

Get Set to Read

Akiak



Robert J. Blake  
**AKIAK**  
A TALE FROM THE IDITAROD

California  
Standards

Standards to  
Achieve

Reading

- Identify main events of plot (R3.2)

# Running THE IDITAROD

Every March teams of sled dogs run the world-famous Iditarod race. The course covers more than 1,000 miles of rugged Alaskan trails. Teams of up to sixteen dogs pull a sled carrying their musher, or driver, who works closely with the experienced lead dog.

Because it can be dangerous, the Iditarod has many rules to make sure the teams reach the end of the race safely. Racers, both animal and human, are required to rest often as well as to sign in at many checkpoints along the way.

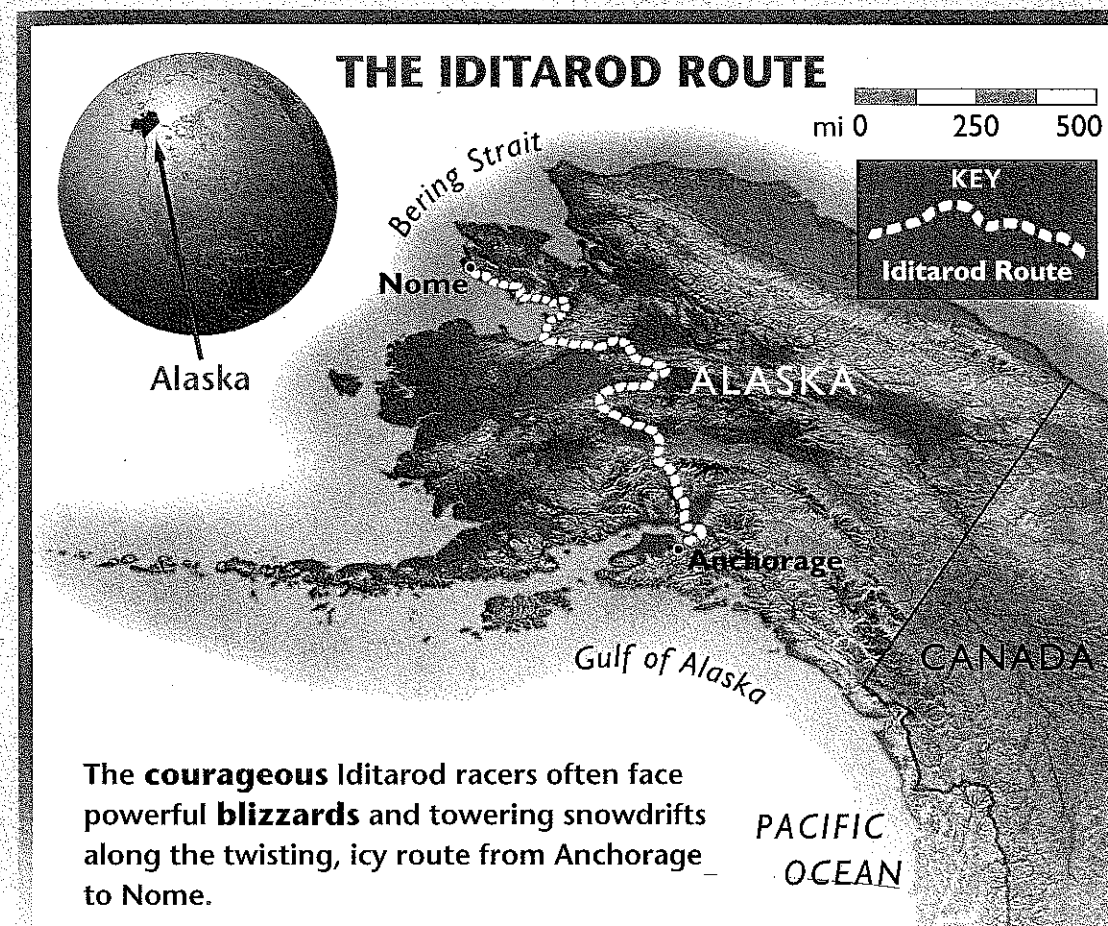
In the story you are going to read, one special racer struggles to overcome the odds and to make the most of her last chance at an Iditarod victory.



