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## Dogged

FROM RUNNER'S WORLD

HE WAS A BAD DOG. That was an awful thing for the runner to think as she lay dying. He had curled next to her that first night in the hidden canyon, after the accident. He had put his snout on her belly, and licked her face as she stared up at more shooting stars than she had ever dreamed. And that first morning — could it have been just the day before? — when it was so cold she had to crack the ice on top of the miraculous puddle, he had played with a stick, run in little circles, and barked with what she thought was happiness, and he was such a good dog then. He made her think that maybe things weren't so bad. She saw an eagle glide overhead that morning. It was beautiful. It was a beautiful morning. She was in a beautiful spot. Red rock and sandy soil and a juniper tree and the soft sighing of the high desert wind, and to lope through it would have been a wonder for a runner whose body wasn't broken and bleeding inside.

All she had was the puddle, and her dog. And then she didn't have the dog, because when she was screaming, when it took her two hours to reach behind her head to fill a water bottle from the puddle, the dog ran away. She couldn't stop screaming. She screamed because she hurt, and because she needed help, and because she was afraid that help might not come in time. The dog came back, but he wouldn't lie down next to her that second night. It was just last night, but it seemed so long ago. There were no shooting stars the second night. The second night, she saw things in the sky that made no sense, and heard a strange voice from the dark, and it made no sense either.

Today, the third day, the dog was gone. Then he was back. Then he was gone again. Maybe she was hallucinating. Even though she was well known for enduring things others could not, for persevering through heat and cold and all manner of punishing climate and topography — even though she was one of the most accomplished endurance runners in the world — she still had her limits. On the third day, in the hidden canyon, her body broken, she discovered them.

And then the dog was back, and now he was coming closer, and now he was lapping at the puddle, her only water source, and she couldn't help it, she yelled at him. It was the only water she could reach. Couldn't he find another puddle? Bad dog!

No one knew where she was. It would be dark again, and cold. No one could hear her scream. No one was coming. Today, her third day on the rock by the puddle, she allowed herself to see the truth.

She had won the Pikes Peak Marathon four times. She had raced up all fifty-four of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks in less than fifteen days, faster than any woman in history. She had competed in 441 endurance events (races that took from an hour to ten days to finish) since 1995 and finished in the top three in 390 of them. Three times she was part of a four-person team that won one of the most punishing endurance events in the world, Primal Quest, a 400-mile trek over land and water, mountain and desert terrain. She had earned six "U.S. Athlete of the Year" titles in four different endurance sports. She had kept going when others had told her she had to stop. Now, she couldn't move.

It was midafternoon on a Friday. She had degrees in biology and kinesiology, and as much as she had invested, personally and professionally, in the awesome power of the human spirit, she also possessed grim knowledge regarding the limits of flesh and bone. It was ten days before Christmas. That's when Danelle Ballengee, just thirty-five years old, prepared to die. That's when the runner who never gave up, gave up. It really was a beautiful spot. She felt peace. And then she heard another sound. And it didn't make sense either.

Two days earlier, on Wednesday, December 13, Ballengee had spent the early part of the morning e-mailing with sponsors, writing arti-

cles, answering questions from clients who had hired her as a personal trainer. She left her house on Cliffview Drive in Moab, Utah, at 10:00 A.M. She also had landlord duties to attend to. She owned three rental properties in Colorado, and she rented out space in her Moab house, and one of her tenant's friends had stolen some money, so she had to go to the bank to file a fraud report. Only then could she begin the highlight of her morning — the run.

With her dog, Taz, a three-year-old reddish-brown mutt with a long jaw and a broad chest, she climbed in her white Ford Ranger truck, her kayak on top of the roof. She stopped at a Burger King for a chicken sandwich and French fries and a large coffee, because she had forgotten to eat breakfast. The dog got a bite, because the dog always got a bite. She had spoiled him since the day she got him from the pound, when he was just a few weeks old.

It was a good day for a run, cloudy but not too cold. She listened to "Beautiful Day," by U2. She thought about the guy she had met a few weeks earlier at a race in Leadville, Colorado, and smiled because she thought there was potential. When she got to the parking area at the Amasa Back Trail, five miles out of town, she kept driving, continued a quarter-mile north on the road to a turnoff near a cliff. She did it because she wanted to shave a quarter-mile off her run. The endurance runner was feeling lazy.

