

A Brief Yet Intimate Look at the Winter-Wolf-Pack Escape From Base-Camp-Grumble



By Samus Sheffield.

Despite rumors to the contrary, Ellie McKenzie lived a simple life. Bed early, up early, rouse the pack. Comfy wood-cabin, good leader-type, old books. Breakfast on the way.

She drove an orange and white commute-me-utility to work every morning. Carpool. Cut through the deep bright snow she used to dive into when she was a kid. Dig deep, beneath her paws. Forget about everything. Pass the day exploring. See what's beyond the forest. Asking questions to her mom-long-gone. Kept running.

Weight of her responsibilities tugging her back. Camus scuffling at her door.

Early morning sunrise. Feelings for Camus Kennedy always smiling on her porch. Waited patiently. We all knew they'd end up together.

Fresh coffee smell. His happy-heartache-energy. She still had feelings. Kissed once, at least that's what she told me. Laughed at the snow in his hair. Almost perfect-anticipation. Kind and always there, happy to see her. Both at-the-lead goodness. Independent also-had-his-own-plans.

Both set out strong. Bumping into each other, playfighting. Bit his neck. No words. Couldn't help but smile, when he was around. Jumped into Ellie's truck. Big tires. Engine struggling up. She turned to look at him, sipping. Blinking in the sunlight.





His easy-to-get-lost-in eyes. Tried not to get too distracted. Definitely her type. Focused on the slippery road ahead. We all knew the would-they-won't-they results. First time they met. Still held our breaths.

Short winding road along the ridge, pick everyone up. Then dip down into the valley.



Parker Bailey was our first stop. Detour-but-it-felt-right. Signed him out. Cab a little quiet. Awkward. Camus felt responsible-for-no-reason.

Parker still in jail. For the second time. Bit an irate tourist heading for a ledge. Saved her from a fatal fall, called him all kinds of angry words, kicked out, pressed charges.

He should have handled it differently, but he was tired. Still angry from the first time. Sentence should have been suspended. Dismissed.

But they still wanted him to work, could pay him less. Or not at all. We all had thoughts of we-were-next. Jumped up tourist-might-have-been-a-Husker-plant theories.

Allowed out on weekends didn't make it okay. A few months left inside. Probably stretch it to fit a year. Knew he'd escape one day soon. Weren't going to say anything. Or sit around. Deserved to be free. Had to help. Not just because he was Camus' cousin. Still just gaslight-me-up theories till the sheriff arrived.

Dusky said as much. Sheriff Emmett Duchowsky. With the windswept laissez-fair of a digestive biscuit. Tapped on Ellie's window late one night. Last week. Winter coat, big western hat to hide his want-to-talk face. His couldn't-win shame.

They didn't speak long. Said the lodge had a deal. Free-labor-by-incarceration white-collared-crime model. Targeted obvious troublemakers first. Moved on from blaming the Ossovo wolves for murders when they shipped a sheep to the meat-market. Acceptable-injustice. Profit made it okay, just shrugs losses

Only answers Ellie needed. Dusky said he might have misplaced the gun cupboard keys on the way out. Post some conveniently positioned patrols. Retiring so he'd be easy to forgive.

But couldn't help more than that. Gave Ellie schedules, maps. Easiest routes. Places to avoid. Wished her luck. Said he was always fond of Parker. Like a troubled-brother-he-had-and-lost. Wanted to help. How this all started.

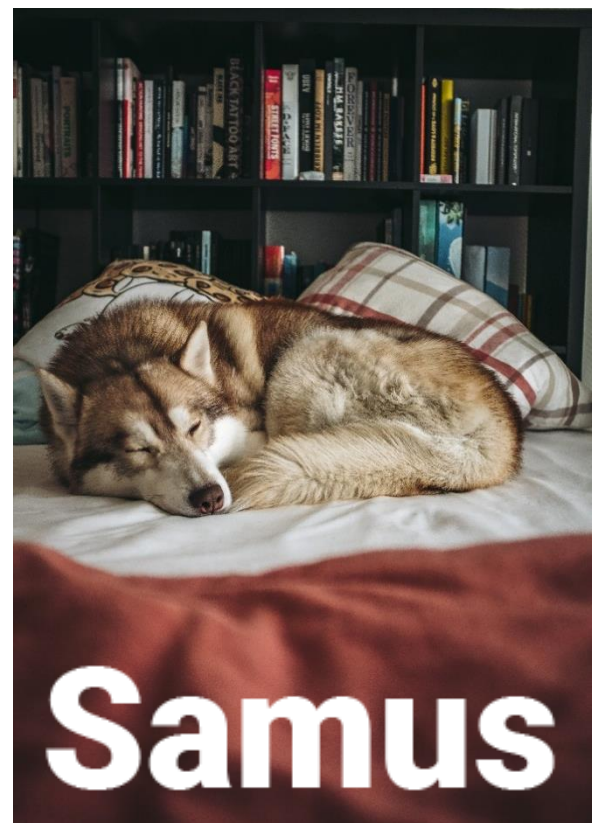
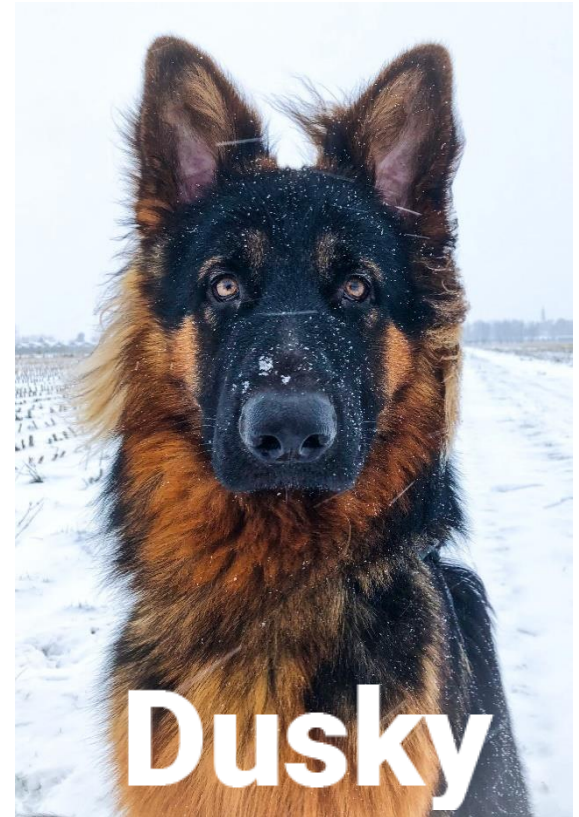
Samus Sheffield was always late. So my friends say. Weird talking about myself in the third. Had to do all this by telling not showing. Couldn't be helped, already happened. Hoped the readers would forgive me.

But it was true, I never slept. Or overslept. They stopped going to my door. Knew me too well. Headed for my bedroom window instead.

Gentle knocking growing insistent. Friendly faces wearing down. Still funny. Watched me yawn, apologize. Felt bad, act surprise. Rush back into the room. Mime apologies again. Stumble on my bed. Stub a toe. Flailing. Rescued by my covers. So comfy and warm, their warning barks drew me back.

