

ROOM FOR EVERYBODY

*A Story of Belonging, Boundaries,
and Learning to Listen*

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Room for Everybody

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CHAPTER 1

The Blue Plate



Kai liked knowing where things belonged.

Her colored pencils belonged in the top drawer of her desk, arranged from red to violet, with brown, black, and gray lined up at the end. Her high-tops belonged beneath the wooden bench by the front door—not kicked into the hallway where somebody could trip over them. Her library books belonged on the second shelf, tallest to shortest, their spines facing out.

And Saturday pancakes belonged on the blue plate.

Not the pale blue plate with the tiny chip near the rim. Not one of the white plates Mom bought when all five of them still lived at home most of the time. Kai's plate was deep blue, the color of the sky just before night settled in. Its edge curved upward enough to catch runaway syrup, and it made the butter look extra yellow when it melted.

Kai had eaten Saturday pancakes from that plate for as long as she could remember.

This morning, it was missing.

She opened the cabinet again, although opening it a second time could not make a plate appear.

White. White. Pale blue. Chipped blue. Two green bowls. A stack of saucers nobody used.

No deep blue plate.

Behind her, batter hissed when Dad poured it onto the griddle. The kitchen smelled like vanilla, hot butter, and the cinnamon he always added when Mom was not looking.

"I saw that," Mom said without turning from the sink.

Dad pressed one finger to his lips. "Saw what?"

"Exactly three shakes of cinnamon."

"That sounds like an accusation without evidence."

Mom pointed a wet spoon at him. “The evidence is floating in the batter.”

Zoe laughed from the table, the loose sleeve of her rainbow pajama shirt dipping dangerously close to her orange juice. “Put in four shakes next time. Then she’ll forget about the three.”

“That,” Dad said, “is why you’re my attorney.”

Normally, Kai would have laughed too. Instead, she stood with one hand on the cabinet door and studied the shelves as if the plate might be hiding behind a bowl.

“What are you looking for?” Mom asked.

“Nothing.”

The answer came too quickly. Kai softened it with a shrug.

“Just my plate.”

Zoe looked down at the pale blue plate in front of her. “This is mine.”

“I know.”

“Because you were staring at it like you wanted it.”

“I don’t.”

“Good.” Zoe wrapped both arms around it. “Because I already warmed it up.”

Kai pulled a white plate from the cabinet. It made a dull scrape against the one beneath it—a small, ordinary sound that somehow landed behind her ribs.

It was only a plate.

She knew that.

She also knew Nia would have understood without Kai needing to explain.

Nia had been away at college for thirty-seven days. Kai had not meant to count. She had simply noticed the number every morning, the way she noticed the date in

the corner of the classroom board or the percentage on her phone battery.

Thirty-seven days since Nia's boots had disappeared from beside the bench. Thirty-seven days since her bedroom door had stayed mostly closed. Thirty-seven days since people started saying things like, "Kai, you're the oldest one at home now," as if Nia had handed her a job on the way out.

Dad slid the first pancake onto Zoe's plate. It was shaped like a lopsided heart.

"Mine looks like Virginia," Zoe said.

"It looks like a potato," Kai replied.

"A Virginia potato."

This time, Kai almost laughed.

The doorbell rang.

Everyone stopped.

It was not a quick ding-dong followed by a package landing on the porch. The bell rang once, waited, and rang again—long enough the second time to sound worried.

Mom dried her hands on a dish towel. "Who is here this early?"

Before Dad could answer, three heavy knocks shook the front door.

Zoe's eyes widened. "Maybe it's the police."

"Why would it be the police?" Kai asked.

"Because Dad committed cinnamon fraud."

Dad turned off the griddle. "Tell them I regret nothing."

Kai followed Mom into the hallway. Cold air curled around their ankles when the door opened.

Grandma Kay stood on the porch in a plum-colored coat, one hand gripping the handle of an enormous flowered bag. Her silver hoop earrings moved when she breathed. Behind her, the front walkway had disappeared beneath boxes, grocery bags, two suitcases, a folded card table, and a plant so large it seemed to be waiting for its own invitation inside.

For one second, nobody spoke.

Then Grandma Kay lifted her chin and said, "I hope those pancakes have cinnamon in them."

Dad appeared behind Kai. "Four shakes."

Mom looked at him.

"Three," he corrected.

Grandma Kay smiled, but it did not reach her eyes.

Kai noticed because Grandma Kay's real smile always arrived everywhere at once. It lifted both cheeks, deepened the lines beside her mouth, and made her eyes shine as if somebody had switched on a lamp behind them.

This smile stopped at her lipstick.

Mom stepped onto the porch without a coat. "Mama? What happened?"

Grandma Kay's fingers tightened around the flowered bag.

"A pipe burst in the apartment above mine." Her voice was light, almost breezy. "Apparently, somebody's bathroom decided it wanted to visit my living room."

Zoe squeezed between Kai and the doorframe. "Your whole bathroom fell down?"

"Not my bathroom, baby."

"Did the toilet fall?"

"Zoe," Mom warned.

Grandma Kay's almost-smile became real for half a second. "No toilets. Just water, part of the ceiling, and a mess I do not intend to discuss before breakfast."

Mom looked past her at the boxes. The morning breeze lifted one corner of a black trash bag and let it fall again.

"How long?" Mom asked quietly.