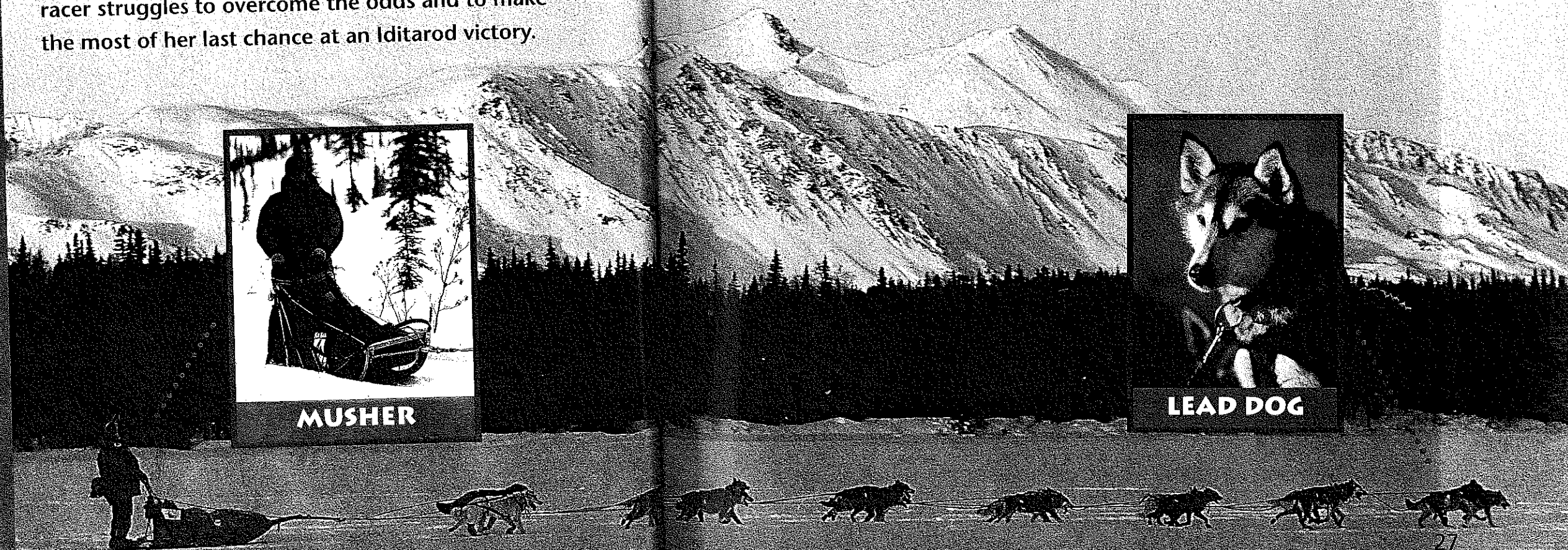
MUSHER



LEAD DOG



The **courageous** Iditarod racers often face powerful **blizzards** and towering snowdrifts along the twisting, icy route from Anchorage to Nome.





## MEET THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR



# ROBERT BLAKE

As a young boy growing up in New Jersey, Robert Blake always loved to draw. He recalls the time he drew a mural on the hallway wall. This drawing was “not artistically appreciated” by his parents, he says.

Blake enjoys traveling to get ideas for his stories. For *Akiak*, he journeyed to Alaska to watch the famous Iditarod race. To research some of his other books, he has traveled to places as far away as Ireland and has sailed the coast of New England.

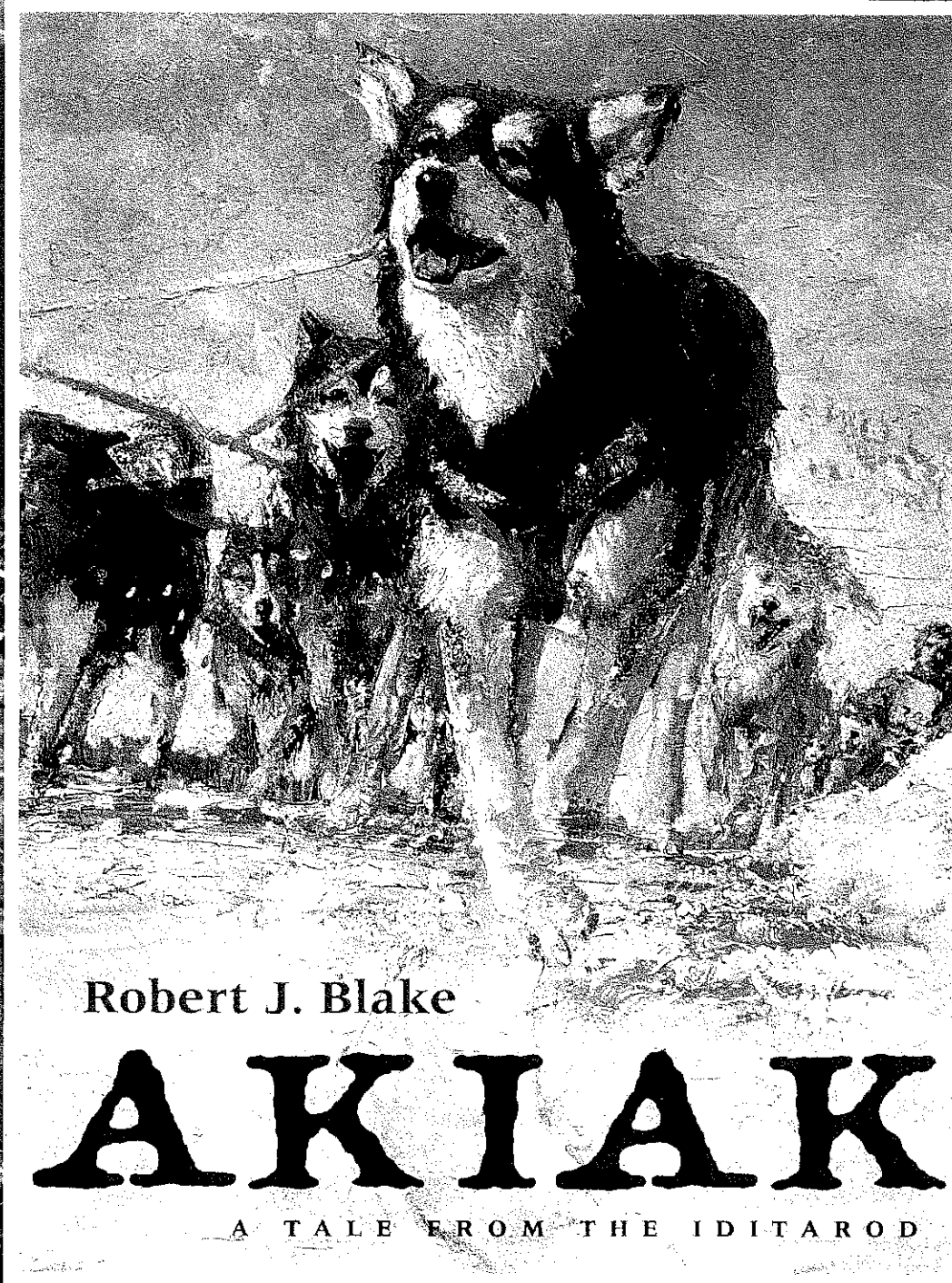
Blake says that he hopes to paint in every state in the nation and in every country in the world. But in the meantime, he lives in New Jersey with his wife and son. He continues to paint in his studio, which is located in a barn.

