

NUGLY



M. C. ROSS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Copyright © 2023 by M. C. Ross

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-338-82718-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
First printing 2023

Book design by Maithili Joshi

I



The Number One Main Thing

The number one main thing a dog does every day is: fall in love. Dogs do this over and over again, often without really thinking about it, the same way you and I sneeze or blink at bright lights.

The second main thing a dog does is: be hungry. That one's pretty self-explanatory.

Within five seconds of Nugget being born, he did both.

Being born is a bit overwhelming, so it was sort of nice that Nugget had something to focus on. Also playing in his favor was the fact that puppies are unable to open their eyes for ten to fourteen days after they're born. This is a very smart system. Imagine going from never having seen anything at all to seeing a crowded room with lots of people all paying attention to you. It'd be a lot to take in. You'd want some time to adjust. Like, say, one to two weeks. This is exactly the amount of time puppies get, and just one of the many ways in which humans have yet to catch up to dogs.

But even though he couldn't see that he'd been born,

Nugget could certainly feel it—and smell it. One moment his entire universe had been warm and extremely compact. Now there was air on his fur, and that warmth, which had previously been all around him, was suddenly behind him, big and soft and breathing in and out. To Nugget's nose—which even from birth could smell things no human would ever be able to—the big warm thing smelled like comfort and courage and *home*. And a voice, delighted, came from on high: “Aw, look at that cute little nugget!”

Nugget had been born and named in a single instant. Again, a bit overwhelming. But just before Nugget could panic, that big, warm, good-smelling presence beside him stood up, shifted around, and plopped back down right in front of him, where it proceeded to lick his face urgently. *Hello*, those licks said. *Don't worry. I'm here for you. You're safe. It's okay.*

That's when Nugget realized: This was his mother.

That was also the first time Nugget loved someone.

He'd get a chance to try it out again soon. Like, right now. Because, all of a sudden, his mom was standing back up and turning away from Nugget. His tiny heart, just a few *ba-bumps* into its professional career, nearly stopped. Why had she left him? Was this forever? But no—within moments Nugget's mother had completed a full rotation, and when she returned, she used her nose to nudge someone right up next to Nugget. Someone just as small as Nugget, and just as wriggly, and just as eager to get a big, wet, sloppy face bath from their mother.

Nugget's heartbeat came back twice as fast. A sibling. He had a sibling!

Soon came another puppy, and another, and pretty soon Nugget had six brothers and sisters, and he loved each one of them more than the last. Or, wait, no—he loved each one of them just as much as the last. Or, hold on, wait—well, actually, Nugget wasn't too worried about the details just yet. Love, in Nugget's case, was quite literally blind.

And, anyway, he had more pressing things to focus on right now. Because while all this had been happening—while he and his siblings had been entering the world, and while the voices from on high had been cooing and conversing amongst themselves, and while his mother had been making sure each and every puppy received a warm welcome—Nugget had also been experiencing another feeling for the first time ever. It was a constant dull ache, like waves on a beach, and it pushed him and his siblings toward their mother.

Because Nugget was a dog, and therefore, Nugget was hungry.

Again: pretty self-explanatory.

As he enjoyed his mother's milk for the first time, squeezed up between his siblings almost as tightly as they had been before they were born, Nugget decided that on the whole, being alive seemed like a pretty good state of affairs.

But if that tiny heartbeat ever fluttered in those first few minutes—if doubt ever flickered behind Nugget's closed

eyes—it was because some part of him still remembered those terrible seconds when his mother had turned away from him. When, for a second, Nugget held out all the love he had to give in his little body and felt the terrible fear of not knowing if that love would be returned.

Later, when people spoke about Nugget, they would say he was different from other dogs. Unique. Some would mean it in a nice way; others would not. Almost all of them would be referring to the parts of Nugget that were easiest to notice, that even a stranger could see.

But from his very first breath, Nugget had been unique in a much less obvious way. What set him apart was this: He had so much love in him that he could change people's lives. It was so much love that it felt like it might give him unimaginable strength—or tear him apart.

In time, it would do both.

For now, Nugget just enjoyed the feeling of being safe and happy and taken care of and loved by his family with no questions or hesitations. It took precedence over any other worries he may have had.

It was the number one main thing.