Finding My Place

Finding Our Way - Book 5

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Finding My Place

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Chapter 1

The Table in the Middle

Ellie Carter knew where she belonged in the cafeteria. She belonged at the long table near the windows, three seats from the end, between Mia Lawson and whichever person arrived late enough to claim the spot on her other side. The arrangement had changed slightly over the years, but the table itself had not. In sixth grade, it had been close enough to the trash cans that people complained about the smell of banana peels. This year, the custodians had moved the cans, and the table had somehow become one of the best in the room.

It was bright without being too bright. Close to the doors without being directly in the path of seventh graders stampeding toward recess. Far enough from the teachers that nobody lowered their voice whenever a lunch monitor passed. Most important, everyone knew it was theirs. On the first Monday of seventh grade, Ellie carried her tray through the cafeteria without even looking for an empty seat. She could hear Olivia Grant laughing before she reached the table.

"Tell her," Olivia said as Ellie sat down. "Tell Ellie what you did."

Mia dropped her forehead into one hand.

"I didn't do anything."

"You called Coach Ramirez 'Mom.'"

"I said, 'One second, Mom.' It slipped out."

Kenzie Blake nearly choked on a grape. "During volleyball tryouts?"

"During warm-ups," Mia admitted.

Ellie set down her tray. "That's actually better. It established trust early." Mia looked up. "Thank you."

"I'm sure Coach Ramirez appreciated knowing you see her as a maternal figure."

"Never mind."

Everyone laughed, and Ellie felt the familiar ease settle around her. This was how lunch was supposed to feel: jokes crossing over one another, people reaching for each other's chips without asking, Olivia telling a story with so many hand gestures that her water bottle nearly went flying. There were eight girls at the table that day. Sometimes there were ten. Sometimes twelve, if people from their classes joined them. Ellie could usually talk to anyone. She knew which teachers assigned too much homework, which sixth graders had older siblings, and which eighth graders were nice even when their friends were watching. She had never thought of herself as popular.

Popular sounded like something you announced, which would immediately make it untrue. Still, Ellie was invited to things. She knew people. Teachers remembered her name. She had never entered the cafeteria wondering whether someone would make room. That morning, Olivia had posted a picture of their group outside the school with the caption Back where we belong. Ellie had liked it before the first bell.

"So," Olivia said, turning toward her, "Friday."

Ellie opened her milk. "What about Friday?"

"My house. Beginning-of-the-year thing."

"You mean a party?"

"It's not a party. My mom said twelve people maximum."

"That is a very specific non-party."

"Exactly. Just us and a few others." Olivia pulled a folded sheet from her binder pocket. "I made a list."

Kenzie leaned across the table. "She made a seating chart too."

"I did not make a seating chart."

"You made zones."

"They're not zones. I just don't want everyone standing in the kitchen the entire time."

Ellie smiled. Olivia had always organized things. In elementary school, she assigned roles during recess games. In sixth grade, she had created a shared calendar for birthdays, school dances, and what she called "socially important weekends." Most of the time, it was helpful.

"Friday works," Ellie said.

"Good." Olivia made a check beside her name.

"You actually wrote down whether we're coming?"

"People forget things."

Mia reached for one of Ellie's pretzels. "Olivia doesn't forget things. She makes sure the rest of us can't." The bell rang before Ellie finished eating. Everyone stood at once, collecting trays and backpacks.

"Ellie, wait," Mia said as the group moved toward the doors.

Ellie stepped aside while Mia dug through her bag.

"What did you lose?"

"My schedule. I know I have science next, but I can't remember the room."

"You've been there three times."

"That doesn't mean I know where it is."

Ellie laughed and held out her own schedule. Mia leaned close to read it. They had been friends since fourth grade, when Mia had transferred halfway through the year and mistakenly spent an entire morning calling Ellie "Ella." Ellie had eventually corrected her during math. Mia had stared at her for a second and said, "That would have been useful information before I wrote you a friendship bracelet." The bracelet had said ELLA. Ellie still had it in a drawer.

