

The Spanish Lady (part 5 of 6)

by

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(based on COTY)

The ride out of town was easy enough. Here the trails were broad, well-used by hunters and trappers alike. The snow and ice had been tramped down by feet and sled runners alike until they were as good as any road. Even further out, as the paths started to split off and snake their lonely ways through the trees, the going was still easy. Louise's dogs barked joyfully as they ran, scarcely needing her occasional "gee!" or "haw!" to send them in the right direction. If the truth were told, Louise felt much the same way. She'd been trapped in her sick-room for weeks; she'd had the care of her father a week more, and after that she'd been all but chained to the hotel. It wasn't the worst part of winter just now, but the dark months always weighed heavy on her, especially when she couldn't get out. Even with the low grey clouds covering most of the sky, she felt as if it were spring at last - she was outside, she was flying, she was free...

She'd never known the dogs to be so swift before. Then again, she'd never gone mushing with an unladen sled. All the sled carried just now was herself, her father's gun, and a smallish medical bag. She'd reckoned they wouldn't be out long, so there wasn't really any need for supplies. Even if Sergeant Preston were still far away, she wouldn't need much. She'd find a sheltered spot along the trail some ways out of town and wait there. She did have flint and tinder in her parka, and there were enough fallen branches about under the snow. That should hold her for a few hours.

The dogs slowed without warning; Louise grabbed at the sled's frame, blinking in confusion. That's funny, she thought. "Whoa, boys, whoa," she called- not that they needed her encouragement to stop. Tossing the clawlike sled anchor into the snow, she stamped on it heavily until it bit into the ice. Moose looked up at her, whining softly; she crouched down next to him, running one mittened hand along his back, then reached for his nearest paw. Nothing wrong there, not that she could see, nor on any of the other paws either. It was the same for Champion and Bear. Shaking her head, Louise sat back on her heels. "What's the matter with you three?" she asked. "Honestly, there's-

Moose whined again, trying to scrabble backwards. It didn't work very well, as he was harnessed closest to the sled, but it struck Louise as an odd thing for the dog to do. She turned, looking over her shoulder; she saw nothing but the trees. "There, you see?" she said. "I... don't..."

Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed as if something had just slunk between two of the larger spruces. Something big.

Suppressing the urge to shiver, Louise reached slowly for her father's rifle. Expecting to run into a wolf pack, Miss Delaney? Well... yes. She shouldered the weapon, waiting for the beast to show itself again, but it never came. The dogs still huddled nervously, but Bear, at least, no longer seemed quite as ill at ease. She shook her head a little. Somehow, she hadn't expected to see a wolf quite this close to the city.

Then again... She realized with a jolt that she could barely make out the city's chimney smoke over the tops of the trees. Come to think of it, she wasn't really sure that was smoke at all. It had a certain look about it that left her thinking "clouds" instead - the first faint traces of that southern storm, perhaps? She couldn't say. How far had she come, exactly? She couldn't say that, either. Her dogs were fast, and she wasn't sure how long they'd been traveling. They could be anywhere.

No, she thought, not anywhere. They couldn't be anywhere, because they were still on the trail. All she had to do was turn the sled around and they could be back in town just as easily as they'd come. It wouldn't be that hard - easier, probably, since the dogs would be able to follow their own tracks homeward. Even if it started to snow, it couldn't be that much of a problem. The wolf, if there was one, would give up soon enough. She could go back any time she wanted, really

That settled it, as far as she was concerned. So long as the road lay open behind her, the road ahead of her was fair game. Relaxing, Louise slung her father's gun across her back and pulled the anchor out of the ice. "All right, you three," she said sternly. "It's just one wolf, and you're faster than him. We've got a Mountie to find. Let's get moving."

