

Dad left a ladder leaning against the side of the house and I climbed up, surprised at how easy it was. I walked over the staggered black roof shingles and peered into my own bedroom window. Then I went to the ladder and looked down. Getting down was going to be a lot scarier than going up. I wandered around on the rooftop until it was dark. It was the first time I saw my world in one big view. I could see my street all the way down to the park at the end. I pretended I was the God of Rooftops and this was my domain to rule. I was all powerful. I could see everything coming before it could sneak up on me. Mom and Dad were walking around outside calling my name. I don't know why I did it, but I did not answer them. I just sat on the roof watching the cars roll down the street as the sky darkened and the stars appeared. Until my Dad's head appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Hey there, Jeremy," he said. "Whatcha doing up here?"

I shrugged.

"Let's get down now," Dad said. "Can you come over here to the ladder?" I did not answer him. I could get to the ladder, yes, but I didn't *want* to. The stars were just coming out. It was the best part of the day and I had a new place to watch it all unfold. My kingdom.

Dad got onto the roof and walked toward me with careful steps. I scooted away, crab walking across the roof. As Dad came closer to me and made a grab for my leg, I crab walked right onto the skylight.

That's when I heard a shattering crack, like a dropped glass jar of jelly on the tile floor. The skylight broke apart and collapsed underneath me.

The scary part wasn't falling. It wasn't even hitting the bottom. It was the horrified look on Mom's face when I landed with a thud on the kitchen floor. I let out a wail as she rushed to brush glass away from me. Dad ran in a few seconds later.

I suffered a few bruises and scratches, but that was nothing. Mom and Dad fought for days, then stopped talking to each other, because they couldn't agree whose fault it was that I fell through the skylight.

I learned two things.

One: Even though Dad made me practice going up and down the ladder, my bedroom window was the easiest way to get on and off the roof.

Two: Falling isn't all that scary, but the landing? That takes some getting used to.

When we leave Room 3.14, I'm sweaty and a little shaky and it is time for lunch in the MPR. I unzip my new lunch box expecting to see the familiar prepackaged meal with ham and crackers and a chocolate peanut butter cup. Nope. My mom has packed deli ham in a baggie, whole almonds and sliced apples which are turning brown. No crackers. I don't eat ham without crackers. Plus, this isn't the ham I like. It's darker in color and instead of being cut into a perfect circle to fit on a round cracker, it's crumpled, thinly sliced meat. I quickly hide the napkin where Mom has written *Good Luck! I love you!* before anyone sees it. I zip up my lunch box and don't eat anything. My stomach is full, anyway.

"You're not going to eat?" Trace asks. I shake my head.

He hands me something from his lunchbox. It's a protein bar.

"Try this. It's got non-dairy chocolate chips."

I take off the wrapper and take a bite and it's better than I expect it to be, so I eat a couple more bites. But my stomach is a balled up fist. No room for food.

“Meds?” He asks.

I nod. How did he know?

“Which one?”

I shrug. “It’s blue.”

Trace says, “The first couple of weeks are the worst. It gets better, though. You should try to eat something.”

It hasn’t occurred to me that the little blue pill I tried to wipe off my tongue could be the cause.

On the way to fifth period, Trace, Ben and David and I are walking down the hall when someone tugs on my shirt. I turn around to see a boy looking at my shoes. It’s the little boy that sat with Bree. He has long blond hair to his shoulders and some of it falls over his face. For a second I think I am looking at a smaller version of me.

“You’re it,” he says, extending his index finger and touching me lightly on the arm. Then he runs.

Trace, Ben and David laugh. “That’s Jeremy,” says Ben. “We’re going to have to call him something else, now.”

“Or we have to call *this* Jeremy something else,” says David.

Trace points to the little boy disappearing around the corner.

“Jeremy the Younger!” Trace exclaims. “He likes you. He never touches anything he doesn’t like.”

“He’s Bree’s baby brother,” David chimes in. “So, no one ever messes with him.”

We arrive at a classroom I recognize from the tour and Trace says, “This is your room for fifth period. It’s first-timers class. You only go for the first week. Then you’ll be with Ruthenium element again.”

In first-timers class, there are kids of all ages. There are only a few tables and chairs and most of the kids aren't even sitting down. They roam around the room playing with stuff in Distraction Station. Some have metal puzzles. Others play on a piano. A boy is upside down on the sofa with a Rubik's Cube. Two girls sit crisscross-applesauce on the floor playing chess. One kid draws diagrams of molecules on a dry erase board with markers.

Trace must have made a mistake. I've wandered into daycare. I am backing out of the room when a voice calls out.

"Welcome, Jeremy! Please come in and get comfortable."

I spot the teacher, who is on his knees with a boy sorting bins full of interlocking circuits.

"Come on in," he waves me in. "We'll get started with class in five minutes, meanwhile, it's free thinking time." Then he calls to the boy who is upside down on the sofa.

"Let's hear it for vestibular and proprioceptive sensory input, aye, Stanley?" The boy on the sofa twists away at the cube and gives a slight nod.

I liked this room last week when it wasn't full of children. I don't know anyone. There are desks and chairs but no one is sitting in them. It's like free time but there is so much to look out I don't know what to do.

Therefore, I do what works in this situation. I back up to the wall and slide down to the floor. I pull my knees up to my chest, wrap my arms around my knees. It's the only way I know how to be still.

It only takes a few minutes for the first kid to wander my way. It's the upside-down kid named Stanley. He pokes my knee. I notice his red hair.

"What are you supposed to be?" He asks.

I spring to life and wave my arms like a monster, roaring at him. The kid jumps back, startled. At first I think he is going to cry. Then he nods.

“I get it. You’re a monster. That’s not very original,” Stanley says and holds out the Rubik’s Cube.

“I got one side done,” he says. “Green. Where’s yours?”

I get mine out of my pack and show him.

“You don’t have any sides yet,” he says. He twists it slowly to demonstrate. “You do it like this.”

He’s moving the green side out of place but as he does, the white side comes together.

“You have to mess it up before you can fix it right again,” he explains. “Plus, it helps to know the algorithms. I’m still learning them.”

The teacher calls for attention and sorts everyone into groups, mixing in young kids with older kids, then pointing us to round tables with our names taped to them. I am at a table with Stanley and a little girl name Gemma and an empty chair named Hazel.

The door opens and a girl walks in. It’s the girl from Room 3.14. The one who whispered, *I get it!* I catch a glimpse of Dr. Nugent closing the door behind her.

The teacher waves her in and motions to my table.

“Come on in, Hazel. Right here next to Jeremy.”

Hazel sits down. She looks like she’s been crying. She turns to me with excitement in her voice.

“I threw up in the girls’ bathroom. This place is amazing, don’t you think?”