Name: _____ Date: _____

Anchor Leg

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1796 words

Dani Moreau was the fastest thirteen-year-old on skis in the whole of the Orrin Creek, and she did not trust anyone with the last leg. She had been quite open about this. In a relay, four skiers each ski a loop and touch the next one on the back, and the fourth, the anchor, crosses the line with everybody watching. Dani had wanted to be the anchor since she was ten. She had never explained why, because nobody had ever worked up the courage to ask her.

In December, the club's fifth skier, Mika, fell on the ice at the bottom of Long Hill and broke her wrist, and that left the Orrin Relay team with four. Coach Haldane, who was tall and mild and wore his mittens on strings like an enormous child, wrote the line-up on the board in the wax hut. TOMAS. RUTH. PIA. DANI. Dani studied the third name for a long and unfriendly moment. "She is nine," she said. "I can see that," said Coach Haldane. "Four skiers," he added gently. "Four legs."

Pia Lindgren was the tiniest person in the club, with a serious face and a blue hat with a pompom bigger than her head. She stood in the doorway of the wax hut, holding her skis like firewood, and when Dani looked at her, she looked back without blinking, which Dani found thoroughly irritating. Pia's skis, Dani noticed, had been waxed wrong. "A kicking wax is a kind of conversation with the snow," Dani said. "If it is too hard, you slip, and if it is too soft, you stick, and you are slipping, so you need a softer one."

She showed her how, holding the ski in a vise and rubbing a stick of wax on the middle, where the foot pushes. She smoothed it with the heel of her hand until it shone like a candle, while Pia watched the way a person watches a magic trick. "Why only the middle?" she asked. "Because the ends have to glide and the middle has to grip," said Dani. "It's both at once. It's the whole sport." Pia put one small finger on the wax. "It feels like soap," she said, and Dani found that she was smiling.

They practiced for three weeks, and Dani taught her to kick and glide, to plant her poles at an angle, and to look at the track ten meters ahead and never at her own feet. She taught her the hand-off, which has to be a flat touch on the back in the exchange zone, or else the team is disqualified. "You tag the next skier, like a game," she said, and Pia tagged her with a shy slap. Dani said that was fine, and said it twice, because she did not like how much she had begun to care.

The Orrin Relay course is two and a half kilometers, in three parts. There is the Meadow, a wide white field. There is Long Hill, which is long and does not improve. And between them there is the Tunnel, a stretch of trail through old spruce so tall that, in winter, at four in the afternoon, it is almost night. Dani had skied it a thousand times. On a Wednesday, in the last

gray light, she took Pia there, and Pia stopped at the edge of it with her poles at her sides, and did not move.

"It's too dark," Pia said, very small. "It's not dark," said Dani. "It's just trees." "It's too dark," said Pia, and her chin trembled. Dani opened her mouth to say what she usually said, which was to hurry up, but she looked at the blue hat and shut it again, because she suddenly remembered something that she had never told anybody. When she was ten, in a squall, she had skied off the edge of the Meadow without knowing it, and had stood for forty minutes, waist-deep in a drift, until a snowmobile found her.

So she told Pia, which was easier than she had expected. There were orange flags along the whole course, she said, one every fifty meters, and in the Tunnel they were reflective. If there was ever a whiteout, when the snow came so thick that you could not tell the sky from the ground, you did not ski toward the next flag. You stopped at the last one you could see, and blew the whistle in three blasts, and stood there. "Hardly anyone who stays at a flag gets lost," she said. "Almost everyone who keeps going does."

She took the little silver whistle from her own zipper and fastened it to Pia's, with a knot that she checked three times. Then she skied into the Tunnel, one flag at a time, talking the whole way, and Pia came behind her like a duckling, counting aloud. "Seven," she said. "Eight. Nine." By the end her voice had steadied, and when they came out into the gray light on the far side, she raised both poles over her head. "I was only a little bit scared!" she shouted. "You were completely scared," said Dani. "You did it anyway."

Race day was clear and bitterly cold, nine below zero, with a sky of pale blue glass and snow that squeaked beneath every step. Eight teams assembled at the start, and the spectators stood along the fence in their puffy coats, stamping and blowing on their hands. Dani waited in the exchange zone with her skis on, bouncing on her toes. Tomas was steady and powerful, a boy who skied the way other people read instructions. When he came through the zone, he tagged Ruth, and the team was in third, and Ruth went out like a startled deer.

It was during Ruth's leg that the squall arrived. It came over the mountain in less than five minutes, a flat gray wall with a white curtain under it, and the light drained out of the sky. Coach Haldane lifted his head and said a word under his breath, and Dani felt her stomach drop. Ruth skied into the zone through the first white streamers of snow and slapped Pia on the back. "Go," Ruth gasped. Pia went. Her blue pompom bobbed once, and twice, and then the wind took it, and the whole course disappeared.