I was still trying to write my first novel. Never gave up. Had ideas. So many. They said it suited me. Wanted to say something. Clear my throat. Kept choking.

Brushed my teeth, splashed my shirt. Morning routine. Got soap in my eye. Blinked finally-awake in the mirror. Minty fresh-smile. Ruffled hair was okay. Long day ahead. Stepped outside, way too cold. Rushed back in for my trusty plaid-fleece travelling blanket. Camus' extra coffee heating my paws. Hugged him with all my heart. Comfy-soft backseat against my cheek. Wouldn't be long. Parker staring outside. Free. Not sure if he still felt like he belonged. To the forest. Heard that should-probably-go feeling in his heart. My head against his shoulder, and he didn't seem to mind.





Frankie

Franklin Albright was two cabins down. Short drive, but we always took so long. Group said it was my fault, which was accurate but not exactly fair.

Frankie waited patiently on that bench at his door before dawn, each morning. Had trouble sleeping. Tapping his foot. Music in his soul. In his head. Getting louder.

Used to be in a band. Suffered from ageist-perceptions and being ready too early didn't help. Overdressed in a waist coat. Suited him. Walking stick. Legs not what they used to be. In charge of their gear. Used to play guitar. Still a veteran in his field.

Played the calm wise-old-half-wolf but kept forgetting what to say. Ellie told him it was okay, and he believed her. Stood and waved hello as our car drifted round the corner. Nearly everyone piled out to greet him. To help lug the bags. I was passed out on the backseat. Head on Parker's lap, mouth half open at the ceiling. Dead to the world for a few more minutes. Parker humming, non-committal.



Stella

We piled in, engine on to keep the heat. Waited for Stella Macaulay's smiling face. Never long. She liked running before breakfast. So much heart. Heaving chest. Skidding along Alapache Ridge. From her rose-tinted-wood cabin further down. Through the fresh snowfall and tall trees. Only drank Maple-Crunch cherry or so it seemed. Smile-all-the-time beliefs. So excited. Big heart care-pup of the group. Almost-always saved our mood.

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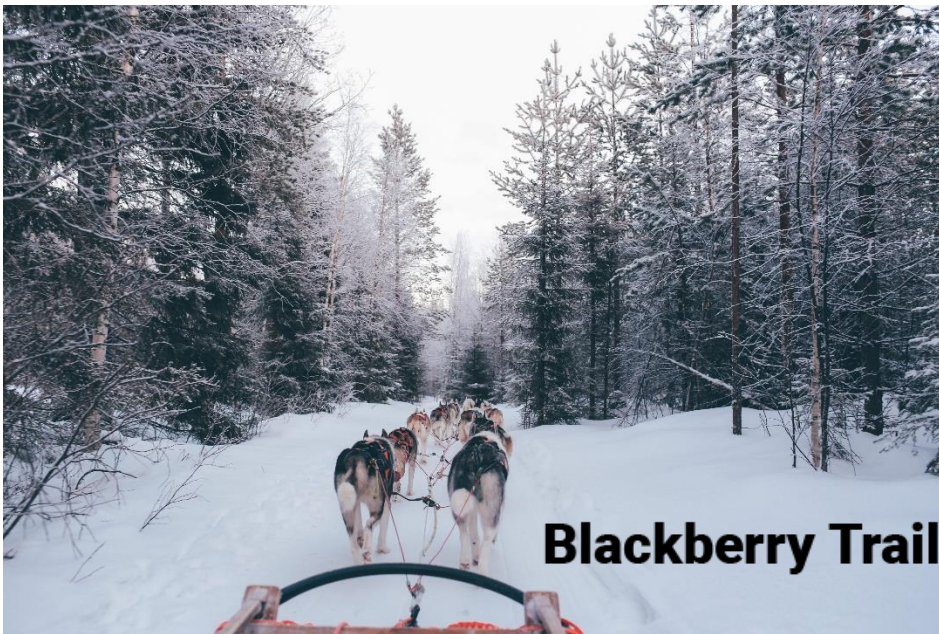
We worked for the Hound-Me-Meckel travel company in Noruf-Asgah. Before they filed, with most arrested. Used to provide the best almost-real into the wild experiences.

Jaw-awe adventures, from a small picturesque fishing village in the Asgah-Picklemouse region. Just past Oaksme and Kenneth-Cross cove. Up-up north. Always-snowy winters.

Seasonal-floods of nature-peckish tourists looking for meaning. Purpose beneath magnetic-green skies because it could be their visible-magic.

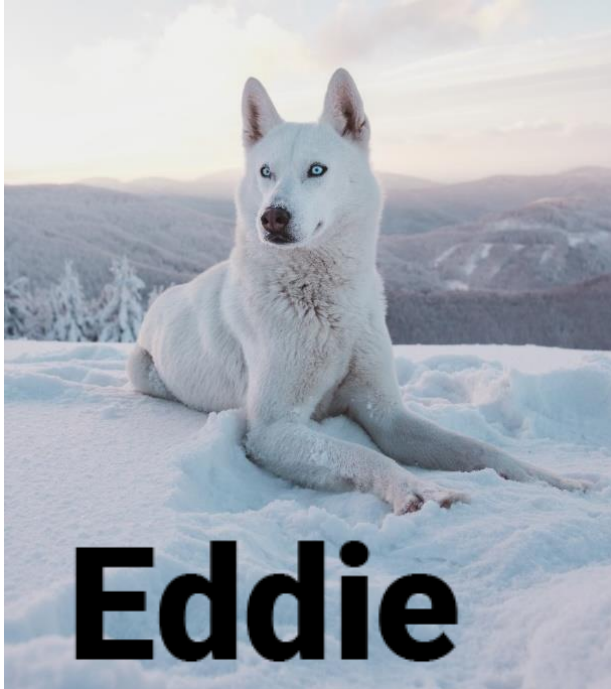
To us it was winter-work. Pay was good. Came up each season. Since they were pups. Kept us together. Family. Pretended leaving didn't hurt. But probably our last season. And turned out we were right.

Frankie was retiring. Had relatives in Phoenix Falls. Not the same without him. Subtle key shifts. Knew we'd stay in touch. Still felt like something magical was ending.



We worked Noofing Forest, Blackberry Trail our most popular route. Peggy-Cutter's Ridge came a close second. Less challenging. But shared the tall-tall trees hugged together. Tight corners, fast straights.

Made the tourists cuss and howl. Beg to slow down. Go faster. Rejoice. Rekindle. Be dumbstruck, renewed, when the valley opened up. Thank us on the way home. Safety. Promised change, up at the nightlights.



We saved Eddie Babinski for last. Ellie's chunky Norfolk-Pheasant truck finally cozy-warm, pattering up steadily to Cliff's Edge, our faces stared out from almost-fogged-up windows. Ellie leaning to see. Heater fan on full. Pushed my ears back. I tried not to fall asleep. Often failed, but that was okay.

