

THE ROOM FOR EVERYBODY SERIES · BOOK TWO

THE SPACE BETWEEN US

A Story of Rumors, Loyalty, and the Truth Between Them

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The Space Between Us

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CHAPTER 1

Approximately One Hundred Billion Stars



There are approximately one hundred billion stars in our galaxy, and somehow seventh grade had already found a way to make fourteen seconds feel larger than all of them.

Kai did not know about the fourteen seconds yet.

On that Monday morning, February twenty-third, her biggest problem was a chair.

Not an empty chair. She had learned enough about those.

This chair was occupied by Laila's backpack.

It sat on the stool beside her in the student-news room, one purple strap hanging toward the floor. Laila stood behind a camera with one eye squeezed shut, filming Serena in front of a green screen. Serena held a cardboard microphone and pointed toward a weather map that had not been added yet.

"Temperatures will remain disrespectfully cold," Serena announced. "Students are advised to stay home until April."

"That is not news," Kai said from the doorway.

Laila lowered the camera. "It is the most accurate forecast we have ever produced."

Serena pointed the microphone at Kai. "Do you have a statement for the public?"

"Yes. Your map is invisible."

"Budget cuts."

Laila laughed.

There had been a time when Kai could make her laugh before anyone else did. She noticed that thought arrive. She also noticed the small pinch that came with it.

Then she let both pass.

This was something she had been practicing.

Feelings could sit beside her without taking over the entire table.

It sounded wise when their assistant principal, Ms. Hart, said it. Inside Kai's head, it mostly sounded like telling a loud person to use an indoor voice.

Laila lifted her backpack from the stool and dropped it beneath the equipment table. "You can sit there."

"I can't. Homeroom starts in three minutes."

"Then why did you come?"

Kai held up Laila's blue water bottle.

Laila stared at it. "I was looking for that."

"You left it on the bus."

"How did you get it?"

"Mr. Ellis found it and gave it to me because my locker is beside yours."

Laila accepted the bottle. "Thank you."

She did not say, *Of course you found it. You always find my things.*

Kai did not say, You would lose your head if it were not connected to your neck.

Those had been their usual lines for years. The empty space where they should have been felt strange, but not sharp.

Different and gone were not the same thing.

Kai had written that sentence in her notebook after last fall's Community Table celebration, when their class built a project about belonging and her friendship with Laila began changing. She had underlined it twice, which was how she turned thoughts into rules.

The problem with rules was that life kept finding exceptions.

Serena leaned toward the camera. "Can we try the opening again before the bell?"

Laila twisted the cap onto her water bottle. “Give me ten seconds.”

“You need fourteen,” said a voice behind Kai.

She turned.

A girl Kai had never seen stood in the hallway holding a folded schedule. She was a little taller than Kai and wore silver star-shaped pins along the collar of her dark denim jacket. A narrow white streak curved through the front of her braids. Not the gray kind adults tried to cover. This one looked deliberate, like a comet had passed through her hair and left a trail.

She pointed through the doorway at the camera display.

“The countdown,” she said. “It’s set for fourteen seconds.”

Laila checked the screen. “She’s right.”

“I usually am about numbers,” the girl said. “People are less predictable.”

Serena lowered the cardboard microphone. “Are you looking for student news?”

The girl unfolded her schedule. “Room 214.”

“Other end of the hall,” Kai said. “Down the stairs, past the library, left at the mural, then—”

The girl looked at Kai.

Kai stopped.

In the past, she might have taken the schedule, walked her to the room, explained which stairwell became crowded, warned her about the pencil sharpener, and possibly created a labeled map.

Now she asked, “Would directions help, or do you want me to show you?”

The girl’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“Show me,” she said. “If you have time.”

“I do.”

Laila smiled at Kai—not a large smile, not one that asked for a conversation. Just enough to let Kai know she had heard the question.

Kai followed the new girl into the hall.

“I’m Kai.”

“Amara.”

“Are you new to Riverview?”

“I am either new or extremely lost.”

“Both can be true.”

“Good. I like a school that allows complexity.”

They moved through the morning crowd. Locker doors clanged. Sneakers squeaked against the tile. Someone shouted from the water fountain as if the person standing two feet away had moved to another state.

Amara studied the ceiling signs as they walked.

“The room numbers don’t make sense,” she said.

“They make sense if you know the old science wing used to be the main building.”

“I do not know that.”

“Then they don’t make sense.”

At the mural, Kai pointed left. “Room 214 is at the end. Ms. Taylor’s class.”

Amara glanced at Kai. “Yours too?”

“Homeroom, advisory, and math.”

“Good.”

She said it simply, but something in Kai’s chest warmed anyway.

Kai did not offer to tell her where to sit.

Growth sometimes looked like keeping her mouth closed for six whole seconds.

When they entered, Ms. Taylor stood on a step stool covering the bulletin board with dark blue paper. Large silver letters stretched across the top:

RIVERVIEW CONSTELLATION CHALLENGE

The final E in CHALLENGE tilted toward the floor.

Jamal stood beneath it with both hands raised.

“I have been offering professional installation services for four minutes,” he said.

“You taped your sleeve to the board,” Ms. Taylor replied.