Other books by Robert Blake:  
*Spray, The Perfect Spot, Dog*

Internet

To find out more about Robert Blake, visit  
Education Place. [www.eduplace.com/kids](http://www.eduplace.com/kids)

## Selection 1



### Strategy Focus

*Akiak* is divided into sections describing different days of the Iditarod race. As you read, stop every few pages to **summarize** each day's events.

Reading

Use reading strategies (R2.2)





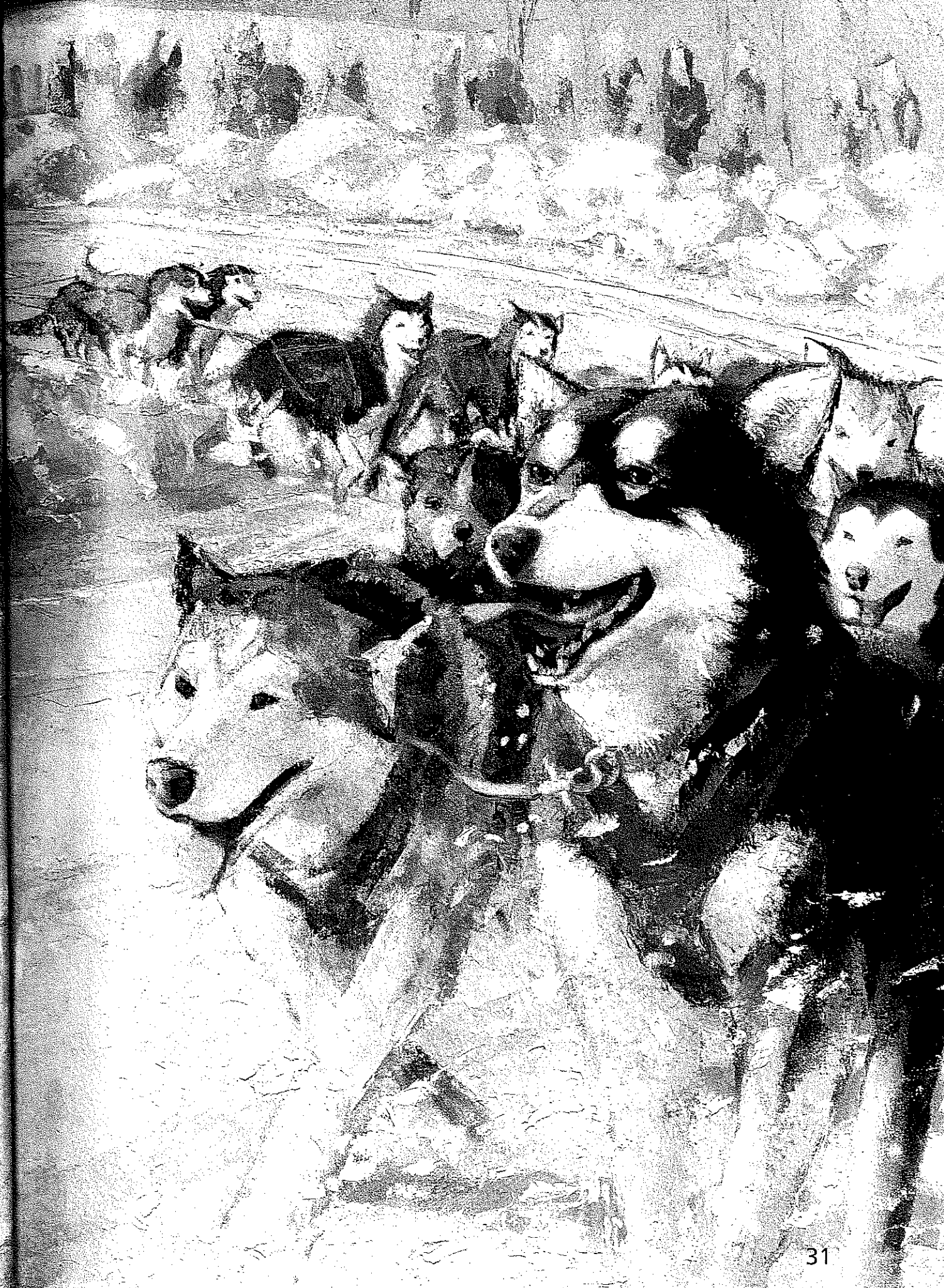
### DAY ONE

Akiak knew it. The other dogs knew it, too.

