

# One



Something was happening to my puppy family. Up until now, my world was made up of my littermates and a man named Roger. (Roger was the one who'd come up with the brilliant idea to feed us soft food.) There was also my mother dog and the yard we lived in. We were all given names (I was Zeus) and this was life—wonderful, wonderful life.

But one day two women and a child came and played with my sister Lady, and when they left, Lady went with them. Then my brother Henry departed with a full human tribe—too many children to count! Next it was Snoopy who vanished. And very much to my surprise, not long after that, my mother left, too.

My mother and my littermates, it occurred to me, were all getting *families*. The thought made me swoon. Roger didn't spend much time with us. I enjoyed loping around in the sun and the grass with other dogs to keep

me company, but it would be even better to have a family all my own—a bunch of people dedicated to *me*.

Except this didn't happen. No families came to take my brother Troy or me. Troy and I regarded each other warily. For some reason, we were just not good enough to have our own families. Did it have something to do with the fact that we were the two biggest of the bunch? Did people like smaller puppies better? I worried about it a lot as I lay in the grass and chewed sticks or Troy's ear or now and then my own front paws, just to see what they tasted like.

Why wasn't Troy good enough to get a family? Why wasn't I?

A long time passed, and then one day the gate opened. Troy and I went berserk, because a new family walked in, with a woman and a man and many human children. "Troy, Zeus, this is the 'Ōpūnui family," Roger announced to us.

The children separated me from my brother, giving us each undivided attention. So many feet and ankles to sniff. So many fingers to lick. So many hands stroking me. *Yes*, this is what I wanted.

I had finally met my family.

"You said these puppies were born on a farm?" the woman asked, reaching down for Troy. I watched jealously as he squirmed in her arms.

"That's right," Roger told her. "Pregnant female just showed up at the farm one day, no microchip, no collar."

“These are such beautiful chocolate Labradors. I don’t know how you do it.” The woman gave Roger a sad smile. “I’d want to keep all of them for myself.”

“Animal rescue is hard,” Roger admitted. “We don’t let ourselves fall in love. Finding them new homes is more important.”

“So how does this work?” the adult man asked. He stroked Troy’s head, but I was not too jealous because a boy and a girl were focusing warm, happy attention on me, rubbing my soft, round belly until I groaned with happiness.

Roger nodded. “I told you on the phone about Marco Ricci. He’s a paramedic and a member of the Oahu Search and Rescue team. He’ll be out in a few days to decide which dog he wants—I reserved the two smartest ones for him. Then, if you want, you can have the other one.”

“Oh, we want, we definitely *want*,” the woman assured Roger.

“He sounds like an interesting guy,” the man observed.

“Marco? Oh yes, that’s the perfect word, *interesting*,” Roger replied with a chuckle. “Extremely organized and strategic. If he says he’ll be here at 10:35, that’s when he’ll arrive. But the guy came back from a visit to family in Italy with the idea of training dogs in water rescue, and now they say he’s just about the best in the world.”

“I don’t know that we’re good at dog training, but

we'll certainly give Troy or Zeus a lot of love!" the man said with a smile.

The man and woman took a turn petting me next, while some of the children played Tug-on-a-Stick with Troy. Everything seemed to be going just as it should. So Troy and I were stunned when the family left without taking either of us. We had been so good!

Many more days passed without families. I felt pretty confident that Troy was the problem.

One morning we were sleeping deeply when I had a sense that someone new had arrived. Both Troy and I blearily opened our eyes to find a man kneeling right there, smiling down at us. I sniffed his hands, finding a rich, earthy odor and strong traces of dog. The man's eyes and hair were dark like Roger's, but his arms and hands were lighter.

Roger watched approvingly as Troy and I found our energy and leaped up at the new man's face, trying to lick him. "I already have a family lined up for whichever one you don't pick, Marco. That one's Troy, and that one's Zeus," Roger told him. I heard my name, but I was focused on this man, chewing his hands with affection so that he would understand that I, and not Troy, should be his dog.

I was pretty surprised when he scooped us both up and stood. Troy and I stared at each other, amazed to be so high off the ground.

