E.M. Kerkman, recently graduated from Hamilton College with a BA in Creative Writing, is primarily known for her surreal, apocalyptic short stories. Her works have or will be appearing in *Apex Magazine, Red Weather, Modern Elixir,* the *2021 Change the World* anthology, and elsewhere. She is an alumnus of young writers workshops such as ALPHA, the Kenyon Young Writers Workshop, and the Iowa Young Writers Studio, and her short stories have won the 2024 Dell Award, First Runner-Up for the 2025 Dell Award, a 2021 YoungArts Merit Award, and a 2021 American Voices nomination, among others. Find her online at emkerkman.com or follow her on X at @em_kerkman. Her first story for *Asimov's* follows a spectral paramedic confronted with a moral dilemma while rescuing a man in the Alaskan wilderness, which leads to . . .

LOLO'S LAST RUN

E.M. Kerkman

I know Jome Hill-Moses is in the crevasse before I look in it—and as soon as I do, I don't need to reach the bottom to know he's dead.

In a way, that's actually good for me. It's infinitely easier to rescue a dead person than an injured one. Injured ones have to be kept alive—far easier said than done when the nearest hospital is a plane ride away.

I still need to get him out of the crevasse, though. As I descend between the narrow, glossy blue walls, I can't help but think of how much of a pain that's going to be.

My missing victim is on a snowbridge about halfway to the bottom, which is close to a hundred feet down, by my estimation. The shattered remains of his dogsled are scattered about, lodged in the snow beneath him and embedded into the icy walls. He probably would've survived the accident if not for that sled; one of the steel runners is protruding from his abdomen, low enough to have torn through his large and small intestine but miss anything more important. The shock of the injury is probably what killed him, as opposed to the fall.

Not that he could have climbed out of here by himself with a wound like that—but that's why I was sent. Once I find the person, I possess them, turn off their pain receptors, and get them to safety. It creeps the hell out of most folks, but more often than not, they're willing to let me in if it affords them a marginally higher chance at survival, so we get there in the end.

Since Jome Hill-Moses is dead, there's no soul in there to bicker with, so my life has become significantly easier. Before being sent out to search for him, we were all warned he might reject us. In that case, there's nothing to do but wait until the situation becomes a body recovery and proceed as instructed. A bit morbid, but hey, I don't make the rules.

As soon as I reach the bottom, I enter his brain and wait the few minutes it takes the human body to recognize it once again has a consciousness.

In a way, firing up a dead human is like powering on one of those newfangled computational devices—neurons fire in a boot-up sequence, starting with the cerebellum and basic functions needed to live, like breathing, pumping blood, etcetera. You might think that a dead body doesn't need these things to function, but that's where you'd be wrong—blood pressure makes the muscles move. No blood pressure, no moving.

In that regard, a dead human is an awful lot like a dead spider, at least mechanically. When we go through SRS training, they start us with spiders and we work up to humans. The image has always stuck in my head, though. Humans and spiders, both alike in corpse mobility.

Jome Hill-Moses blinks one eyelid at a time, and I'm staring up at the thin gray crack of sky above us, the top lip of the crevasse, because that's the last thing he saw when he died. It seems he was beginning to get cataracts in both eyes. Perhaps that's why he didn't see the crevasse before falling in it.

After his body recognizes it's once again conscious, the process is very routine: I shut off all of the brain's little warning systems that scream "don't do this or you'll hurt yourself" and stop feeling the dull throb of pain and the bristling bone-deep ache of the cold. His body begins generating heat very slowly, and soon enough the semi-frozen muscles of his arms and legs can operate without shattering. I stand up, contorting his body in a normally impossible way to allow the sled runner to slide out of him. If I had to snap it in half and pull it out, we'd be here another hour, and I have a plane to catch.

Even if he was still alive, he probably wouldn't have survived the trek to Nikolai, I think, taking stock of his injuries. Internal decapitation, likely from the initial force of impact. Two floating ribs, seven broken in total. Crushed tailbone and fractured sacral spine, which I'll need to be careful about—nerves are how the body pilots itself around. If those are severed, I'll have to bring his body back by crawling it on its hands and knees. Considering he also has a broken forearm and collarbone on his dominant side, that would be a bit tedious.

