

## Author's Note

I love words. I can't remember ever *not* loving them. As a preschooler, when class ended, my parents were still hard at work. Luckily, I attended preschool on the college campus where my mother served as librarian. She would have us nap in the stacks as she continued to work, and I nestled with books and stories and words. Even today, the rich scent of a library or the waft of a freshly opened book makes me smile.

Not only were words my companions, they were also my protectors. One day during first grade, the principal of Anniston Avenue Elementary fetched me from class and walked me outside to one of the trailers that lined the back of the school building. I vividly recall standing there wondering why I had been brought out to the schoolyard before recess. My next memory is of the door opening wide and a lovely woman greeting me. Mrs. Blakeslee—my soon-to-be second-grade teacher.

Unbeknownst to me, I had been moved up a grade in the middle of the term. As a new kid in class, the strongest, most familiar sight was the books on the shelves near the front of class. My teacher invited me to read as many of them as I wished. In those uneasy first days, while other kids played at recess, I read quietly, unsure of my place—until I opened the pages of a good story. There, I could hide from the older children who teased me, and revel in the victories of others. When Mrs. Blakeslee chose me for the spelling bee that year, her act of kindness nudged me out of the books and into a world I had never imagined.

My first spelling bee combined my greatest joys and biggest fears: talking about words and making mistakes. More than forty years later, these remain the stalwart axes against which I measure my growth. In that contest, I learned in front of a live audience that chocolate has two *o*'s. When the bell dinged, I practiced stoicism before I knew of the concept. And I still recall my

mom pressing the yellow candy into my hand, remembering that I, her second of six children, loved that color most. Because of that first lost spelling bee, followed by four more close calls until I claimed victory in sixth grade, I discovered how to merge my delight and my terror, realizing that failure is never more than an invitation to try again.

Like Jake, some kids picked on me and others who were different. Over the years, I learned how to use my words to do good, even when I am most afraid. I constantly strive to speak up, especially when it makes me nervous. And if I am doing my very best, I make room for those who haven't discovered their superpowers. Yet.