"Thanks for holding them for so long," the new man

said cheerfully. “I know it’s easier to adopt out younger puppies, but there’s really no way to test them before they’re three months.”

Roger shrugged. “You do enough for our rescue, Marco. And like I said, I’ve already got a family for the one you decide isn’t good enough.”

“Oh,” the man corrected, “I’m sure they’re both good. But to work in water rescue you need to be *fearless*. By the end of the day, I’ll know if one of these can make it through the program.”

I had never been beyond the gate of our yard, so when the man stepped through it, my nose was in the air, drinking in new smells. The man smiled down at us. “Ready for a ride in the Jeep?”

He put us in a crate in the back of a car and closed the door. Next to us was another crate, with another dog in it! He was male and huge, with a white face spotted with what looked like mud splatters. Troy and I climbed on top of each other to get a better look. “That’s Bear,” the man told us before he moved around to sit in the front of the car.

“All right, little guys, let’s go find out which one of you will be the next water rescue dog!” he called back to us.

Soon we felt ourselves *moving*. Troy splayed his legs out nervously. I lifted my nose to the amazing assortment of scents that were streaking by, a jumble of birds and flowers and other living things, most obviously the big dog next to us. A deep rumble vibrated up through the floor.

Was this where our siblings had gone when they were carried out of the gate by their new people?

After a while, the rumble ended and we stopped moving. Troy fell down. Sharp, clean, nearly overwhelming fragrances flowed into my nose. The man took us out of the crate and set us down on warm pavement.

“What’ve you got here, Marco?” a smiling woman asked. This was when I decided that Marco was the name of the man who’d brought us here, the way Roger was Roger and I was Zeus and Troy was Troy.

The woman was shorter than Marco and carried the same strong scent as the air—it blotted out everything else, this fiercely clean odor.

“Aloha, Jessica. This is Troy and Zeus.”

“And this is the famous Bear,” she said delightedly, as the big dog dropped down next to us. Troy and I instantly nosed him, climbing on him, loving him. He regarded us with a dour expression while we tried to bite his jowls. “He’s so big!”

“Bear’s face is English Setter, but his body’s all Newfoundland, like his mother.”

“He’s beautiful! Okay, you’ve got the whole day. The water park’s closed to the public for spring inspection,” the woman told Marco.

“That’s more time than I need. All I’m looking for today is a sense of how they react to scary things, like waterslides and wave pools. A rescue dog needs to think of water like air—something to move through.”

“Have fun,” the woman said with a smile.

“Okay, dogs. Dogs!” We heard the sharp note in Marco’s voice and looked up in amazement. For some reason, he ran away from us! Didn’t he like us?

But the big dog followed Marco, so we followed the big dog. Now I understood—we were playing a chase game! We ran through some sort of gate and across a stretch of concrete that was slick and hard under my paws. I realized very quickly that Troy was faster than I, which was frustrating. Whatever we were doing, I wanted Marco to love me the most for doing it.

Marco reached the sloping edge of a pool of clear, glassy water. This was where the sharp smells came from—the water! It didn’t smell anything like the water in my bowl back in the yard.

Marco didn’t stop. He just kept running, right into that strange-smelling water. It started out very shallow and quickly got deeper, up over his ankles, then as deep as his knees.

Bear didn’t hesitate, so Troy and I didn’t either, plunging after him, galloping, then lunging, and then finally swimming to catch up with Marco. He waded ahead of us and then turned and smiled. “Look at you! You’re such good dogs!”

Troy and I reached Marco and didn’t know what to do next. I tried to climb up Marco’s legs, but that didn’t work. The water splashed into my nose and I sneezed and paddled as hard as I could.

“Come on, Zeus! Come, Troy! Come, Bear!” Marco turned and waded energetically back to shore. “Let’s go to the river!”

The big dog, I decided, was called Bear.

We followed Marco across more pavement and reached a place where the pavement ended. More of the clear, pungent water flowed past, moving quickly.

Marco and Bear didn’t even stop. They just kept moving, jumping into the air and then dropping through the water’s surface.