Eddie was our troubled little brother, by choice. Mildly-maniac wildcard. Stella said he needed meds, but he wasn't that bad. Just always rearing to go, occasionally missing. Injured. Suspiciously blood stained. Never mean or cruel. Sometimes shooing off a stranger-strangers we'd-never-met that vaguely resembled wanted posters at the sheriff's office.

Eddie got a minor-pass for his scary-enough childhood, made minor-mishaps okay. Raised by actual-local wolves he was related to. Never-belonged but the blood was there. Left home young. Something stung behind his eyes, not quite right, but he tried. Most days.

Eddie's parents are the Ossovo-Clayton Pack. Infamous, obviously. Named after the hazardous Clayton Ravine and Hellen Ossovo's bloody past. Made them permanent-scapegoats in every sheep-murder case. Occasionally actually-guilty.

Still used as boogie-wolf motivators by parents across the valley. Made young pups eat their porridge, even when too hot. Go to bed when told, carrying flashlights. Stay awake under the covers. Tell each other stories. Made their own adventures, daring escapes in their heads. Tell their next-day-friends. Be good or the Ossovo will get you. Quiet down, they're just outside.

They were the real-real wolves the tourists didn't want to see. Too scary, dirty, hungry. True outsiders. Daily petty theft and violent crime lifestyles. Slowly escalating under new management.



Bodies buried, nomadic. No flags. Just fear-agendas. Had oh-so different beliefs. Nibbling along the edge of town. Always cold. Survival.

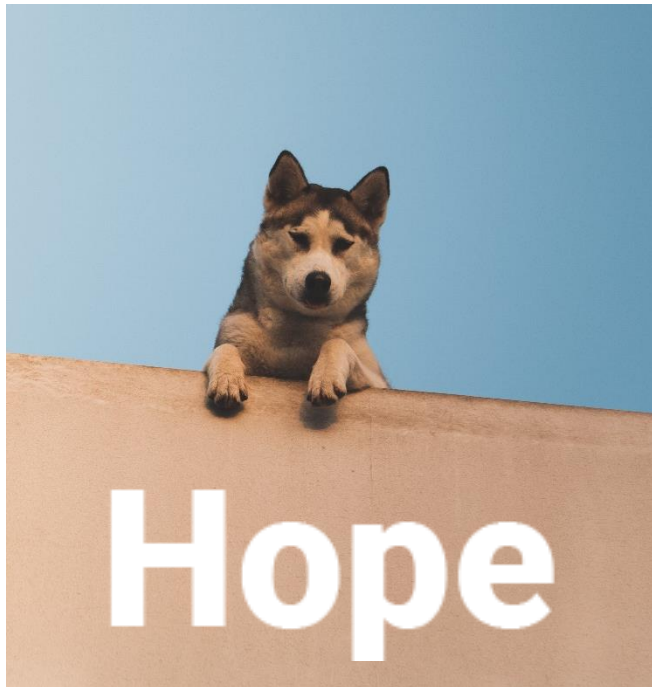


Eddie's mom was Betty Babinski. The Ossovo's head honcho. Leader of the pack since Jimmy Morton disappeared. Rumors that she killed him was common. Body not yet found. Still wore his ring. Kept his leather jacket. Not Eddie's dad. Only realized she was pregnant when it was done.

Eddie was born hyper. Curious. Jittery. His mom told him to keep still. So much to learn but he couldn't help it. Heart leaping from his sleeve. Wanderlust dreams. Wanted to see what's around every corner, and the next. And the next. Starbright sprinting happiness across his face the faster he went. Paws in the snow. Nose buried. Travel-hound-happiness. Kept getting lost. Scolded. In trouble-bludgeoned by bigger scarier folks he met by accident. His mom. Eventually ran away.



Ran with Gabrielle Amali. His first friend. Always cheered her up. They stayed at the back. Tried to hide. Asked her to come with but she was scared. Eddie couldn't wait. Uncertain. Should have held his breath, longer than an hour. But he was young. She might have changed her mind. Said she felt the same. He felt bad for leaving her behind. Swallowed back by years. Didn't know any more. We hardly spoke.



Simple plans were best, sometimes. Spring Parker before it's too late. Collect what we're owed. Knock them down a peg or five.

Hope Scofield was our sharp-eyed inside-hound. Had a boyfriend who disappeared. Blamed the company. Didn't let on. Her job was to keep Parker on course. Get him to gate 41. 12:48, no later. Just before lunch, shift change. Most distracted. Hungry. Callous. Our best chance.

We knew they'd stretch Parker's time to years. Find some excuse. Didn't book his hearing. None of us coming back. Who'd be next? Some smalltime workplace dispute. Wake up in a cage. Gave me nightmares. Couldn't do another year. Not leaving without him. Without everyone.



Ellie and Camus tag-team to knock out the generators. Elle only one tech-enough to do it. Camus as romantic-backup to keep-her-safe.

I sneaked in the tourist way. Swanky cable car smelt like lettuce and pine. Hurried to the main office. Nearly-got-caught hubris. Said hi to Gladys. Her naptime-chin missing her desk, disinterest. Kept it light. Waited for her break to Fobits-Hotdogs and ducked inside.



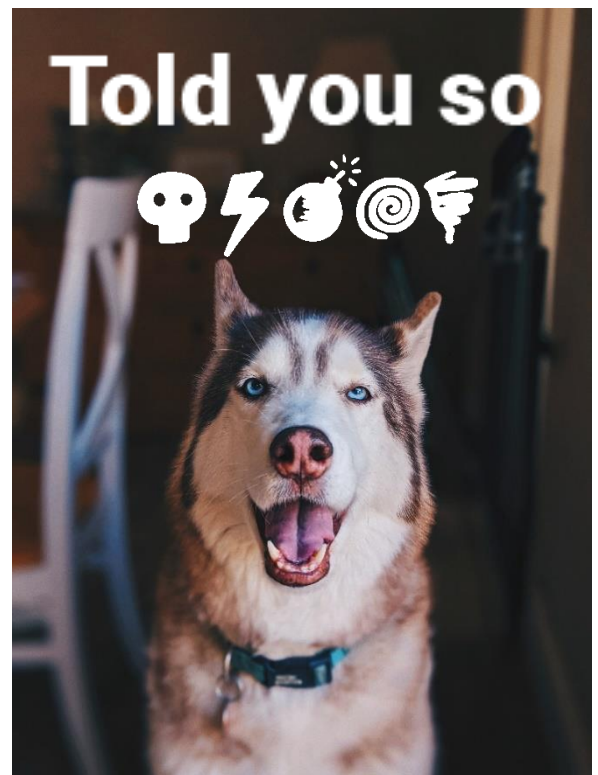
She kept the keys in her drawer. Unlocked. Blue tags. Openly-hated her job. Her boss. Made it too easy to break into Husker's office. Would have given me the accelerant if I'd asked.

His walls were cluttered with small-time sports victories gold-framed on the wall. Team-building with sad folks. Used-to-be a ski resort days. Before his partner left. Broke free. Before he turned it into a tourist-work camp. Trap.

