

# THE RACE

by  
Victoria Furman

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Debbie *had* to win—everything depended on this race.

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The morning of the sled-dog race, Debbie and her brother Mark were up before the sun had lightened the cold New England sky to finish the chores around the family kennels. They packed their racing equipment in the farm truck—the harnesses made of white bands with each dog's name stitched in red, the hitching lines, water pans, and the medicine kit. Mark tied the light ashwood racing sled on top where it sat like a strange wild bird. The team of five strong husky dogs was lifted into individual boxes built into the truck. When everything was ready, Mark took the wheel and Debbie hoisted herself into the seat beside him. Her clothing was warm and practical for the race: windbreaker over a thick sweater, ski pants, waterproof boots, and two pairs of gloves. Her dark hair was smooth under a ski headband.

As they bowled along the deserted highway with snow heaped high on the sides, Debbie tried not to think how much depended on her performance in the race today. She had trained hard,

taking the dogs out every day and running them six or seven miles over the snow-covered back roads, but still! She had never come in first in a race and that's what she had to do for the prize of two hundred dollars. The money was needed to pay the veterinarian and the feed bills.

"We can't ask for any more credit," Mark said, as though reading her thoughts. "Debbie, you have to win today. We must pay our debts, but we also have to sell more pups or we can't keep the kennels going. Since Dad died, our dogs haven't won a race, and folks won't buy pups from huskies that trail along near the end. I sure wish I could have a try at that prize today." His hand pressed against his leg which he had injured in a race. He would be out of the running for a month.

"Oh, Mark, don't make me any more nervous than I am. Please! I'll try, really I will." Panic raised Debbie's soft voice to a high pitch.

"You have to do more than try, you have to race to win. Stop being so easy

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on the dogs and stop helping every driver along the trail. And forget about the scenery; just concentrate on winning!"

Debbie closed her eyes to shut out the determined hard look on her brother's face. How changed he was since Dad died. It used to be fun to drive in the sled-dog races, but now Mark's obsession with winning took away any pleasure. She pulled her gloves off, then put them on again. If only she weren't so jittery. Mark was only seventeen and the man of the family now, a heavy burden of responsibility for him to carry. He was worried about making the kennels pay. Debbie sighed, and once again she forgave him the harsh words.

They arrived alongside the frozen lake where the race would start and end. Mark maneuvered the truck into a parking space, joining a long line of other racing outfits. There were old station wagons with dogs piled in the back, trucks like Mark's with homemade dog boxes on top, and some expensive dog vans, painted with racing scenes and the dogs' names lettered in gold. The drivers were from all the New England states and as far north as Canada.

Mark laid out a chain to which the dogs would be staked until racing time. Debbie let the dogs out and snapped fasteners from the chain to their collars. The beautiful huskies pranced with

excitement, their ears erect and their bushy tails waving. Dozens of other teams lined the roadway. Most of the dogs were howling, barking, or whining, filling the chilly air with a deafening chorus.

Usually Debbie enjoyed visiting around with other drivers, talking shop and renewing acquaintances with out-of-town friends, but today she stayed by the truck. A stream of racing fans and curious spectators walked by, staring at the dogs and their owners. One man asked Debbie, "Which race are you in, miss?"

"The Five-Dog Race in Class B," she answered. "It's six miles long." She stroked the head of her lead dog, Keemo, who was straining to get away.

"Whoa, Keemo, calm down now; you'll get a chance to run. He loves to race; they all do."

"That sled looks pretty skittery," the man said, pointing to the sled Mark was lifting down from the truck. "Do you sit in it? And how do you steer it?"

Debbie smiled. She had answered such questions every time she raced.

"The sled doesn't have anything to steer with, nothing but a foot brake. I guide the dogs with voice commands that tell them when to start and stop and which way to turn. All sled dogs are trained to voice commands." She straightened up. "I don't sit in the sled, but if a dog goes lame, I let it ride in the sled. I stand at

the rear on the ends of the steel runners, see? There are broader places for your feet, and I hold onto the sled with this handlebar." She grasped the high band of wood, shaped like an upside down U. "You're right about racing sleds being skittery. I often fall off and the sled turns over. Sometimes I get dragged."

