

1 Race FACE

“Let’s go, Finn!” Niko shouted.

He sat in the cockpit just ahead of me. His strong arms pulled the blades of his paddle through the churning water beside our kayak.

We were racing against two other boats from our Okanagan Kayak Club. Chad and Sanjay were blasting their sprint kayak through the course in the lane to our left. Leo and Theo’s sleek boat was flying on our right. We were all gunning for a spot on the U15 squad for the national championships in Ottawa. No one wanted to lose. We all wanted Coach Cooper to pick us for the team going to Ontario in August.

Niko and I had started the race strong. Our blades hit the water at exactly the same moment. Every time Niko took a stroke on the left side, I matched him with one of my own. Every time he dug in his paddle on the right, I did the same. We were in perfect sync. Our kayak was a red torpedo shooting straight through the deep blue waters of Lake Okanagan.

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For the first 200 metres of the race we were in the lead. Stroke . . . stroke . . . stroke, we took off like a bullet. I shot glances to both sides and didn't see the other two boats. I smiled. *No one is going to catch us today*, I thought. But the race was a thousand metres long. There was still a lot of paddling ahead of us.

We kept up the pressure on the other two kayaks. With every stroke, our rounded blades scooped the water alongside our hull. Spray kicked up against our hands and arms, but we gripped the shafts of our paddles tight. We couldn't let go. A slip could cause even a single missed stroke, and that could spell defeat. Over and over, we pulled our black blades through the water. We knew that, with each stroke, we were getting closer to the finish line.

From the corner of my eye I spotted the pointed tip of a blue boat in the left lane. Chad and Sanjay! My eyes darted to the right lane and saw a green tip. Leo and Theo! *How could this be happening?* I wondered. Both the other kayaks were catching up. All three boats were neck and neck and neck, rocketing between the white buoys marking the course. Anyone could win.

Niko put his head down. His black hair was wet with sweat. "Come on, Finn!" he shouted.

I kept driving my blades into the water, trying to match Niko's frantic pace. My arms burned. My back ached as we pushed forward. But something was wrong. No matter how hard we paddled, the teams in the other

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two lanes were pulling ahead. They were leaving us in their wakes.

There was no way I was the problem. The year before, I had been one of the best U15 paddlers in the province. Not bad for a thirteen year old. I even had a gold trophy in my bedroom to prove it. This year my results hadn't been as good. But how bad could I really be? Maybe I wasn't training as much as before, but I had my reasons. No, the problem was definitely Niko. He was the one slowing us down.

"Bring it!" Niko shouted, paddling even faster.

I pulled my blades through the swirling water as hard as I could, but I couldn't keep up. Part of me didn't want to keep up.

Now our strokes were out of sync. The tips of our blades started to hit each other. Our narrow boat started to rock. Sprint kayaks are built for speed, not for lurching back and forth like a seesaw. Spray started to wash over the sides into our boat.

Chad and Sanjay crossed the finish line far ahead of us. They whooped as they raised their paddles in victory. Leo and Theo powered across a couple of seconds later for second place. All four paddlers turned their heads to see where the third-place kayak was. They all wanted to know what had happened to the boat that was supposed to win.

Niko and I dipped our blades into the water one last time and struggled across the finish line. Our kayak

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was heavy with water. Three inches of Lake Okanagan sloshed around in the bottom.

Slumped over and gasping for breath, Niko was so tired he couldn't speak. Our kayak glided for a few seconds before he whipped around to face me. His eyes were filled with anger. "What was that, man?" he snapped.

"We took on water." I nodded at the liquid swishing around the bottom of our boat.

"No kidding!" Niko shot back. "It's like we were paddling in a bathtub." He splashed a handful of lake water out of the kayak in disgust. "I'm in front. I set the stroke rate. It's your job to keep up with me, Finn."

"You were paddling too fast," I said. I knew it was just an excuse.

"That's because we were losing." Niko narrowed his eyes at me. "We still had a chance to win."

"I didn't think we did." I shrugged. "We were in last place. It was all over."

"It's like you gave up. Like you just didn't care." Niko shook his head at me. "That's not the way you used to be, Finn."

"Well, that's the way I am now." I turned my head away, not wanting to meet Niko's glare.

"I want to make the team going to nationals," Niko said through clenched teeth. "But I don't know if I can with you as my partner. You're always letting me down."

I knew Niko was counting on me. It was a two-man kayak, after all. We both had to do our part. The

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only problem was that Niko wanted it more than I did.

“Making the nationals is no big deal,” I said blankly.

“It is to me,” Niko snarled. “I want to be on the team. I don’t want to be left behind.”

I slammed my blade into the water. The kayak slowed to a stop. “You don’t know anything about being left behind,” I said bitterly.

We paddled back to the dock in silence. A grey haze was hanging in the distance. It was a reminder of the wildfires that were burning farther north. I took a deep breath. The faint smell of smoke filled the air.

“Good effort, everyone,” Coach Cooper said. He stood above us on the dock. When I looked up at him, his shoulders were so broad they blocked out the sun. “But I’ll be expecting more from you guys when school’s out for the summer. That includes you, Finn.” Coach stared down at Niko and me, still floating in our kayak. “If you and Niko want to make it to nationals, you’re going to have to work together as a team. I know you can do better.”

After Niko got out, I stayed sitting in the kayak a while longer. I wondered if Coach and Niko were right. If I did just quit trying. If maybe it was my fault we came last. If I even wanted to do better. I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that everything had changed since Mom left.