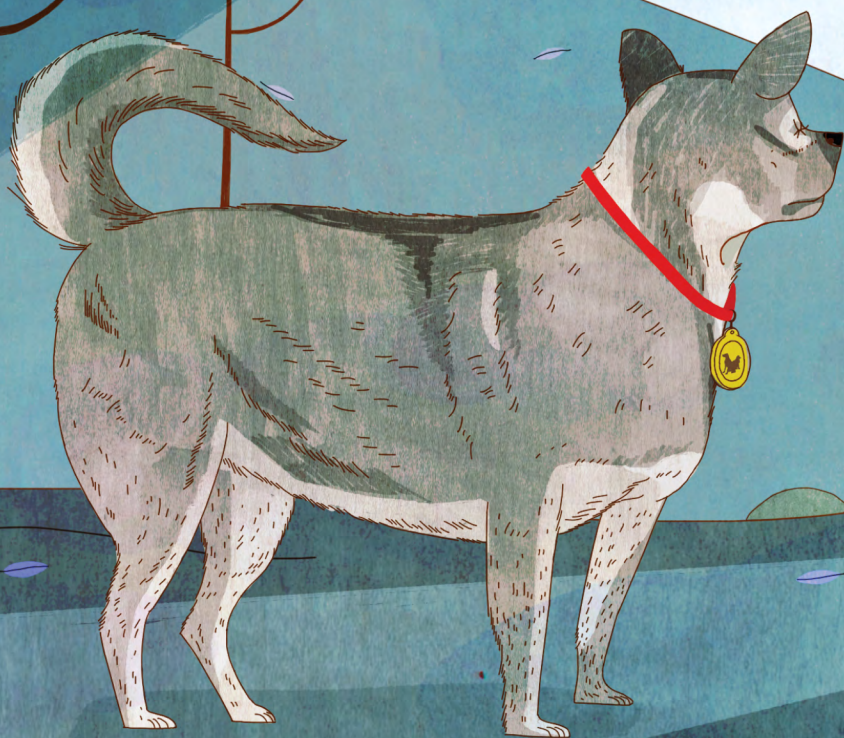


Living



WONDER DOG

When disaster struck last Christmas Eve, the Hawman family never imagined the hero of the day would be their rescue dog, Rex.

BY ANDREA KARR

ILLUSTRATIONS, JOSIE PORTILLO

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ANTANA HAWMAN was only a few minutes away from her acreage northeast of Saskatoon, driving her three young kids and nephew home from Christmas Eve dinner, when her husband's name lit up her caller ID. Though she wouldn't normally answer the phone while driving—especially at night on the dark country road—she knew Mitch would call from his truck, which followed just behind them, only if it was urgent. Mitch's frantic voice leaped from the speaker. He had just spoken with his mother, Noreen, who was visiting for the holidays but had stayed home for the evening with a fever and aches and pains; while she had been sleeping on the couch, the house caught fire. It was now burning to the ground.

As Mitch raced home, Santana called 911, watching an orange glow rise to the sky. "It was

little interest in the young couple or their 11-month-old daughter, Marley. They were drawn instead to a friendly puppy that was sitting in his kennel, wagging his tail. He sat next to the family for an hour in the visitation room, even allowing Marley to hang on to his neck. Though he was only eight months old, he was calm and well behaved. Rex came home with the Hawmans that day. No one could have predicted that, years later, he'd thank them with an epic act of bravery.

That fateful Christmas Eve, Noreen watched her son's family leave for dinner, then took a sleeping pill and fell asleep on the couch. When the house caught fire, three smoke detectors went off, but she slept through them all, curling herself deeper into the cushions. Rex began barking and pawing at Noreen, trying to rouse her, but the sleeping pill was strong and she simply turned away.



When Noreen didn't respond, Rex's survival instinct kicked in. Though almost nine years old at the time and much slower than he used to be, he found the strength to grab hold of Noreen's pajama leg with his teeth and yank multiple times, dragging her onto the ground.

surreal," she says. "I had all four kids with me, so I was trying to keep it together and not freak out." She tried to give details to the operator, but all she knew was that Noreen had jumped into the family's third vehicle and pulled it out of the driveway, so she was safe and warm on that cold winter night. As Santana drove toward her swiftly burning home, her next thought was of the family's pets: four dogs, four cats, two rabbits and a hamster.

As soon as Santana pulled up to the house, she started counting the dogs: Rex, an eight-year-old German shepherd-Alaskan malamute cross, was howling; Ozzy, a Norwegian elkhound puppy, was running back and forth, unsure of what to do; Capone, the five-month-old golden retriever-Pyrenees baby of the family, was sitting in shock; and Phoebe, a schnauzer-Lab, was planted on the road, far from the house. "She wouldn't even come to us," remembers Santana. "I had to pick her up and put her in the vehicle." Three of the cats survived, but the family's indoor cat, Bella, died in the fire, along with the hamster and rabbits. An ambulance ferried Noreen to the hospital, and neighbours took in the kids and dogs, as Santana and Mitch watched their house burn out.