"Room 214," Ellie said.

"Right. Upstairs."

"It was upstairs yesterday too."

Mia linked her arm through Ellie's as they joined the crowd. "This is why I keep you around."

"Because I can read?"

"Among other reasons."

At the stairs, Olivia and Kenzie were waiting.

"Hurry," Olivia called. "Kenzie needs to tell us what happened in English."

"It wasn't that interesting," Kenzie said, which meant it was definitely interesting.

They climbed together, filling the width of the staircase until an eighth grader behind them said, "Some of us are trying to graduate." Olivia moved aside. "It's September."

"I like to plan ahead."

For the rest of the afternoon, Ellie carried the lightness of lunch with her. Seventh grade had new lockers, new teachers, and a confusing rotating schedule, but the important parts were still in place. Her friends were still her friends. Their table was still their table. Nothing had really changed. After school, Ellie found her mother's car at the curb and slid into the passenger seat.

"How was it?" Mom asked.

"Fine."

"Fine good or fine terrible?"

"Fine good."

"That sounds convincing."

Ellie buckled her seat belt. "Olivia's having people over Friday."

"Already?"

"It's not a party. There's a twelve-person maximum."

"Ah. A legally distinct gathering."

Ellie smiled. "Exactly." They pulled away from Alder Creek Middle School, joining a line of cars inching past the crossing guard. Mom had changed out of her work clothes and was wearing the old gray sweatshirt she used for errands. A cardboard box sat on the back seat beside several reusable grocery bags.

"What's that?" Ellie asked.

"Something for you."

Ellie twisted around.

"If it's a puppy, the box is not large enough."

"It's not a puppy."

"A hamster?"

"No living creatures."

"That eliminates most of my list."

Mom reached over at the stoplight and tapped the envelope tucked into the cup holder. "Open that." Inside was a printed registration form.

RIVERSTONE COMMUNITY ARTS CENTER

Below the heading, in smaller letters, it read:

BEGINNING CERAMICS: YOUTH SESSION

"Pottery?" Ellie asked.

"You liked it at the street fair."

"I painted a bowl."

"You spent forty-five minutes painting a bowl."

"It was detailed."

"You also talked about the pottery wheel demonstration for the entire drive home."

Ellie looked back at the paper. Two weeks earlier, they had gone to Alder Creek's summer street fair, where local artists sold paintings, jewelry, candles, wooden signs, and oddly shaped soap. One booth had let visitors decorate small ceramic pieces. Ellie had chosen a cereal bowl and painted tiny blue leaves around the rim. It was now sitting on her desk because Mom had declared it too pretty for cereal.

"I thought you might enjoy trying the actual class," Mom said. "It starts tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I know it's soon. Someone canceled, and the arts center emailed this morning. But I haven't paid yet. You don't have to do it."

Ellie read the schedule. Tuesdays and Saturdays through the fourteen-week fall session. The Tuesday class was from four to five thirty. Saturdays were ten until noon. Saturday morning might interfere with

plans sometimes, but people usually did things later in the day. And volleyball had taken Mia out of circulation three afternoons a week anyway.

"Who else is going?" Ellie asked.

"I don't know."

"From school, I mean."

"I don't know that either."

Ellie ran her thumb over the edge of the paper. It wasn't that she needed to know someone everywhere she went. She had done summer camps and school clubs before. But joining something alone felt different, especially when everyone else seemed to be choosing activities together. Olivia and Kenzie were doing student leadership. Mia had made the volleyball team. Ava and Tessa were both taking dance at the same studio. Even when their schedules changed, they changed in pairs.

"I could try it," Ellie said.

Mom glanced over. "You could."

"Just the first class."

"That's generally how classes begin."

Ellie ignored that. "And then if I hate it—"

"You don't have to continue."

"What if everyone's already good?"

"It says beginning ceramics."

"People lie."

"About ceramics experience?"

"People lie about lots of things."