The rest of his injuries are pretty trivial in comparison, not enough to impede our return to civilization. But I do need to take care of the decapitation and the tailbone injury.

Since hypothermia is no longer a concern, one of his many layers of outer clothing can be repurposed into a cervical collar. Easy enough to manage; I've had to make do with worse. The sacral injury, however, will be harder to treat in the field. At least it doesn't hurt—if he was alive, the pain of moving might've been enough to send him into cardiac arrest.

Now that he's no longer impaled, the difficult part begins; scaling the nearly sheer crevasse walls for a hundred feet until we reach the top. Thankfully, the wreckage of the sled can be easily fashioned into improvised ice picks, and his thick gloves and steel-spurred boots will only help.

However, as I'm constructing the shattered birch into a pair of spikes, I hear a whimper.

It's distant, and very small, but Jome Hill-Moses' hearing is better than any of his other senses, so I can trust it's real. It's coming from below the ledge we're on, which concerns me—as far as I was aware, Jome was alone.

Peering over the edge, all I see below me is darkness. Then some of that darkness begins to *move,* and I am struck by an overwhelmingly powerful string of memories about Lolo.

We're playing in a field of golden and strawberry-blond late-summer grasses. The distant mountains are emerald green, capped with snow, and the nearby lake is bluer than the sky. I am in my forties here, and Lolo is a puppy, no older than three months. She's a ball of fluff with legs, all malamute gray save for a black spot on her left foot, like a sock, and a patch of black around her eye—one blue, one brown. She's happy. I'm happy, too.

Then we're a little older, racing the first Iditarod. It's the ceremonial start in Anchorage, and I'm sweating in my gloves, but at the head of my pack, Lolo is calm. She wasn't bred for this; she was supposed to be a nanny dog, but she was meant to be *here*, same as me. The banner hanging on Fourth Street reads *The Last Great Race!* and the year is 1973. Ten years before the disaster. Things are good.

Then she's become old. We're sitting in our cabin in McGrath, outlasting just one of many never-ending winters. Lolo is curled up on the rug in front of the hearth. My neighbor knocks at the door, and Lolo doesn't get up when I go to let him in, which is just one of many signs that something is wrong. "The post plane came in. Figured I'd save you the walk," he says, and hands me a small package of letters tied with twine. The top one has the stamp of Lolo's veterinary office in Anchorage. I open it. It's cancer, as I knew it would be.

Here, standing on a snowbridge halfway down a crevasse, looking at Lolo on another snowbridge even further down, I am already halfway through a plan on how to get the dog out before I stop myself.

My mission was recovering *Jome Hill-Moses.* Not a dog. Getting Jome back in one operational piece will be difficult enough, and adding a dog to the mix will only make it take longer.

But she's Lolo, my subconscious—or rather, Jome's subconscious—informs me, and I'm once again compelled.

"Fuck it," I mutter and finish constructing my ice picks before climbing down to Lolo.

The other six dogs in his sled team are dead. Some of them were impaled by sled pieces or strangled by their harnesses; others died from the height of the fall. I remember all of their names—Ogi, Nona, Desmond, Jio, Suka, and Mercado—and feel Jome's pain no matter how deep I bury it.

But Lolo is still alive. Her position as lead dog is probably what saved her—she's tangled in her harness like the others, but clear of the impact zone where the rest of the team fell. I untangle her, and she gets up to her feet laboriously, wary of me. Dogs are always wary when their owners are rescued by the SRS. They have a sixth sense, or something.

"Come on, Lolo," I tell her, and her ears perk up slightly, but her tail doesn't wag.

"Loly-lo-lo, time to go-ly-go-go," I singsong, on instinct, and Lolo comes over to me slowly. I cut her free of the lead line, making sure to keep her harness intact so I can use it to carry her out of here. She stands at my side, left rear foot held off the snow. I can tell at a glance that her pelvis is broken, or at the very least fractured. This will be harder than I thought.