Did my part. Got our files, push the payments, checked the building. Empty. Dumped my bag. Set it on fire and got out.

Waved at the big portrait Husker had of himself. Always a red flag. Flipped him off one last time.

And if you're reading this Husker, from prison. Told you when you took Parker, I'd be back to burn the place down. And Gladys is fine. Working in Fokipsi, architecture firm. Never been happier. Gets to sleep all the time.

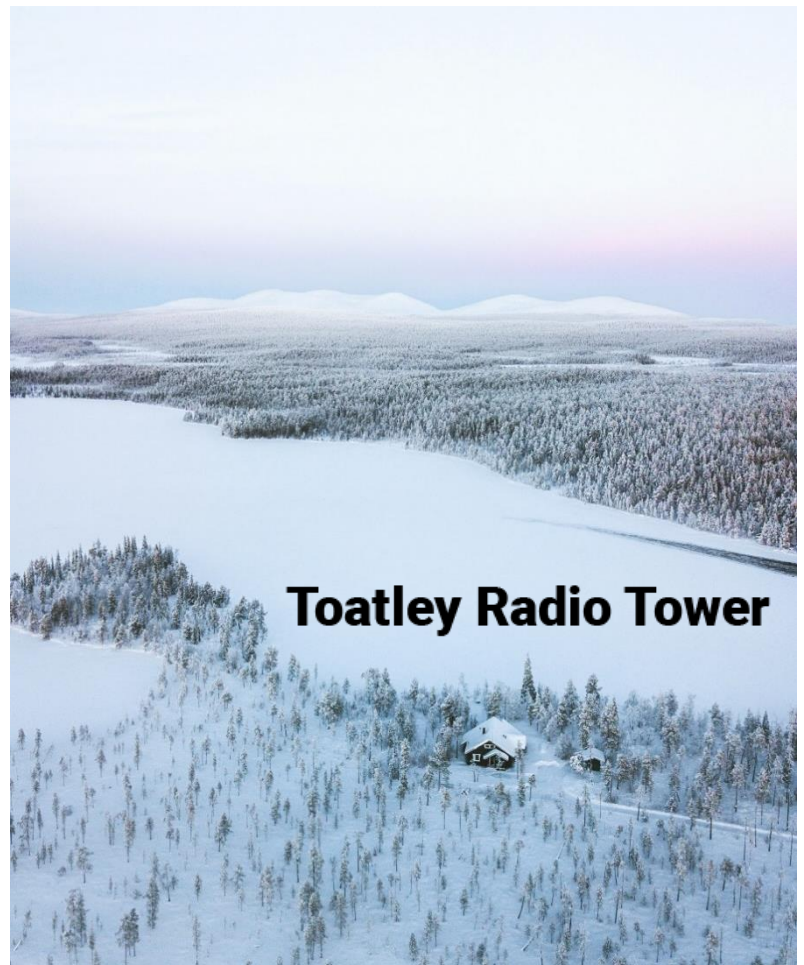


Peter Jebediah Aurelius Husker played the part of devil-doesn't-care villain all too well. Ex-Hound-Me-Meckel-CEO. Spat on nearly everyone. Disliked him the day we met. Too hungry, sweaty for petty control. Small things. Past trauma fed. Should have worked more on himself. Been kinder. Found a hobby-for-release. Looked up catharsis. But blamed only others. Ate with his mouth open. Serving consecutive life sentences for Hope's loss, being a terrible boss, and predominantly, serial sheep murders lasting decades.



Wanderlust-Eddie was in charge of knocking out the Toatley Radio Tower. Run by Magic-Mervin and his trick-knee. Busted from his semi-pro basketball career. Knew Eddie all too well. Frequently misguided interactions with local law. Luckily Dusky let most things slide.

It was just outside of town. And Eddie'd get there quickest. Knew they'd merry-chase him. Wore his freshly-pressed had-to-be-guilty face. Audible-denial. Circle back. Buy us time. Tore the wires out.





Eddie vouched for Shamus Petals to pull open the prison gates. One of his stranger-strangers. Strong long-distance runner and the real-deer-face behind the Gaitsborough-Church-Ghost mystery. He liked the elderberries that grew near the vicar's lounge. And Vice-Vole-Vicar Morris was practically blind.

Shamus and Eddie met when Eddie woke up on the Petal's couch one morning with no memory, been part of their family ever since.

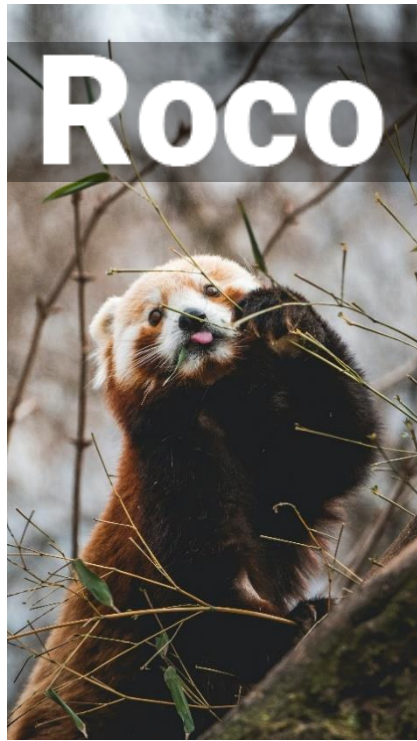
Shamus' wife, Marley, promised it would be okay. Said Shamus was the best clatter-and-kick distraction artist this side of Gumford-Bay.

And who could say no to that



Marley and their undecided son, Momo, waited two clicks south.

Once the gates were open, Hope and Parker would leg it towards them. Through the Shrubtree-Oakle shortcut. With I-run-a-lot-Stella as their scout, cutting a long arc across the Blackberry Trail. Her nose leading the way. To the rendezvous. For a quick change.

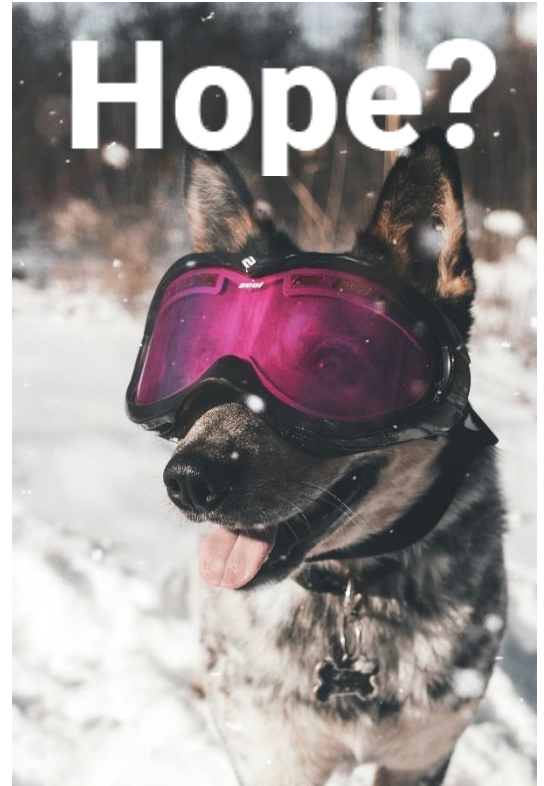


We hired Roco Lapinsky, he was the best. Gave us a discount. Local dressmaker-remaker in charge of snacks and disguises. Official title. Back of his shop was bigger than the front. Made his clients social and legal chameleons by trade. New identities, backstories, recent histories. Eyewitness offhand accounts. Served up delicious edibles while we wait.