“Every profession has setbacks.”

Mateo sat at his usual table near the window, drawing in a black notebook. He glanced up when Amara and Kai entered. Kai gave him a small wave. He tapped his pencil twice against the page.

That was enough.

Ms. Taylor stepped down from the stool. “You must be Amara Brooks.”

Amara handed her the schedule. “Unless this belongs to another Amara Brooks who is also extremely lost.”

“We only have one today.” Ms. Taylor smiled. “Welcome to Room 214.”

She introduced Amara to the class without asking her to tell everyone where she came from, why she had transferred, what her hobbies were, or one interesting fact about herself. Adults liked interesting facts because they made meeting a new person feel organized.

People were rarely organized.

Amara chose the open seat across from Mateo. She set down her bag, removed a thick astronomy book, and placed it beneath her desk.

Jamal saw the cover.

“Are you an expert?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good. Experts create unfair competition.”

“Competition in what?”

Jamal pointed dramatically at the bulletin board.

At that exact moment, the crooked E detached and landed on his head.

Amara looked from the letter to Jamal.

“I see,” she said.

The bell rang.

Ms. Taylor waited while everyone settled. Then she picked up a small metal box from her desk. It was dark with age, no larger than a lunch container, with a silver star stamped into its lid.

The room quieted.

Even Jamal stopped trying to attach the E to his shirt.

“This was found Friday afternoon,” Ms. Taylor said, “inside a locked storage cabinet behind the old auditorium booth.”

She set the box beneath the document camera. Its image appeared on the classroom screen, scratches and all.

“How was a locked cabinet opened?” Jamal asked.

“A pipe leaked.”

“Water solves another mystery.”

Kai thought of Grandma Kay's apartment and did not smile.

Ms. Taylor noticed. Her eyes rested on Kai for half a second before returning to the class.

“The maintenance team moved the cabinet,” she continued. “The back panel separated, and this box fell out. Inside were five metal stars, part of a sky map, and

a notebook created by Riverview students twenty-one years ago. The notebook shows a set of six stars. One was missing from the box.”

Whispers moved across the room.

Mateo closed his drawing notebook.

Amara leaned forward.

Ms. Taylor lifted one of the stars. It fit in the center of her palm. A number had been etched onto its back.

“The students were designing something called the Constellation Challenge as part of their Spring Voices oral-history project,” she said. “According to the notebook, they hid a series of clues throughout the school and surrounding community.”

“Treasure,” Jamal said.

“Clues,” Ms. Taylor corrected.

“Treasure-adjacent.”

“The original challenge was never completed. We do not yet know why. Teachers have adapted the surviving clues for this year, but we are still investigating the history behind them.”

That sentence changed the room.

An unfinished assignment was ordinary. An unfinished mystery was an invitation.

Ms. Taylor explained that seventh-grade volunteers would form six challenge teams. They would solve the surviving clues, research the original project, and design a final constellation representing the connections within their community. Student news would document the challenge. Families would be invited to the final presentation in the spring.

“There will be points,” Jamal said.

“There will be collaboration,” Ms. Taylor replied.

“That was not my question.”

“Yes, there will be points.”

Jamal pressed both palms to his desk as if preparing to launch.

Ms. Taylor began reading the team assignments. At the Lyra table, Leah Park adjusted her round glasses and turned a penciled fox in the margin of her worksheet into a tiny astronaut.

Laila's name was not on the team list because student-news members would work as reporters rather than competitors. Kai already knew that. Still, hearing the teams made it official in a way knowing had not.

“Team Orion,” Ms. Taylor read. “Kai Patterson, Jamal Reed, Mateo Rivera, and Amara Brooks.”

Jamal whispered, “Unstoppable.”

Mateo wrote something on a small card and turned it toward the team.

TOO EARLY TO KNOW.

Amara nodded at him. “Statistically responsible.”

Kai looked at the three people around her.

Jamal, who could turn cardboard into almost anything.

Mateo, who noticed patterns most people walked past.

Amara, who had found a fourteen-second countdown from the hallway and carried a book about stars on her first day.

And Kai.

She was not sure yet what she contributed.

Ms. Taylor handed each team a sealed envelope.

Orion's was dark blue. A silver number one had been drawn across the front.

Jamal reached for it.

So did Kai.

They stopped with their hands above the envelope.

“Would you like to open it?” Kai asked.

“Very much.”

She moved her hand.

Jamal tore the envelope across the top and pulled out a sheet of cream paper. In the center was a single printed sentence:

*BEGIN WHERE EVERY VOICE WAS SAVED—
EXCEPT THE ONE THEY DECIDED NOT TO
KEEP.*

Beneath it, someone had drawn six stars.

Five were connected.

The sixth stood alone.

Amara studied the page.

Mateo's pencil became still.

“That's not Orion,” Amara said.

Jamal turned the clue sideways. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?” Kai asked.

Amara looked at the separated star.

“Incomplete,” she said.

Across the room, the student-news camera light turned red.

Continue reading

The Space Between Us

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Includes the complete opening chapter, "Approximately One Hundred Billion Stars."

This is a reading sample, not the full book. Original book page numbers have been preserved.

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