Mom smiled as she turned onto their street. "Try one class." At home, Ellie carried the box inside. It contained an apron, a small sketchbook, and a set of inexpensive pottery tools Mom had bought from the arts center. She took a picture of everything spread across the kitchen counter. She considered sending it to the group chat. Then Olivia's message appeared first. Friday is officially happening. Wear

something cute because my mom wants pictures. Kenzie immediately sent three dress emojis.

Mia replied:

Can I wear my volleyball hoodie or will I be removed from the premises?

Removed, Olivia wrote.

Ellie typed:

Apparently I'm trying pottery tomorrow.

She looked at the words. They seemed oddly serious sitting there beneath the dress emojis, like she had announced she was leaving school to become a traveling ceramicist. She deleted the message.

Instead, she sent:

I'll help Mia sneak in the hoodie.

Olivia responded with a red X. The conversation moved on. Ellie placed her new tools back in the box and carried them upstairs. She told herself she hadn't mentioned pottery because it wasn't important yet. One class did not count as a new thing. Not until she knew whether she belonged there.

Chapter 2

The Wobbly Bowl

Riverstone Community Arts Center used to be a library. Ellie could tell because the front doors were too heavy, the windows were too tall, and a faded metal slot beside the entrance still said BOOK RETURN even though someone had taped a sign over it that read:

PLEASE DO NOT RETURN CLAY HERE.

Mom parked at the curb on Tuesday afternoon.

"That sign suggests there was an incident," Ellie said.

"There's always an incident before a sign."

Ellie looked through the front windows. Inside, people moved between tables beneath strings of colorful paper lanterns. A woman carried a canvas covered in orange paint. Two younger kids walked past wearing enormous papier-mâché animal heads.

"Still interested?" Mom asked.

"I said I'd try it."

"You did."

"That doesn't mean you have to sound surprised."

Mom held up both hands. "No surprise." Ellie picked up the box containing her tools and apron. The box suddenly felt much larger than it had at home.

"Text me if you need anything," Mom said.

"I'll be fine."

She climbed out before she could reconsider. The lobby smelled like paint, dust, and something warm that reminded Ellie of rain hitting dry pavement. A bulletin board displayed flyers for watercolor classes, adult figure drawing, children's theater, and something called Experimental Fiber Night. Ellie followed signs toward the ceramics studio. The room

at the end of the hall was bright and crowded. Shelves covered one wall from floor to ceiling, filled with bowls, mugs, lopsided animals, tiny houses, and sculptures Ellie could not identify. Six pottery wheels stood in a row near the windows. Large worktables occupied the center of the room.

A man with silver hair and clay on both elbows looked up from the sink.

"You must be Ellie."

She stopped. "How did you know?"

"You have the expression."

"What expression?"

"The first-class expression. Somewhere between interested and ready to escape through a window."

Ellie glanced at the nearest window. It was painted shut. The man smiled. "I'm Mr. Navarro." He shook her hand, leaving a pale thumbprint near her wrist.

"Sorry," he said. "Clay follows me."

"That's probably useful here."

"Excellent point." He gestured around the room. "Put your things anywhere. Aprons on the hooks. Tools can stay in the box today. We're beginning with our hands."

Ellie chose a hook near the door. There were seven other students. Three looked younger than her. Two boys were arguing quietly about whether a clay snake counted as a sculpture. A girl with short blond hair sat at one of the wheels, pressing her thumbs into a lump of clay. She looked older than Ellie—maybe eighth grade. Her jeans had paint marks across both knees, and one sleeve of her green sweatshirt was pushed up farther than the other. She wore small silver stars in her ears. The clay on her wheel spun smoothly beneath her hands. Ellie tried not to stare. The girl looked up anyway. "First time?"

"Is it obvious?"

"You still look clean."

Ellie glanced down at herself. "I've been here four minutes."

"Exactly."

The girl lifted one hand from the wheel and pointed toward the empty stool beside her. The sudden movement made the clay wobble.

"Sit here if you want. That wheel makes a weird noise, but it works."

"I thought this was a beginner class."

"It is."

"You don't look like a beginner."

