

Chapter 1

ROMEO – A Home Worth Waiting For

Last night I dreamt I sang with the elephants.

I'm a small dog, and I used to live in a gutter. It's taken me a long time, but I am starting to believe that my life is worthwhile. My name is Romeo, a terrier mix, probably a hodgepodge of Jack Russell and Rat terrier, with a touch of Chihuahua. And who knows where I got my big ears and red spots from? Along with my girlfriend Roxie, I'm the narrator of this story.

I had been surviving in trash and weeds on the side of the highway. My one friend was a little mouse who would come out of a hole in the ground and visit me. The only building nearby was a rundown bar called Booze Hounds with boisterous and rough-looking customers. The stale beer odor reeked out onto the street. A smashed-in wreck of a car lay curbside a few feet away. When it rained, I was grateful to crawl inside its stripped interior, although with my throbbing and injured back legs, I could barely move.

Most cars whizzed along with no notice of the shabby

corner where I survived. On the other side of the speedway, about a quarter mile away, I could see a large white edifice with columns and landscaping. From my perspective, it appeared to be a shining palace on a hill, close enough to see but impossible to reach—though I now believe it was probably a fancy Motel 6. But seeing it there, in its seeming grandeur, gave me an inkling that there was something nicer than what I was experiencing. It was a signpost for my dreams—a glimmer of life that *could be*.

I now share a home with Kate, my gorgeous and brilliant super-mom who welcomed me as her beloved pet, and with Roxie, my white-bearded terrier-princess, who was also adopted by Kate. When I met them, I became exuberant. It was the first time in my life I spun around for joy—something I have done gleefully hundreds of times since. Connecting with them was the most life-affirming, soul-healing event that could have happened to a wounded, homeless mutt.

There's no way I could have known at the time that Kate and Roxie needed me as much as I needed them. I later found out that Kate searched high and low for me. And when she saw a small photo of me, she knew right away that I was *the one*, and that our coming together was somehow meant to be.

Kate has a strong spiritual connection with animals, including a special love for her adopted baby elephants in Africa and us dogs. She had lost her wildlife photographer husband, Gerard, and believes she'll never find someone else like him again. On top of that, Kate and Roxie were grieving the death of their companion dog, Marcello.

So you can see, this was no casual adoption. The connections are deep: it is the fitting together of a much larger puzzle. We all love and respect each other for who we are. Fate brings us together, and our bonds will never be broken!

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Kate and Roxie and I reside in a pretty townhouse near the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, California, where I've been learning many lessons to become a respectable pet. To me, *Nirvana* itself couldn't be better.

Roxie has been my shining star from day one. She has taken me under her wing, so to speak, and she and Kate have taught me everything from how to ride in a car, sleep in a dog bed, even run and play like a regular dog—and most of all, to enjoy life and to trust. I admire Roxie, who gets a kick out of abundant casual relationships with friends and acquaintances. Many people know her name, and she is friendly and available—unlike me, who is suspicious and awkward around new people.

I try to follow her every move, including her bark. When she barked her high-pitched yip one day, I let loose and followed up with my own unique sound, which was more like a tenor wolf howl, Kate said. It made a jolly tune, and so we would carry on and on as Kate laughed uproariously. I never

knew before that I had such a voice. Kate encouraged us to use our song to scare away bullies and to entertain the neighbors.

In fact, Kate liked it so much that she trained us to perform in unison so we could enter a TV contest. She said many people would admire us and be entertained, and it could be a great *confidence builder* for us. I think she meant mostly *me*, as Roxie already seemed overconfident compared to me. Kate put T-shirts on us that read “Roc n Ro.” She said it was our stage name and encouraged us to sing on cue. The rehearsing was fun. We were singing all the time.

When it came time for our audition at the studio, that was a different story. After much waiting around, I was spooked by the musicians who were placed behind us, especially when they started to bang on the drums. I got so nervous I ran off the stage behind Kate’s legs and peed on the floor. That was a very low point for me. In fact, I was horrified. There was a loud gonging sound that filled the room. It felt as though it was reverberating all the times in my life when I didn’t make the cut.