It wasn't until the following day, after Noreen was released and Santana noticed a rip in her pajama pant, that the family received the full story of that horrific night. "What happened?" asked Santana. "Rex," responded Noreen.

Rex had been part of the family since September 2007, when the Hawmans rescued him from the Saskatoon SPCA. Santana and Mitch originally had another dog in mind—a fluffy chow-chow mix that ended up showing

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By Boxing Day, the local community had the Hawman family placed in a rental home, and everyone stopped by to pet "the hero dog." His story made the 6 o'clock news and was featured in local papers, which is how the Purina Animal Hall of Fame, an annual event in Toronto honouring pets that have performed life-saving feats, caught wind of Rex's heroic act. He was awarded a medal in May 2016. "It was super emotional," says Santana. "You meet these other fantastic families and their amazing pups, and then you watch your dog walk up there. He's got no idea what's going on, but you're just so proud."

The Hawmans have rebuilt on the site of their former home, and they made sure to take extra precautions when it comes to fire safety: There's a fire extinguisher in the garage, another under the kitchen sink and a third in the upstairs hall closet. They'll never know what caused the fire, which makes it difficult for them to relax, but at least they've got Rex keeping a watchful eye. "Each night, he'll walk around the whole house to see where everybody is before he lies down and goes to sleep," says Santana. "We're his people. He's always with us." ●



COURAGEOUS CANINES

These pooches, all Purina Animal Hall of Fame inductees, showed amazing loyalty and courage in the face of potential tragedy.

The Purina Animal Hall of Fame is an annual ceremony that recognizes heroic animals from across Canada—to the tune of 172 inductees in its 48 years. The vast majority are dogs, but there have also been feline inductees—and even a horse! This year, in addition to Rex, a Saskatoon-area pooch who saved a family member from a house fire (find his story, opposite), four other Canadian canines were honoured. Read on for their heartwarming tales.



Sixth Sense

Late one evening, Matthew Church returned from a bike ride complaining to his wife, Patricia, of pain in his shoulder and elbow. She gave him a couple of Aspirin, and he went upstairs to watch TV while Patricia read by the fireplace downstairs, the family's labradoodle, Zola, at her feet. Moments later, Patricia heard a thud from upstairs. She would have brushed off the noise, but Zola began to bark and growl at Patricia. Confused by Zola's behaviour, Patricia followed the dog upstairs, where Matthew was lying facedown without vital signs. He'd gone into cardiac arrest, but because of Zola's protective instincts, the ambulance arrived in time to restart his heart and save his life.



Risky Business

Raya, a five-year-old black Labrador retriever-Norwegian elkhound mix, loves elk hunting with her owner, Brent Cote, and his mother, Trudy. On a warm fall day in 2015, one such outing turned out to be much more exciting than usual. They'd been hiking for several hours when dusk fell and they began making their way back to their truck, walking along the edge of the forest. Out of nowhere, a bear burst out of the brush and charged toward the family in an effort to protect her cub. In an instant, Raya leaped in front of Brent and Trudy, barking and growling at the bear. After three attempts at charging, the mom and her cub were forced to retreat. Because of Raya's bravery, the trio was able to escape without injury.



Good Company

Port Alberni, B.C., resident Kayla Aolick credits her golden retriever, Shadow, with helping restore her independence. Kayla has epilepsy, the aftereffect of a cancerous brain tumour that was removed when she was 11, and her episodes were once so bad that she couldn't go anywhere alone. But since the Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides matched her with the seizure-detection dog four years ago, things have been very different. Shadow warns Kayla when a seizure is coming on—and he may be the reason she now experiences fewer episodes. With Shadow around, she and her family don't stress out as much about what will happen if a seizure strikes; they know he'll alert Kayla, get her mom or even push her medical-alert button, if necessary. From taking cooking classes to running errands solo, Kayla can finally live a more independent life.



Brave Heart

Toronto Police Service Canine Unit Const. Steve Balice rarely goes anywhere without his police dog, Lonca. One November evening, the duo was stationed at the back entrance of a residential address, while the rest of the Emergency Task Force entered through the front door. Const. Balice saw an armed man running from the building, seemingly headed toward the officers out front, so he shouted numerous warnings before finally releasing Lonca to bring the suspect down. The man proceeded to strike Lonca in the face with a machete—but he didn't let go until the suspect finally surrendered. Though bleeding, Lonca assisted in the capture of a second suspect before being rushed to the veterinary hospital, where he received five stitches on his face and two staples in his paw. The suspect who attacked Lonca was the first in Canada to be charged under Quanto's Law, a piece of legislation enacted in 2015 to protect law-enforcement animals, military animals and service animals. ●