Some had run it many times and others had never run it at all. But not a dog wanted to be left behind.

It was Iditarod Race Day. 1,151 miles of wind, snow, and rugged trail lay ahead, from Anchorage to Nome. Akiak had led the team through seven races and knew the trail better than any dog. She had brought them in fifth, third, and second, but had never won. She was ten years old now. This was her last chance. Now, they must win now.

Crack! The race was under way. One by one, fifty-eight teams took off for Nome.







## DAY TWO

"Come on, old girl, show 'em how," Mick called. "Haw!"

Mick worked the sixteen-dog team through Akiak, calling "Haw!" when she needed the dogs to turn left, and "Geel!" to go right. Mick was the musher, but the team followed the lead dog. The team followed Akiak.

Through steep climbs and dangerous descents, icy waters and confusing trails, Akiak always found the safest and fastest way. She never got lost.



### DAY THREE

Akiak and Squinty, Big Boy and Flinty, Roscoe and the rest of the team pounded across the snow for three days. The dogs were ready to break out, but Mick held them back. There was a right time — but not yet.

High in the Alaskan range they caught up to Willy Ketcham in third place. It was his team that had beaten them by just one minute last year. Following the rules, Willy pulled over and allowed Mick's team to pass.

"That old dog will never make it!" he laughed at Akiak across the biting wind.

"She'll be waiting for you at Nome!" Mick vowed.





#### DAY FOUR

High in the Kuskokwim Mountains they passed Tall Tim Broonzy's team and moved into second place. Just after Takotna, Mick's team made its move. They raced by Whistlin' Perry's team to take over first place.

Ketcham made his move, too. His team clung to Mick's like a shadow.

Akiak and her team now had to break trail through deep snow. It was tough going. By the Ophir checkpoint, Akiak was limping. The deep snow had jammed up one of her pawpads and made it sore. Mick tended to her as Ketcham raced by and took first place from them.

"You can't run on that paw, old girl," Mick said to her. "With a day's rest it will heal, but the team can't wait here a day. We've got to go on without you. You'll be flown home."

Roscoe took Akiak's place at lead.





### DAY FIVE

By morning most of the other dog teams had passed through the Ophir checkpoint. The wind was building and the pilot was in a hurry to leave. Akiak tore at the leash as the volunteer brought her to the airplane.

"Get that dog in," the pilot hollered. "I want to get out of here before the storm hits!"

Akiak jumped and pulled and snapped. All she wanted was to get back on the trail. To run. To win. Then all at once, the wind gusted, the plane shifted, and Akiak twisted out of the handler's grip. By the time they turned around she was gone.

### DAY SIX

Akiak ran while the storm became a blizzard. She knew that Mick and the team were somewhere ahead of her. The wind took away the scent and the snow took away the trail, but still she knew the way. She ran and she ran, until the blizzard became a whiteout. Then she could run no more. While Mick and the team took refuge in Galena, seven hours ahead, Akiak burrowed into a snowdrift to wait out the storm.

In the morning the mound of snow came alive, and out pushed Akiak.





### DAY SEVEN

Word had gone out that Akiak was loose. Trail volunteers knew that an experienced lead dog would stick to the trail. They knew she'd have to come through Unalakleet.

She did. Six hours after Mick and the team had left, Akiak padded softly, cautiously, into the checkpoint. Her ears alert, her wet nose sniffed the air. The team had been there, she could tell.

Suddenly, cabin doors flew open. Five volunteers fanned out and tried to grab her. Akiak zigged around their every zag and took off down the trail.

"Call ahead to Shaktoolik!" a man shouted.





The illustration is a black and white drawing of a winter scene. On the left, a wide, flat expanse of snow or ice stretches towards a distant, snow-capped mountain range under a dark sky. In the foreground, a small, rustic wooden cabin with a steep, snow-laden roof stands on a slight rise. Icicles hang from the eaves. A single dog, possibly a husky or similar breed, is walking on a path in the snow in front of the cabin. The overall mood is cold and desolate.

## DAY EIGHT

At Shaktoolik, Mick dropped two more dogs and raced out, still six hours ahead of Akiak.