And she must be in pain, my subconscious—or rather, Jome's subconscious—informs me, and I feel the urge to abandon his body and take over hers, to take away her pain instead, as it's more important. I've never had to rescue a dog before. I wonder how different it will be.

"Stop that," I inform myself—and Jome—out loud, and return to the task at hand. I strip the lead lines from the other dead dogs' harnesses and double up the sturdy nylon to make a sling, threading one end under Lolo's harness before tying it in a

loop. I put the loop over one shoulder like a satchel strap and stand up, Lolo's hefty weight now suspended from my shoulders.

The screaming pain from his broken collarbone tells me it's a very good thing Jome is dead, because he never would've made this climb alive. Not with Lolo, at least. And something tells me he wouldn't leave her behind and would've fought me off if I'd suggested it.

We begin to climb. Lolo is patient and silent as I work my way meticulously upward, testing every handhold and foot placement twice, which is something I never do. Perhaps this overabundance of caution is due to Lolo's weight at Jome's back, warm and breathing and very much alive. The fall would kill her, too, and then there would be no point in rescuing both of them.

I'm beginning to think a lot like Jome, I realize as I climb. It happens with every person I rescue, to a degree—I *am* inside their head, after all. But it's happening quicker with Jome than with most. The ease of integration is disconcerting.

Human memory is a strange thing. When we die, our memories don't really *go* anywhere—memories are nothing more than neural links between synapses structured in impossible-to-replicate patterns, which means they remain as permanent structures in the brain. When I rescue someone, I see every memory they have, unless something happened to change them, like a traumatic brain injury. Rescuing people with TBIs is always interesting. I can usually *feel* the space in the brain where something is supposed to be but isn't.

However, it's a bit more complicated than that, as humans also have souls, and those souls often retain memories after death. I myself am evidence of that. We don't always stick around, and when we do, we don't always remember everything about who we were or what we did. Science still isn't quite sure why or *how* we sometimes exist independent of the human body, either. Our being here has something to do with the disaster, certainly, but the reason ultimately doesn't matter. We exist, that's all. I don't like dwelling on my circumstances.

It doesn't help that I've been here since spirits first began to hang around. I was a flight paramedic stationed at the USCG base in Kodiak when the disaster hit. I died in service when the engines of our Jayhawk seized during the initial fallout, sending us straight into the side of a mountain. A week later, I walked my own corpse back into base, completely unaware that my consciousness had been separated from my corporeal body and that my body was missing an arm and half its face. Border patrol put my body to rest *real* fast after that, yet I stayed.

For a while, I and others like me existed in limbo, drifting untethered in the ether, untouchable even by air. It took a few months for the higher-ups to realize how useful we could be—then the USCG created a new branch of the military called the SRS—Spirit Rescue Service—for us and put us back to work. It was different work than I was used to, and I had to go through a clunky and untested training program, but it gave me a purpose, and after a few years I figured out how to make my work interesting. Considering there's nothing else for me to do, it's not a bad lot.

Jome and Lolo and I reach the top of the crevasse an hour later, because climbing sheer walls of ice is easy when you can't feel pain. As long as I don't injure Jome's body any further, I'm allowed to contort it however I need to ensure a "safe rescue." The wording in that section of the SRS handbook is intentionally vague.

I let Lolo down from her harness contraption and she stands by my side, statuesque and waiting for instructions. She's a good dog, both for Jome and in general. I can tell she still isn't sure about me, but she'd follow me to the end of the earth since I'd proven to care about her, too.

"Loly-lo-lo," I say, not for any particular reason, then look to the Sun low on the horizon and pick a direction to walk.

Jome went missing somewhere between McGrath and Anchorage. His friends in Anchorage sent the first missing person alert and gave us a very clear route to search and find him—the same route Iditarod racers took between the two towns. Despite how well-mapped the course is, it's still 330 miles to cover with a time limit hanging overhead. The closest town to our location with an airstrip is Nikolai, about fifteen miles to the southeast.

I'm worried about Lolo. It's a long walk for an injured dog.

