

THE ART OF  
BELONGING

*ELEANOR RAY*



PIATKUS

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*For Roger, the best of fathers,  
and Teddy, Violet and Clementine, the best of children.*





## ***Chapter 1***

Grace Sayers sat on the park bench, clutching her paper cup close to her chin for warmth. She was watching the small coffee van parked across from her, enjoying the dramatic puffs of steam as the coffee machine exhaled, the smooth gliding of steel on perfectly fitted steel as the man slotted the filter into place, the sound of metal tapping on wood as he loosened the ground beans.

A woman about her daughter's age was chatting to the man making coffee. They were both laughing as she shook chocolate sprinkles onto the top of her drink and the wind swept them onto his counter. Near the woman's feet, a small boy was pushing a toy train along the tarmac while simultaneously sucking on a carton of juice. Grace watched as he temporarily removed the straw from his mouth to emit a loud 'choo choo', then reinserted it and sucked until his face and the carton both puckered up, concave.

The noise was too familiar, and it gave Grace a sharp pang, as if the paper straw were stabbing into her. She didn't think she'd let any sound escape, but the woman turned to look at her, so she must have done.

Not wanting to be seen as a silly old lady, Grace made a coughing sound to compensate. 'Coffee went down the wrong way,' she

explained, with a theatrical tap to her chest. Her words must have been swept away by the wind, because the woman turned back to the truck and the sprinkles and the smiling man, and Grace realised, with embarrassment, that she was talking to the air.

The woman had brown hair, swept back into a bun in a style that Grace's daughter used to wear before she got sick of her long hair and cut it all off. Grace would never forget the time she'd come into her teenage daughter's room to see her hair sitting on the desk like a small rabbit, while Amelia stared at her defiantly, still clutching the scissors. Years of brushing that hair, teasing out the tangles, for it all to go like that, not even cut straight. Grace had wanted to cry, to mourn those silky curls, but Jonathan had told her to relax. It was Amelia's hair, he'd said, to do with as she pleased. And if she'd made a mistake, it would grow back. Worse things could happen.

He was right, of course he was. Grace didn't want to be someone who tried to control what her daughter did with her hair. She'd been a feminist in the seventies, for goodness' sake, or at least she thought she had.

These days, she made a point of complimenting her daughter on her still short hair, whatever it looked like, every time she saw her. Which wasn't often enough.

Grace felt the urge to phone Amelia bubble up inside her like the froth on her cappuccino. She suppressed the desire, putting her hand to her own hair, usually neat but today dishevelled by the wind. She had to be careful with Amelia. Even as a baby, she'd been easily angered, her little face puckering up with rage if she dropped her dummy or her nappy was inadvertently fastened too tightly. And then, after it happened, things had become even more fragile.

But she wouldn't think about that now. Grace took a sip of her coffee, swallowing it carefully in case life followed lies and it really

did go down the wrong way. Amelia didn't like to be disturbed during the day, not when she was working. *I'll call you*, she'd said, sounding irritated, the last time Grace had tried to contact her. *When I have time.*

That was five days ago now, though Grace had promised herself she wouldn't be counting. Amelia was busy, that was all. Grace pulled her phone from her bag. No calls. She tucked it back in again. She knew what it was like to be busy at work, with children, with life. It had been years since she'd felt like that, the type of busy that made her feel important and stressed and hurried and efficient, all at once.

The kind that meant she missed things right in front of her nose.

Grace bit her lip and turned her attention to the boy. The carton was now completely flat, sucked of all air and juice, and he was pulling on the hem of his mother's coat. 'Pop it in the bin if you're done,' the woman said, barely glancing his way.

There were no cars in the park, of course, but it didn't mean that bikes, scooters and the occasional large dog didn't charge along, and Grace watched nervously as the boy ran, without looking, across the path to the bin that sat next to her bench. Scraped knees, bloody noses, cut elbows came to her mind.

The right kind of inflictions for childhood, the kind that could be mended with antiseptic, plasters and kisses.

She tried to catch the child's eye and smile, but he was reaching to the bin, carton in one hand, train in the other, absorbed in his task. It was too high for him, and he had to stand on tiptoes, his arm raised like a crane as he released the carton to join the rest of the rubbish.