"I've taken it twice." She lowered her voice. "Mr. Navarro lets people repeat as long as they pretend to listen during the safety talk."

"I heard that," Mr. Navarro said from across the room.

"I'm listening already," the girl called back.

Ellie sat beside her.

"I'm June," the girl said. "Eighth grade at Alder Creek."

"Ellie. Seventh."

"I thought I recognized you."

Ellie looked more closely at her. June did seem vaguely familiar, although not from any particular class or hallway. "Have we met?"

"No. You're friends with Olivia Grant, right?"

The question made Ellie sit a little straighter. "Yeah."

"Her locker was near mine last year. She always had those tiny mirrors inside it."

"She had three."

"Why?"

"One was magnifying."

"That raises more questions."

Ellie laughed. Mr. Navarro clapped his hands, and the room settled.

"Welcome back, returning artists, and welcome for the first time, new artists. Today, everyone makes a bowl."

One of the younger boys raised his hand. "Can I make a dragon?"

"Is the dragon also a bowl?"

"No."

"Then today it will be a bowl-shaped dragon."

Mr. Navarro demonstrated how to wedge clay by pressing and folding it against the table. He explained air bubbles, moisture, and the importance of not wearing anything they expected to keep clean. Ellie put on her apron. June looked at it. "That's new."

"My mom bought it yesterday."

"It's very white."

"I'm beginning to understand the problem."

When it was time to use the wheels, Mr. Navarro placed a lump of clay in front of Ellie. It did not look promising.

"First," he said, "center the clay."

He demonstrated at an empty wheel. His hands moved easily, pressing the spinning lump until it rose into a smooth, even shape.

"That seems possible," Ellie said.

June snorted. Ellie wet her hands, pressed the pedal, and immediately sent the wheel spinning too fast. The clay lurched sideways. She released the pedal.

"Good," June said. "You've established dominance."

"I think it established dominance."

Ellie tried again. This time the wheel moved slowly, and she pressed both hands around the clay. It shifted beneath her palms as if it were trying to escape.

"Use your whole hand," June said. "Not just your fingers."

Ellie leaned in. The clay flattened.

"Not that much whole hand."

For the next ten minutes, Ellie attempted to center the clay. Each time she thought she had it, one side bulged outward. Her apron collected gray smears. A strand of hair fell loose and stuck to her cheek. Across the room, the bowl-shaped dragon had become mostly dragon.

"You can start over," Mr. Navarro said when he passed.

"I'm close."

He studied the clay, which was leaning noticeably to the left.

"Close is a flexible word."

"I can fix it."

"You can," he agreed. "Or you can start again. Both are pottery."

On June's wheel, the clay was already opening into a neat, round bowl.

"Does yours ever do this?" Ellie asked.

"All the time."

"It doesn't look like it."

"That's because you missed the part where I dropped an entire mug on the floor before you got here."

"You dropped it?"

"It was too wet. It folded in half."

"What did you do?"

June shrugged. "Made something else." She said it as if ruining a mug was not a personal failure. As if it did not require an apology, an explanation, or a plan to ensure nobody saw. Ellie looked down at her leaning clay.

"Okay," she said. "I'm starting over."

She scraped the clay from the wheel and reshaped it into a lump. The second attempt was better. Not good, exactly, but the clay stopped trying to flee. When Ellie pressed her thumbs into the center, a hollow slowly formed.

"I'm making a bowl," she said.

"You are making something with an inside," June replied. "That's the first requirement."

Ellie widened the opening. The sides rose beneath her fingers, uneven but recognizable. For several minutes, she forgot to think about anything else. She forgot about Friday at Olivia's house and whether Mia would really try to wear her volleyball hoodie. She forgot that her phone was in her backpack. She forgot to wonder whether she was doing the right thing with her hands. The clay spun. Her fingers moved. The bowl

became taller. Then one side collapsed. Ellie gasped and lifted her hands. The shape sagged inward like a tired balloon.

"Oh no."

June leaned over. "That's fixable."

"It was a bowl."

"It still has bowl energy."