She put on a pair of cheap orange sunglasses, grabbed her MP3 player and a large plastic bottle filled with water and a raspberry-flavored energy gel. She wore running pants, a fleece hat, silk long underwear, a polypropylene shirt, and a thin fleece jacket. The temperature was in the forties, but she wanted to be prepared. She invested as much in preparation as she did in the power of positive thinking. Just before she locked her wallet and cell phone in the car, she spotted a fanny pack in the backseat. She had forgotten it was there. She grabbed it, stuck her water bottle in, and took off.

Her plan was to run and hike an eight-mile loop. She would start on the Amasa Back Trail, popular among bikers and hikers, especially in spring and fall. But she would veer off of it after just a few miles, just before the top of a mesa, where she would follow a seldom-used jeep trail known to the locals as the Mine Sweeper and into a hidden canyon, then she would scramble up the rocks of that canyon, toward Hurrah Pass, onto another seldom-used jeep trail, through another canyon, up some more rocks, and she would

eventually land back on another jeep trail that would take her back to a road that led to her truck. Taz ran alongside her, panting happily. An hour in, she had covered five miles. She had drunk half her water bottle. She was scrambling up the rocks in the first hidden canyon, Taz just behind her. It really was a beautiful day.

If you stopped to think about the things that could kill you, you could drive yourself crazy. Another second in an intersection. Another inch on a highway. One misstep on some ice-covered slick-rock. Or maybe it was just slippery lichen.

One second she was one of the best endurance runners in the world, out for a late autumn loop in the high desert, breathing in the soft, juniper-scented air, barely paying attention to the low, grayish clouds scudding by. One second she was a world champion out for a light workout.

And then the second was gone. Now she was sliding, like a kid down a giant water slide. That's what she thought at the time, that it felt like a water slide. Past lichen, past rocks, past sand. She slid on her butt, hit "a little bump," then "another little bump." Then she came to "a little ledge."

People hear Primal Quest and they see adrenaline junkies. People read about Danelle Ballengee and they think risk seeker. But in her kayak, she steered clear of white water. On skis, she descended carefully, avoided steep out-of-bounds areas. She had no interest in bungee jumping. Other adventure racers yipped with glee at sections that demanded hanging from ropes. That was the point in the race when Ballengee frowned and gritted her teeth.

She kept picking up speed. According to a newspaper account published a week after the accident, she flew off a cliff and plummeted the equivalent of two stories, landing on her feet. The reality was messier, and more plain. She ended up halfway down the hill, prone. She caught her breath. She had once survived eight sunbaked days in the Morocco Eco-Challenge, a race equally as fearsome as Primal Quest. A leech had attached itself to her eyelid in another race, given her a corneal ulcer, blinded her for three days. That was punishing. This was just a nasty tumble. But she was smart, and careful. She had her two degrees from the University of Colorado. She would be methodical. She put her right hand on her right leg, her left hand on her left leg. *Whew*. That was the word she thought. *Whew*. She wasn't paralyzed. This was her next thought:

*Man, it's gonna be a long walk out of here.* A moment later she realized she couldn't stand up.

She would crawl thirty feet to the bottom of the canyon. She would drag herself over rocks and through scrub. Then she would *crawl the three miles to the Amasa Back Trail and hope that someone would see her.* It was noon when she started.

Her left leg wouldn't move. She scooted forward on her right knee, balanced, then reached back with both hands and pulled her left leg forward. She knew things were broken. She knew she was in trouble. When she reached the bottom of the canyon, she looked in her fanny pack to see if there might be something to help. She found another pack of raspberry energy gel, a shower cap, and two ibuprofen. She swallowed the pills, kept crawling. She crawled through sand and brush and some snow — the canyon floor was not just sand — and by the time she arrived at a flat rock, and a sinkhole filled with water, the air was getting cold and shadows in the canyon were lengthening. It was 5:00 P.M. She had crawled a quarter of a mile, and it had taken five hours.

She lay down on her back, drank the remaining half of her water bottle, put her hands between her legs because they were so cold. She decided she would refill the water bottle from the sinkhole — she didn't care about parasites. But it hurt too much to turn over. So she reached backward over her right shoulder and filled the water bottle without looking.