Hope's disguise was mainly pink-goggles-based, quick-shave, and spatters of hair dye. Boyish-cologne. Shiny bone-biscuit collar trinket to completion. Distractingly confident.

She played the part of Boomer Poxy, illegitimate daughter of a gruff-reclusive adhesive magnate.

All-too-common money-has-no-meaning travelling-skier that could barely see.



Parker's new life-look demanded more to keep him safe. A metamorphosis from angry-caged-butterfly to retired sheep-revolutionary, none other than the previously-deceased Paco Holimigdia himself. Somehow resurrected in an orange bobble hat.

Roco said rumors would make locals believe. Maybe fuel the ovine uprising. Finally set the sheep free. For even fabricated-miracles had a way of motivating folks to do it themselves.

The tiny panda also spread a counter-rumor that the revolutionaries were shipping him out. Offering him up to the meat-trade authorities for frustration relief. Important to keep the narrative unclear, contradictory, unpopular, and the authorities confused.





Roco's own, arguably unnecessary, disguise was undoubtedly amazing. The red panda liked being thorough. Even came with a backstory, that of Almu Pinkerton. Wonder-mutt in his youth, turned cautious hobbyist, and suspiciously-frequent innocent bystander. Avid sled-racing enthusiast and habitual carrot-eater.

Rumored champion sled-driver of the Ocelot-Cunningham Winter Endurance Race. Because, why not.

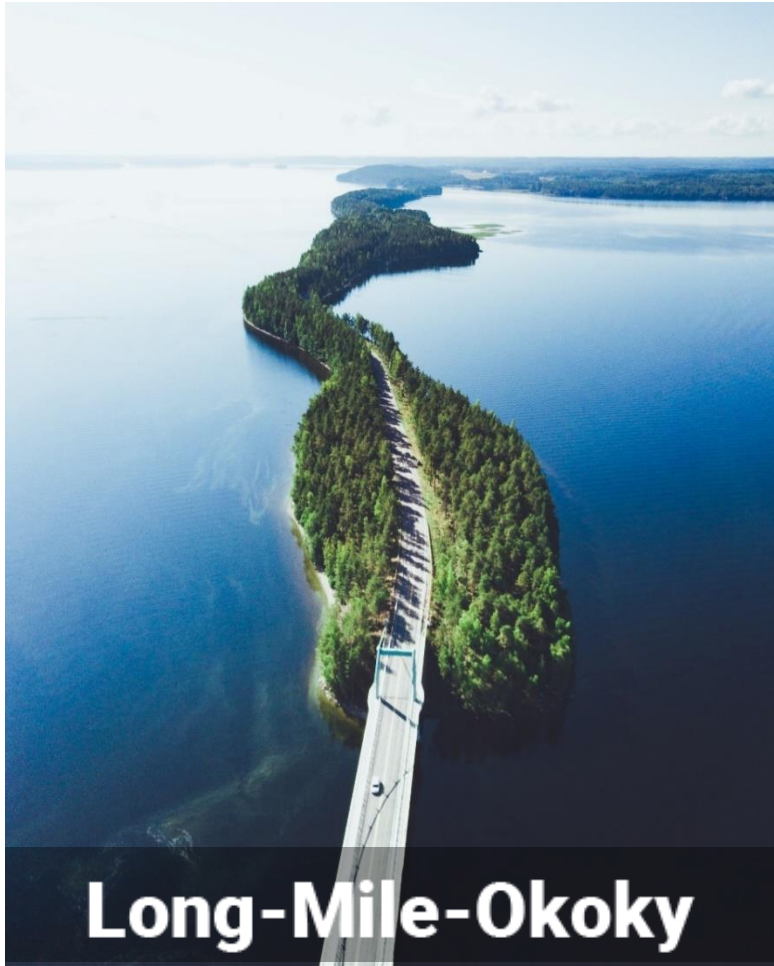


But it was Marley and Merrick that would race the trio of escapees to their border. Fake tourist-mannequins made from hay and stuffing. Blanket wrapped. Propped up all the way to Polpo Station, where their ditch-me-quick getaway car was waiting.

Meanwhile and without wasting time, Shamus-the-wonder-reindeer would lead the guards the long-wrong way. Circle back and straight into the welcoming paws of Poncho Sansa's discreet ambush.

Poncho was one of Ellie's young cub-cohorts-in-training. Part of her tourists-are-not-snacks safety-first awareness-program. And Poncho really was super friendly behind the façade, but scary enough to keep the guards trembling and distracted.





Long-Mile-Okoky

From there, the trio kept going, down the Long-Mile-Okoky stretch. And then south, south, south. Hook a right, couple of squiggles, and a straight fast-as-you-can-line. On till morning.

Till they hit the heat of Marsten Desert.

Luckily their new van came loaded with fresh icy water, lemon juice, and a big bag of sugar.



Marsten Desert



Parker and Hope now live in Phalanx-Alabaster. Officially. With their newly-minted Aunt Almu Pinkerton. Pinkie to her yappy-friends.

Fake-aunt Roco opened a deceptively-profitable on-the-road-to-help-you-escape-injustice franchise.

The trio helped a few folks in relatable-mishaps along their way. Found the lifestyle suited them.

Far from Phalanx-Alabaster



Parker and Hope were like two ronin. Fighting crimes with their plucky used-to-be-a-red-panda forger-smith. Always at their side.



Samus became the face of The Daily Parapet. Mostly lucky scoops. Some good writing. Look at my face, I look so young. So happy. I was happy.

Still went to bed late. But now I had a patient stylist that did my makeup in the car. Made me look less tired.

Became their top presenter. Friends watched my show, said I found my calling. Was fun interviewing famous folks from all over the world. Poke at politicians. My coy-good-looks let me ask more pressing questions. Not the usual pander-biased mumble-salad caught-at-the-back-of-your-throat fluff. Went on to cover the Briar-Island-Sheep Civil War. Changed my life.



That's where I met Lena. Lena Osprey Parish. Foot-soldier-turned-captain in the SLF. Sheep Liberation Front. Spurred on by our very own fake Paco Holimigdia, created seamlessly by Roco, and played triumphantly by Parker.