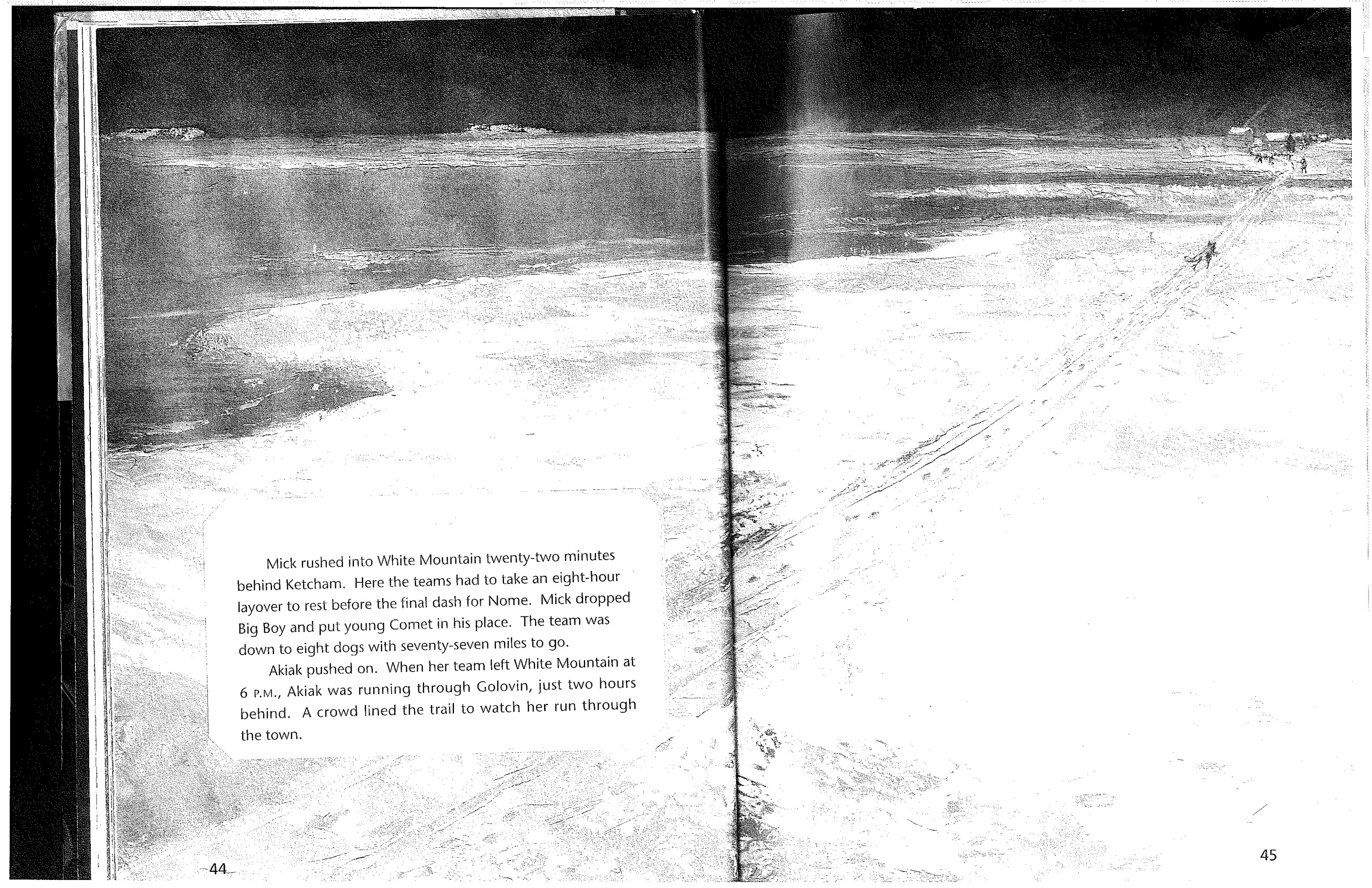
Hungry now — it had been two days since she had eaten — Akiak pounded over the packed trail. For thirst, she drank out of the streams, the ice broken through by the sled teams.

She struggled into Shaktoolik in the late afternoon. Three men spotted her and chased her right into the community hall, where some mushers were sleeping. Tables overturned and coffee went flying. Then one musher opened the back door and she escaped.

"Go find them, girl," he whispered.

At Koyuk, Akiak raided the mushers' discard pile for food. No one came after her. At Elim, people put food out for her. Almost everybody was rooting for Akiak to catch her team.





Mick rushed into White Mountain twenty-two minutes behind Ketcham. Here the teams had to take an eight-hour layover to rest before the final dash for Nome. Mick dropped Big Boy and put young Comet in his place. The team was down to eight dogs with seventy-seven miles to go.

Akiak pushed on. When her team left White Mountain at 6 P.M., Akiak was running through Golovin, just two hours behind. A crowd lined the trail to watch her run through the town.



## DAY TEN

Screaming winds threw bitter cold at the team as they fought their way along the coast. Then, halfway to the check-point called Safety, they came upon a maze of snowmobile tracks. The lead dogs lost the trail.

Mick squinted through the snow, looking for a sign. There. Going right. She recognized Ketcham's trail.

"Geel!" she called. Gee — go right.

But the dogs wouldn't go. They wandered about, tangling up the lines. Mick straightened them out and worked the team up the hill. At the top they stopped short. Something was blocking the trail.





"Akiak!" Mick called.

She ran to her usual spot at the harness, waiting to be hooked in.

"Sorry, old girl." Mick hugged her. "Rules say I can't put you back in harness. Get in the sled."