I was running so fast that I couldn’t stop even if I’d wanted to. In a moment, I was over the edge, and then I was falling. I sank in bubbles and bobbed up, blinking, totally confused.

Bear was swimming in circles around Marco, so I followed. Swimming felt a little like running, except it was harder work to push my legs through the water than to gallop along the ground.

Marco stood and water parted around him. When I went toward him, the paddling was easy. But if I tried to head away from him, the water pushed at me, hard. I had to struggle to keep moving.

“Zeus! Oh, that was good. Look at you, brave puppy!” He glanced up. “Come on, Troy!”

Troy was still on the pavement, some distance above us, wagging anxiously. He did *not* want to make the leap. But I could tell he wanted some of the approval Marco was showing me. Perhaps my brother had figured out



the same thing I had, that making Marco happy would mean having a family.

So, with a final glance at me, Troy flung himself off the perch, falling into the water to be with us. He went under and came up sputtering. “Good dog. Good dog,” Marco told him. I didn’t know what this meant, but I heard the approval. Troy and I had figured out how to please Marco.

Marco boosted us out of the water and then we did the same trick over and over, moving along the stream. Each time, the edge we jumped from was higher and the water below us was deeper. Troy’s hesitation had vanished, making us equals as far as I could tell. That was too bad. I didn’t mind if Marco liked Troy, but I wanted him to like me more.

“Such good dogs,” Marco praised both of us.

I liked hearing that, whatever it meant. Marco’s voice was happy, and I liked making him happy.

“All right, let’s do the wave pool.”

By this time I’d decided that whatever was going on, I should just mimic the big dog. When Bear swam out after Marco into a wide, flat pond, I followed. Swimming was getting easier, and I was starting to understand how to keep my nose high enough that the water would stay out of it.

I was astounded to be tossed high when the water suddenly swelled and crashed. Troy decided he’d had enough and went for shore, but I hung with Bear and Marco.

“You’re fine. See, it’s just a wave. You’re fine,” Marco told me.

We swam in the middle of the pool as one mound of water after another came at us. The mounds swept me up high and then slammed down on my head, dunking me under. It was very strange and confusing, but I learned that I’d bob up to the surface every time, so it wasn’t too bad. And Marco was happy.

Finally, we joined Troy at the edge of the unstable pool. I could tell my brother was as tired as I was, even though all he’d done was run around and yap, anxiously watching us get tumbled by water.

“Just one more thing,” Marco promised. We followed on his heels, no longer full of berserk energy but just keeping pace as he trotted over to a set of stairs.

He reached down and gathered up Troy. I watched in distress as Marco climbed up with my brother under his arm. Bear mounted the steps under his own power.

I was alone! Would a yip be appropriate? I put a paw on the first step and looked up, wagging in confusion. How was I supposed to get up there? My brother peered at me smugly from under Marco’s arm, clearly assuming he was the one chosen.

But Marco understood what was wrong. I loved Marco! He came back and carried me up next to Troy, and we were again equals. We were on a small platform high above a bright, glistening pool. There was barely room for all of us.

Marco sat down. “Okay, I promise you, this will never happen in real life. Who wants to go first?” He scooted himself forward until his legs were dangling over the edge of the platform, his feet pointed down a long, wet ramp. “Ready for the slide? You ready, Troy? Zeus, you want to do the slide?”

I thought of this new place as Slide.

Then, to my utter shock, Marco pushed himself off with his hands and shot down the ramp. He was gone! He fell into the pool with a massive splash, and I whined with worry. But a moment later he stood up in the water, clapping his hands. “Bear!”

The big dog leaped forward and plummeted down, into the pool. I stared in disbelief, utterly astounded that a dog could do something like this!

“Okay, Zeus. Okay, Troy. Come!”

I was beginning to understand that word, *Come*. Marco seemed to use it when he wanted us all to be together. But why was he saying it *now*? The slide was between us, keeping us apart!

I gazed down the steep ramp, my heart pounding. Though I had just witnessed Bear flying down it, what Marco was asking seemed *impossible*. Troy whimpered, utterly terrified. We couldn’t go back—the ground was too far below us. Going forward seemed just as perilous.