"Sounds pretty hazardous. Well, good luck, miss."

"Thanks." To herself she mumbled, "And do I need it!"

Mark, who had gone to headquarters to sign in, returned with a bright orange canvas bib, which each driver had to wear, with a starting number on it.

"Good, my number's three," Debbie said, slipping into the bib. "I won't have to stand around long, getting more scared every second."

A whistle sounded down at the lake.

"There's the signal to start the race," Mark said. "Let's hitch the dogs and move up near the starting chute."

They harnessed the dogs to the sled, putting Keemo in the lead. He was a strong, intelligent dog and the two teams hitched behind him were from Mark and Debbie's father's winning team. They were getting old but could still hold their own in the short races. Mark took Keemo's collar and led the team past the other dogs and the throngs of fans pressing close near the start. Debbie guided the sled. Friends called to her, wishing her luck. Teams numbered one

and two took off at five minute intervals, and Debbie moved into the starting chute. She was next.

Mark, holding Keemo, led the team to the line. "Remember to start fast, keep a steady pace, and don't fool around!" He yelled over the din of howling dogs and noise of the crowd.

Debbie nodded. She licked her dry lips and grasped the handlebar of the sled, crouching to brace herself for the takeoff.

The official starter counted to three, snapped down a checkered flag, and shouted, "GO!"

"Run, Keemo! Hike!" Debbie called as the sled jerked forward. She ran behind it for a few yards, her boots pounding on the frozen lake. When the dogs settled into a fast lope, she hopped on the runners. The wind whipped her hair behind her and made her eyes sting. She bent forward to lessen wind resistance, balancing expertly on the light sled.

The exhilaration of the race gripped her and for a moment she forgot she must win. Racing was the greatest thrill ever! Her attention wandered to the mountain in the distance that she and Mark often climbed. How magnificent its craggy top was against the winter sky! She gulped the cold air, fragrant with pine and fir. But the dogs were slowing down!  
Jerking her attention back to the

race, she called, "Pick it up, Keemo! Straighten out there. Good boy, good dog!" She talked to the team, encouraging them, keeping contact with them as all good racers did. Soon she was pressing close behind team number two. She was going well enough to pass and called the signal.

"Trail, trail!" she hollered. The driver, a young boy, pulled his team to the side of the trail, which was now a plowed track over a field.

Debbie noticed that the boy appeared unhappy and that his dogs were tangled in their harnesses. Well, she dare not stop. She had promised Mark! It was against the racing rules to do more than hold a sled in this situation while the driver untangled his dogs, but Debbie stifled her natural desire to help. Urging her team to gallop she rounded a curve and whizzed into a stretch of woods. The trail was narrower, but good with soft snow. Ahead of her was team number one. Yard by yard she gained on it. The team slowed down and when she passed it she thought one of the dogs was limping. But she must not stop. She was first now, but that didn't mean she would win. Each driver raced against time, and she had to beat fifteen teams.

Soon the trail would cross a main road where fans always parked to watch the teams at close range. "Slow down!" she called to the dogs. A policeman, seeing her approach, stopped traffic in

both directions and motioned her ahead. Debbie hopped off the runners and pushed the sled to help the dogs on the bare road.

A girl about Debbie's age broke away from the fans, and called breathlessly to her. "Hey Debbie, wait a minute will you? I have to get a picture for *The Headliner*." She aimed a camera at the team.

"I can't stop; I'm sorry." Debbie called, pushing on.

"But it's my first assignment! Please, Debbie!"

With a quick shake of her head, Debbie pressed on to the other side. She felt like a snake, refusing the girl. *The Headliner* was the school paper. Well, she hoped Mark would be proud of her, because she wasn't proud of herself.

At the half-way point of the race, Debbie stopped the team for a brief rest. The dogs sank to the snow, their tongues hanging out like red flags. She checked their harnesses and examined their feet for any ice balls. Suddenly there was the sound of pounding feet behind her. She whirled around. A team was bearing down on her without a driver—a runaway! This was the most dangerous thing that could happen in a race.