Ellie laughed despite herself. Together, they coaxed the clay upright. The finished result leaned slightly and had a rim that dipped lower on one side, but it could hold something. Probably. Mr. Navarro inspected it.

"Good first piece," he said.

"It's crooked."

"Most first pieces are."

Ellie waited for more, but Mr. Navarro had already moved to the next student. At five thirty, she placed the bowl on a wooden board labeled with her name. It would dry before the next stage, when they would trim and glaze it. June washed her hands at the sink beside her.

"You coming Saturday?" she asked.

"I think so."

"You think?"

Ellie dried her hands. "I have plans Friday night." June looked confused. "Okay."

"I just mean, I'll probably still come. Unless it goes late."

"The class starts at ten."

"I know."

June nodded slowly, as though Ellie had given her information without explaining why it mattered. Ellie felt a little foolish.

"I'll be here," she said.

"Good. We're making mugs."

"You already made one."

"I made half of one. The floor made the rest."

Outside, Mom was waiting in the car. Ellie climbed in and placed the box at her feet.

"How was it?"

Ellie looked down at her apron. The white fabric was now streaked with gray, including one perfect handprint across the pocket.

"I made a bowl."

"A successful bowl?"

"It has bowl energy."

Mom glanced at her.

"That's what June said."

"Who's June?"

"An eighth grader. She's taken the class before."

Mom smiled but did not ask anything else, which Ellie appreciated. Her phone buzzed as they pulled away. The group chat had forty-three new messages. Olivia had changed Friday's plan from pizza to tacos. Kenzie wanted everyone to vote on a movie. Mia had sent a picture from volleyball practice with the caption My knees have resigned. Ellie scrolled through the conversation.

She typed:

Pottery update: I made a crooked bowl and got clay in my hair.

Her thumb hovered over the send button. Then she pressed it. Mia responded first.

PICTURE

Ellie wrote:

It has to dry.

Kenzie sent:

Wait you actually went??

Before Ellie could decide whether the question sounded surprised or impressed, Olivia replied:

Cute. Are you still coming Friday?

Ellie looked out the window at the arts center disappearing behind them. Obviously, she typed. Olivia sent a heart. The conversation returned to movies. Ellie slipped her phone into her pocket. She was still coming Friday. She still belonged at the table near the cafeteria windows. She was still part of every plan that mattered. Nothing had changed. But as she leaned back in her seat, Ellie thought about the crooked bowl waiting on the studio shelf. She found herself hoping it would survive.

Chapter 3
Twelve People Maximum

By Friday afternoon, Olivia's "not a party" had acquired a playlist, a taco bar, matching paper cups, and a basket by the front door labeled PHONES DURING MOVIE.

"It's twelve people maximum," Ellie reminded Mia as they walked up Olivia's driveway.

Mia adjusted the strap of her duffel bag. "There are balloons."

"There are four balloons."

"One of them says Celebrate."

"That could mean anything."

"It means party."

Ellie rang the doorbell before Mia could continue presenting evidence. Olivia opened the door wearing a dark green sweater and jeans that looked comfortable but had probably required planning. Her hair fell in smooth waves over one shoulder.

"You're here," she said, pulling Ellie into a quick hug. Then she looked at Mia's oversized volleyball sweatshirt. "You wore it."

"I survived three practices this week. I've earned sleeves."

"I told you to wear something cute."

"This is team-issued. That makes it official."

Olivia stepped aside. "At least take it off for pictures."

"No promises."

The house already smelled like seasoned meat and warm tortillas. Music played from a speaker near the stairs. Kenzie and Tessa were sitting on the living room floor arranging snacks into bowls, while two boys from student leadership argued over whether a hot dog counted as a sandwich. Ellie knew everyone there. That was one of the nice things

about Olivia's gatherings. There were rarely true strangers. Even the people Ellie did not know well were familiar enough to talk to without the painful beginning part where both people asked what classes the other had and then ran out of information.

"Ellie," Kenzie called. "Settle something."

"That's dangerous."

"Is pottery hard?"