She did crunches with her head and neck to keep warm. Her knees were bent, and she tapped her feet on the rock. She rubbed her hands together. She reached for the shower cap in the fanny pack, but she couldn't find it. Taz curled up next to her. He put his chin on her stomach and looked at her. The temperature dipped into the twenties. She lay on her back, freezing, exhausted, and looked at the moonless sky. She saw the Milky Way and shooting stars. She had never in her life seen so many shooting stars.

She wondered what the guy in Leadville was doing. She wondered if someone would see that her truck was missing from her house. Then she realized how dumb that was. She loved working with others in the endurance challenges, but she hadn't told anyone where she was going. And what she was most famous for was enduring. Why would anyone worry about her?

It was so cold. She didn't want to die. She *couldn't* die. There

were friends and family she wasn't ready to leave. She continued her crunches, her feet-tapping, her finger-curling.

At first light, she saw Taz playing with a stick. That cheered her. She ate one of the energy gels. She tried to refill her water bottle, but the water in the sinkhole had frozen. She reached over her shoulder and broke through it with the cap of the bottle.

She decided that today she would crawl out of the canyon. She tried to roll over, to get on her hands and knees, and she screamed. She felt pain radiating down her legs, up her back. Taz licked her face and she lay back down, on her back, to gather her strength. And she screamed for help, in case anyone could hear her, and when she looked up, Taz had gone.

Then it was three o'clock and he was back. She wasn't sure how so much time had passed, but it had. The temperature had risen into the forties, and that felt good, but it would be dark again soon, and the cold would come. She screamed for help, even though she knew no one was coming. That's when she saw the shower cap — it was just a couple feet away. It was too far. She raised her head, lowered her voice. She looked at Taz.

"I'm hurt," she said. He looked at her and tilted his head, first to the left, then to the right. She knew it was ridiculous, but it looked like he understood.

"Taz," she said, "you know, maybe you could go and get some help for me."

He tilted his head again, didn't move. She told herself not to be stupid, that he was a dog. Just a dog. And then Taz ran away again, down the hidden canyon.

Now it was four o'clock. She had to get the shower cap. She would need it for the night, to keep what meager body heat she still had. Two feet. It took an hour to get it.

And now the sun had left the hidden little canyon, and it was getting colder again, and she felt a swelling in her midsection, a lump the size of a water bottle, and she knew she was broken inside. Then Taz was back, which was comforting, but it meant that he wasn't magic, he didn't understand English, he was a good dog, but he was just a dog. No one would be coming down the hidden canyon to rescue her.

She started the crunches again, the feet-tapping, the hand-rubbing. Taz refused to curl up next to her. Was it an animal's in-

instinctive recoiling at imminent death? Did he want softer ground? It made no sense to her. Every so often, though, he would place a paw on her chest, lick her face. "Good dog," she would say.

It got colder, and colder, and darker. She gazed up, looking for shooting stars, for the Milky Way, for evidence that the world hadn't ended. That she hadn't ended. She saw only stripes. Long, white stripes slicing through the black night sky. She knew her body was shutting down, her brain malfunctioning. She was seeing things. She cried. She cried for her family and her friends and the nascent romance with the guy from Leadville that would never go anywhere. She is not religious, and she did not pray. What she did was plead.

"Please," she pleaded. "Please, somebody, notice that I'm gone."

Dorothy Rossignol is seventy-six years old, a "nosy neighbor" by her own account. Others in Moab call her a "piece of work," a "little old lady," and "the busybody of the neighborhood." She is childless, a widow since 1990. She loves mining, and if there is a town in the American West that ever produced a significant amount of any valuable mineral, whether gold, silver, or lead, she can name the town, along with its mineral. Chances are she lived there with her husband, Robert, who mined it. "My husband would rather mine than eat," she says. They first came through Moab in 1957, a young bride and her husband, a miner looking for work during the uranium boom. They returned in 1969 and settled there for good. Moab was something in the boom years. "Parties you wouldn't believe," she says, "... dancing girls from Spain."

Life is slower now, nights quieter, days longer. She volunteers at the Dan O'Laurie Museum, eats lunch four days a week at the Moab senior center ("I'd eat there five days, but they're closed on Thursdays"), tends to the five peachcot trees (peach trees with apricot fruit grafted on) in her yard. Rossignol liked the young woman who moved next door five years ago, which is saying a lot. "I don't rush over to meet new neighbors right away," she says, "because you don't know what kind of people they are."