But she's Lolo, I think, and the idea is comforting. She's *Lolo*. Lolo can do anything.

We pick our way across the glacier field, and I have to wonder why Jome thought taking this shortcut was a good idea. According to the report, he'd made the crossing numerous times before, and anyone who knows the area knows shortcutting through these plains is too big of a risk to take. Jome *did* leave McGrath in a storm, according to eyewitness reports, so it's possible he got disoriented and went the wrong way. But I have a hard time believing that about a musher as experienced with the route and area as he was.

I'd search his memories for an answer, but we're given strict instructions *not* to. We're supposed to leave the Cerebral Case Closure to the professionals. I can get the answer when the report is filed, if I ask.

Lolo takes the lead once she catches on to where we're headed, and I trust her to take us where we need to go. She's smart, even in her old age.

As it turns out, the going is difficult without snowshoes. Jome is fit for a middle-aged man, but he still sinks into the snow with every step. Even Lolo struggles at points, but she never complains—at least not in a way I would recognize.

We walk for the whole day and into part of the night, following the Kuskokwim River to Big River. The terrain is our biggest obstacle; steep riverbanks, narrow gullies, and an otherwise poorly marked sled trail. I'm familiar with rescue in remote wilderness, but not this kind of trail-following. However, Lolo knows where we're going, and leads me through the winding riverbeds, brush, and switchbacks with practiced ease. I help her up the steepest portions, and she bites my sleeves to help pull me up after her.

We stop at Guitar Lake for the night, not because I need to stop, but because Lolo does. She stands at the edge of the lake—a large, flat, snowy expanse in an otherwise tumbled and tree-filled terrain—and doesn't look back at me.

"You need food," I say, and Lolo just sits down—slowly, as sitting pains her. She still doesn't make a sound, nor does she look back at me.

I didn't think to take anything from Jome's supplies. Jome's subconscious continually berates me about that, but I didn't have dogs growing up so I didn't even think about it.

Some rescuer you are, Jome's subconscious informs me. I ignore him.

Lolo doesn't seem to care, which concerns both me and Jome. She's old, she's sick, she's injured—she needs food and rest. *I suppose if I can provide one of the two, that's better than nothing,* I decide, and I lean against a log, making myself a wind barrier for her.

I should head to the Tatalina Mountain LRR station while she rests so I can report our location to the USCG, as well as my findings so the SRS can alert the proper local authorities. However, something compels me to stay, and at this point I've come to recognize that compulsion as Jome's love for Lolo. I shouldn't leave her here alone. We're critter food in the state we're in, and showing up with a gnawed-on body shows negligence on my part. Animals recognize something is off about SRS victims and steer clear of us when we're on the move, but stopped, we're just a corpse like any other.

Lolo gets up from where she's sitting and hobbles over to me. She noses at the bloodied front of my jacket where the rail went through me, then decides I'm okay even if it doesn't smell like it and curls up at my side, putting her head in my lap. I

can feel her heartbeat even through her thick fur and my winter layers. It's heavy and fast, like the wings of a giant hummingbird, and doesn't feel right.

"Don't die on me, old girl," I tell her, but the words sound odd because they're something *I* would say to her, not something Jome would say. Jome doesn't seem worried about her dying, or at least it doesn't feel like that. Perhaps it's because he's known her for her entire life and been there for every moment of it, good and bad. He's gotten more years with her than he could've hoped, and I've only just met her. To me, it doesn't feel like whatever time she has left will be enough.

We need to get to Nikolai. Guitar Lake is only ten miles from the town, and after crossing it, we'll reach a section of flat and frozen marshes, as well as the main snowmachine trail between McGrath and Nikolai. We'll be able to do ten miles of flat terrain in a day.

I wonder why Jome didn't just take the snowmachine trail instead of the Iditarod course, but I know the answer before I even ask the question—this trip wasn't about getting Lolo to Anchorage for treatment. It was about giving them one last good memory.

And look where that idea got them. A momentary lapse in judgment led to the taking of an ill-fated shortcut, and now Jome is dead and Lolo injured.