Instinctively Debbie braced herself and as the dogs flashed past, she reached for the handlebar of the sled and hung on. The runaway team didn't

stop. She was dragged behind the sled, her body banging on the ice and snow. She pulled her feet up enough to give herself a shove and managed to reach the brake. She jammed down hard, calling, "Whoa. Who-a!" Finally the five huskies slowed down and stopped. They panted hard and their breath hung in a frosty cloud above them.

She looked behind her, searching for the driver. Where was he? She couldn't stand here losing time. A team was zooming towards her and would pass her. And now her own dogs decided to gallop to her and when they all met there could be a terrible dog fight! Why did this have to happen when the race was going so well?

"Whoa, Keemo! Stop!" She shouted to her leader, and well-trained that he was, Keemo obeyed. She breathed easier—at least her own dogs were safe. A man came running around the bend of the trail, hard. He waved and shouted, "Hey, that's my team!"

"You can have them!" she called back and hurried to her huskies.

"Say, thanks very much!" he yelled, but Debbie had already taken off. As the dogs trotted through the woods, tears stung her eyes and fell in icy cold drops on her cheeks. Brushing them away with her sleeve, she noticed a stain of red. She must have cut her face. She could never win now and Mark would never forgive her. How would they pay the feed bills? And the vet?

Maybe they would have to sell their wonderful dogs and close the kennels. All the years of work their father had put into them would be lost because of her. Debbie shivered. She felt cold through and through.

The rest of the race was a blur. Trees rushed past, snow from the dogs' feet pelted her, and her legs began to ache. Near the finish line she ran behind the sled to lighten the load, but when the dogs flashed across, she stumbled with exhaustion.

Mark was there, waiting to guide the team through the crowd. His face told her without words how he felt. He had timed her and knew what a poor race she had run. When all the teams were clocked in, Debbie learned that she was fourth. The prize was fifty dollars.

"That will pay the vet anyway," she said forlornly.

Mark nodded.

They were packed up and Mark was starting the truck's motor when a man ran towards them, gesturing and calling, "Wait! I want to talk to you!"

Debbie recognized him as the driver of the runaway team. Oh, she hoped he wouldn't tell Mark! It was better that her brother think she was just slow than to know she had deliberately lost.

The man leaned against the side of the truck and said, "Young lady, you saved a valuable team out there on the trail and you saved my job. I'm Pierre Cadeau. I take care of the kennels and

drive for Mr. King of Quebec. Those dogs might have been killed or lost or hurt somebody if you hadn't stopped them. Not many drivers would hold a team for another and risk losing the race."

Debbie moaned inwardly and dared not look Mark's way.

"I asked the officials your name and they say you have kennels with good huskies. Mr. King wants some American racing stock and told me to buy two or three pups if I find good ones. Are your kennels far from here?"

Before Debbie could reply Mark said eagerly, "We have some of the finest huskies in the east; Siberians and Alaskans. If you follow us, we'll show you the way." The man agreed and hurried away. As they waited for him, silence settled heavily over Mark and

Debbie. She dabbed nervously at her cheek with a tissue.

"Mark," she said finally. "I couldn't—positively *couldn't*—let that runaway team tear past and not try to stop it."

Mark stared straight ahead, leaning forward on the steering wheel. "I guess I don't really want a sister who wouldn't care what happened to the other guy or his team. I've been pretty worried and up tight about things, maybe the wrong things." He turned to Debbie and his eyes, that had been so hard since Dad died, softened. "Here comes our man. Let's go sell those pups."

Debbie did some quick mental arithmetic. Yes, there would be enough to pay the feed bills and more. The next time she raced maybe she would come in first. Well, at least second.

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### Comment

1. Why is it so important to Debbie to win this race?
2. Why doesn't Mark race the dogs himself?
3. Reread Mark's comments about winning (page 171, column 2, paragraph 3). Do you agree with his ideas about racing? Explain.
  - a. Why does Debbie give up her chance to win by stopping the runaway dog team?
  - b. In your opinion, did she make the right decision? Give reasons for your answers.