“Troy! Zeus!”

Trembling, I put one foot, then the other, on the slippery slide.

## Two



**A**s soon as my front paws touched the smooth ramp, everything went *wrong!* My feet slid forward and I collapsed, spinning. Frantically, I splayed out my claws, but they didn't slow me down one bit. Stinging water splashed into my eyes and I couldn't see and I fell faster and faster and—*splloosh!*—hit the pool. I struggled, sinking, water gushing up my nose.

I felt Marco's strong hands reaching for me. "Oh, Zeus," he crooned, "that was amazing."

Marco called and called for Troy, who bowed and wagged and turned in circles high up on the platform. Finally, Marco went up and carried my brother back down the steps. Why hadn't I thought of that?

Marco and I took several more trips down the slide. I didn't like it—I *hated* it—but I went because it made Marco so happy. Troy waited for us at the bottom and

jumped on me as soon as Marco lifted me out of the pool.

“Let’s get the chlorine out of your fur,” Marco finally suggested. We all followed him gleefully, but we lost our enthusiasm when he turned a hose on us, dousing us with clear water.

*Why?* Weren’t we already wet enough?

We were still soggy when Marco put us back in the crate. Even with the outdoor smells and Bear next to us, my brother and I dropped into an exhausted sleep the moment we started moving.

When we jerked to a halt, Marco pulled us out and set us on the ground. We were back in our yard, and I saw immediately that the family we’d met before had gathered right there on the grass, sitting cross-legged as if waiting for us to arrive.

Troy and I ran to them joyfully. I had already started to love Marco, and he knew of the most amazing places to take a dog. But he was just one person. This was several boys and several girls and a man and a woman. They were a *family*. I wanted to be with *them*.

Plus, I could feel that they already loved me completely. Marco liked me, and he liked that I’d gone down the slide with him. But as Bear came out of his crate and sat loyally by Marco’s side, I realized that Marco already had a dog, and that dog was not me, or Troy either.

“Aloha, Mr. ‘Ōpūnui,” Marco called out cheerfully.

Roger was there too, smiling. “Aloha, Marco. Got a couple of anxious people here.”

The children were giving Troy and me so much love we were wriggling in absolute delight.

“Which one is ours?” the woman asked urgently. “Were you able to decide which one you want to keep?”

Marco nodded at the woman. “Well,” he corrected her kindly, “not *keep*, exactly. I train them to be water rescue dogs and sell them to overseas buyers.”

“Overseas?” the man repeated.

“We don’t really use dogs for water rescue here in the USA,” Marco explained. “Scarborough, in Maine, is the only place I know about. But it’s a big thing in Europe.” He glanced over to where Troy and I were being cuddled by the children. “These are both great dogs, two of the best pups I’ve seen at this age. But Zeus was absolutely fearless. I can see him diving out of a hovering helicopter someday, hitting the water in heavy surf, and pulling a swimmer to safety. So it’ll be Zeus that I’m taking.”

I heard my name and felt the approval from Marco. I figured he was telling the family that I was the best dog and the one that should go with them.

So I was startled when the woman turned and called, “It’s Troy!” Everyone in the family immediately

surrounded my brother, petting him, showering him with kisses while he licked their faces in response. The children were smiling and giggling and happy. “You’re our dog. You’re our dog,” a boy kept saying.

The girl who was holding me got up from where we were sitting together in the grass. Gently, she put me at Marco’s feet.

I licked Marco’s toes so he wouldn’t feel left out and turned around to hurry back to my new family. But he put a hand down to my collar and held me still.

I was dumbfounded when, a few moments later, a boy, staggering a little under my brother’s weight, led his whole family out the gate. I stayed behind with Marco. I didn’t have a choice.

When the gate closed behind the family, I realized that the last glance from my brother might be all that I would ever have of him. Just as my sisters and other brothers and my mother had been led out into the world by their people, Troy had been taken by his.

What about me? I gazed up at Marco. Though he was approving and smiling and friendly, I did not get the sense that he had fallen in love with me the way the children had fallen for Troy.

Did that mean I would never have a person of my own?