They'd long since left the encounter with the wolf behind them when Louise noticed that the cold was starting to seep through her mittens. Well, no surprise there. By her best estimate, they'd put a good fifteen miles or more behind them. No thanks to the trail, mind you. There'd been more than a few places where the path had all but petered out, only to be picked up again meandering through the trees somewhere. Once she'd had to close her eyes and just hope Bear could follow the trail, since she couldn't see any signs of it any more. Inspector Harper had warned her that might happen. The past few weeks had seen more than a few spates of bad weather, just the sort of thing to confuse even the most seasoned of mushers. She had no illusions on that front. It was time to find a place to pull aside and wait.

The dogs seemed to share her desire, yelping joyfully and veering off to the left side of the trail as she called, "Come haw!" She anchored the sled and unhitched

the dogs; Champion promptly flopped to the ground, refusing to move. For a moment Louise wondered if she'd driven the team too hard. Then she saw the twitching of the white dog's tail, and smiled to herself. She stepped out of the Siberian's way just in time - an instant later he pounced, catching Moose unawares. The two dogs went sprawling, rolling over and over through the snow.

Louise just shook her head and reached for Bear's paw. For all that the black-and-white lead dog ran well, he'd still managed to get quite a bit of ice and snow between the toes. She tsk'ed to herself- should've seen that coming- and worked free what she could. It was slow going; the dog was fidgety (probably wanted to join the wrestling two) and the air too cold for her to safely take off a mitten. It occurred to her that booties might not be the worst idea in the world for sled dogs, assuming they'd put up with the things for long. Bear, she knew, would most likely try to chew them off if he weren't kept running. As for Champion or Moose-

Come to think of it, she couldn't hear either of them any more. Louise dropped Bear's last paw and got up, brushing the snow from her knees. "Moose?" she called. "Moose, where are you, boy?"

Nothing.

"Champion? Come on, now, you two, quit playing."

Still nothing. Sighing, Louise looked down to Bear. "Come on, you," she said. "I'm not going after them by myself."

The problem with a good dog team, reflected Louise as she and Bear plunged into the woods, was that the dogs had spirit. Champion and Moose had run off after each other, occasionally stopping to tussle, if the tracks and smashed snow were anything to go by. Unfortunately, it hadn't snowed in a few days. The snow on the forest floor was covered with a thin crust of ice, broken not only by her dogs' feet but by the feet of every hare, wolf, and other creature to live in these parts. Figuring out which marks belonged to her dogs was slow going. By the time Louise caught up with them, sprawled on the ground beneath a twisted, scrawny spruce tree, she was wishing devoutly that she'd had the sense to bring snowshoes. "There you are!" she cried, diving at Champion and grabbing his collar. "Bad dog! Both of you, very bad dogs! Don't ever do that to me again!"

If it hadn't been for Bear, she wouldn't have been able to get back to the sled. Champion whined piteously and hung limply in his collar. Moose didn't want to come along at all. Only the lead dog's growls and occasional snap at Moose's hindquarters got the other husky moving, and even with Bear's help it was still slow going. The Siberian eventually grew tired of being dragged, struggling to get his paws on the ground, but Louise wasn't falling for it. "Champion," she said firmly, "I will let go of you the instant you're in harness, and not a moment before."

Somewhere behind her, Moose let out a short, sharp bark. Louise glanced over her shoulder, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just Bear, nipping his teammate's flank. She turned her attention back to the unhappy Siberian. "We'll get back to the sled much more quickly if you quit struggling. You know, for someone who doesn't like being hauled around, you sure don't make this any easier on yourself!"

He didn't listen, of course, but she felt better for having said it.

Moose and Bear kept on barking at each other as she slogged the last few yards through the frozen woods. The sight of her sled, untouched, left her with a sharp pang of gladness mixed with something else. Almost she paused to look for fresh tracks, to see if she'd missed another dog team during her impromptu hunt- but Champion chose that moment to start struggling again. Wishing like mad that she hadn't been brought up not to swear, she contented herself with dragging the dog back to the anchored sled. "Come- on- you- there! There we are, you'll stay with me and like it!"