It feels harsh to judge them, but the question was bothering me the entire day of walking. At least now I have some sort of "why."

Lolo's breathing evens out as she falls asleep against my side, and I pass the night hours watching the stars, something neither Jome nor I often get to do. Lolo wakes up about six hours later and stands, slowly and stiffly, giving us a look that seems both determined and tired, like she's ready to get to Nikolai and be done with this whole thing. I can't blame her.

We begin walking again. After crossing Guitar Lake, we reach the swamp flats and continue back onto the Kuskokwim. We follow the river to the sections of swampy portage, then back onto the river, oscillating between the two terrain types.

It's slow going, as the temperature has dropped to such a deep cold that Jome's body is no longer functioning optimally. Lolo struggles, too. This stretch is one of the coldest on the whole Iditarod course—which Jome knows well—but ever since the disaster, it's only gotten worse, with temperatures reaching -70 or lower. Once you hit -50, it's hard to tell the difference between that and anything colder, regardless of whether you're alive or dead.

It's at this point that I see lights in the distance. Snowmachines, most likely, or the headlamps of another sled team. Lolo and I continue along the edge of the trail as the lights approach, keeping out of the way in case they choose to pass us by—which they very well might, as anyone traveling this route on foot is either dead or on their way to being dead.

It's always a risk, talking to anyone while possessing a body for body recovery. Especially in this part of the world, this close to the Russian border, and especially when the body is in as bad a shape as Jome's is. He's held together with the equivalent of improvised duct tape and it shows. *I* wouldn't want to come across him wandering through the wilderness. Especially not if I knew him, which it seems most people in this part of Alaska do.

The approaching team of snowmachines stops a few hundred feet ahead of us. There's five of them, each riding the newest Evinrudes, each towing a sled with gear strapped to the top. They're clad in snow camo with yellow bands on their arms, identifying them as Civilians' Militia. The AK-47s slung over their shoulders were probably taken from Soviet ground forces. And I can see a signal jammer strapped to the front of one Evinrude, which means they're traveling off-grid.

"Jome?" the rider of the first snowmachine asks, his tone wary but hopeful, and I wrack Jome's brain for his name, since it sounds like they knew each other.

Russel, it supplies, and I'm once again thrown into Jome's memories.

We're in high school. It's the first truly cold day of the year, and there's finally enough snow on the ground to wear snowshoes to school. Russel is sitting next to me, scribbling something on his slate and not paying attention to the teacher, as usual. He flips the slate to me. The words on it read *race to woodsole later?* I write on my own slate, *woods hole—yes.* He smiles widely, showing off the buck front teeth he never grows out of, and I smile, too. Russel wants to be a postman, but I don't know what I want to be yet. So long as it involves sleds, I'll be happy.

Then we're at his wedding, and I'm his best man. It's a small affair at the Catholic church in Talkeetna, because that's where his wife is from. We ran the dogs up from Anchorage in a big parade and tied white linen tablecloths to the back of our sleds like ribbons, since the ribbons his wife ordered didn't arrive in time. There's a big storm predicted for the next week and everyone is worried about it, but we aren't. Russel just got married, and I'm happy for him, even if it means I'll be running the Iditarod alone. We're smoking stogies on the porch, a real treat. The future is ours.

Ten years later, we're in Anchorage at the new city hall, waiting outside in the heavy snow on a sunny summer day that should be fifty degrees or warmer. It's the first time we've seen each other in almost a decade, since our fight at the start of my first race. Old grudges are forgotten now, in the face of this new terror looking down on all of us. "How are you?" Russel asks, to distract from the tense, cold wait for the news we've dreaded for years. I tell him that I'm fine—I've moved to McGrath, married the woman who took me in after I broke my leg in the race. I'm still racing dogs and I've got a new girl I think will be the best lead dog anyone's ever seen. He calls me a dreamer. I inform him that now more than ever, we need dreamers.

"It's not me, Russel," I tell the Russel I'm talking to now as he steps off his Evinrude and walks toward me. I can see the range of emotions that cross his face, even behind the goggles, balaclava, and hood. "I hate that you've found out this way," I continue. "Jome died in a sled accident—I'm with the USCG SRS."

