

RESCUE **DOGS**

DUSTY

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A black-and-white puppy snuffled along the edge of a dark road. The little dog was no bigger than a soda can and had to brace himself to keep from being tumbled in the wind whenever a car zoomed by on the two-lane highway. The headlights from each passing vehicle briefly lit up the dog's large, upright ears before quickly disappearing down the road into darkness. The pup barely looked up when he heard them approaching . . . he just locked his short legs and kept his black-and-white speckled nose close to the ground, sniffing through trash, leaves, and dry grasses. He was looking for food.

Looking for food—and water and shelter—was the

little dog's full-time job, and his only chance for survival. It had been a dry, hot summer, so everything was covered with a layer of dust. He nosed a gritty scrap of paper to get a second, closer sniff. The paper might have had food on it at one time, but the smell had faded. There was nothing to eat there, so he kept walking. The night was moonless and the pup had only his nose to rely on. Luckily smell was the keenest of his sharp senses—his nose rarely let him down. He drew in a breath and paused. This time he was certain he smelled *something*. It wasn't much, but something was always better than nothing. He and his pack had gone with nothing for too long.

The little dog paused to listen for his mother and two sisters. They were just a short distance down the roadway, also looking for food. His stomach rumbled. He froze and lifted a paw. It hurt. All of his paws hurt. His ears twitched, unable to hear his pack rustling through the roadside debris.

Back the way he'd come, there'd been a stronger food smell, a smell so strong it made his mouth water and the hunger gnawing his insides almost

impossible to bear. But the smell had come from the middle of the pavement, and the middle of the pavement was a dangerous place. It was a place for zooming cars and big trucks and buses that smelled like gasoline and metal and oil. It was no place for a dog. He'd ignored the gnawing in his stomach and moved on.

The dog's ears twitched again, straining to hear his mama and sisters. They were coming along behind him more slowly than usual. He put his nose to the dirt on the edge of the road. Maybe he could find enough food for all of them.

The pack had been together since the three puppies were born. It was all the family the black-and-white pup knew, and he always felt safer when his mother and sisters were close by. Even when they were too hot or too cold or too tired or too hungry, they could curl up together and sleep. The sounds of his littermates breathing and his mama's heartbeat made him feel secure. It reminded him of the first days when they lived under the porch of the little casita behind the big house on the edge of the city,

where the mama dog had crawled in to give birth and stayed to raise her puppies. It was nice there . . . cool and dark. The puppies had milk to drink, and there was a young girl who found them and brought his mama food, filled an old bowl with water, and held the puppy and his sisters. She kept the pup's little family a secret for as long as she could.

When the girl's parents found out what their daughter was up to, they put a stop to it. There was already a dog in the big house, a dog that barked at anyone who approached. They didn't want a stray and her puppies. They chased the pack away and put fencing around the porch so they couldn't get back in.

After they were evicted, the mama and her pups had taken shelter wherever they could: under trees, inside culverts, beneath boxes. Nobody brought them food or water. Nobody held them. Nobody took care of them. There were other dogs living on the streets, too. Lots of them. Some were friendly and some were not. All of them had to look out for themselves.

The little pup paused on the roadside. He lapped

up a few drops of water condensed on the underside of an aluminum can. The puddles had dried up between the brief spells of rain. The drops were not enough to quench his thirst. Still, they moistened his tongue.

Headlights appeared again in the distance, and a few minutes later a noisy car raced past. The pup braced himself but was blown back. He tumbled away from the road. Standing to shake himself off, he smelled something new—carne! The smell was strong and this time he did not hesitate to alert his pack. *Food! Here! Come get it!* he barked.

The sound was swallowed by the rumble of a bus barreling closer, then drowned out entirely by the squeal of brakes. A horn blared and the smell of burned rubber filled the dog's tiny muzzle. A dark and frightening feeling filled his chest.

The pup crept back through the dark toward the spot where the bus had stopped on the pavement. The giant machine heaved, like it was letting out its last breath, though its headlights still shone in the darkness. It shuddered and went silent. The doors

opened and the driver descended. The pup drew closer. He couldn't see anything much beyond the hulking bus through the trash and dry weeds on the roadside.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke the silence. She was barking angrily. The pup craned his neck and saw the head and shoulders of a young woman with a young man beside her. They'd gotten out of the bus to talk to the driver, who stood silhouetted in the headlights with one hand on his head.

"Get back on the bus," the driver shouted at the woman in Spanish. "There's nothing you can do here. These mongrels shouldn't be in the road. They're nothing but trash!" he growled.

Even in the dark the puppy could tell that the girl didn't like the man's words. Or what she saw. She stared in the direction of the lights and held her stomach with one arm. She held her other hand over her mouth. After a moment she took it away to howl a reply to the driver. Her voice sounded wounded. Hurt.

All three of the people kept their eyes on the road

in front of the bus. They seemed frozen. They could not look away.

The pup snuck closer but stayed in the ditch, in the trash. He knew how to keep out of sight to avoid the kicks and brooms of the people who didn't want him nearby. He raised his head as high as he could to try and see what the people were looking at. He rose up for a moment, balancing on his back legs, and instantly wished he hadn't. With his nose high he smelled blood. With his eyes above the trash he saw his mama and sisters lying on the pavement. They were not moving. The woman let out a sharp wail, and the puppy swallowed his own. His pack was gone.

He was all alone.