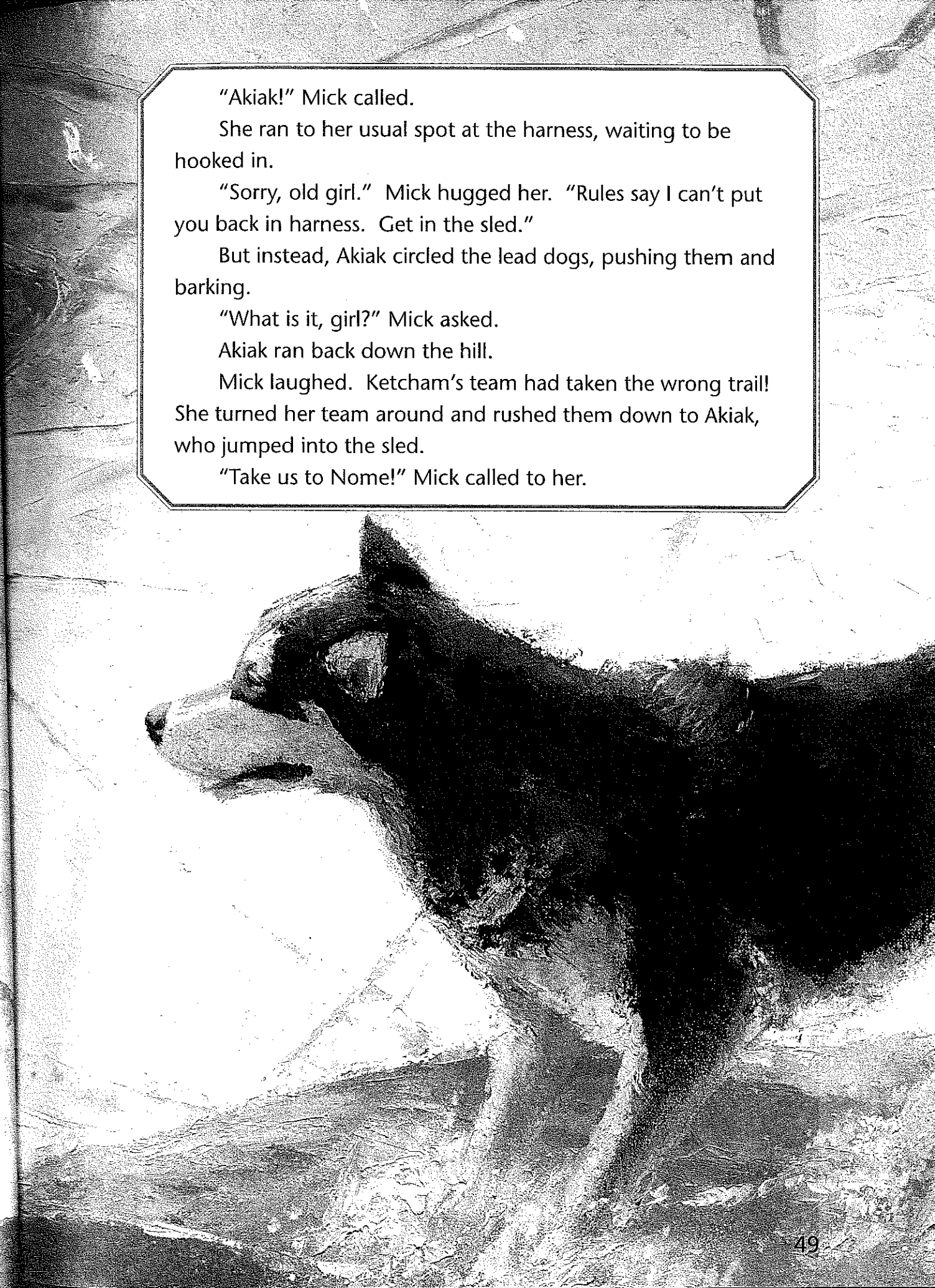
But instead, Akiak circled the lead dogs, pushing them and barking.

"What is it, girl?" Mick asked.