But the young woman seemed nice, and quiet, and she bought a puppy who jumped over the little metal fence separating the yards so often and scratched at the widow's door so relentlessly that she finally gave up and bought a bag of dog biscuits. Every day Taz



would come over, and every day Rossignol would give the mutt two biscuits. He'd eat one there and take the other one home. Ballengee was gone a lot — "training for one of those adventure things" — so Rossignol fetched her mail, made sure her pipes didn't freeze in the winter when she was traveling.

They would do yard work together and chat "about everything in general and nothing in particular." As nice as Ballengee was, she wasn't so great on following leash laws. "So when I see the police or the dog catcher," Rossignol says, "I tie him up."

Taz didn't come to visit on Wednesday, December 13, and that night Rossignol looked outside and saw that Ballengee's truck wasn't there. She also saw that Ballengee had left her drapes open, her lights on. She saw Ballengee's laptop computer on. She knew that Ballengee was a free spirit, that when she wasn't training or visiting her parents in Evergreen, Colorado, she sometimes left to visit friends. She knew that Ballengee sometimes didn't tell anyone where she was going. The widow didn't exactly approve of all that gallivanting. On the other hand, she had to admit, she admired it. They weren't all that different, the endurance runner and the miner's widow. Self-sufficient women in a man's world. Rossignol might have been a nosy neighbor, but she wasn't a scaredy-cat. She would feel foolish calling the police if her young neighbor was out just having fun. She went to bed.

On Thursday afternoon, Rossignol looked again and saw the open drapes, the blazing lights, the computer. That's when she called Gary and Peggy Ballengee, in Evergreen, Colorado. She told Danelle's parents she was worried.

She was so tired. And cold. What was the point of tapping her feet? No one was coming down the hidden canyon. She stopped tapping. Then she heard a strange voice, commanding her. She knew she was alone. She knew there was no one telling her anything. She didn't believe in God. She knew there couldn't be a voice. But there was. And it wouldn't shut up. Keep tapping, the voice said. She kept tapping.

Word had spread through town, along with rumors, and someone from the bicycle shop called someone else who called the guy from Leadville. "I promise," the guy told Ballengee's parents over the

phone. "I did not take your daughter to Mexico. I don't know where she is."

Police spent three hours inside Ballengee's house that Thursday. When they arrived, Rossignol was waiting. She told them her neighbor was in trouble, that they should be looking for her truck, and her dog. She told them she would show them where things were inside the house, where to find important clues. When they refused her entry, she stood on the sidewalk outside. She stood on the sidewalk for three hours.

One of the police officers was a woman. She listened to the widow's requests and suggestions and urgent entreaties. Then the officer gave her a card. It was dark now. If Rossignol heard anything, the cop said, feel free to call. Then the cops left.

The strange voice had stopped. The stripes were gone. It was light and she was alive. But the water in the puddle was frozen again and Taz was gone. She broke through, filled her bottle. She ate the other raspberry energy gel, the last one. No one was coming. She estimated she couldn't make it more than a few feet an hour, and wondered if it was worse to die trying or to die next to her little puddle. She started crawling.

She dragged herself off the rock, and her pants came off, because she couldn't lift her pelvis off the ground. She found herself in a shallow depression. She was stuck. She saw the stupidity of her decision and crawled back onto the rock. A round trip of four feet. It took two hours. Now she was hyperventilating. Now she felt the ball of clotted blood and swollen flesh moving inside her. And now it was 1:30 P.M. She would never leave this hidden canyon. Why had she wasted hours, and time, and precious energy to go four feet? Why hadn't she told someone where she was going? Why hadn't she told more people she loved them? And where the hell was Taz? What was wrong with that dog?

Craig Shumway grew up in Moab, dug in its soil for uranium during the last years of the boom. He loves the high desert, the wide-open spaces. He has been in law enforcement for seventeen years, a Moab detective for four. On Friday morning, December 15, he was sitting in his office at the police department on East Center Street when Sergeant Mike Wiler walked in and sat down.

Wiler told Shumway there had been a missing-person report the previous night. He said it looked like someone had left a house unsecured. He said he had given the information to the Grand County Sheriff's Department and that they would be checking trailheads to see if the truck might be there. In the meantime, Moab police had put out an Attempt To Locate (ATL). In Moab, a magnet for the young, the adventurous, and the risk-seeking, an ATL is not exactly a red alert. "You just don't jump out and go look for every one of 'em," Shumway says.