Moose barreled out of the trees, Bear hot on his heels. Dreading another wild goose chase, Louise lunged at him. She missed the collar, but got hold of the wheel dog's tail. The force of his charge sent her sprawling into the snow, tangling the sled's traces around her - but she didn't let go. Moose came to an abrupt stop, barking furiously. "Shut up!" she cried, desperately trying to wriggle free. "Just-just- you be quiet, Moose!" To her horror, Champion joined in, dancing wildly in the traces as he tried to get around Louise and jump at the other dog. With a heroic effort, she managed to writhe free of the straps and snatch Moose's collar, but she couldn't push the white dog away in time to avoid another tussle. "STOP IT, BOTH OF YOU!" she screamed.

The echo of her voice through the empty forest would have shocked her, had there been any echo at all. As it was, the snow swallowed the sound and faded her words into silence. Only Bear's tense, fierce growl could be heard as the other dogs fell quiet. Louise didn't stop to think about it. She was too busy being grateful for the little respite as she worked herself free and roughly strapped the wheel dog into place. When she came around to Bear, he didn't fight her, but he didn't much seem to want to move, either. "Oh, don't you start," she muttered. "I don't see what-"

And then she stopped, because she did see. The sky back in the direction of Dawson City was all but black with cloud, save where the haze of dropping snow blurred the horizon to grayish-white. If it even starts to look like the storm's arrived and I haven't found him yet...

"No," she whispered. "Oh, no- Bear, come on!" She tugged frantically at the big dog's collar, but he only growled. "Yes, I know," she murmured. "I can see the

storm, Bear, it's all right." Inside she was kicking herself for having let the dogs loose in the first place. If she hadn't been that foolish, she might've been able to get a bit farther, might've found the Sergeant. She could've just let the dogs rest for a while and gone on further before the storm hit. Now she was going to have to make it back to town on her own, without anything to show for her troubles.

She had just managed to haul the big malemute around and buckle him into his harness when all three of the dogs broke out in frantic barking. Alarmed, she whirled around.

The wolf had found them. And it had company.

There wasn't enough fur in the Territory to warm the chill that shot through Louise as she saw the grey shapes slinking between the trees. One, off to the left - two there, almost side by side and straight ahead of her - one circling around behind the sled. She started to back away, but Bear was there, just behind her. Her arms windmilled furiously as she struggled not to trip. She had to get the sled going - had to -

Campion leapt forward as the wolf pair drew closer, his own teeth bared in a terrible snarl. The harness held him back, but the Siberian's ferocity communicated itself to the wolves anyway. The two Louise could still see stopped, heads low and legs tensed. Not wanting to waste the chance, Louise turned quickly, intent on ripping that anchor out of the ground. There was a sharp thunk and a searing pain across the back of her head; she let out a cry, staggering. One hand flew up to - wood?

Yes, wood - the stock of her father's rifle, all but forgotten until it smacked her in the head. Still swaying a little, she scrambled to unsling the gun, looking around as she did so to keep an eye on the wolves. With a shock, she realised she could only account for one. The others had vanished into the snowy undergrowth. The urge to cry, in pain or fear or anger, grew suddenly so strong that she could barely hold the rifle steady. "You," she said, eyes on the lone visible wolf. "I never wanted to bother you. Go away, you hear me? You - you - just go away!"

It looked back at her, or seemed to; it was hard to tell. The dogs were struggling against their restraints, whether to escape or fight she couldn't say. She risked a look away from the wolf for a moment as something crashed in the snow behind her - wolf? Tree branch? Falling ice? Louise couldn't say. She whipped around back again, bringing the Enfield to bear on the golden-eyed beast. "Go on!" she cried. "Get out of here! Leave us alone!" Please, she mentally added. Oh, please, for the love of God, just go away!

It suddenly braced itself, as if to leap. Louise's finger, already cramped by the cold, reflexively tightened on the trigger. The gun's report, the whine of the bullet, rang shockingly loud in the snow-muffled landscape. With a yelp, the wild beast

scrambled sideways, floundering over the icy crust as the shot buried itself in the snow. "That's RIGHT!" Louise cried, even as she berated herself for being so careless. "Run, you stinking- stupid- just- just run!" She fired again, the second time clipping the wolf's hindquarters. It yowled, scrabbled momentarily, and finally found enough purchase to flee into the trees.