“Come on, Zeus,” Marco announced, “let’s go home.”

I was back in the crate soon after. There was plenty of my brother’s odor in the carpet under my feet, but he was gone.

From his own crate nearby, Bear glowered at me, apparently disappointed to see me. I slept but awoke instantly when the vibration shuddered to a stop. We were not home, we were not at the place with the pools and the river and the slide—we were someplace else. Strong, humid odors filled my nose—wet plants, mud, water. *Moving* water—I could hear it.

Marco's hands gathered me and tenderly set me in some grass. I squatted, and then Marco lifted me up and climbed the steps of a house. Bear trotted ahead of us through the front door.

“Look at this baby!” a woman's voice crooned. A very large woman with delicious-smelling hands reached for me. She was as tall as Marco but moved more massively through the world. Her white teeth gleamed against her dark skin as she beamed at me.

“Tutu, this is Zeus. He's going to live with us for a while.”

The woman (Tutu?) laughed as I licked her face. “Zeus!”

“Did you hear from my son?” Marco asked the wonderful woman.

“Kimo landed. He's on the airport shuttle. He should be here in ten minutes or so,” she replied, as she set me down.

Marco grinned. “Can't wait to show him his birthday present!”

I wanted to add to the joy, so I raced around the



house, my nose down, then turned on Bear, nipped at his ear, and dashed away. He didn't seem to realize how much fun we were having.

I was delighted when Marco fed Bear some delicious-smelling food in a bowl and gave me a more bland meal in a smaller bowl. We both choked down our food. Then I trotted over to Bear's bowl to see what he'd left for me and was disappointed to find nothing. Here I was, a new dog in the house, and I wasn't even being given a welcome gift.

To amuse myself, I found a shelf full of tasteless paper things and pulled one out and began shredding it. "No," Marco shouted.

I was startled. I had never heard such a word, nor such a tone from a human. I looked at Bear for an explanation, and he glared back as if I'd done something wrong. What was a No?

"Don't chew the books, Zeus," Marco scolded me. I lowered my head and let my ears sink down.

"Kimo's shuttle is right around the corner!" Tutu announced.

"I'm going to put the dogs behind the gate in the back room until the boy's settled," Marco told her. I jumped up when Marco called, "Bear!" and I followed the big dog down the hall into a room that was shut off with a gate.

Bear gave me a glum look. He seemed to think that whatever was happening was my fault.

Marco closed us in and left us alone. Bear sat expectantly at the gate, so I did, too. We both sprang into alertness when we heard the sounds of excited voices. Another human male had arrived.

“Tutu Nani!” the new male called. His voice sounded younger than Marco’s.

“Aloha, Kimo! It’s so good to have you back.”

Bear and I were pressed firmly against the gate. I noticed that the spaces between the slats were wide—puppy width, in fact. I pushed my little nose into the gap and then wriggled my body until I was out.

Bear glared in disapproval, but he was on the other side of the gate, and I knew he was just jealous that he couldn’t do what I had done. I scampered down the hall toward those voices, gaining speed.

“How was your birthday?” Marco asked.

“Great!” came the reply. “Mom gave me a basketball.”

“I’ve got something for you, too,” Marco advised with a smile.

I slid around the corner and saw a young male talking to Marco. The new boy caught the motion and turned, lighting up in a smile. “Oh wow,” he blurted, “you got me a puppy!”

The boy fell to his knees and held out his hands and I jumped into them. It was as glorious as jumping from the banks of the river into the water next to Marco, a plunge that took me from the life I’d had to the life I was

going to have. This was, I realized, why I was here. *This* was my boy!

“Oh,” Marco murmured.

The boy was grinning and I was trying to lick his face. He was pulling his mouth out of the way. “What’s his name?”

“Zeus.”

“Oh, Zeus. Zeus,” the boy gasped, still laughing.

Marco cleared his throat. “Actually, no, that’s not your birthday present.”

The boy struggled to his feet. I tried to go with him, tried to stay in his arms, but he let me slip gently down to the floor. I dove onto his feet, chewing at a leather strap I found across his ankle.