'Nice train you've got there,' ventured Grace. He was a cherubic little thing, maybe three years old, with just a few smudges of what must have been his breakfast still clinging to his chin. The remnants of a dippy egg, perhaps, or maybe dried yoghurt. Hard

to tell. Grace wished she had a napkin to give him a good wipe, but of course she couldn't, even if she did. She was just a stranger in the park.

'The train goes very fast,' the boy informed her, rather sternly. 'The wheels go round and round.'

'That will be the pull-back mechanism,' said Grace. 'Inside the chassis.'

He frowned at that news, then dragged the train backwards along the concrete path, several times, rather roughly. He released it and it travelled forward a few centimetres before coming to a rather pitiful halt.

'Broken!' he exclaimed. Grace looked at him, then the train. He was right on the brink of tears. She hesitated. It really wasn't any of her business. But then again . . .

'Here,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Perhaps I can take a look?' The boy stared at her, suspicion clouding his features. 'The internal coil spring is probably jammed. I'll fish out my tweezers . . .' Grace located them in her handbag and held them up for the boy's inspection.

The tweezers clearly endorsed her credentials in the boy's mind, and he handed her the train.

'There we are,' said Grace. 'Look, that bit of the chassis is misshapen. It really isn't a very good design. If it were me, I'd have built in a better suspension system. Right, I'll pull this out here . . . There you go.'

She passed the boy the train and he snatched it back, pressing it to his lips.

'Oops, I've dropped the tweezers,' said Grace, squinting at the paving. 'Can you pass them up to me, please?'

But the boy only had eyes for his train. He pulled back the toy and shrieked with delight when it went charging off along the path. He chased after it like a dog with a ball.



Grace sighed and creakily crouched down to pick up her tweezers. They were her favourite pair, just right for adjusting miniature fishplates. She grabbed them and then took a little moment near the ground, steeling herself to get up again. Gravity seemed to have a much stronger hold on her since she'd passed seventy. She put her hand to the ground to steady herself, then noticed that her coat was trailing in a puddle, soaking up the dirty water.

'Bother,' she said, her voice coming out rather more loudly than she'd expected.

'Oh my goodness, you poor dear.' Grace looked up to see the boy's mother descending on her. 'You've had a bit of a fall.' She felt arms around her shoulders. 'Stefan, can you help me get her up?'

'No, really, I'm quite capable . . .' began Grace, feeling horribly embarrassed.

'Must be an awful shock,' said the boy's mother. To Grace's dismay, she found the coffee man's hands in her armpits, heaving her back to her feet with a rather bigger grunt than really seemed necessary.

She took a moment to regain her balance, then let the full horror of the humiliation sink in. 'Thank you,' she said politely to Stefan, who to his credit slunk back to his van with a gentle nod of acknowledgement.

'There you go,' said the woman. She smiled at Grace. 'Maybe you'd better have a sit.'

'I'm fine,' said Grace.

'Of course you are. It's lucky I was here.'

'Not really,' said Grace, feeling flustered at being manhandled. 'I didn't fall.'

'Oh my goodness,' said the woman. 'You slipped on Felix's train, did you? I told him to keep it close, that it can be such a hazard for the elderly, but he just does what he wants. Boys will be boys, won't they?'

‘I hardly think his gender has anything to do with it,’ said Grace. ‘A girl could just as easily—’

‘Let me buy you one of Stefan’s muffins,’ said the woman. ‘To apologise.’

‘No, really . . .’

‘Oh my goodness, is that the time? Felix, we’re late for our mother and toddler yoga class. Come along.’ She pressed a coin into Grace’s hand. ‘For your muffin,’ she said.

‘I can afford my own muffin,’ exclaimed Grace.

‘Yes, of course, but with the price of heating, it must be *so* hard.’ The woman smiled benevolently. ‘You just never know what people have to deal with, do you?’

‘No,’ replied Grace, as she supposed that was true. No one ever did know, not really.

The woman hurried off, Felix in tow. He looked back to Grace, and she thought she saw the words *thank you* forming on his lips, before he turned around and ran after his mother, the train flying through the air at the end of his outstretched arm.