It takes Russel a moment to process the news. "The SR— Oh," he replies. "Spirit Rescue Service. Oh, hell."

Russel and I look at each other for a very long time, saying nothing. I feel vaguely uncomfortable, but I can't tell if the feeling stems from me or Jome or the cold.

"You need a ride back into town," Russel eventually says, a statement, not a question.

"Only if you're headed to Nikolai," I reply. "I'm to bring his body to the nearest airstrip and fly it to Anchorage."

"We're going to McGrath to restock the base there," he informs me. "Six hours out by machine. We can put you on a plane and fly you back from there."

I'm about to tell him *thanks, I'll be fine walking to Nikolai, even if it takes longer* when I remember Lolo. Lolo who needs food, water, and medical treatment. She won't get any help in McGrath, but if I can convince them to allow her on the plane to Anchorage, maybe then—

This goes against my orders, I inform Jome's subconscious, but it doesn't seem to care.

"Only if you're comfortable with it," I tell Russel, as I'm instructed to.

"Jome was a good friend of mine. Anything I can do," Russel says.

"Is there space for Lolo?"

Russel looks at me oddly. "Lolo?"

I stop abruptly and a sinking feeling of despair crawls out of Jome's mind and leaches into mine. But when I turn around, Lolo is still there, still holding her rear paw above the snow because it hurts.

The way she looks at me tells me she knows I now understand. Lolo sits down in the snow on the side of the road and watches me as I silently pilot Jome onto the

back of Russel's Evinrude, careful to maintain a comfortable distance between us, as most people don't enjoy sharing a snowmachine with a corpse. Lolo continues to watch us as Russel motions for the rest of his squad to move out, and the idling Evinrude lurches forward with a cold groan and a belch.

She follows along behind us for a while, running as fast as she can, and Jome's memories proudly inform me that she's just as fast as a snowmachine on her best days. But Lolo is injured, and these Evinrudes are new, and she soon fades into a black and gray blur in the flat and swampy distance, still running to catch up.

I ignore Jome's distress about leaving her behind and shut myself out of his head, but I'm surprised some of that distress still lingers. It must belong to me.

I've taken a leave of absence after dropping Jome on a plane in McGrath. He's safely en route to Anchorage in a body bag, which is half of the mission completed. I'll give my account of the return mission when I get back; it's not like the department can hunt me down and drag me back to court-martial me. From what Russel explained on the ride to McGrath, they're busy with other things. And if they need a spirit for another search and recovery mission, they'll have to make do with someone else.

The road from McGrath to Nikolai is much easier to traverse when you're not doing it corporeally. The gully-crossed steep and rocky section becomes a sightseeing trip, and the uneven and swampy terrain of the second section is boring enough that I'll zone out and fly straight off the unmarked path. I pass no one as I go, which is unsurprising—there won't be another supply mission to McGrath for two months. If they need supplies, they'll have to come by air—and considering how restricted flights have become, it'll have to be a real emergency for that to happen.

Not that I need to worry about any of that. It doesn't affect me. The sentimentality and concern over these places are left over from Jome, I'm sure—McGrath was his home, and Russel was his friend. It's easy to absorb the things someone cares about into yourself when you've spent a day and a half inside their head, piloting them around.

I speed right past Lolo the first time, already a quarter of a mile further down the path when my mind catches up with what I saw. When I turn around, she's trotting down the road toward me, tail swinging behind her. She stops a few paces behind me and looks at me imploringly.

Hi, Lolo, I think. Since I can't actually speak without a corporeal body, I direct the thought toward her and hope it reaches her somehow. So sue me—I'm a little out of my depth here.

Lolo looks at me skeptically, then walks up to me and sniffs the air where my invisible hands would be.

Jome is on a plane to Anchorage, I continue, not really sure if she understands me or not. *It's okay. He's safe now, and you can go.*

Instead of disappearing like I expect her to, Lolo simply sits down at my feet and continues to stare at me.