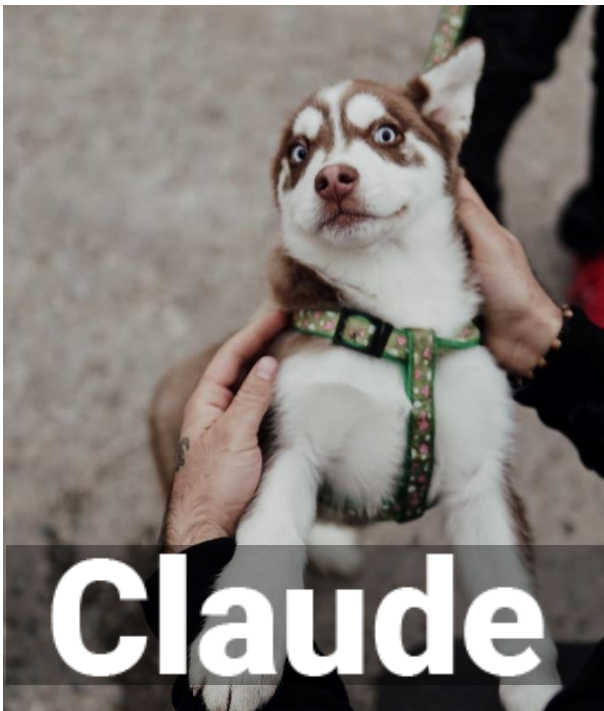
Inadvertently brought the long-time-coming revolution to life. Gave their movement the momentum it needed. And I was so in love.

Forgot about journalism for a bit. Fell. Stayed in love. Fought alongside Gupple-Bleat herds defending their homes. Shellfire cracked walls and burst windows. Shard-life. Real-real brave survivors.

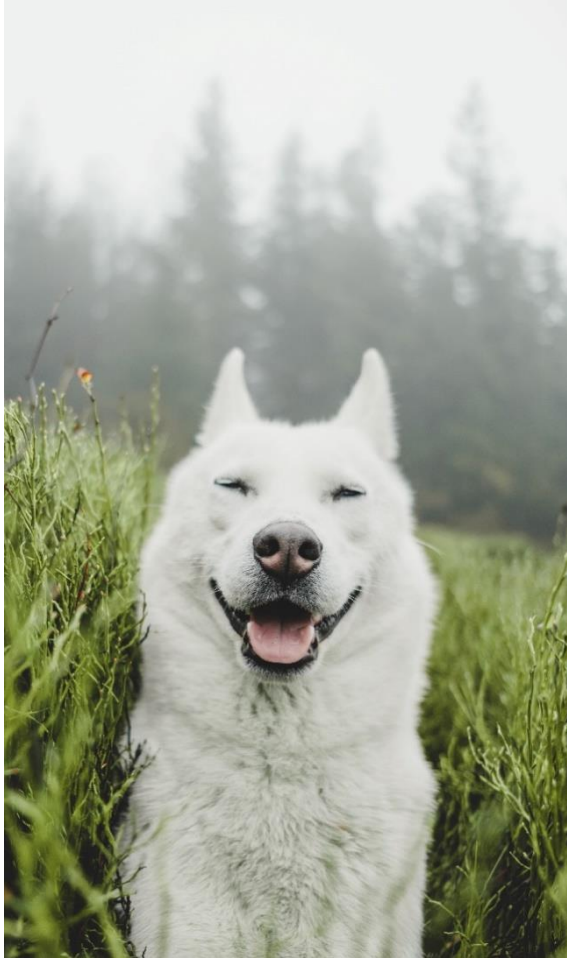
Light side led by General Grammie Oats. Wild ridge-hunter. Survived decades, two wolf attacks and the Boxie-Furnace shelling. One of the last surviving members of the Emmersfield 75th Charging-Delight Brigade.

In her youth, she was the consecutive regional winner of the world's fluffiest winter coat, and amateur astronomer.

Her dad wanted her to be a researcher. Mom thought vet was the way. She might have opened a bakery, but they were long gone, and things went the other way. General Oats rose up the ranks. Never looked back.



We had Claude when the dust settled. Lost an ear in a school-scuffle. Not his fault. Suited him. Danger magnet like his moms. Sure he'd be a writer one day. Lena voted botanist, the way he was always in the garden. Or whatever brought him joy.

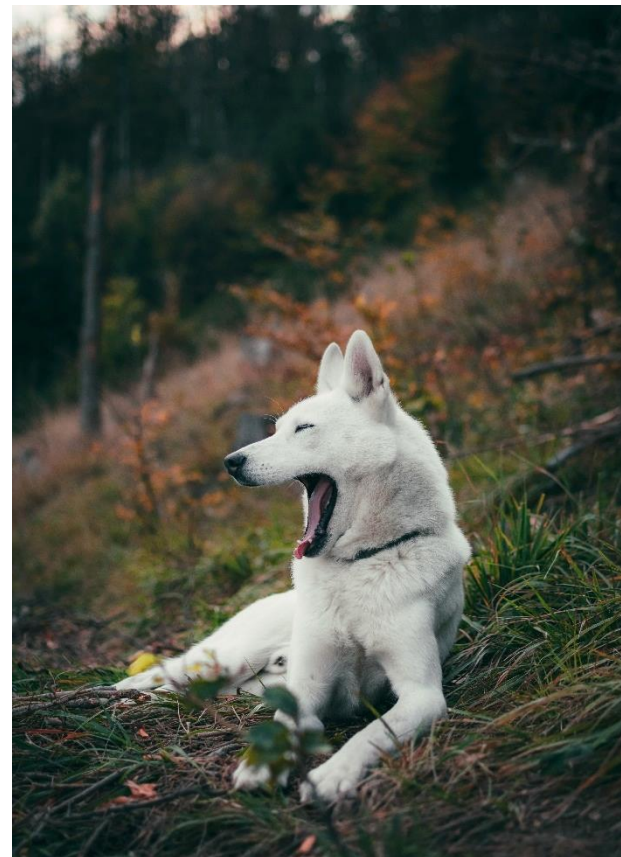


Eddie travelled the world. From the rice patties and tea fields of Elma Green, down Driftwood-Causeway and up Mount Caw-Taw-Maw. To meet the wolves there. See if they'd have him. If he fit in.



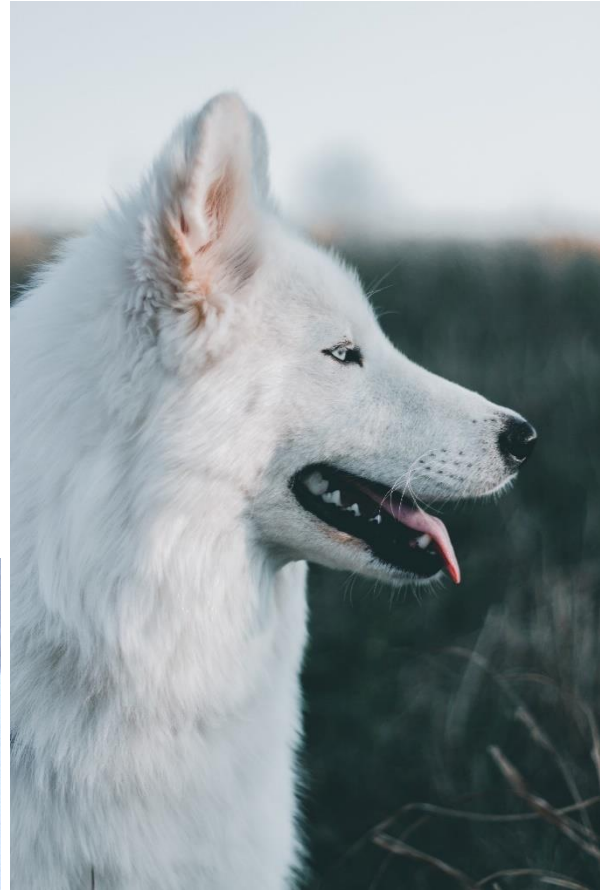
But he kept going. Sent photos of him staring up at the pink skies of Cotton-Fluff-Rory Crossing. Way-way out east.

