

# *One Last Run*

by

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“We’re going to the libertery,” whispered Sancho smiling at his mate. His smile was overly large, and he drooled slightly.

“Library,” Ruthy whispered back, wiping the spittle away with a tissue, “And I want you to behave, all right?”

Sancho grinned at her. “All right,” he whispered in reply... then taking in a deep breath, yelled out, “LIBRERRY!”

Ruthy reached out a paw and rubbed the area behind his ears where the lump was. Sancho had been such a good sled dog... the best... and she was his running mate; until he got sick. “Library,” she corrected him softly, knowing it would make no difference. She gently moved her finger to the white star shaped spot on his forehead. She’d always teased that being second on his team was easy because all she had to do was follow the star.

“Librititary,” he replied, near giggling. “Cap’n Joe be there?”

Captain Joe was his favorite librarian and chief story teller during the children’s story hour. All the pups who attended loved Sancho. He was an adult come to their level; playing blocks with them on the floor, never talking down to them... and always attentive when Captain Joe read to them.

“Captain Joe will be there, and he told me to tell you he’s going to read, ‘Toby’s Red Mittens’ just for you.”

Sancho began bobbing up and down... all two hundred pounds of him. He was suddenly licking her face. Normally this would tickle her, and she would interact with him as they only could in the privacy of their home; but tonight she was in a hurry. Myra was meeting her for coffee while Captain Jack kept an eye on him. She needed a break and a coffee with Myra down at the Husky Lodge, though not a long break; was at least respite from her endless responsibility.

She held him close in a hug and whispered in his ear, “If I had a wish Sancho, it would be that you could start all over again. It’s just not fair, my darling. You were the best sled dog in the North Country and now you’re just a puppy again. I would give anything if we could have just one last run... I would die happy for that.”

“Liberary,” he whispered back.

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Talk at the Lodge had been of the races. It was always about the races. Even in the short amount of time that Ruthy had, she'd been propositioned no less than five times by different lead Dogs to run as their second. Though none of them inferred she was wasting her time taking care of an invalid, their attitude said as much; and it hurt that she so wanted to say yes.

“Go ahead and do it,” Myra told her in private. “Jack and I will watch Sancho for you. I'm willing to bet you could out pace any of those five. In fact, if you had a mind to do it, you could have your own team Ruthy. The Dogs would all line up at a chance to join with you. Think about it hun... the money you'd win could be a blessing in taking care of your mate.”

“Not without Sancho,” she'd replied softly, and the conversation was discretely changed.

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The walk back from the lodge normally was peaceful, but a flickering light in the distance made the hair on the back of Ruthy's neck stand up. The night was dark and the Northern Lights were dancing; but there was just too much light in the sky for it to be normal. That was when she heard the village bell begin ringing. It was the fire alarm, and everyone within hearing would try their best to get to where the fire was.

A huge dog ran towards her in the darkness. “RUN RUTHY!” he yelled, “THE LIBRARY'S ON FIRE!”

Without thinking she sprinted into the night next to the other dog. She caught his scent right off... it was Sancho... Sancho came for her... he was running again, and she was by his side.

“What happened?!” she managed to ask; struggling to match his rhythm.

“I don't know. There was an explosion and then fire. Captain Joe was just getting to the good part of ‘Toby's Mittens’ when it happened. It was fast... the flames climbed the book cases... we got all the pups out but one.”

They were moving swiftly, eating up the distance in the night. It didn't matter that Ruthy couldn't see the path... she was again following her star and the star always knew where to go. Adrenaline flow shocked her to incredible awareness and her legs pumped; seemingly disconnected from her brain. She had flashes of the fire in her mind. It was all around, climbing the shelves, hanging from the ceiling, racing across the floor to...

“Do you see him?” Sancho asked her as she raced the last hundred yards to the burning building.

“Yes.”

“He’s in the story circle. I couldn’t get to him. You’ll have to do it. I’ll lead... just like in the old days... you follow and I’ll protect you as much as I can. In and out... straight through the flames.”

And then he leapt through the window with Ruthy close on to his tail. There were flames everywhere, and the heat took her breath.

“This way!” Sancho yelled.

His bulk covered her face and she was suddenly able to inhale. The smoke was thick and choking but she followed his lead and there was the small body laying at her feet. The pup’s fur was singed and he was not moving. In his small arms was the book ‘Toby’s Red Mittens’. Grabbing him by the scruff of the neck, she spun, looking for a means of escape.

“THE FRONT WINDOW!” she heard Sancho yell... and there it was. With the sound of shattering glass and the feel of cool clean air, she was through... and then there was darkness.

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Ruthy woke to someone licking her face. There was a terrible smell of smoke in the air.

“Sancho?” she said as she opened her eyes.

Old Captain Joe sat next to her in the snow. Nearby were the families of the pups who had come for story time. The fire illuminated them in flickering shadows as they sat protectively next to their children. The old dog’s face was not happy.

“We got all the puppies out,” he told her softly. “Sancho seemed to snap out of his illness for that time Ruthy... it was a joy to see him in action again.” He sighed. “When they were safe, he apparently lost hold of his sanity again. He got this funny look in his eyes, and ran back into the building, yelling something about bringing me ‘Toby’s Red Mittens’ so I could finish the reading. I’m so sorry.”

Ruthy stifled a sob. Looking towards the library she saw that it was not much more than smoldering ruins. With a crumpling sound, one of the remaining walls toppled, sending a shower of sparks into the night.

“He was a true hero,” Captain Joe told her. “It happened so fast I couldn’t have saved them all by myself.”

She sniffed the air, and looked around. “There was a pup with me,” she managed.

“I saw that... had no idea where he came from, so while I stayed here with you, I had Myra take him around. You’ve been unconscious for near an hour now. So far no one has claimed him. He’s got that silly book clutched in his arms and won’t let it go. I’ve no idea where he came from.”

Rising from the snow, and shaking herself, Ruthy said, “Take me to him.”

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Myra hugged her friend in a death grip of sorrow. “I’m so sorry,” she finally managed to say. “So so sorry. Sancho was such a wonderful dog.” Inwardly, though she would never admit it, Myra was secretly relieved that her friend was once again free. Life was indeed unfair, but at least from here it would get better.

“Where’s the pup?” Ruthy asked softly when they broke apart.

“He’s with Constable Glen,” she told her. “The poor thing is a total mystery. No one knows who he belongs to, so I guess the Constable will take him to the children’s home.”

“I need to see him,” she replied, feeling a sudden urgency.

As they approached the Constable, dressed in his red uniform and writing notes in his small breast pocket book, a small body separated from his shadow and ran towards them.

“Hey there pup!” yelled the large Mouny, “Come back here this instant.”

Apparently the Constable had never dealt with pups and didn’t understand they had a mind of their own. Yelling for them to come back when they had a notion to follow was pointless; and this one seemed to have a very large notion. In his arms was still clutched the book, ‘Toby’s Red Mittens’, and as he hugged Ruthy’s leg, the white star on his forehead was clearly evident even in the dim illumination provided by the Northern lights and the fading fire.

Reaching down, she picked him up and cradled him in her arms; squeezing him tightly.

“Liberaaary,” the pup squeaked.

“Library,” Ruthy automatically corrected, and they both laughed.

Above them in the sky the Northern Lights silently danced with a multitude of sparks from the fire; the pairing of these partners following a tune only able to be heard by the heart. In life, it is said; magic does happen... wishes sometimes are seen to come true... and life does happily move on.