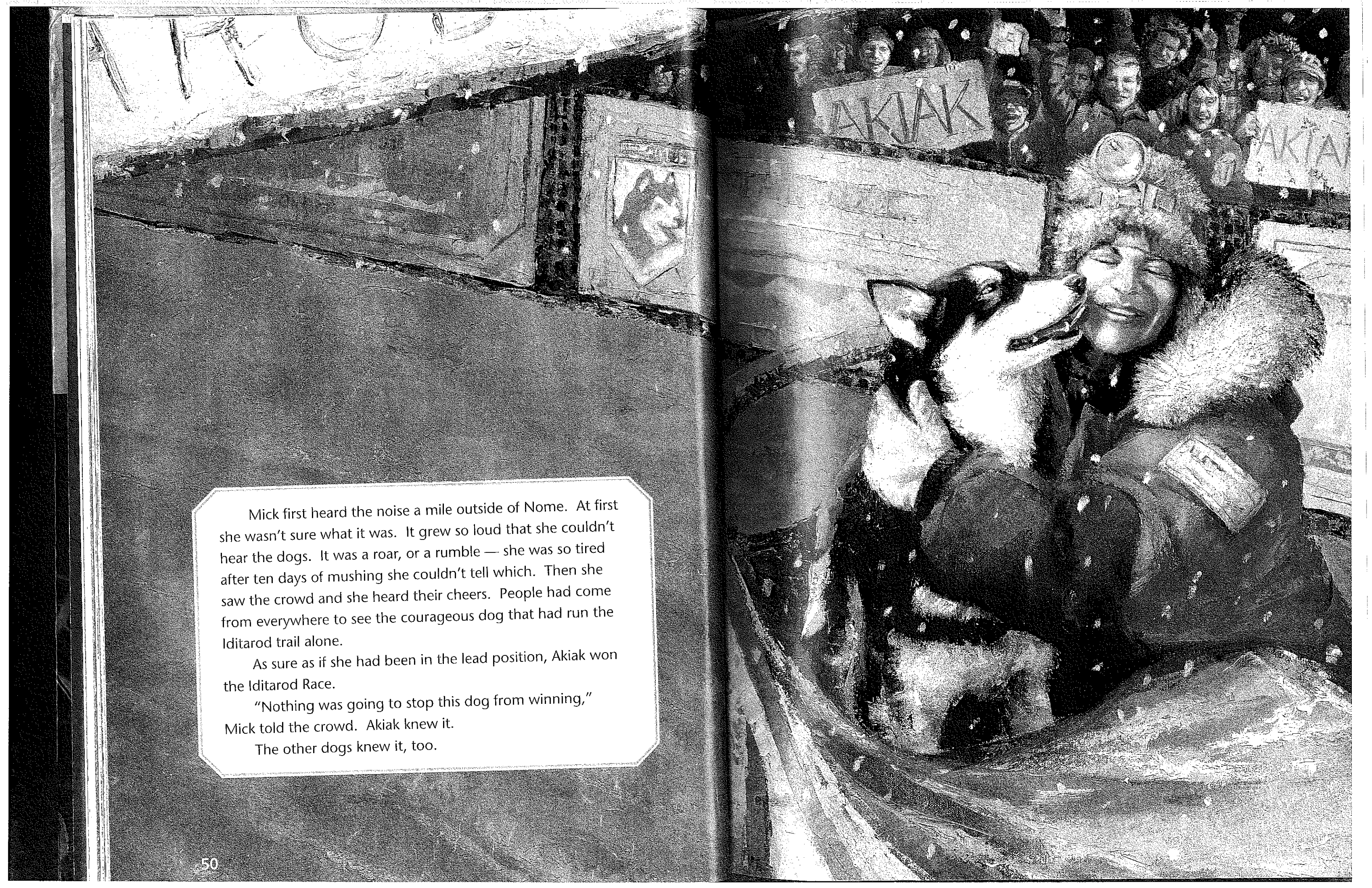
Akiak ran back down the hill.

Mick laughed. Ketcham's team had taken the wrong trail! She turned her team around and rushed them down to Akiak, who jumped into the sled.

"Take us to Nome!" Mick called to her.







Mick first heard the noise a mile outside of Nome. At first she wasn't sure what it was. It grew so loud that she couldn't hear the dogs. It was a roar, or a rumble — she was so tired after ten days of mushing she couldn't tell which. Then she saw the crowd and she heard their cheers. People had come from everywhere to see the courageous dog that had run the Iditarod trail alone.

As sure as if she had been in the lead position, Akiak won the Iditarod Race.

"Nothing was going to stop this dog from winning," Mick told the crowd. Akiak knew it.

The other dogs knew it, too.



## Social Studies Link

**Skill: How to Read a Magazine Article**

- ① Preview the article to see what it is about.
- ② Look at the headings to see how the article is organized.
- ③ Read the main part of the article first. Then read other special sections, such as captions and boxes.

California  
Standards

### Standards to Achieve

Reading

- Identify structural patterns (R2.1)

Science

- Survival of plants and animals (S3.b)

# GO, TEAM, GO!

by Judith E. Rinard

Eager dog teams streak through an icy wilderness with passengers and sleds in tow.



**WILD ride,  
WILD place,  
WILD animals!**

Sounds like another wild weekend for Alexandra Smith and her brother, Skye. Alexandra, 14, and Skye, 10, are mushers, or sled dog drivers. On weekends and holidays they help parents Diane and Richard Smith run dogsled trips for the family business.



Diane Smith harnesses a dog team in Alberta, Canada.

They guide the sleds through remote wild country near the Rocky Mountains, some 60 miles from their hometown of Rocky Mountain House, in Alberta, in Canada (see map). Wild animals such as moose sometimes watch as they speed by.



Downhill sledding feels like a fast descent on a roller coaster. To gain speed and momentum, mushers often “pedal,” or push with one foot. “You feel the wind in your face,” says Alexandra. “I love it.”

Alexandra and Skye also train and care for the 38 purebred Siberian huskies that pull the sleds. Daily they give the dogs food, water, and exercise. They also give them lots of attention by talking to them and brushing and petting them. Alexandra says that when a dog gets too old to pull a sled, it becomes an “old friend.”