Like in the shelter, where I was kept for a while and was not adopted. I was taken down that ominous hallway from which dogs don’t return. It was only by a moment of grace I was saved when that young woman, Charlene, ran down the hall huffing and puffing. She stopped the man who was carrying me at the very last second before we entered the euthanasia room. I’m so grateful to Charlene and the Dexter Foundation who rescued me before I breathed my last breath. Ricarda, the founder of the rescue group, took me to a doctor and saved me yet again—when the doctor wanted to amputate my left leg. She talked him into inserting a steel plate instead. And that was followed by months and months of healing in cages in foster homes before I finally met my own loving family.

I worried whether the loves of my life, Kate and Roxie,

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would still want me and hold me dear after the TV debacle. I held my breath. I became extra sensitive to moods and on the lookout for negative feelings. Luckily for me, nothing changed. Even though we were all disappointed that we didn't win the free trip to New York, no one ever chastised me or treated me differently. Kate said we would just have to "give it more time" until I felt more secure. It was never mentioned again after that.

At Christmastime, Kate decided we should go visit her mother, Grandma, who is staying in a town in Oregon. Kate packed our things and she loaded up the car. Having never been on a trip before, I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't understand what Christmastime was about. Kate said, "It's the time of year when we like to visit friends and family. There may be festivities while we're there, like people singing Christmas songs, and maybe there will be a pretty Christmas tree." I felt excited.

Then we drove, and drove, and drove. All the way up the long California coast. We got out of the car to look at the sea otters along the way. So cool! They're like little dogs who live in the water. Kate took lots of pictures. At night we stopped in motels on the way. We even stopped in a fancy Motel 6! (That's when my *mind* was really spinning!) During the days on the road, I looked out the car window and saw lots of empty streets. I was reminded of my vagabond roots. I felt safe and secure in the car with my very own mom and my girlfriend. I was so relieved that street living was behind me.

The more we drove, the chillier it became. Mom put both our sweaters and our jackets on us when we went outside, but we still couldn't get warm enough. When we had to pee, we did our business but ran back in the car.

We finally got to Oregon, and in Grandma's town, there was snow on the ground. I had never seen that before. But after Roxie and I got used to it, we loved playing and sliding in it. We got more used to the cold and began jumping around in the snow. We chased each other around in the drifts. Kate joined in for some snowball throwing. Snow is exciting! She had trouble getting us to come back inside! But, once we were back someplace warm, we didn't want to go outside again for a long time.

Grandma lives in an apartment building where lots of old people live. She didn't want us to get up on her furniture, but she was friendly to us. Roxie and I felt pleased to meet new people who are part of our family. Kate got worried about us making noise and bothering people. The old people who live in the building do not like noise. Singing was definitely not allowed. Outside it was still freezing cold. Not too much for dogs like us to do.

Kate doesn't like to be cold either. She took us out in the backyard of the retirement building and let us run off leash in the deep snow. It was fun for a while—until it started to sleet. We were getting so cold and wet by then that we pounced right back toward the door. Then suddenly, we found something large in the snow. At first, we didn't know what it was, but it started to move and make a noise. It was an old man. He had snow all over him and not too many clothes. Roxie and I barked and jumped up and down. Kate yelled from inside the door, "Come in, it's cold!"

Roxie and I looked at each other. We knew we had to help Kate find the old man. So instead of running toward her as we would usually do, we stayed with the man, and we kept jumping and barking. She came over to see what was going on. "What is it, guys?" She saw the man. "Oh, no! Great work! Very good doggies! Thank you for letting me know. Come on, we'll go get help." She comforted the man, "Don't worry, sir,

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help is on the way.” We could barely see with the sleet on our eyes, but we trudged our way back to the door. There was an alarm going off. We raced up the steps and over to the front desk.

Kate told the receptionist, “A man outside is stuck in the snow. It’s very cold. Please send somebody right away!” There was a lot of commotion as the lady called people to help. We had to go back outside to show them where the man was. The sleet was now a blizzard and it was coming down so hard that we could barely see at all. We were worried that we might get stuck out there and freeze—or suppose we couldn’t find our way back? Kate said to the responders, “The dogs found him. I think they’ll be able to lead us back.”