‘So, a stranger gave you a pound for a muffin?’ Ava’s voice was loud, echoing around the toy museum, and several members of the Merrington Miniature Club looked up from their tiny chalet kits, paintbrushes paused mid-stroke. ‘I bet that wasn’t enough, not at Stefan’s coffee van.’

‘No,’ said Grace. ‘It wouldn’t even buy one of those vegan bars that inexplicably taste of leather.’

‘Those are great for your digestion,’ said Ava. She paused. ‘Did she think you were homeless?’

‘What? No,’ exclaimed Grace, wishing she hadn’t said anything about the morning’s incident. ‘Of course not.’ She paused. ‘She just thought I’d fallen over her son’s toy train.’

‘So she gave you a pound?’ queried Samir.

‘That’s hardly recompense,’ said Ava. ‘You could have sued her.’

‘But I didn’t fall,’ insisted Grace. ‘I was picking up my tweezers.’

‘Is that what you were wearing?’ asked Ava. ‘You should let me take you shopping.’ Grace watched as Ava cast a judgemental eye over her comfy M&S elasticated-waist trousers with a warm cardigan over the top. It hardly looked as though she were on the breadline, thought Grace, even if she did have a little mud on her coat and her hair was in disarray from the wind. The cardie was cashmere blend, for goodness’ sake. Though when she looked back at her friend’s rather more colourful and much less comfortable home-embellished sequin-encrusted ensemble, she did feel rather drab. Perhaps some people could still convincingly pull off sparkles past the age of seventy. She wasn’t sure she was one of them.

‘I don’t think you look homeless at all,’ contributed Toby. ‘You look very nice.’

Ava tutted at him. ‘Trust you to stick up for her,’ she said. ‘In your corduroy.’

Toby looked at his corduroy trousers as if he hadn’t noticed them before. Then his eyes went back to the chalet he was trying to decorate. ‘I do like your snow recipe, Grace,’ he said. ‘But my consistency doesn’t seem quite right.’

Grace looked over. ‘Yours is a bit too thin,’ she said. ‘You need to add more plaster-of-Paris shavings. If it gets too thick, add more talcum powder. The paste, two parts glue to one part water, should hold it all together.’

‘To think I’ve been buying snow ready-made online for all these years,’ said Samir. ‘And it still doesn’t come out as nicely as this.’

‘You should manufacture this snow,’ suggested Toby. ‘I’d stock it.’

‘It’s nothing really,’ said Grace, though she was flushing with

pleasure. 'You just need the right ingredients, in the correct quantities. A little like baking a cake. Or fusing an alloy.'

Grace settled back into the task at hand. She'd joined the club almost four years ago, when she found herself alone again, and it had quickly become the highlight of her week. The toy museum closed early, the children shooed out to be replaced by the motley assortment of OAPs she could see surrounding her now. Toby was the founder and organiser of the club, using kits from his shop, and they took it in turns to make the tea and provide the biscuits. The museum gave them the hall, and in return they paid a small hire fee and donated some of their best creations to the displays.

Some of the members, like herself and Toby, were genuine enthusiasts with working model railways at home. Others, she suspected from the crookedness of their constructions, were here out of boredom, loneliness perhaps. Ava came because she was determined to find a boyfriend to liven up her sunset years, but the endeavour had been disappointing to her so far, as she'd whispered to Grace rather too loudly over a cup of tea and a Jammie Dodger the first time they'd met.

'I was thinking,' said Toby, 'of installing a ski lift in my alpine section.' He looked at Grace for approval.

'I was thinking the same,' she replied.

He smiled at her. 'I've ordered rather a nice kit into my shop,' he said. 'Perhaps you'd like to come and see? Something similar might work for you.' He paused a moment. 'I could even help instal it, if you'd like? I'd love to see your models.'

'Is that what they call it now?' smirked Ava, never one to miss an innuendo, even if it did come from a retired septuagenarian sporting elbow patches and with Rich Tea biscuit crumbs in his greying beard.

'I'm going to build the lift myself, I think,' replied Grace, pretending she hadn't heard Ava. 'The pulley system shouldn't

be too hard to replicate, and then I could construct the lifts with wire loops.'

