

1 Wilderness RACE

“What’s your name?”

Michaela wasn’t sure if the voice was directed to her. She turned around on the slab of Canadian Shield rock. Water lapped over her feet.

Two white girls stood in front of her. She wondered where the other girl was, the one they were always with. Michaela had overheard that they called themselves the Three Musketeers. They each lived on acres of land with big houses.

“Michaela. Michaela Robinson,” she said. *I’m surprised they want to talk to me*, she thought.

Back in March, Mom had taken her to an information session for first-time campers. “Imagine how good it will be for you, child, to experience more of the province. You can’t spend another summer just in the city.”

“Two whole weeks with the apartment to ourselves,” Dad had said. “We’ll parade around naked if we feel like it, eh Lorna?” he had joked to Michaela’s mom.

Michaela had been at Camp Stone Hearth on Lake

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Simcoe for almost the whole two weeks. In all that time, she had not made any friends.

“I’m Bethany,” said the girl who had spoken. She twisted her blonde ponytail.

“And I’m Cindy,” the short brunette said.

“You looked pretty good in the kayak yesterday,” Bethany said. “Your first time?”

Michaela nodded. “I was a little nervous.”

“Couldn’t tell,” Cindy said. She put a piece of chewing gum in her mouth. “Considering you live in the city,” she mumbled around the gum.

Three Black girls passed by, laughing among themselves. They were the only girls of colour at the camp, apart from Michaela. She had tried to talk to them when she arrived. But soon she had realized that they had their own high-class clique. There was no room for another “sista.”

“You look like a runner, though,” Bethany giggled.

“I ran the 400 at Finals,” Michaela offered.

“Sprinter. Told you so.” Cindy shoved Bethany playfully.

“Come with us,” Bethany ordered. “Someone wants to meet you.”

Michaela was feeling lost and alone at the camp. There were no girls there from her part of Toronto. There were no girls who had been friendly until now. She would be glad for some company. So she followed Bethany and Cindy.

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The third girl was waiting outside a cabin. “That’s Rachel,” Cindy told Michaela as Bethany whispered into Rachel’s ear.

“Did you win at your City Finals?” Rachel asked Michaela. She was as tall and long-legged as Michaela.

“I did okay,” Michaela shrugged.

“What’s . . . okay?” Rachel prodded.

“Bronze.”

“Yeah. That’s okay.” Rachel smiled. “I’m looking for a fourth for the annual under-14 cross-country race tomorrow.”

“We’ve been coming to this camp since we were seven,” Bethany said.

“And we’ve trained for this race, like, a lot,” Cindy added.

“Yep. Rachel even ran alongside us while we were on horseback,” Bethany giggled.

Michaela looked at their sporty outfits. High designer logos sparkled in the sunlight. Who needed that kind of thing for camp? She wondered if they had arrived with six suitcases each.

“We really, really wanna win,” Rachel stated. “You interested?”

“I’ve never run cross-country before,” Michaela replied. “I was thinking I’d do it this fall.”

“You’re a runner, aren’t you? It’s only two kilometres. That’s settled then,” Rachel said with finality.

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Michaela did not want to seem like a spoilsport. She nodded.

Sure, she thought. I could be the fourth musketeer.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap. Tap, tap. Tap, tap.

It was the sound of running shoes upon a dirt track. Now and then twigs cracked.

Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh! Huh . . .

Michaela was speeding along with other thirteen-year-old girls. Rachel was in the lead. Michaela figured they had been running for about a minute through the forest.

Before the race they had all been given the important information. There were “2-K” signs taped to trees every two kilometres, with arrows giving directions. For safety, there was a Lead Senior running at the front of the pack and a Rear Senior behind the last runner. Dotted along the way were other Senior Race Assistants in pairs. They held whistles and cell phones, in case a runner fell and injured herself or fainted from the heat.

It was day twelve of camp. *Two more to go*, she thought. Michaela thought about what she liked about being at camp. She had been enjoying the fresher air. She had fallen asleep to the sounds of crickets and other creatures. She enjoyed the songs

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at mealtimes and had no complaints about the food. She had even tried new activities. But it was almost like she was at camp alone. She hadn't made any friends.

The track opened out to a small clearing. Above, the blistering July sun beat down upon them. She squinted from the glare of the light.

There were four teams of four runners each. All wore white T-shirts and shorts. Michaela and her team had pink ribbons pinned to their left sleeves. The other teams wore red, green and blue ribbons.

They ran along the lake on firm sand. Then they returned to the forested area. The course narrowed to single file. Michaela began to feel her calves on fire.

Maybe I should stop and rest, she thought for the first time.

But there was no place to stop. They were bunched up. It was not the heat that began to affect her. It was the pace. And it was punishing.

No one had given her advice about this type of running. Now she wished she had asked, instead of just jumping in.

Several runners passed Michaela on a country road, including her teammates Bethany and Cindy. Moments later, Michaela looked behind and realized that the only person behind her was the Rear Senior.

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Knowing she was last took the wind out of Michaela's sails. She just couldn't run any more. She stopped and bent over, gasping and out of breath. She fell to her knees. The Rear Senior blew a whistle. Two Senior Race Assistants joined them.

"Stay with her," Michaela heard the Rear Senior say. "I'll go join the runners."

"Are you okay?" a tall senior asked.

Michaela stood up and nodded, still catching her breath.

"Let's get you back to camp, then," said the tall senior. She handed Michaela a bottle of water.

"Every summer there's some newbie who doesn't complete this course," she said to her partner, who snickered.

By the time they arrived at the camp, the race was over. Michaela noticed Team Blue celebrating their win. She could not see her Pink teammates anywhere. She wanted to tell them she was sorry.

Rachel, Bethany and Cindy were waiting for her outside her cabin. They did not look happy.

"Let's take a walk," Rachel said through her teeth. It was more like a command.

Michaela looked at each of them. Her skin prickled with nerves. Yet she was not afraid. She was prepared to fight all three of them, if it came to that.

Bring it on, she thought.

They walked without speaking a word. They stopped

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on the beach at the edge of camp and the three girls surrounded Michaela.

“You know what DNF means, don’t you?” Rachel asked sarcastically.

Michaela knew what she meant. In running, DNQ was Did Not Qualify. And DNF was Did Not Finish. She nodded.

“Which means you desecrated our sport,” Bethany chimed in. “And you embarrassed us, city girl.” She twisted her ponytail.

“I’m s —” Michaela started.

“Zip it,” Cindy hissed. “Don’t wanna hear it.”

Bethany laughed out loud like she just heard a joke. Michaela was surprised, until she saw two seniors stroll past them.

“This is what we really, really want, Michaela from the great big city.” Rachel took charge again as soon as the seniors had gone. “Here’s a little advice. Never run cross-country ever again,” She said, pointing at Michaela’s face.

“That way, you won’t let anybody down,” whispered Cindy.

“Totally, stick to track. By yourself, *bronze medalist*,” Rachel spat.

“Or kayak through your concrete jungle,” Cindy offered.

“Nothing with the word *team*,” Bethany said.

“We gave you a chance. But you blew it,” Rachel declared.

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She signalled to Bethany and Cindy and they all walked away. Michaela stood alone facing the water, peering out to the horizon.

Maybe they're right, she thought. I'm no cross-country runner.