So Roxie and I led the way, though it was even harder to get through the blizzard than we thought. We stayed as close to each other as possible, each one of us helping to guide the other. We were a real team. But it seemed like it was taking forever to get back to the place where we found the man. Finally, we saw him. He was almost completely covered in snow.

“Quick, call an ambulance!” someone shouted. That was a relief. Now that the rescue folks were on the way, we could go inside. We and Mom pushed ourselves back through the blizzard towards the door as best we could. Our paws were freezing!

We climbed back upstairs panting towards Grandma’s warm apartment. All those people on the first floor looked at us like we were brave and courageous, which we *were*. I thought we might expect praise from Grandma, too. Grandma was sitting on the couch with a funny look on her face. In a scolding voice, she said to Kate, “There you are! I wondered where you went. You’ve always liked spending your time playing with animals. I guess you haven’t changed.” Uh oh. From the tone of her voice, it sounded like a put-down.

Kate looked at us, and we looked at Kate. We could tell that there was pain in her heart. Roxie and I kissed her hand. She smiled at Grandma and nodded. There was a long pause, then Mom offered to get Grandma some tea. We both sat down on the rug, quiet as mice. Later, Grandma heard about our brave rescue from the office people. We heard her tell her friends about it, as though she was *proud* of us after all.

There was a large group of her friends all gathered downstairs by a Christmas tree singing carols. She invited us to come downstairs with her. It was exciting to me, as it was my first Christmas celebration ever. As we sat patiently nearby while she sang, she patted our heads. We got lots of smiles from her friends. People came up to us and told us we were good dogs—and heroes! At the end of “Jingle Bells,” Roxie and I looked at each other. We saw Kate smiling. Roxie started in with her little barks and I joined in. We gave them a thrill hearing our rousing song. Some of them held their ears like they hurt, and others laughed. At the end, some of them clapped, and then they all joined in. So finally, we enjoyed our time in the spotlight!

A few days later, it was time to get back on the road.

Driving home in the car, Kate explained that some people do not understand animals or how other people can love them so much. When she was a little girl, her uncle let her pick out a dog in the shelter for Christmas. Kate said she and her mom had just moved to a new neighborhood. Her dad was in the Army and had to go out of town to work. She didn’t have any friends.

When we got to the motel that evening, Mom continued her childhood story. Her dog, Bernie, became her best friend and she loved him so much. Their landlord didn’t like dogs and said they would have to move. Kate was so upset that she tried to run away with Bernie. It caused a lot of problems for her mom, even after they caught up with her. The police took

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Bernie away. Grandma never let her have any pets after that. Kate got very sad as she remembered Bernie and even got tears. Roxie and I cuddled with her and licked her face.

We were relieved when we got back home. No more wearing sweaters or jackets all the time. A little rain no longer bothered us. We learned a lot about life. And about people, too. Although Kate has a heart of gold for animals, her mother doesn't feel the same. Roxie and I share lots of love with our mom. I bet there are a lot of dogs—even what they call “purebreds”—who never get to experience so much love and learn all the things we do. I was starting to feel more and more like I belonged and was needed—like an important part of this little family.

A few weeks ago, Kate's father, Horace, came to visit. He and Grandma have been separated for a long time and he was feeling lonesome. He and Kate decided the best thing would be if he stayed with us for a while. He could enjoy our company and help Kate take care of us at the same time. He's a mellow guy, very soft-spoken and he seems to like me and Roxie, and we like him, too.

Now, however, Kate is planning a big trip to Africa. She'll write articles about conservation and explore ways to help elephants! We dream about seeing the elephants that Mommie talks about. She's going to take Grandpa with her. Roxie is an optimist. She thinks Mom will take *us* with her, too.

