

THE NIGHT WE GOT LOST

*A Mystery About Courage, Trust, and Finding
the Way Together*

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The Night We Got Lost

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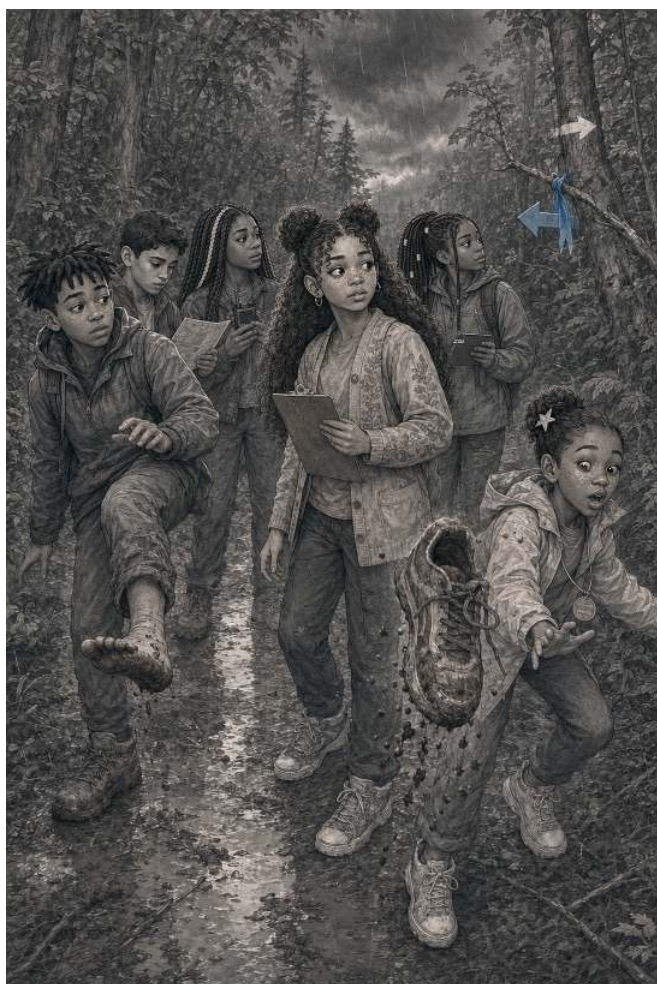
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CHAPTER 1

The Shoe That Chose the Mud

Kai's left shoe stepped off the bus and made a decision without her.

It chose the mud.

Her foot kept moving.

The shoe did not.

Kai landed on one knee beside the Camp Northstar welcome sign while thirty-two students watched her begin Leadership Weekend by losing an argument with the ground.

Zoe, her younger sister, climbed down behind her.

"Should I tell Mom you arrived safely?"

Kai pulled her shoe from the mud with a sound like the forest swallowing soup.

"You should tell Mom nothing."

"I could send a picture."

"Zoe."

"For documentation."

Kai shoved her foot back into the wet shoe. "You have been spending too much time with Amara."

Amara raised her phone from three people away. "I already got the picture."

Jamal leaned over her shoulder. "Strong opening. Shows vulnerability."

"Delete it."

"Shows growth potential," he added.

Amara deleted the photograph and aimed her phone at the muddy shoe. "Just the shoe?" Kai nodded. She

should have known the weekend would not respect her plans.

She had packed two flashlights, three pairs of socks, a waterproof notebook, a printed schedule, a backup printed schedule, and the granola bars Grandma Kay had pushed into her bag while saying camp food was “too dependent on hope.”

She had not planned for her shoe to leave first.

Camp Northstar spread across a wooded ridge. Cabins stood between tall pines. Trails curved toward a lake, a climbing wall, and a white observatory dome high above everything else.

A banner stretched across the orientation field:

NORTHSTAR LEADERS FINISH FIRST

Below it, staff members arranged radios, maps, orange safety vests, and small black Course Trackers on folding tables.

The setup looked organized.

Kai trusted organized things.

Usually.

Director Bennett welcomed students, families, and volunteers. He described the weekend as a challenge in navigation, communication, problem-solving, and independent leadership.

“You will make decisions,” he said. “You will face obstacles. And you will discover what kind of leader you are when the path is not easy.”

Zoe whispered, “The path already ate your shoe.”

Kai nudged her.

Director Bennett introduced the safety system. Every team would receive a printed map, a live radio, and a Course Tracker—a phone-sized device linked to the

participants' wristbands and showing the team's checkpoint location and participant count. Staffed stations stood along every official route. Rangers patrolled between them. White markers identified the main course. Orange markers identified approved detours.

"If weather conditions change, we pause," Ranger Alvarez said. "If a route becomes unsafe, we change it. If you are uncertain, contact us. Asking for help does not end your course."

Kai liked him immediately.