'That's ambitious,' said Toby.

Ava stifled a yawn. 'Yes, yes, Grace is a genius. Now, I'm too young for all this stairlift chat. How's your lovely granddaughter?' she asked. 'Did she like those clothes I made for her?'

'She loved them,' replied Grace, though she'd received no acknowledgement at all. The outfit had been rather more sparkly than anything she'd ever seen Charlotte wear, but Grace had been touched when Ava made it for her, and so she had packed it up, sent the parcel, and hoped that it would be well received.

She glanced around the museum, uncomfortable with her lie, and noticed Hector staring at her. He was a large, extremely old teddy bear that sat in one of the glass cases. He inspected her disapprovingly from his one remaining eye and Grace imagined the horror he must cause to the poor children who visited the place. She went back to her snow. It was fine and white and it made her wish for Christmas, even though the last one had been rather lonely. Perhaps if she added more glue, she could fashion a tiny snowman.

She'd done some rather lovely decorations for Christmas in her diorama, not bothering to decorate the real house. It would have just been for her sake, as Amelia and her family had gone skiing. 'You don't mind, Mum, do you?' her daughter had said, clearly expecting her to say it was fine. 'It's just with Tom's business, my job and Charlotte's school, it's the only time we can go.'

'But it's Christmas,' Grace objected, feeling like a petulant child.

'It's just a day like any other,' Amelia replied. 'We'll celebrate together once we're back. You know how much travel we missed in the pandemic.'

'OK,' Grace had replied. It wasn't just travel that had been sacrificed in the pandemic. It was time with her daughter and

granddaughter too. She knew they had to stay away for all those months to keep her safe, but regular visits had never really resumed in the same way. It was such a minor complaint, after everything that had happened, that she hadn't said anything. 'Do what's best for you,' she conceded instead. 'Of course you need a holiday.'

'Like I said, we'll celebrate properly once we're back,' Amelia had replied, a concession to the sadness in Grace's voice. 'It will be even better. You can buy the presents in the sales.'

Except when they were back, they became busy, and now a month had passed and she'd eventually packed up their presents and sent them in the post. Next year perhaps she'd invite them earlier in December, maybe even November, before they got busy. Now, when would the shops start selling turkey?

Grace stopped herself. It was only February, and she was planning Christmas already! When had life become quite so devoid of events to look forward to? Perhaps she should book a holiday. For a moment, her thoughts were filled with sunny cafés and walks on the beach, before practical concerns at what to pack and travelling alone and whether she'd be able to lift her suitcase took over and she sighed with imagined exhaustion.

'My snow!' exclaimed Ava, as a cloud of talcum powder rose from her chalet. 'I hadn't mixed in the glue yet. You've sent it everywhere. Breathe on your own chalet!'

'Sorry,' said Grace, but she caught Toby's eye and they smiled at each other. Ava was coated in a white talcumy shroud.

'It looks like dandruff,' she declared, brushing it off her lap in disgust. She grinned. 'Do you dare me to sprinkle some on Samir's shoulder?'

'No!' exclaimed Grace, looking at poor Samir, his remaining length of unnaturally black hair pasted carefully across his forehead as he frowned through his glasses at the skiing figure he was attempting to paint.

'Spoilsport,' laughed Ava, putting down her chalet and stretching. 'I'm done for today. Who fancies the early-bird special at Luigi's? If you smile at him, he throws in a glass of red.'

'I'm not sure he'd do that for me,' said Toby. 'But yes, I'd love to.'  
'Grace?'

'Maybe next time.'

'That's what you always say.' Ava stood up. 'Samir?' He ignored her, so she walked around to his good ear and waved at him. 'LUIGI'S?' she shouted.

'YES,' replied Samir. 'AND THERE'S NO NEED TO SHOUT. I'M NOT DEAF.'

Ava mimed speaking at him, and he frowned, fiddling with his hearing aid.

'You're awful,' said Grace, trying not to giggle.

'He likes the attention,' replied Ava, with a smile. 'And remember what I said about shopping. I'm here to be your stylist any time you need. De-hoboing you would be a treat. Now, you're sure you won't come with us?'

'I've got to get back,' said Grace. 'Amelia might call.'