A few days later, Kate announces that she's decided we will *all* relocate to Kenya to live. She wants to be of value in elephants' lives like she is in mine and Roxie's. I don't relish the idea of leaving our comfortable castle by the sea, but I am beguiled because I think elephants must be something extraordinary. After all, Kate loves them so much that she's

willing to drag us halfway around the world. I feel pretty sure that I will love them, too.

Kate had met elephants a few times before when she visited Africa. She went on excursions with her photographer husband, Gerard. It was her favorite thing to do. I heard her tell her friend, Golda, all about it on the phone “The last trip Gerard made to Africa, I wasn’t able to go. My mom was ill and I wanted to help her. Gerard was like a young David Attenborough, eager to learn more about all species, every chance he got. He was riding in a small plane in the Congo when it crashed...” She couldn’t tell the story without breaking down in tears.

That happened two or three years ago. Now she feels ready to go back to Africa, and with Horace coming too, we will *all* be able to go and stay longer. She says the elephants are in trouble from people poaching them and others not protecting them, and she feels in her heart that *they want her* to come back. She tells Roxie and me how much she loves Africa but that it can also be dangerous. So it is very important for Roxie and me to listen to her very well and do just what she says. Roxie and I look at each other in wonderment.

Neither Roxie nor I have seen any elephants in person, and I am still confused about them. Kate says they are gigantic, but in her pictures of them, and even on TV programs, they look small. Are elephants like pets and family members? I can’t figure it out. She admires them so much, she has pictures and statues of them all over the house. Suppose she likes elephants more than she likes us? That’s the scariest question—what will happen to us if she wants to stay in Africa for good? Maybe she would not have time for us in that case?

She only left town without us one time before, and I was almost falling apart, even though a nice dog sitter named Carl took care of us while she was gone. At the thought of being separated from her, I brood and whine. Kate tells me, “Let’s

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all act more elephant! Elephants are brave and kind. The families stick together and help one another.” I want to make her proud. I wish I *were* an elephant. But I’m only a dog, and, as much as I may want to be something else, I can’t be.

Kate brings our cookies in her pocket when we go out for walks. She bribes us to “sit” and “be quiet” all along the way. Kate says she’s teaching us to go on a long airplane ride. She says that she may need our help to hear and be aware of some things. That’s why we’re learning to pay more attention. We’ll be her service dogs. I feel glad we’re able to help her. It makes me feel more elephant. I wonder if she knows that I would do anything in the world to help her. She’s my one and only mom, and I would protect her with everything I’ve got.

But somehow, deep down inside, I can’t believe she will *really* bring us along. Here comes Carl for a chat, and I’m thinking it must be to pick up our house keys. When she leaves, I’ll have to go through so much pain and drama all over again. *It’s too much to bear.* What can I do? I bear it.

Kate realizes I am acting moody and she tells us again, emphatically, that we’re *all* going to Africa! I’m still uneasy. It’s like when she leaves the house, she tries to make me feel better and says, “I’ll be back real soon.” But sometimes it’s *hours* before I see her again! No matter what Kate says or how many treats she gives me, I’m still worried she’s going to leave without me.

I want to cry out, but I can’t speak English. *Don’t go!* It gets worse and worse because she won’t stop talking about it. Kate realizes how I feel. She says, “Don’t worry, my sweet boy. We are *all* going on a great adventure together. You will meet an elephant, I’m sure of that.”

That’s great, Mom. Later my nerves kick in again. We didn’t go there before—so why would we go now? Every day when she’s excited and making plans for the trip, I want to cry, “Don’t leave me, Mommie! Please!”

The day of departure comes. Kate is cheerful. “Come on darlings, let’s make sure we are all packed up and ready to go. We may find a beautiful place to live in Africa and *never even come back!*”

Roxie smiles, “Okay Mom! We’re ready to go.”

Meanwhile, I’m thinking, “*Never come back?*” What does that mean? Where in the world would we go where we *never wanted to come back home?* Home is paradise. Home is where it’s at. How can she be so casual about leaving it all behind?”

Roxie muses, “It must be some place really nice, Romie. Sometimes you just have to take a chance or you will never learn anything. Kate and Horace will be there. They’ll take care of us. Don’t get yourself in a pickle.”

