

REBECCA JÄGER



TOUCH OF HEAVEN

"A skillfully written story which takes the reader inside a world few have ever seen." - Barbara Smith, San Antonio, TX.

I'm standing on the skids of a dog sled. In front of me, runs a team of my eight Siberian Huskies. It's a night safari deep in northern Finland. A windy day brought a fresh layer of snow and molded the effortless stuff into sleek dunes. The night is staggeringly bright with a full moon which rises from the forest. I hear the paws of the dogs touching the deep snow. They pant. The light Birchwood race sled runs smoothly. It weighs only twenty-two pounds and I add one-hundred and ten more. We move incredibly fast.

The silvery moonlight reflects from the tiny crystals of the powder snow. I put out my headlamp when I reach the curve which leads into the snow-covered heart of the pine tree forest. I slow down into a standstill with the soft mat brake and order the dogs to wait. I push the anchor into the deep bank with my boot. The dogs jump up and down when they understand that we are going nowhere.

I yell the order “stop!” repeatedly but half of my team consists of young dogs still in training. They yank their harnesses in agitation. The white bitch, Omen, keeps bouncing up and down with all her paws in the air.

“Why are we stopping?” She seems to ask with her light blue eyes as she gazes back at me.

But I don’t give in. They must learn to wait to earn rank.

My breath puffs up in clouds. I remove my Canada Goose Expedition parka hood and gaze up. Each inch of the black velvet fills with dotted stars until the Aurora Borealis lights up the sky with elusive neon green. I take off my down-stuffed mitten and my hand becomes numb in seconds. It’s freezing: minus twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit. The sky is alive with light, movement, and color. Blue breaks through the darkness. Lilac appears on the edges, where blue dissolves into the ruby red.

And he comes forth from nothingness with stars in his fur. The playful *FireFox* gallops across the sky. His black paws kick the air in the West where the remnants of the sunset still lick the horizon. The fox arches his back and springs into an agile leap. He lands on his extended front paws in the black East. He throws his head back while his flames never stop moving. His tail is fluffy and brushes the cold sky with vivid color. Sparkles pop as he touches the hillside and the mute treetops. The tip of his tail whips the dome of heaven until he pauses. When he looks down at me, a sly smile spreads on his canine face. I feel so small compared to the scale of Mother Nature.

I am a speck of dust.

The fox ruffles his fur. He waves his tail for goodbye and vanishes with a flash of light. I wait for a reappearance, but the fire is gone.

Old Finns believed that the Aurora Borealis was created by a fox which ran across the sky on cold winter nights. His tail brushed the colors on the canvas of the black velvet. It's not just a legend. I've seen him many times.

I draw my finger across the Milky Way which appears in its full glory now. I close my eyes and feel the touch of Our Father on my face. I'm blessed. A single tear forms on my lower eyelid. It freezes into my lashes.

Thank You, God. Thank you for letting me live here.

I'm pulled out of it as Ferro, the young male, releases a sorrowful wail which can be heard for miles. Standing put is against his eager nature. *Huurre* (which means Frost in Finnish) reprimands him by standing steadfast with spread legs while the youngster yanks the ropes again. A disapproving look from the older husky's amber eyes stops him from moving.

Huurre is my leading dog, worth his weight in gold and diamonds. He waits for an order but I say nothing.

He's eleven years old and slower than he used to be. It's his time to retire when the puppies are adequately trained.

I remember how Huurre was born. It was a warm summer night and the air filled with mosquitoes. The darkness was only a thin shadow in July. The sun stayed behind the forest to rise within an hour. I received Huurre when he slipped out of his mother's womb. I opened his amniotic sack and cut his umbilical cord. This was the bitch's first litter and she didn't understand what was inside the slippery pocket. She massaged the other puppies with her tongue but discarded the one who remained in his delivery package. I wonder what would have happened to Huurre if I hadn't stayed up all night and watched out for him. I remembered wrapping him inside a clean towel and moving

his front legs up and down like he was a tiny gymnast. When he started whining, I placed him on his mother's breast. He grew up to be an excellent sled dog: an epiphany of power and speed. Our eyes meet again. His tongue hangs from his mouth as he breathes the freezing air. I see that he understands how much I love him. My heart aches to think of an imminent departure in just a few years' time.

I'm thankful for you.

My huskies are lean but muscular. Each one seems to have a built-in nuclear power plant. They are molded for the race. I pray that the harnesses can hold their strength. Omen has been chewing on hers while I admired the sky.

I smile and release the anchor.

"Drive!"

The dogs move faster than my thoughts and I'm in heaven.