She had no time to savor the triumph, if triumph it could be called. Moose's low, warning chuff whipped her around swiftly. There- through the snow that had just started to fall, the pair from before! She took aim and fired, but in vain. What little practice she'd had with the rifle had been at immobile targets, and the two- no, three- shots she loosed at the wolf pair went wild. All but screaming with impotent rage, she ran towards them, pausing only when the two launched themselves in separate directions. She let off another shot; there was a spray of red suddenly, shockingly visible through the snow, but the wolf kept running anyway.

Louise caught herself wanting to chase the beast down so she could finish the job of killing it. The thought shocked her. She'd never killed anything in her life. Hadn't even wanted to. The wolves hadn't hurt her, or the dogs, either. All they'd done was scare her- no. No, that wasn't true. They'd slowed her down. If it hadn't been for them she'd have been able to get the sled free. She'd be on her way back to Dawson by now. True, she would've failed in her attempt to warn Sergeant Preston about the influenza, but she'd be on her way to safety if it weren't for the wolves. And who knew what they MIGHT've-

It occurred to her that the commotion behind her sounded different all of a sudden. And, with a further chill that had nothing to do with the Yukon weather, it occurred to her as well that there had been four wolves.

Desperately she turned around, running back to the dogs as fast as the snow would allow. The fourth wolf, smaller than the rest, had taken advantage of her carelessness. Campion lunged at him, snapping as the charcoal-grey wolf danced back just out of reach. Bear- even from a distance Louise could see Bear had wriggled almost completely out of his harness. Oh, God, he'll kill him! rang through her brain. The wolf's going to kill him! Bear's lost every dog fight he's ever been in! "Get DOWN, Bear!" she yelled. The big malemute looked up, ears pricked in surprise. It was all that saved him. The wolf chose that moment to leap at the distracted team leader; if Bear hadn't turned as Louise spoke, its fangs would've closed on his throat. They ripped into his shoulder instead, sending red over the snow as the dog tried to wriggle himself free.

Louise was barely aware of her reaction after that. She simply didn't have any room for conscious thought. There were too many images, too many other sensations: blood smell, pain-raddled barking, breaking ice underfoot, fresh falling snow, a grey shape just barely visible as it went at her dogs again- the stink of gunpowder, thunderous bangs, the rifle's kicks against her shoulder the frantic,

hollow sound of a hammer repeatedly colliding with nothing at all...

She shook her head rapidly, lowering the rifle. Bear was whimpering somewhere nearby. The wolf was dead, sprawled horribly across the narrow trail in a pool of its own blood. Campion and Moose were still struggling, the snow was still blowing, but the wolf was dead. And she and her dogs were still alive.

Wounded, in Bear's case, but still alive.

Out of ammunition, miles and miles outside Dawson, but still alive.

Looking a snowstorm of pure winter malice square in the face, but still alive.

Louise staggered forward, prodding at the wolf with the rifle's muzzle. It didn't move. That... that was good. She couldn't remember if the pack was supposed to come back and avenge the death, or what, but this particular wolf - the dangerous one - was dead.

Still whimpering, Bear butted his head against the back of Louise's leg. She let out a sudden wail and sank down to her knees. So the weather would freeze her tears to her face, to the mask she yet wore; she didn't care. It was all too much to bear, taken together and thrown at her at once. The best she could do was cling to the wounded lead dog, heaving with sobs and wondering what the wilderness would throw at them next.

"Whoa, Duke!"

That... that was a human voice. And dogs, she could hear other dogs too. Somewhere - somewhere close by?

"Whoa, you huskies! Those shots came from right around here."

That voice. She knew that voice. Shaking uncontrollably, not sure if she could bring herself to stand, Louise looked up uncertainly. "B- Bill?" she called. "Bill, is that you?"

Silence, utter silence, except for the hissing of falling snow and Bear's soft whimpers. Then, incredulous and shocked: "Louise?"