A yawny-autumn in the Fariki Forests looking for the Gosford Ghouls. Well-known fire-watch wolfpack. Why their forest rarely burned.





Sounded like he made some friends.



Found himself. Drifted back home.



Officer Dusky on patrol

Says Dusky stops in from time to time. Checked if he was okay. Distant-good could-be-dad. But didn't stay long. But good enough. Stayed close. Stayed friends.



Weeks later, he found Fargo It's-un-Fairchild. Leader of the Something-Something-Hounds. I can't remember. Only briefly. Problematic reputation. Wanted to find out.

Eddie became their vice-captain but the sunken leadership and outright-misguided violence meant he couldn't stay. And Fargo turned out to be a mean drunk, sparked something in the Eddie-pup.

They found Fargo's body down Peggy-Cutter's Ridge. Month later. His raiders disbanded. Another for-the-best. We all guessed. Dusky helped clear it up, but didn't say any more.



I suspect it had something to do with Eddie and Gabrielle getting back together. The should-have-run-away-together girl he still pined for. Letter to Ellie said they'd never been happier. Eddie's voice bouncing off the page. And that they missed us.

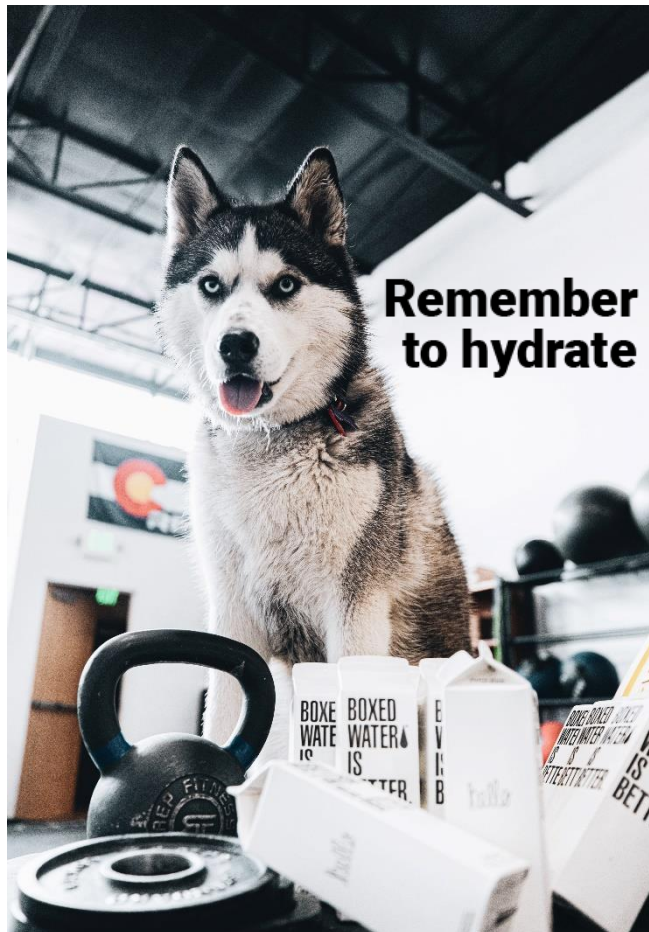


They had Mikhail Ellie Babinski a few seasons on. Named after Ellie for being there, for saving him. Caring. Wasn't planned. He was hyper like his dad. Little nervous like his mom. But holding on. More loved. Better future. Better parents than Eddie's mum.



Frankie started playing again. Just to pass the time. Weeks later found the Duo-Don't-Own-Me jazz band. Headlined at the Starbright Lounge in Faraday Heights. Said he made it. That they liked his style, the way he played. Sounded so surprised.

He helped Stella with her training. Her roadwork. Stayed close by.