Ellie stopped beside the coffee table. "What?" Kenzie looked up from a bag of pretzels. "You said you made a bowl."

"A crooked bowl."

"That's still a bowl." Tessa tilted her head. "Did you use one of those spinning things?"

"A pottery wheel?"

"Yes."

"You could've said wheel," Mia told her.

"I forgot the word."

Ellie sat on the edge of the couch. "It was harder than it looked. The clay kept sliding sideways." Kenzie mimed something flying off a table. "Did it shoot across the room?"

"No."

"That would've made a better story."

"She got clay in her hair," Mia offered.

Olivia appeared from the kitchen carrying a tray of cups. "We saw the update."

"You responded," Ellie said.

"I did."

"With one word."

"It was a supportive word."

"You said 'cute.'"

"That is supportive."

Olivia handed her a cup and moved on before Ellie could answer. It was not a strange exchange. Olivia always did three things at once when

she hosted. She kept track of food, music, and whether anyone had disappeared upstairs despite her mother's rule that everyone stay on the first floor. Still, Ellie had pictured telling them more. She had imagined describing June's collapsed mug or Mr. Navarro's rule about bowl-shaped dragons. She had even taken a picture of her apron after class, the handprint across the pocket making it look as if the clay had tried to escape. Nobody asked to see it.

Ellie took a sip of lemonade and reminded herself that they had only just arrived. The evening moved quickly. They ate tacos at the dining table, played a game in which everyone had to guess songs from the first three seconds, and took pictures in front of the fireplace while Olivia's mother tried to make twelve people look natural.

"Stop leaning away from each other," Mrs. Grant said.

"We're not," Kenzie protested.

"You look like magnets with the same charge."

Mia whispered, "Science insult." Ellie laughed and leaned closer to her. After pictures, Olivia examined them on her mother's phone.

"This one," she said. "Everyone looks good."

"I'm blinking," Tessa said.

"You always think you're blinking."

"Because I usually am."

Olivia sent the photo to herself, then immediately began cropping it. Ellie sat on the rug beside Mia and watched the others talk over one another. The room felt full in a familiar way. Kenzie was telling a story about a substitute teacher. Tessa kept throwing popcorn at Ben Wilkes whenever he interrupted. Someone had changed the music, and Olivia was pretending to be offended by the new song. Ellie should have felt exactly as she always did. Instead, she found herself thinking about how quiet the pottery studio had been when everyone concentrated. Not silent—the wheels hummed, people talked, Mr. Navarro dropped things into the sink—but nobody seemed worried about filling every second.

"Movie vote," Olivia announced.

She held up four choices on her phone. Two were comedies. One was a superhero movie. The last was a documentary about competitive cheerleading that Kenzie insisted was "basically an action film." Ellie voted for the comedy everyone had been talking about at school. Mia voted for the cheerleading documentary.

"You're betraying me," Ellie said.

"I've heard there's drama."

"There's always drama when people are thrown into the air."

The comedy won. While Olivia set it up, people shifted around the living room. Ellie and Mia claimed one end of the sectional. Kenzie squeezed in beside them, leaving almost no space between Ellie and the armrest.

"Move," Ellie said.

"There's nowhere to move."

"You're sitting on half my leg."

"You have another one."

Ellie shoved her gently, and Kenzie shoved back. Then Olivia paused the television.

"Wait. Before we start, student leadership is planning the fall kickoff."

Ben groaned. "Are we in a meeting now?"

"It's one question."

"You said that in homeroom and it lasted twenty minutes."

Olivia ignored him. "We need ideas for the October school spirit week. Not basic ideas. Last year they did pajama day and hat day."

"What's wrong with hat day?" Mia asked.

"Nothing. That's the problem."

Kenzie leaned forward. "We should do dress-like-your-future-career day."

"Too many doctors," Ben said.

"Or famous duos," Tessa suggested.

"What if someone doesn't have a duo?" Mia asked.

"They find one."