Shumway nodded, plowed through some paperwork, then decided, before lunch, he would take a drive. No one was too alarmed about the missing woman — people took off for days without telling anyone all the time in Moab, and she was a world-class athlete. And it wasn't his job. It wasn't his jurisdiction either. But he knew how big the desert was, how many trails crisscrossed the canyons and rivers of southern Utah. First he stopped at Ballengee's house, took a quick look. Then he drove ten miles north to the Sovereign Trail and checked the trailhead, and found nothing.

Law enforcement officers often talk about intuition and gut feelings and how important it is to recognize them. On the way back to Moab, though, Shumway felt something unfamiliar.

He drove down Kane Creek Road, to the parking lot of the Amasa Back Trail. He's not sure why, but he passed it, kept going, to the top of the hill, to the little spot near the cliff. That's where he saw the white Ford Ranger. He wanted to document things, in case there had been a crime. He pulled out his eight-megapixel Canon digital camera and took pictures. Later, he would look at the receipt that the runner had left inside the car. It was from Burger King, for a chicken sandwich and large fries and a large coffee. It was dated Wednesday, December 13, at 11:00 A.M. Now it was 1:30 in the afternoon, two days and two cold nights later. Shumway had another feeling, a bad one.

It was the effort she had expended crawling into and out of the little depression. It was her body shutting down. It was fear. She knew she needed to stop hyperventilating. She forced herself to breathe more slowly, and it worked. She breathed. She didn't know where her dog was, and soon it would be cold and dark, and she was broken and bleeding inside, and no one was coming, but at least

she was breathing. So she breathed. She breathed and she waited to die.

By midafternoon, when the Grand County Search and Rescue team gathered at the Amasa Back trailhead, they knew who they were looking for. John Marshall, the officer in charge of the team that day, had met Ballengee once before, when he worked as a volunteer at the 2006 Primal Quest in Utah. When he had first seen her then, she had just finished a 46-mile trek across the desert. The temperature had been 105 degrees. She had been without water for the past four hours. Her feet were more blisters than flesh. Marshall suggested an IV drip that day. Ballengee declined. She was in a hurry.

And now she had disappeared. "I'm thinking," Marshall says, "this was a world-class, I-eat-nails-for-breakfast person we're looking for. I'm thinking she's been out there for two nights.

"I'm thinking she didn't twist an ankle. I'm thinking there's something very, very serious going on."

As soon as Marshall and the others got near Ballengee's truck, they saw the dog. It was running in circles, "going a million miles an hour." Marshall suspected it was the runner's dog.

"Most dogs won't leave their master as long as their master has a pulse," he told a newspaper reporter. "To see that dog was a truly saddening sight."

He called Taz, tried to coax him over. But Taz wouldn't come. The dog circled Marshall and the others, then dashed toward town. Marshall thought they should try to grab him, but no one could. Then the dog stopped, looked back over its shoulder. Then the dog was gone.

Marshall sent Melissa Fletcher, a team member who works as a backcountry mountain bike guide, running up Jackson's Trail, a narrow, steep, single track, because it was the most difficult and she was the most fit member of the team. He stayed near the truck to coordinate the search. Though he wasn't a Search and Rescue team member, Craig Shumway had, after calling his discovery in, gone home, changed into hiking clothes, and trekked up the Cable Arch Trail to make sure Ballengee wasn't there. She wasn't. Marshall sent two men and a woman up the Amasa Back Trail in ATVs. Riding the second ATV were Mike Coronella and Barb Fincham. In

the first ATV was a sixty-year-old commercial heating and refrigeration installer named Bego Gerhart.

Gerhart is five-feet-eight-inches tall, weighs 180 pounds. He has a full gray beard and piercing blue eyes and a potbelly. He looks like he'd be more at home in front of a cheeseburger than driving an ATV through the backcountry, looking for a woman about to die. He hitchhiked to Moab in 1970, a onetime California Eagle Scout with no particular direction. A Moab cop asked him for identification, and Gerhart asked if the cop knew anyone looking for work. That's how he ended up as a trucker, "with guys who had two-hundred-word vocabularies, and a hundred of 'em were obscene."