A whiteout is not the dark. It is worse, in a way, because it is bright. The sky and the ground melt into each other until there is no horizon, no hill, no shadow, and you can stand in the middle of a field and not know whether you are looking up or down. Dani could not see the Meadow or the fence. She stood in the exchange zone with the snow driving into her face and counted the minutes, five and then ten, and there was still no small blue hat.

Twelve minutes after Pia had left, the first team from behind them came out of the white and tagged its anchor, and went away again, and then another. "She's late," said Dani. "Everybody is late," said Coach Haldane. "It's a whiteout." "I'm going to go and look." She had already started to move, and she felt his mitten close on her sleeve, gently, on its string. "You'd be disqualified, and you would be lost," he said. "She has a whistle. She knows the rule." "I taught her the rule," said Dani, and her voice cracked.

Then she heard it. At first she thought that it was the wind. It came from a long way off, thin and silver, and it came in threes: three short blasts, a long pause, and three again. She stood absolutely motionless, with her eyes shut. Somewhere in the white, a small person was standing at a flag, and not moving, and blowing a whistle, exactly as she had been told. A marshal on skis came out of the snow a few minutes later, one hand on a small blue shoulder, and the squall began to lift.

Pia skied the last two hundred meters in sunshine. She came into the zone in a sort of lurch, with her eyelashes frosted white and a pale patch on one cheek where the cold had bitten it. She slapped Dani on the back, small and flat and exactly right. "I stopped at the flag," Pia said. "I know," said Dani. "I heard you." Then she bent and pushed off, with the team in eighth place and nine minutes behind the leaders.

She had never skied like that. She flew down the first slope in a tuck so low that her chin nearly touched her knees. She took the Tunnel at a speed that she would not, afterward, admit to, counting the orange flags in the corner of her eye. She passed a team on the Meadow, and another on Long Hill with her lungs on fire, and a third in the last kilometer, and the crowd along the fence went wild. She crossed the line in fifth place, with the fastest leg of the day by forty seconds.

The results were chalked on a board outside the wax hut. FIFTH, ORRIN VALLEY. Dani looked at it, with her breath pouring out in clouds, and felt the emotion that she had expected, which was fury. She had won her leg by forty seconds, and the team had lost, in a squall, because a nine-year-old with a whistle had done exactly what she was told. She turned around, prepared to be angry, and found that she was not, which was strange, like reaching for a step that was not there, so she went into the hut instead.

Pia was sitting on the bench beside the stove, with a blanket around her shoulders and a mug of cocoa larger than her face. Her cheek had turned from white to pink. She looked up at Dani with worried eyes. "Was I too slow?" she asked. Dani sat down beside her and, for a long time, said nothing. She was thinking about the whistle, and the three blasts, and the hand on the small blue shoulder, and how the fastest leg of the day had been followed by the slowest. "Nine minutes," she said at last. "I counted every one."

Pia put her head against Dani's shoulder, and the cocoa tilted dangerously, and Dani caught it while the stove ticked beside them. Outside, the sun had come out over the Meadow, and the

snow lay smooth and gold and utterly innocent, as though it had never done anything. Tomas and Ruth came in, stamping, and Coach Haldane followed with a thermos. Pia had fallen asleep. Dani did not move her arm. She did not move it for forty minutes.

Questions

1. Why did Dani want to ski the last leg?

A. She did not trust anyone else with it
B. The coach had promised it to her
C. She was the oldest skier

2. What is a kicking wax for?

A. Making the ends of the ski slide
B. Gripping the snow under the middle of the ski
C. Keeping the skis warm

3. What was the rule Dani taught Pia for a whiteout?

A. Ski faster toward the next flag
B. Take off her skis and walk
C. Stop at the last flag, blow three blasts, and stay there

4. In the story, a whiteout is

A. a blinding snowstorm with no horizon
B. a very fast ski
C. a kind of wax

5. Why was Dani unable to go and look for Pia?

A. She had no skis
B. She would be disqualified, and she could also have become lost
C. The coach had gone to look

6. Why did Dani not feel the anger she expected at the results board?

A. She had won the race
B. She did not care about skiing
C. She had come to care about Pia more than winning alone

Words to know

anchor: last skier
whiteout: blinding snow
marshal: course official
squall: sudden storm
disqualified: removed from race

Answer key: Anchor Leg

1. A. She did not trust anyone else with it
2. B. Gripping the snow under the middle of the ski
3. C. Stop at the last flag, blow three blasts, and stay there
4. A. a blinding snowstorm with no horizon
5. B. She would be disqualified, and she could also have become lost
6. C. She had come to care about Pia more than winning alone