Ellie pictured June at the pottery wheel, wearing the paint-stained jeans she probably wore for everything. She wondered what June would choose for a spirit day. She did not seem like someone who would spend an hour coordinating an outfit.

"What about something people make?" Ellie said.

The room quieted enough that she continued.

"Like a school art display. Each grade could make something for the hallway. Murals or sculptures or—"

Kenzie smiled. "A giant crooked bowl?" A few people laughed. It was not a mean laugh. Kenzie's expression was open, waiting for Ellie to laugh too. So Ellie did.

"Exactly," she said. "The seventh-grade crooked bowl."

Olivia was already typing ideas into her phone. "Art display could work, but spirit week needs dress-up days."

"Right."

"Maybe we can use that for the fall festival instead."

"Sure."

Olivia moved to the next suggestion as the opening credits began. She had not expected everyone to be fascinated by pottery. She was not fascinated by volleyball drills or student leadership meeting agendas, and she still listened when Mia or Olivia talked about them. But that was different. Those things belonged to the group already. Pottery felt as though it belonged somewhere else. Halfway through the movie, Mia leaned close.

"You okay?"

"Why?"

"You've been quiet."

"I'm watching."

"You usually explain why every character is making bad choices."

"The main character has walked into a basement after hearing a noise. I assumed the mistake was obvious."

Mia smiled. "There you are." Ellie smiled back. After the movie, people checked their phones and gathered their things. It was almost eleven. Mom had texted that she was outside. At the front door, Olivia hugged Ellie again.

"Tomorrow afternoon," she said.

Ellie blinked. "What's tomorrow afternoon?"

"We're going downtown."

"Who is?"

"Whoever can come. Kenzie wants to find shoes for the dance."

"What dance?"

"The fall dance."

"That's in six weeks."

Kenzie appeared behind Olivia. "Good shoes require planning."

"What time?" Ellie asked.

"One-ish."

Ellie felt the answer form before she said it.

"I have pottery until noon."

"That's fine," Olivia said. "Meet us after."

Ellie hesitated. The arts center was twenty minutes from downtown. She would have to go home, shower, change, and ask Mom to drive her back out. Still, it was possible.

"I'll text you," she said.

"Okay. Don't take forever."

The words were light. Olivia was already turning to say goodbye to someone else. Outside, the air had cooled. Ellie climbed into Mom's car with Mia, whose father was picking her up from their house.

"How was the legally distinct gathering?" Mom asked.

"There were balloons," Mia said.

"I knew it."

"It was fun," Ellie said.

And it had been. Mostly. Mia leaned her head against the seat. "Are you going downtown tomorrow?"

"Probably."

"You don't have to."

Ellie looked at her. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You'll be tired after pottery."

"It's not that tiring."

"You came home covered in clay."

"That isn't the same as exhaustion."

Mia shrugged. "I can't go anyway. We have a tournament." Ellie looked out at the dark storefronts passing by.

"You didn't tell me."

"I mentioned it at lunch."

"You said you had volleyball."

"That was the mention."

Ellie turned back toward her. "So it'll just be Olivia, Kenzie, and Tessa?"

"And Ava, I think."

"Right."

Mia pulled out her phone. "Take pictures of the bowls."

"There's one bowl."

"Take several angles."

Ellie smiled, but the uneasiness followed her home. By the time they reached the house, Olivia had posted the group picture. Everyone stood close together in front of the fireplace, faces bright under the ceiling lights. Ellie was near the middle. She looked exactly where she was supposed to be. She tapped the heart beneath the picture. Then she set her alarm for pottery.

END OF SAMPLE

Right in the middle of the picture.

Ellie looks exactly where she is supposed to be. So why does the uneasiness follow her home?

Keep reading with Chapter 4, "People You Used to Know."

Continue the adventure in

Finding My Place

A Finding Our Way Novel, Book Five
by Mara Ellis

Available in paperback on Amazon

FINDING OUR WAY

Book One
The Things We Still Carry

Book Two
When Everything Changes

Book Three
The New Kid's Backpack

Book Four
More Than a Trophy

Book Six
The Sound of Courage