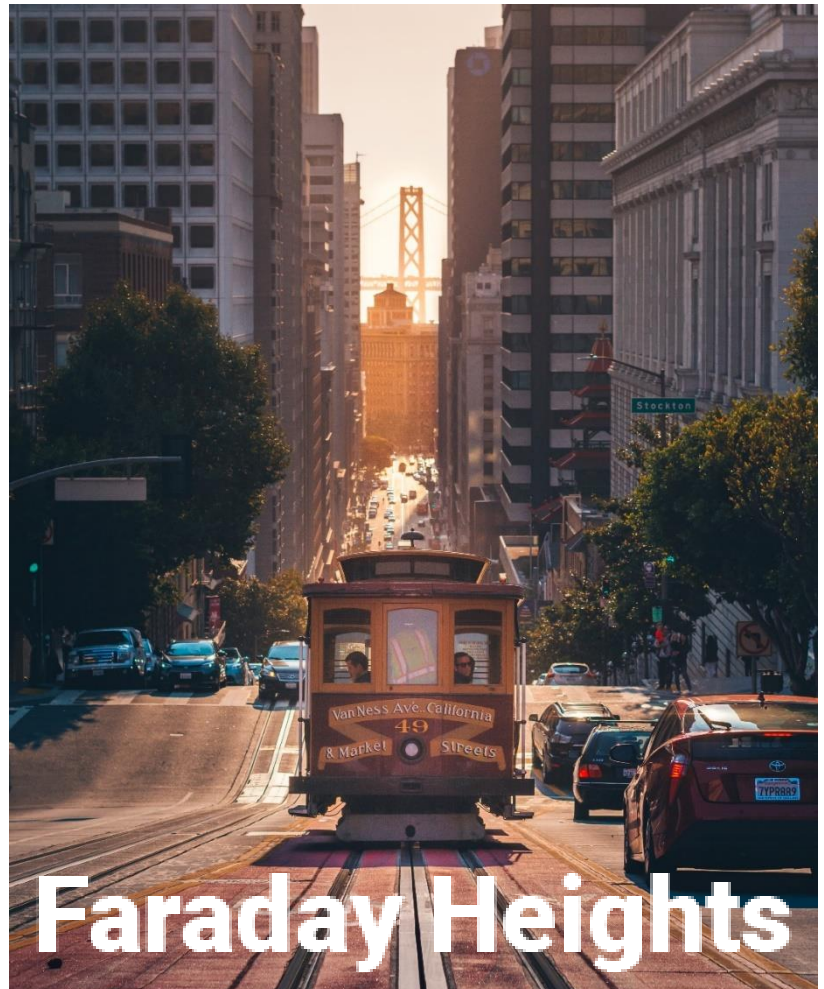


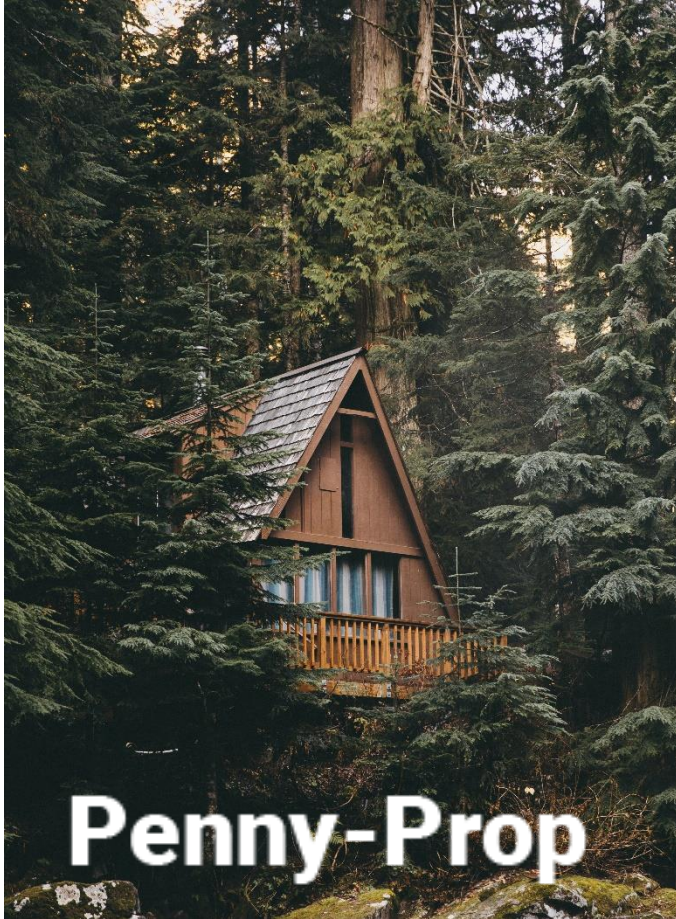


Stella joined the FHFCPD. Faraday Heights Fair-Cop Police Department. New initiative. Better training. Better hours. Mental-healthcare. Worked for a better future. Became best friends with Officer Davey. Highest case clearance rate, lowest complaints. Didn't take shortcuts. Still made mistakes, fixed what she could. Lived on the second floor of Maple-May apartments. Ate hotdogs on the weekends, in the park.

They had a standing rivalry with an uptight Officer Ipton and his partner, Officer Wendy. But Stella and Davey almost always won.

Loved her new city, the streetcars. And the bay. Long runs on the beach. Davey hugging her. Seeing Frankie all the time. Slow fresh-breeze-sunsets.

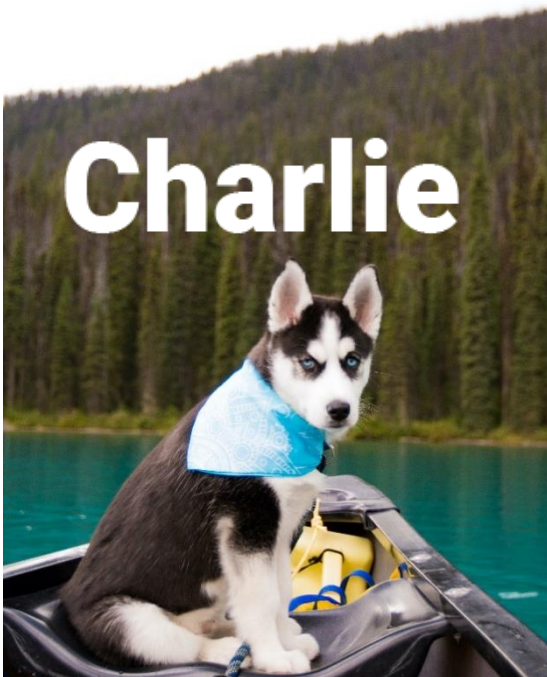
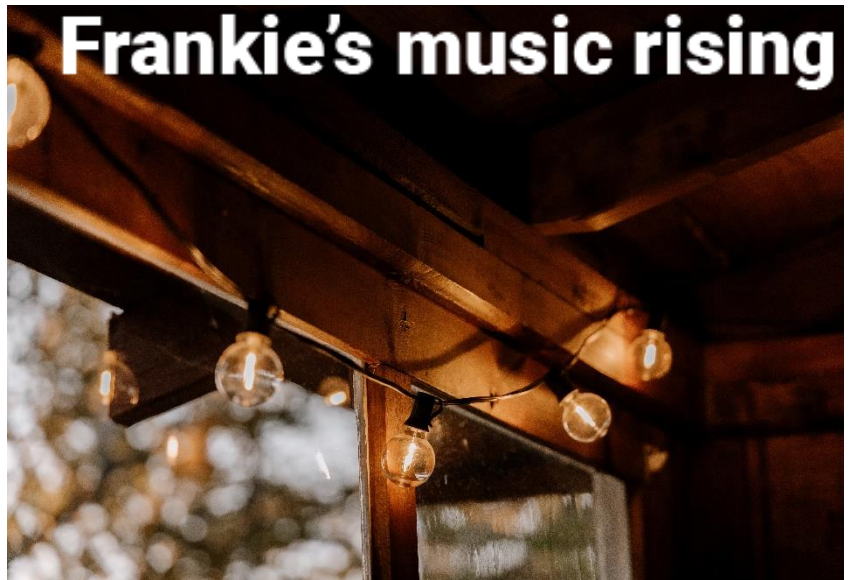




Ellie and Camus bought Penny-Prop cabin near Lake Elody. Finally got time together. Slowed down together.

And as a really close friend, I can wholeheartedly say, they are ridiculous. In love. In like. In so many ways.

Boat rides, camping trips. Long walks. Best free coffee whenever we arrive for slow summers. Marshmallow-snowed-in winters. Noisy spring kids. Old films in autumn. Always-movie nights.



After the investigation, Ellie was offered an advisory role. Campgrounds and Adventure tours for the entire region. Hound-Me-Meckel's parent company, Ardent-Pinnacle, said they were determined to change. Improve. And Ellie kept them in check. Kept folks safe. Kept some time for herself.

Camus turned out to be a real great dad and Logistics Coordinator. Worked closely with Ellie. She knew he would, loved organizing things. Always soft and kind. Even to himself.

Forest never been happier. So glad we all made it.

Must have been nine seasons later, when they adopted a little sailor of their own. Charlie-Starbright McKenzie. Just loved the way it sounds. Had Camus' eyes. Frankie was pleased. Hoped Charlie would forgive his silly parents one day.

We all still visit from time to time. Holidays. Big birthdays. Escape the bright-lights-days, the big-city-bustle. Life goes on. The open road. Found our forever-homes. And everything was going to be okay.