Most of the time, when people die, their spirits pass on and go somewhere else. Since the disaster, more and more of us have stuck around. In SRS training, we're informed that all spirits have a purpose for staying, and once that purpose is served, we simply disappear. Nobody *really* knows what happens to us after that—or how it occurs, or why. Every theory is just conjecture. Spirits in the service have taken to calling it *going on.* No spirit in the SRS has *gone on*.

However, all of us in the program were healthcare workers of some sort—I was a flight paramedic, some were nurses, some were doctors. A few were even medics in Siberia at ground zero. The running assumption for us is that we'll always be here, because our purpose is saving people, and that's a job that will never be finished.

On the ride back to McGrath, I came to the conclusion that Lolo's purpose was staying until Jome got to safety, and once she knew he was delivered to his friends and family in Anchorage, she'd be able to go on. Apparently I was wrong.

As I'm standing there conjecturing, Lolo presses her nose into my hand and takes it upon herself to tell me why she's stayed.

We're in a field of golden and strawberry-blond grasses, wearing a harness we desperately want to chew off. It's attached to a tiny birch wood sled with some mail parcels on it to weigh it down. We run around with it, trying to flip it over, as a middle-aged Jome watches us and laughs. We like the sound of his laughter, and his praise, so we keep doing it.

Then we're older, but not by much, and standing at the front of a pack of dogs all sidestepping and panting eagerly, one sled team out of many. The harness feels like it *fits,* and the snow and sand underfoot makes our paws itch. We want to run, to *go*, to be the first, to be the *best.* Jome stands on the sled behind us, smelling of sweat and nerves, so we stand still and poised, our way of telling him it's okay, we're *ready.*

Then we're older and so is Jome. Our joints ache and we are not as fast as we used to be. We're in the shed in McGrath, home, pacing around the kennel while Jome straps gear to the sled. Nona is jumping up and down and whining, and Desmond and Suki are biting at each other, young and full of frenzied energy. We are patient, as patient as we can be knowing we're going to run again. We don't run as often as we used to, which makes it even more special when we do.

Then we're old—not just older, but old. Sixty-three and seventeen. We're tired from time, and we enjoy sleeping in front of the fire much more than we used to. So does Jome. But we're gearing up again today for a big run. *One last hurrah, Loly-lo-lo,* Jome tells us. *One last run.* We're out on the ice then, down in the gulleys and riverbeds we know so well. The course has changed since we last ran it, but muscles hold memories, too, and we follow the same path we've always taken. The snow is thicker here, deeper from years of collecting without melting, and we should be wary of it, but we're not. We're running again, finally running again, and Jome is yelling *Gee, Gee—Loly, Gee!* and we run, we listen and we run and it's *exhilarating*—Then the snow is cracking underfoot, cracking and giving away, and Jome is calling *Easy! Easy!* but it's too late, and we're falling, we're falling and running on air and it's too late—

Lolo cuts the memory off there, before I can feel her pain and her loss, but echoes of it flood over to me anyway. The brittle sharp crack, the cold, the sound of Jome calling out—not for help, but to her and the team, a repeated and desperate call of *It's okay, Loly-lo-lo, you're okay, Loly-lo, you're okay* until silence and pain are the only things she remembers.

She steps back slowly, an old and aching shuffle, and it's then that I understand why she's still here. She wants to run. One last run.

I want that for her, too. I want her to run. I want to run *with* her.

And so we do. I don't have to say a thing—Lolo knows when I make my choice and takes off like a shot, heading toward Nikolai and eventually to Anchorage, and I follow because I have nothing else I'd rather do.

As I run, I imagine the cold whispering across my skin and through my hair, the numbness in my fingers and the balls of my feet. I hear echoes of the rickety *shush* of steel runners over ice and sand and snow, the drum of two dozen paws on the ground, the rasp of gloriously labored breaths. I realize I know the burden of purpose very well, but I've forgotten how it feels to live for that purpose. I imagine that being alive feels a lot like being loved—like living is love, like *being* is love—and I place my feet where Lolo places her paws and wonder what will happen when we finally reach Anchorage, then find I already know. ❍