Gerhart has volunteered for the Grand County Search and Rescue squad for eleven years. He rigged ropes in New Zealand for filmmakers shooting *Vertical Limit* in 1999. He served as a consultant to a television show called *I Shouldn't Be Alive* in 2006. In 2003, he was on the team that hiked into Blue John Canyon, where he winched a boulder and retrieved the hand of Aron Ralston, who had hacked it off in order to free himself. Others might have broader shoulders and younger legs, but of the ninety-one calls that went out to the Grand County Search and Rescue team in 2006, Gerhart responded to eighty-eight of them, more than anyone else.

A lot of men and women who run (and hike and bike) in wilderness-rich areas like Moab speak of the majesty of the outdoors, the intoxicating consequences of fresh air. Many submit that the majestic sweep of the sky and the exquisite desolation of the desert serve as prima facie evidence of a loving spirit. But those tend to be the younger, leaner runners. Gerhart sees things a little differently.

"What happened to someone like Danelle is pretty good evidence against the existence of a benevolent God," he says. Regarding the secret to survival, he says, "It's all about knowing how to suffer."

Gerhart was a mile down the Amasa Back Trail, pattering along in his ATV, when his two-way radio sputtered to life.

"The dog! The dog!" It was Marshall. Taz had come back. He had sprinted up the trail, passing Coronella and Fincham's ATV. Fincham had gotten out of his ATV to follow the dog on foot, and the dog had promptly disappeared.

The dog dashed by Gerhart's ATV, and it stopped. It looked at

Gerhart, then it dashed off the trail, up to a little mesa. Gerhart clambered out of the ATV, walked up the mesa, where the dog was waiting. Gerhart stared at the dog. The dog stared at Gerhart. And the dog was gone again.

People journey into the desert without enough water or the proper clothing every year, and people die. People slip, and they never rise. People get lost, and they stay lost. Search and Rescue team members do their best, but when someone is gone for three days and two nights, on the fringe of winter, help often consists of a recovery mission. It often includes a body bag. Less than a month earlier, two men had died near Moab. They had frozen to death. Both were wearing heavier clothes than Ballengee. Gerhart knew all that. But he had a feeling. Gerhart is not a sentimental man, nor prone to a lot of religio-mystical mumbo jumbo. This is about as close as he gets: "My mind said, *Follow the dog.*"

But the dog was gone. So Gerhart backtracked to where he had first spotted Taz. A few years earlier, he had taken a tracking course from U.S. Marshals, and now he studied the ground. He looked for dog tracks, next to footprints of a woman runner. When he saw them, he followed them, away from the main road, down a little spur, toward a hidden canyon. He saw that the trail got rockier and more and more rugged. He hopped into his ATV, and he drove toward the hidden canyon, the sounds of his engine echoing off the red-rock walls. And he drove, and drove some more. And then he stopped. He thought he had heard something.

The dog had been disappearing all day. This time, when he got back, he ran straight to the puddle and he started drinking. And he drank and drank. And as much as the runner loved the dog, as injured to pain and loss as she was, she was still human. Bad dog! She yelled at Taz, "Can't you drink out of another pothole?"

And there they lay, less than a week before the shortest day of the year, a woman broken and bleeding inside, a dog lapping up her precious water. She cried. She thought again of the people to whom she hadn't said, "I love you." And then something shifted. It wasn't the dog's fault. It wasn't anyone's. Is this what acceptance felt like? She wasn't angry anymore. Now, she was ready to die. Now, she was at peace. And then she heard a sound that didn't make sense.

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Later, a lot of people would invoke divine mysteries, seek answers in the supernatural. Shumway would reflect on the strange feelings that led him to search for the missing truck, the inexplicable and powerful urges that guided him up the Kane Creek Road and to the little patch of dirt on top of the hill, near the cliff. "You can call it whatever you want," he says. "Call it coincidence, or fate, or whatever. I'm a God-fearing person and I can't explain it. It was a sense of urgency. I had never felt it before." Marshall would ask out loud how someone with virtually no body fat could possibly live through two cold nights in the high desert, "how her internal metabolism defied the laws of physics." People referred to the entire episode as a "Christmas miracle." When it came to myth-making, though, no one beat the dog lovers. In the news accounts and stories of the accident, Taz morphed into a furry genius, a four-legged phantasm, a kind of barking, galloping Gandalf. Some Search and Rescue team members talked about how, in hindsight, it looked like Taz had planned the rescue the whole time. "It was like he was trying to get us to pay attention to him, so when he showed up later, he could lead us to her," Marshall says. (Marshall is a dog lover.) Even academics sang the praises of the wonderdog. Marc Bekoff, a biology professor at the University of Colorado and author of *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, says there's a good chance Taz knew what he was doing. "I don't know what his doggy brain was saying, but it was probably something like, 'There's something novel, there's something new here.' I bet you that dog was just going, 'This is new, this is different, I gotta do something.' There's no doubt that [Ballengee's] scent was changing. At some point, he was picking that up. At some point, I'm sure the dog realized there was some opportunity to save her. I know people will laugh at me, but I don't care. I believe that."