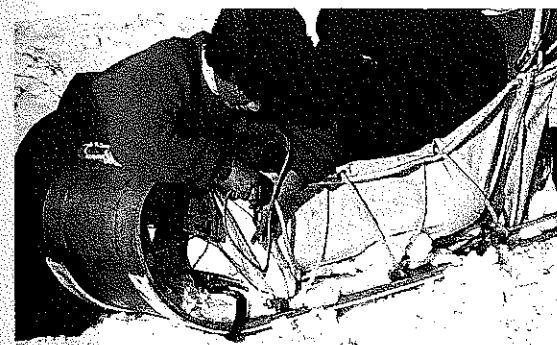
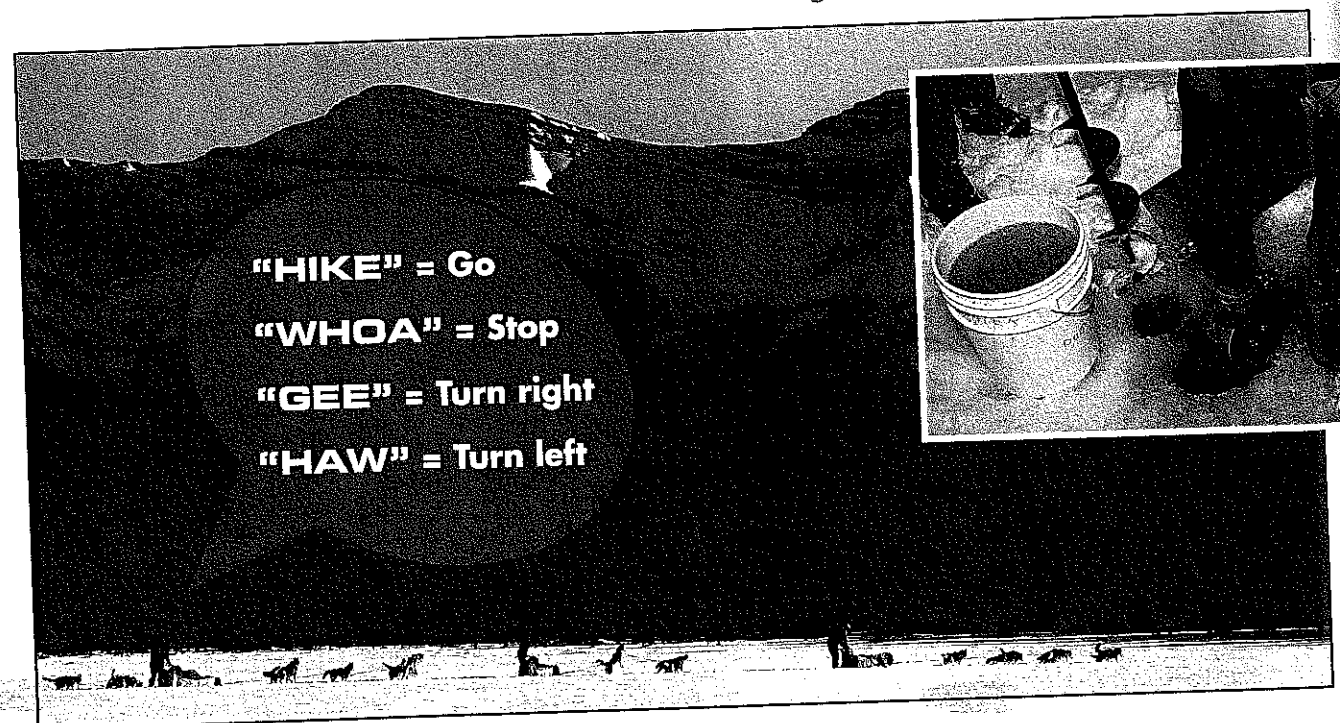


#### RARING TO PULL

King scrambles to get into a truck as Alexandra lifts him up. “He’s pretty bouncy,” she says. “All the dogs get really excited about going to the trail.”

#### ICY DRINK

Skye and his dad drill a hole through ice to get water. The dogs will drink first.



#### PILES OF SUPPLIES

Skye pulls a rope tight to hold food, clothing, and gear in place on his sled.



#### BACK TO BASICS

Skye washes in a basin of lake water heated by wood stove in a cabin at base camp. It might be in the wild, but it’s still home, so Alexandra sweeps snow to avoid tracking it in.



Dogsledding season for the Smiths runs from mid-November to mid-April. To get ready for a trip, the family loads hundreds of pounds of gear and 24 dogs into a truck. They drive to the trailhead. From there they take their clients on dogsled runs. A trip might last one hour or as long as ten days. They use voice commands to communicate with the dogs. (See bubble on opposite page.)

In the wild the dogs can sense if someone is hurt and needs aid. “They do their best to help,” says Alexandra. “They’re always there for us.”

## DOGS ON THE RUN

- Many a husky has both a brown eye and a blue eye.
- A Siberian husky has two coats of warm fur and tough-padded feet for running on ice and snow.
- At night a husky’s nose goes dry — to keep it from icing up in subzero temperatures.
- Rex, a white Eskimo dog, is the only dog to cross both Antarctica and the Arctic Ocean. He traveled with his owner, explorer Will Steger.