Grandma Kay glanced toward Kai and Zoe before answering. "They said it could be a few days."

A pause.

"Maybe longer."

The cold moved farther into the hallway.

Kai pictured Grandma Kay's apartment: the cream sofa nobody was allowed to eat on, family photographs climbing the wall beside the stairs, the glass bowl of peppermints on the coffee table. She imagined brown water spreading across the carpet and pieces of ceiling scattered over the room.

Something inside her softened.

Then she looked at the boxes.

Something else tightened.

"Of course you're staying here," Mom said. "You should have called us last night."

"And have everybody rushing out in the rain? I had a perfectly good hotel room." Grandma Kay made a face. "Perfectly good if you enjoy pillows shaped like bricks and a heater that coughs."

Dad was already stepping outside. "Let's get this stuff in."

"I can help," Kai said.

Mom touched her shoulder. "I knew I could count on you."

The words were meant to feel warm. Instead, they settled over Kai like another box she had agreed to carry.

She reached for the nearest one.

It was heavier than it looked. The cardboard bowed against her palms, cool and slightly damp along the bottom. *KITCHEN—FRAGILE* was written across the top in Grandma Kay's looping handwriting.

"Not that one," Grandma Kay said quickly. "There are dishes in there."

Kai shifted the weight against her chest. "I've got it."

"I know you've got it. That does not mean you have to carry the heaviest thing first."

Kai almost put it down.

Then Zoe darted past with a pillow tucked beneath each arm, looking proud of herself.

"I've still got it," Kai said.

She carried the box inside.

By the fourth trip, the hallway smelled like cold cardboard, Grandma Kay's rose lotion, and the wet earth packed around the roots of the enormous plant. Its leaves brushed Kai's hair each time she squeezed past. One glossy leaf left a drop of water on her cheek.

"Where does this go?" Dad asked, gripping the plant's heavy clay pot.

Grandma Kay looked around.

The front window gave the best light, but Mom's reading chair was there. The dining room had space, but only if someone moved the basket of school papers. The hallway was already too narrow.

"Kai's corner," Zoe said.

Kai turned.

At the far end of the living room, beside the window, stood Kai's art table. Beneath it were two clear bins of supplies. On top sat the miniature room she had been building from foam board and thin strips of wood. She had finished the floor yesterday, laying each tiny plank in a herringbone pattern. The walls were still open. The little room looked as though it were holding its breath.

"It would get good light there," Mom said.

Kai waited for someone to suggest another place.

No one did.

"Only for a few days," Grandma Kay said.

Maybe longer, Kai thought.

Dad watched her face. "We can figure out something else."

All Kai had to do was say yes.

Yes, please. Somewhere else.

Instead, she looked at Grandma Kay's plum coat, still buttoned all the way to her neck. She looked at the flowered bag Grandma had not let go of since arriving. She remembered the smile that had stopped at her lipstick.

"It's fine," Kai said.

Dad hesitated. "You sure?"

"It's just a table."

She moved her miniature room before anyone could see how carefully she held it.

On the way, Dad stopped at the dishwasher for a plate to catch water dripping from the saucer. Kai was busy protecting her miniature room and did not see which one he chose.

Dad and Grandma Kay eased the plant into the corner. Its leaves spread across the window and cast

trembling shadows over the wall. One branch hung exactly where Kai's head had been when she sat drawing.

"Perfect," Mom said.

Kai slid her unfinished room onto the bottom bookshelf. It did not fit. She turned it sideways. One wall bent inward with a soft, papery crunch.

Nobody heard.

From the kitchen, the timer beeped. The second batch of pancakes.

"Breakfast before everything gets cold," Dad called.

They crowded around the table—Mom, Dad, Zoe, Grandma Kay, and Kai. Nia's chair stayed empty at the end, a folded sweatshirt still hanging over its back because nobody had decided where else it belonged.

Dad passed the pancakes. Mom found another fork. Zoe asked Grandma Kay again about the toilet. Everyone talked at once.

Kai reached for the syrup.

That was when she saw her blue plate.

It sat beneath Grandma Kay's plant saucer in the living-room corner, catching a thin ring of muddy water.

For a moment, the kitchen sounds pulled away from her—the scrape of forks, the refrigerator's hum, Zoe's laugh—all of it fading until Kai could hear only the small pulse beating near her ear.

Grandma Kay followed her gaze.

"Oh," she said. "Baby, is that your plate?"

Everyone looked.

Kai could have said yes.

She could have told them about Saturday mornings and melted butter and thirty-seven days without Nia.

She could have said that her art table was gone, her miniature wall was bent, the hallway was full, and she did not want one more thing to be different.

Grandma Kay started toward the plant.

“I’ll wash it,” Mom said.

“No.” Kai tightened her fingers around the white plate in front of her. Its rim was flat. Syrup had already escaped one pancake and was moving toward the table.

“It’s okay.”

“Kai—”

“Really.” She made herself smile. “I don’t care which plate I use.”

Mom’s face softened with relief.

“That’s my mature girl.”

The words landed gently.

That almost made them worse.

Kai cut into her pancakes. They were warm in the middle and crisp at the edges, exactly the way Dad always made them. Cinnamon rose with the steam. The first bite should have tasted like Saturday.

Instead, all Kai could taste was the place where her words should have been.

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Includes the complete opening chapter, "The Blue Plate."

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