But that was all later.

First, Gerhart had to drive toward the sound. That's when he saw them. There, on a rock, in the little hidden canyon, was a woman on her back. And there, lying next to her, with his snout on her chest, the mutt.

"I'm so glad to see you," Ballengee cried, weeping.

"I'm glad you're glad to see me, and that you can say so," Gerhart replied. At least that's the way he tells the story. The way he remembers, she was lucid, but emotional. He was amazed she was so artic-

ulate, but he was concerned about keeping her core temperature from falling, so he fetched from his ATV a heavy sleeping bag with Velcro straps, what Search and Rescue team members call *Doctor Down*. The way he remembers it, he kept her talking, even as he was radioing for help, scanning the landscape for a place where a rescue helicopter might safely land, shoving her hands into heavy gloves. All of that, according to Ballengee, is accurate, but incomplete. The way she remembers it, Gerhart was weeping too.

Taz ran to Gerhart and licked him. Then the commercial heating and refrigeration installer said something to the runner that people have said to other people as long as there have been pets. "You got one heck of a dog," Gerhart said.

She didn't sleep well last night. Every time she shut her eyes, she was tumbling down the slickrock, picking up speed. Every time she opened them, she was on her back, halfway down the steep wall, cold and alone, broken and bleeding inside. And if she did sleep, then what? She was afraid of the nightmares. She didn't want to find herself back in the hidden canyon, cold and alone and dying.

It was midafternoon, January 23, almost six weeks after she fell, and she was tired, and she hurt, and though she was lying on the couch in the basement of her parents' house in Evergreen, and they were upstairs, and she was safe, and though Taz was lying on the floor next to her, and even though she and her dog had been on the *Today Show*, even though she and Taz had ascended in the popular consciousness to Christmas Miracle and Wonderdog status, the reality was messier, more difficult.

She didn't have complete control of her left hand. She wasn't sure if she ever would. Her feet felt as if she were standing in an icy stream. She wasn't sure if they would ever feel differently. Both were consequences of frostbite.

She was taking six Neurontin pills a day to help reduce the pain. She was taking three 600-milligram tablets of ibuprofen for inflammation, four 30-milligram iron pills to help increase her red-blood-cell count, and Percocet for more pain. And anti-anxiety pills, for the nights she had trouble sleeping, like last night. And stool softener. Until a few days ago, her father had been injecting her every day, in her stomach, with a drug to lessen the chances of her blood



clotting. After she complained about the pain, her doctor finally relented. Now she was taking 325 milligrams of aspirin daily.

She is almost five-feet-five-inches tall, and weighed 120 pounds before the accident. Now she weighed 100. She has dirty blond hair, blue eyes, and anyone who has spent any time around her comments on her impishness and how she can't stay still. Today, she was squinting with pain and exhaustion. Her pelvis had broken in four places. At one spot, it splintered into too many pieces for doctors to count. She cracked three vertebrae. She lost a third of her blood. Doctors at Denver Health Medical Center had operated on her for six hours, inserting a titanium plate in her pelvis.

When the *Today Show* called afterward, she wasn't all that interested. Of course she was grateful to be alive, but in the hospital, she hurt, and she was tired, and hungry and — truth be told — scared about what the injuries would mean. Then the *Today Show* people said they wanted Taz on the air too. She hadn't seen the dog since the Search and Rescue helicopter had lifted her into the sky, right after she scratched him behind the ears and said, "It'll be okay, boy," and Taz had gone home with John Marshall, who couldn't live with himself if he let animal control take the dog. If agreeing to be interviewed by the *Today Show* meant she'd be able to see Taz, she was on board.

