

## Somewhere In Africa

The smell of hot, wet asphalt tells me something isn't right. Damp hangs in the air, but the sun blazes behind towering clouds with fierce determination. Sirens and car horns blare in the distance. The building in front of us appears to be the right one, but something, a minor detail, is missing.

Sven punches the air with his free hand. 'You did it, Jay!' He shakes himself free from Jay's grip and starts towards the gate, but I jerk him back by his elbow.

'What the hell?'

'Give me a sec, Sven,' I say. 'Something's not right. This isn't the place.'

'Of course it is. White building, fence, footpath—they're all here, Tori.'

That's when it hits me. The missing detail. *Flowers*. Purple, fluted flowers along the path's edge. In fact, there are no flowers at all. Just lush, green lawn and a footpath made up of interlocking bricks leading to a blue door. I spin to take in the view of where we've come, which confirms my initial doubt.

'This road's paved. We should be on a dirt road,' I say. 'And there should be flowers along the path.'

Jay and Sven peer through the gaps between the posts.

Sven's face turns ashen. 'Jeez, Jayden. Where have you brought us?'

'I messed up. We need to go back,' Jay says, his lips trembling.

'You think?' Micah sneers. 'I thought you knew what you were doing?'

'I... I....'

'We don't have time to argue,' I say, stepping between them. 'We need to find a mirror—the bigger the better.'

Jay clears his throat and offers a timid, 'A public toilet?'

'Good thinking, but where?'

We're on a residential street—for film stars or billionaires from the looks of it. Impressive, gated homes with picture-perfect gardens line both sides of the road in either direction. Hardly the place to have a public loo.

Sven points to a line of trees a short distance ahead. 'That looks like it could be a park. It might have one.'

Just then, I hear voices—deep, shouting voices. I turn to see three uniformed men advancing towards us from a street away.

'*Hé les infants!*' one of them bellows. '*Ou'est-ce qua vous faites?*'

'Is that French? Are they talking to us?' Jay asks, his voice shaky.

‘Who cares? We need to go...now,’ Sven hisses. He puts himself in charge by pushing Jay and me towards the trees. ‘Walk fast, but don’t run! Whatever you do, don’t look back. Tori, zip up your hoodie. We can’t let them, or *anyone* see that amulet.’

The shouting continues as I fumble with the zipper and march forward.

‘I wish I knew what they’re saying,’ Jay says. ‘What if they’re the police?’

‘Do you think they saw how we... appeared out of nowhere?’ I ask.

‘Nothing matters, except getting back. Pick up your pace,’ Sven orders. ‘We’re nearly there.’

The pavement widens at the entrance of a large, grassy field with a cycling path around the perimeter. Luckily, there are enough joggers and leisurely strollers we could wend through to slip away from the men, who are still on our tail. But blending in will be tricky for Sven and me. We stand out like springs of holly on a Christmas pudding amongst the locals. Two boys on motorised scooters brazenly gawp at us as they zoom past and nearly crash into a mum pushing a pram.

Jay looks around. ‘I think we’re somewhere in Africa.’

‘What gave that away, genius?’ Sven patronises. He glances over his shoulder. ‘They’re still following us.’

‘Any sign of a toilet?’ Jay asks.

‘No, nothing.’ I spy some boys kicking a football around the centre of the field. ‘But I think I know how to find one. Follow my lead.’

I turn sharply and run straight towards the boys. When I’m within their earshot, I wave and call out, ‘Hello!’ as if I’m greeting old friends. They stop their game and stare.

‘*Bonjour!*’ I say to the smallest boy. As I approach, I raise my hand for a high-five. He looks at his friends, then apprehensively pats my hand.

‘*Toilette?*’ I ask.

The boy’s large brown eyes dart between me and his friends, who cautiously eye Sven and Jay.

Sven catches on to my strategy. ‘*Où sent les toilettes?*’

He nods and points across the field towards a gap in the trees a football-pitch distance away. There, I make out an outbuilding cleverly painted in different shades of green so that it camouflages with the surrounding trees and shrubbery.

‘*Merci!*’ I say. ‘You’re a lifesaver.’

‘*Merci beaucoup, mon ami!*’ Sven shouts.

We turn on our heels and make a beeline for the outbuilding, sprinting the entire stretch. Sprinting, because our lives and our families’ wonderful long-kept secrets depend on it.