Kate calls us, “Come on, let’s go to the park and run around. We need to get tired out so we can sleep on the plane. Who wants to go to the park?”

“*Okay, Mom. That’s always fun.*” I trudge along but still with a long face. We jump in the back seat of her car on our fake leopard dog beds, as usual. Clover Park is about a mile away from home. We get out and tear across the lawn, pulling on Kate and our leashes. She laughs.

Soon, we are chasing each other around the field. It’s nearly empty at midday, so she lets us run off-leash. We run and we roll down the hill. I’m not very good at rolling, but I follow Roxie’s lead, and soon I am forgetting all my problems and trying to catch her. We rest a minute, then get up and run some more. A gorgeous Southern California day.

Kate loves to go on walks, and she likes to play with us and meet other dogs. She even rolled down the hill with us that day. Sometimes I wonder if she isn’t part dog herself. Horace doesn’t walk as much, and he likes to sit at a desk. Maybe it’s because he’s old.

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We get ourselves nice and tired, then we go home and Kate gives us a warm bath. In the beginning, baths freaked me out. When she would put me into the tub, I would jump right out. But I've come to enjoy the feeling of warm water on my fur, getting my teeth brushed, too. And I love shaking it off and getting towel-dried and hugged by you-know-who.

It's nighttime. They're putting all the suitcases in a taxi, and we're going to the airport.

The airport is noisy, but we are quiet. We get on the plane, and the space is so small where we have to stay. We're quiet. We get treats. Best of all, it looks like *we're all* going to Africa! Kate says we are first going to New York to see some friends. *I'm not getting left behind!* I kiss her hand. Now I'll be more elephant! Everything gets dark, and I fall asleep. When I wake up, we're in New York. Is *Africa* another word for *New York*?

After getting off the plane, they collect all the suitcases and we jump into a taxi. I'm not left behind. *They love me! They really, really love me!* We finally get to our New York room. Mom takes us for a walk. We walk and walk, and we see a tree, but when we get near it, it has a fence around it. Any grass we feel like sniffing has metal bars in front of it. We pass a little park but we can't get in. What the heck? Mom sees we're reluctant to walk. She says we're heading to a different area now, and we may be pleasantly surprised. She must know something we don't know. We come to what looks like a big park. As before, we see it has a fence around it. Wait a minute. *Hey! There's a big entranceway!* It's okay to go in! We get excited!

Central Park! Lots of grass and trees and new smells all around us! This must be Africa! I keep a lookout for elephants and lions to pop out from behind the bushes. We don't see any yet, but we love the spring flowers and shrubs. There's a lake. We go to an outdoor restaurant and meet Kate and Horace's friends. We aren't in New York more than two or three days

when Mom packs up our things and we go back to the airport. I think we're going home to California.

That airport is another hurdle. It is bad enough that we have to mind our manners and keep our mouths shut, but when I hear Kate stutter and raise her voice, I perk up my ears. A guy wearing a badge tells her they can't have dogs on the plane. She says she sent in papers, but he says they don't have those papers. *Grr*. I want to bite the guy who says dogs can't go on the plane. But I wouldn't dare. I'm a good dog, quiet and still, like she taught me to be. Kate acts like *she* is either going to bite or have a meltdown.

These louts want to separate us from the humans who love us? *I don't think so!* I *would* start howling, but I remember her training to keep my mouth shut—and that's what I do. What happens if they don't let dogs go? Would we have to stay at the airport? I don't think Mom would leave without us. *Bad thoughts*. Kate is persistent. Nothing is going to stop her from getting to Africa and seeing those elephants. And she's *not* leaving us behind!

Finally, a lady supervisor comes over. She says it's okay to bring us on the plane. *Whew!* It's good to have a mother who fights for us. Roxie and I sigh and gaze at each other. We wait around the airport for a while longer. Then we get on another airplane. I think, "So this is what she does when she leaves us at home?" I'm surprised because the airplane part isn't much fun.

Now Roxie is going to tell you what happens next.