Now she was talking about how after the shooting for the *Today Show* was done, and how after Taz had gone home with Ballengee's sister, Michelle, to her home in Denver, a quarter-mile from the hospital, the dog had escaped, and how her sister knew where he was going, so she walked to the hospital, and there was Taz.

She was a miracle, and Taz was a hero. Cards came from all over. One day, a box filled with dry ice arrived. It was from a woman in Michigan who had seen the *Today Show*. Inside were five pounds of hormone-free aged rib steaks and a red-and-white Christmas stocking with a stuffed Santa inside. On the top, embroidered in green, was the name of the intended recipient — Taz.

Ballengee had visitors — including the guy from Leadville — and heard from friends and relatives and strangers. She wouldn't make the same mistake again — this time, she told everyone how much she loved them. There were a lot of them. And love was great, and maybe she was a Christmas miracle, but she was still human, and this was life.

She couldn't walk. She stayed in the hospital for fifteen days, and the first week, her biggest accomplishment was forcing herself to sit up in bed without passing out. Ten seconds was a good day. Just a week ago, she tried to get out of bed to use a portable commode that was just a few feet away, and fainted. Now she could make it to the bathroom, using a wheelchair, by herself. That was a big deal. She couldn't afford all the medical bills. At the moment, the bill from Grand Junction, where she had been taken by the helicopter, totaled \$45,000, and the insurance policy that had sounded so good when she bought it turned out to be not so good, and she hadn't even received her bill for surgery or her Denver hospital stay yet. She had managed a lap and a half around a West Denver mall in her wheelchair yesterday, and that had felt great, "just to get the blood flowing," and runners and endurance athletes she had competed with were holding fundraising events for her, and that was great too, but she knew she wouldn't be able to walk for at least two months, and after that, it would be another few months before she could run, and then it would be "how to run fast, then how to run aggressively. On trails and up and down mountains. Whether I'll be able to do it at the levels I used to — I'm gonna try. But if I can run again at all, I'll be so happy."

She works hard at planning to be happy. But she is scared too, and she has nightmares.

She talks about those nightmares, and about Bego Gerhart (whose name, when she first heard it in the canyon, she thought was Bagel, "probably because I was so hungry"). She talks about Dorothy Rossignol who, unbeknownst to Ballengee, has promised that when the runner moves back to Moab, she will be watched with special vigilance — even for a nosy neighbor — and nagged about where she's going, "even when it's just a trip to the mailbox." She talks about how much she misses being outside, "just being with Taz, running through the woods."

She talks a lot about Taz, how people ask if he gets extra treats now, or extra attention. He doesn't. "He's always been spoiled," she says. "I treated him pretty well before."

Mostly, she talks about her days in the hidden canyon, and the cold, and how she was sure she was going to die, and about the way she saw the white stripes in the sky, and heard the strange voice that commanded her to keep tapping her feet.

Daniel Smith, author of *Muses, Madmen, and Prophets*, a book on auditory hallucination, says the strange sounds Ballengee experienced were likely caused by “the abuse the body takes and the exhaustion. [They] often occur in that twilight moment between sleep and wakefulness.”

Ballengee knows that. She earned degrees in biology and kinesiology, after all, not philosophy and religion. But she’s not sure. “As far as I’m concerned,” she says, “I’m going to be the best person I can . . . I’m okay without an answer.”

She has been watching movies at night. She recently watched *Touching the Void*, the story of a man who had to crawl his way off a mountain in the Peruvian Andes and through a crevasse with a broken leg, and *Eight Below*, the tale of eight sled dogs who faced death by freezing in Antarctica. A visitor suggests a few comedies, considering the nightmares.

Then Taz starts barking. He sees a squirrel outside. Ballengee’s father walks down the steps when he hears the barking and tells his daughter he’ll take her mutt for a walk.

“He’s kind of dumb,” Gary Ballengee says, patting Taz on the head. “Brilliant at saving lives, but he’ll chase that squirrel all day. He’s just kind of dumb.”

Her father and her dog are behind her, and it’s not easy to turn her head, but that’s what Danelle Ballengee does. She’s done more difficult things. She turns and looks first at her father, who doesn’t notice, then at her dog, who tilts his head and looks back at her. He tilts his head first to the left, then to the right, side to side, just like he did that terrible afternoon when Danelle Ballengee lay dying. And then the runner smiles at her dog and she puts her head back on her pillow, and she rests.