

IN THE
SAME
BOAT

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for Woody for Dad

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The green glow on the watch taped to the front of my canoe cuts through the darkness. It's a smack in the face. How has it only been six minutes since I last checked? I'd swear an hour has passed.

"Constant forward motion, Sadie," Dad says.

His words echo in my head, drowning out the cicadas and the frogs and the rush of the river. I dig my paddle into the water for a hard stroke. My shoulders, my lower back, even my legs all scream with pain.

The race started yesterday morning, which means we've been on the water for . . . twenty-four and then . . . I can't hold the numbers in my head. I can't hear them over the scream of my shoulder. The last mile marker I saw was 187. That's whatever 265 minus 187 is.

Eighty-three?

No.

Too many.

It's too many freaking miles.

My eyes go blurry with tears. Which makes it harder to spot obstacles in the river. Especially on this dark, dark night lit only by a pair of Maglites strapped to the nose of the canoe. I try to blink the tears back in, but it doesn't do any good.

And I can't wipe them away. Because I can't stop paddling.

Because Dad would know I'm crying. Again.

"You're sagging," Dad says. "Get a snack if you need one. We're making good time, and I don't want to lose this pace."

"I'm okay," I lie. I'm not hungry, but I lay my paddle across my lap and rip a GU packet off the inside of the canoe. The boat rocks a bit with the effort. I bring the packet up to my lips. A burst of orange-flavored energy gel hits my tongue.

After a few minutes, the fog in my mind clears.

My body still hurts.

Three days ago, Dad and I used epoxy to glue the tops of the GU packets into the side of the boat, so that when we ripped them off, we would be ripping them open. I'd thought we were geniuses. That we'd be masters of this race. That we'd have a sub-fifty-hour finish. Maybe we'd even cross the

San Antonio Bay at sunrise when it's supposed to be the calmest.

I want to punch myself in the face for being so stupid. So overly confident. Because it's not just the pain and the fatigue, or the mayflies that somehow got inside my shirt and down my sports bra. We're in a boat, paddling downriver in the middle of nowhere. Threatened by snakes and submerged trees and rapids and low branches and dams and logjams. Fishing line caught between branches that could knock us out of the boat. The woods could be crawling with murderers.

We spent so much time preparing. Scouting the river. Obsessing over water levels. I've followed this race for as long as I can remember. I thought I knew what to expect. But for the last few hours . . . Even longer than that, really . . . For the last day, maybe, with the finish line still an eternity away, the words *I want to quit* have been perched on the tip of my tongue.

And about thirty minutes ago, they actually came out. I wish I could suck the words back in my mouth, because I know he heard me, and he didn't say a thing. Maybe he thinks I didn't mean it.

I tuck the empty packet into my trash bag, rub the tears out of my eyes, and start paddling again. Everything hurts. I've never been so tired in my life. But I keep going.

Because we are Scofields.

Scofields don't quit.

Scofields don't even stop to rest.

Every Scofield for the past three generations has finished the Texas River Odyssey, 265 miles of sweat and pain and paddling. My brother, Tanner, finished the race with Dad last year and is somewhere behind us in a solo right now. He's probably never even thought of quitting. My mom has finished. Even my grandmother has.

We race because it's hard. Because it's pushing yourself further than what a lot of people think is even possible. It's finding out what you're made of.

And doing the race, finishing it, is what makes you a real Scofield.

"That's good, Sade. Now let's pick up the pace a little."

As I dig in harder and faster with my paddle, the tears well in my eyes again.



Inside the cone of light from our flashlights, there's a bend in the river ahead.

"Let's ride the eddy line here," Dad calls.

He steers us into the place where the fast-rippled water meets the slower flat water, but it's hard for him to see from the back of the boat, so I make a tiny draw to the right, putting us on the line. It'll keep us moving with the fast water, but we can jump into the slow water to avoid an obstacle if we need to.

The nose of the canoe starts to veer off into the eddy, the slow water. I jab my paddle into the water on the left and pull. I pull too hard, and as we round the bend, we're sucked into the current.

But it's okay. No sweeper ahead—a fallen tree waiting to sweep us out of the boat. No strainer, either—a submerged tree with branches sticking up, straining the water. Some rocks and a log to our left, but smooth water ahead. I keep paddling.

And then we're almost on it. The water is breaking around something black. A branch or a piece of wood or something. My heart thuds as I dig my paddle into the water to draw us off it. The bow clears it by a hair and my body softens with relief.

Then the current grabs the stern and pushes the boat sideways.

I backsweep, but it's too late. I should have done it sooner. I should have called to Dad that I was drawing us off something. My stomach drops as Dad yells, "Backpaddle!"

And I do. I reach as far back as I can, put in my paddle, and push it forward, willing the boat to back up. The boat rocks as Dad draws us to the left. Too late. The current's got us. The boat *whams* into the branch. And it must be more than just a branch under the surface. There's a sickening crack and I'm lurched to the side.

I crash into cold water. It seeps into my clothes and my

shoes and covers my face as the current pushes me forward. I hold what's left of my breath. My body scrapes against something hard. I kick and pull with my arms and claw my way to the surface. My head breaks through. Water streams into my mouth as I gasp for breath.

I scramble to get into position—feet first, but the water's pushing me too hard, turning me. My right side slams into a rock. There's a sharp pain and something inside me cracks and all the air is knocked out of my lungs. I can't let the river take me any farther. I grab, tear, kick at the rock, scrambling to the top, and finally, I kneel hands and knees on it, out of the water.

I gulp down a few hard breaths. And then the pain hits. Something sharp in my side. My rib cage. I try to suck in more air—but can't get enough. My chest heaves as I gasp for more.

“Dad.”

My voice is barely above a whisper. My heart beats in my throat. I scan the river. Where is he? The only light comes from the other side of the river. From the flashlights attached to the bow. The boat must have floated into an eddy. The light moves across the water and the trees onshore, but Dad's not in it.

His voice comes from upriver. “Sadie! Sadie, where are you? Are you okay?”

I take the deepest breath I can. “Dad!” It comes out louder this time. Hopefully loud enough.