

RED ROVER

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Defenseless

“Something’s wrong with that dog,” said Katie.

Amy stopped drawing and looked up from her iPad. She had been trying to ignore her little sister since Dad had gotten off the highway to avoid the accident a few miles up. The traffic had already been bad coming back from their weekend at the shore, and the crash ahead had only made things worse.

Katie had started talking about anything they

passed, mostly to hear her own voice. *Look, a motel. It says it has a pool. Someone threw a pizza box out of their window. There's a rude word written on that stop sign.* Amy had been doing a good job of avoiding her up until then, focusing instead on brainstorming for her science fair project.

But Katie got Amy's attention this time. Dogs were her weak spot.

"Wrong how?" asked Amy.

Katie had her serious face on, her six-year-old brow knitted and her mouth pulled into a tight line. She pointed out the window, and Amy followed her finger to the dark shape sitting by the chain-link fence.

At first, Amy didn't know quite what she was seeing . . . and then she felt a cold prickle up the back of her neck.

"Dad, pull over," she said.

Her father glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Amy, how many times did I tell you to pee before we left—"

"They did something to its eyes!" she blurted out, louder than she meant to.

Dad frowned, and he and Mom finally looked out

the window. “I give up,” he mumbled, and surprised Amy by pulling over to the shoulder.

“Be careful!” cried Mom, but Amy was already out of the car, jogging through the knee-high grass by the side of the road. The closer she got to the dog, the more she saw and the sicker she felt in her stomach. When she reached the fence it was tied to and knelt down beside the animal, she felt a gasp leave her mouth, and she thought she might cry.

It was a German shepherd, its fur as black and shiny as freshly laid tar. A rusty chain was looped tightly around its neck and clasped with a padlock; another lock held the makeshift leash to a stretch of chain-link fence that seemed to exist for no real reason. A blindfold made from a dirty rag was tied tight over the dog’s eyes, and a thick loop of duct tape had been wrapped around its muzzle, holding its mouth shut.

“Oh, you poor thing,” muttered Amy. She reached out and petted the dog’s neck; she expected it to flinch away, but the shepherd just let her stroke its fur and whined softly.

Behind her, she heard Mom, Dad, and Katie come walking up.

Mom made a noise in her throat. “Oh my . . . that’s so horrible. Look at that, Mitch. How could someone do this to a defenseless animal?”

“It’s pretty awful,” said Dad, though he quickly followed up with, “Amy, don’t touch that dog. He could be sick.”

Amy didn’t even think about that. Her mind was already racing, looking for a solution. Bit by bit, step by step, she worked out the problem, the parameters, and the answer. “We need water. To loosen the tape.” She looked back at Katie, who nodded and trotted back to the car.

“Whoa, now, hold on,” said Dad. “We don’t know whose dog this is. Somebody might come looking for him.”

“They taped his *mouth shut*, Dad,” Amy argued.

“Yeah, but even then—” Before he could finish, Katie was back with the bottle of water from their snack bag.

Amy shushed the dog as she reached around behind his head to untie the blindfold. The rag had been cinched so tight it looked painful, so Amy’s fingers had to work carefully at the knot. She noticed that the

German shepherd didn't even flinch when she finally slid the fabric off his face. This poor guy must have been through a lot.

Once the blindfold was off, Amy could see the dog's eyes shining. To Amy, the dog looked scared, lost . . . and she wondered how he had gotten here.

The muzzle was harder with how the tape was looped around it. Amy took the water bottle and dribbled water onto the dog's fur, trying to loosen the adhesive. Then her father brought out his Swiss Army knife and used the tiny scissors inside to cut the tape where it held the shepherd's mouth shut. Then they poured more water on the dog's nose and chin, and Amy pulled the last of the tape away. It was a traumatic process, she thought, but at least they'd gotten the dog free.

As soon as they pulled the last of the tape off, the dog barked and licked Amy's face. She laughed with a bit of crying on the end, happy to have liberated the dog but sad that anyone would leave such a sweet, handsome animal in this state. The shepherd pulled at his chain, licking Amy's hand and wagging his tail excitedly. Katie stepped toward him, and the minute

she was in reach, the dog bathed the little girl's face in kisses, making her giggle and wrap her arms around his neck.

"All right, well," said Dad, trying to look stern through his smile, "that was very sweet of you, Amy. But now that his face is free, we should call a shelter and leave him."

"Dad!" cried Amy, climbing to her feet. She felt stung—how could he just leave this poor guy here? "We have to take him somewhere. He could die out here!"

"We can't just walk away with him, Amy. He's chained to that fence," said Dad.

"Don't you have bolt cutters in your emergency kit?" Mom asked.

Dad rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Patricia. You really backed me up here."

"I want to save the doggy," said Katie, scratching the shepherd's face. "Please, Daddy. *Please.*"

Amy folded her arms and stared at her father, waiting. Saying no to Amy was one thing, but once Katie got involved, he knew it was a losing battle. Dad stared

back, flared his nostrils, and finally threw his arms up. “Fine. Give me a second.”

Amy knelt down beside the shepherd and scratched his neck. The dog panted and looked from Katie to Amy with his tongue lolling out, regarding them both. *What a good dog*, thought Amy. *Strong, too, and brave*. He hadn’t even yelped when she’d pulled some of his fur out. That was strange—maybe he’d had obedience training in his past, or had gotten tape on his face before. Or maybe he was just happy that someone like her had come along and saved him.

“Good boy, Rover,” Katie said with a laugh.

Amy scowled—typical Katie, naming the dog before Amy even had a chance. “Oh,” Amy said, trying to sound like she was joking, but letting her annoyance slip through, “the rest of us don’t get any say in his name?”

Katie looked perplexed, like she didn’t know where the name had come from. “I dunno,” she said hesitantly. “Don’t you think he looks like a Rover? We should call him that. Isn’t that right, Rover?”

Amy wanted to argue—Katie was the baby, so she

always got her way, which really wasn't fair—but something about the name felt right to her. The shepherd looked noble, obedient, like man's best friend. A classic dog name suited him.

“Good boy, Rover,” said Amy. Rover barked and panted at her.

If Amy hadn't known any better, she would have said the dog was smiling.