Beside the equipment table, a teenage volunteer named Mason Cole lifted a silver crown trophy.

"One team will complete the final challenge first," he said. "That team will be named Northstar's leadership team of the year."

Jamal whispered, "Do we each get a crown?"

"There is one crown," Caleb said.

"Then leadership has already become a supply problem."

Kai tried not to smile.

The students separated into teams. Kai, Mateo, Jamal, and Amara had finished the spring challenge as Team Orion. Now, with the school year nearly over, Laila joined them beneath the familiar name for Leadership Weekend.

Zoe joined them too.

A camp worker checked the roster.

"Junior participants report to the observation activities after the first navigation stage."

Zoe pointed at Kai. "I came with her."

“You are registered,” the worker said. “Your pages are in the junior section.”

He flipped to the back of the clipboard. Several narrow pages had been attached with perforated edges.

Zoe’s name appeared on the second one. The worker handed her a folded junior trail map, which she tucked into her jacket.

Kai checked the roster herself.

ZOE PATTERSON—TEAM ORION—JUNIOR PARTICIPANT

“She stays with us for the first stage?” Kai asked.

“Yes. Her tracker profile should connect automatically.”

Should.

The word was small enough to ignore.

Kai ignored it.

At the next table, Serena argued quietly with a route coordinator. Team Summit gathered around her: Leah, who stood beside Serena using one forearm crutch, along with Eli, Owen, and Caleb.

“The Ridge Loop has steps and loose rock,” Serena said. “The service path reaches the same checkpoint.”

“The service path is not part of today’s course,” the coordinator replied.

“Then change today’s course.”

Leah spoke before Serena could continue. “I can complete a route. I need one that does not treat falling as a leadership skill.”

The coordinator promised to ask Director Bennett.

Serena did not look promised enough.

A young adult volunteer wearing a name tag that read **BRIANNA VALE** approached with an older map.

She pointed to a gradual line through the trees and spoke quietly to Serena and the coordinator.

Kai could not hear the words.

She noticed Leah's shoulders loosen. Amara gave Leah a small nod without going over. Things between them were still unsettled after the spring challenge.

Then Mason stepped in front of Team Orion carrying a radio, tracker, and clipboard topped with a small silver crown. Unlike the students in trail shoes, he wore dark waterproof work boots with smooth heels.

"Every team needs one official leader," he said.

Kai waited for the group to discuss it.

Mason handed her the clipboard.

"Highest orientation score."

"We took one quiz," Laila said.

"Kai got every answer right."

"That makes her good at the quiz," Mateo said.

Mason smiled as though Mateo had made a joke.

"The leader carries the radio and makes final decisions when the team disagrees."

The title warmed something inside Kai.

Official leader.

She imagined herself staying calm, reading the map correctly, and returning with every problem neatly solved.

Then she looked at her friends.

"You will still tell me what you notice, right?"

"I planned to tell you whether you wanted it or not," Amara said.

"That is the spirit," Jamal replied.

Mason switched on their Course Tracker. Six green dots appeared across the bottom of its screen.

“One for each participant,” he explained.

Kai counted.

Six dots.

Six people.

Zoe leaned close enough for her star clip to touch Kai’s cheek.

“Which one is me?”

“They are not labeled.”

“Then how do we know if I disappear?”

“You are standing beside me.”

“That was not my question.”

Before Kai could answer, a whistle signaled the start of the practice stage.

Team Orion’s assignment was simple: follow the white markers to a nearby checkpoint, report one trail observation by radio, and return to orientation.

“Fifteen minutes,” Mason said. “The best leaders keep moving.”

Ranger Alvarez, passing behind him, added, “The safest leaders stop when they need information.”

Kai wrote both sentences on the clipboard.

They entered the forest.

The first white arrow matched the map. So did the second. The trail was wide, the weather clear, and Echo Station visible through the trees ahead.

At the checkpoint, Laila reported a fallen branch near the trail edge. Base answered immediately and thanked them.

Everything worked.

On the return trip, Zoe found the first thing that did not.

“That arrow was not there before.”

A blue arrow had been painted on a tree beside the official path.

It pointed down a narrow trail hidden between ferns.

“Blue is not an official course color,” Amara said.

She photographed it.

At the base of the tree sat a small digital voice recorder, no larger than a deck of cards. A red light blinked above its speaker.

Kai did not touch it.

The device clicked.

A saved voice message began to play.

“If you find a blue marker, do not follow it.”

Static swallowed the next words.

Then:

“Someone changed the course.”

The audio file ended.

Five green dots blinked on the Course Tracker.

Kai counted the people around her.

Mateo.

Jamal.

Laila.

Amara.

Zoe.

And Kai made six.

Continue reading

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Includes the opening illustration and complete first chapter, "The Shoe That Chose the Mud."

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

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