“No, this is your present.” Marco dug behind the couch and pulled up a long, white board.

“Oh,” the boy exclaimed, “you, uh, you got me a new surfboard! Amazing! Yeah, thanks, Dad!”

“Happy birthday, Kimo,” Tutu called from her side of the room. “Thirteen—a big teenager now!”

Marco came over to us. I wagged, but I was still gazing up at the boy.

Marco was not my person, but this boy was different. We looked into each other’s eyes and I could *feel* it. Every dog has a person. This one was mine.

“Zeus isn’t going to live with us permanently,” Marco explained to him. “You know how this works, Kimo.

Every eighteen months or so I bring on a new pup, train it, then I sell it at auction to be a water rescue dog. It's part of what I do for a living."

The boy was still grinning at me, and when he put his hand down, the love flowed into me and I wagged as hard as I could.

"Kimo," Marco warned. The boy glanced up. Marco shook his head. "Don't get attached to this dog. We're not keeping Zeus. He has a bigger purpose. He's a working dog."

It was very strange to feel some sadness in this boy, my boy, even while I was licking his fingers and he was scratching behind my ears with just the right pressure. I knew I would have to love him as hard as I could to make that sadness go away.

A little later, I followed Bear to a table and mimicked him while he sat, an attentive expression on his face. The air was alive with food smells wafting from the table, and Marco, Tutu, and Kimo pulled up chairs. Bear seemed to believe that people eating meant dogs would soon be eating, too. I wasn't going to question his wisdom.

"Are you ready for school Monday?" Tutu asked Kimo. "I guess it's always so hard to go back after spring break. Maybe just realize everybody feels the same way. Probably even the teachers. Was it strange to go back home?"

Marco looked up from his plate. “*This* is Kimo’s home,” he observed quietly.

Tutu nodded patiently. “Yes, that’s what I mean.”

Kimo shrugged. “It’s always fun to see my friends, and it’s so different there. The rain’s cold. We went to Eagle Creek reservoir but the water was *freezing*. Oh, and you know how here we call everyone Auntie and Uncle, even if we’re not really related? They don’t do that there unless somebody’s an actual uncle. Or aunt.”

Tutu sniffed. “Unfriendly and disrespectful.”

Kimo grinned. “I missed you, Tutu Nani.”

I started to think this nice woman was called Tutu Nani and not just Tutu. It seemed to fit—she was solid and needed a bigger name than most people.

Marco was gazing at Kimo with a warm smile. “It’s so good to have you back, son. There’s just so much more . . . I don’t know . . . *life* when you’re around.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I agree,” Tutu Nani added.

“What did you do for Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalaniana’ole Day?” Kimo asked her.

“Went kayaking up the coast, just like every year,” she responded.

Marco frowned slightly. “Though I asked her not to. I worry about you, Tutu.”

Tutu Nani waved her hand dismissively. “How’s your

mother?” she asked Kimo. There was a little hesitation in her voice.

“I think Mom’s happy,” Kimo replied. “She seems happy.”

Tutu Nani shook her head and scowled a little. “Indianapolis is no place for my daughter. She should come back home. She should live here, and be with *ohana*, with family.”

“Sure, but the company she bought is in Indiana,” Kimo pointed out.

“Then she should sell it back,” Tutu Nani answered primly.

Kimo’s hand stealthily lowered, tossing a few morsels down for the dogs. Bear’s instincts were *perfect!* I leaped on one chunk of soft bread while the big dog lapped up another.

I heard an odd noise and Marco stood and pressed a rectangular object to his face—later, I would learn to think of it as a phone. He spoke, then looked at Bear, who went alert, sensing something. “You ready to work, Bear?”

“What’s happening?” Kimo asked.

“A lost hiker,” Marco explained, “Last seen up at the trailhead by the Waimea River. No sign of him.”

“Can we come, too, Dad?” Kimo asked. “Zeus and me?”

Marco hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“But Dad,” Kimo argued, “there’s no school. It’s still

technically spring break. I can stay out as late as we need.”

I wagged, because Marco turned his gaze down on me. “All right,” he decided finally. “Let’s show Zeus what we’re all about.”