

THE GUEST



When Kaden and I returned from playing basketball, the house was quiet. The Girl lay on the couch with The Varmint curled in her lap. Dad worked in the garage, and Mom fiddled with a shallow box of something in the mudroom. I stuck my nose in it. “Hank, that’s not for you. It’s a litter box for the kitten.”

A litter box? What would she do with it? It didn’t smell like anything I would eat. I lifted my nose. Something smelled like tuna fish. I love tuna fish. I trotted out to the kitchen. The Girl held a can of deliciousness. I sat like a good boy and licked my lips in anticipation.

“Kaden, come hang onto your dog while I feed Princess.”

What? The Varmint had a name?

Kaden held onto my collar while The Girl emptied the contents of the can into a tiny pink bowl. Then she set it on the kitchen floor, retrieved The Varmint from the couch, and set her in front of it. She sniffed delicately as she circled the dish.

It’s food! Just eat it already.

A tiny pink tongue emerged and took a minute amount of

the food. Then she settled in and began to eat. She consumed the entire contents of the bowl, then sat back and licked her paws. What happened to sharing? In our family, we share.

I tried to reach the bowl to see if she'd left any tuna, but, for once, Kaden wasn't distracted. He grasped my collar. "Are we keeping the cat?" he asked.

Mom stood watching the kitten eat. "No, we are not. But she needs a litter box even if she's only here a few hours. Sloane took some pictures of her, and we'll put up flyers around the neighborhood. If we receive no responses, we'll take her to Dr. Tate to check for a microchip or news of a missing kitten. Then I guess we'll take her to the shelter so they can find her a home. In the meantime, try to keep Hank from getting into the litter box or her food."

"He won't bother it. Right, boy?"

I wagged my tail. Mom said The Varmint wasn't staying. I only needed to put up with it for a day or so.

Kaden made himself a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and remembered to save the last bite for me. Good boy. Then we went downstairs for some game time.

A few hours later, I could hear noises in the kitchen. I bumped Kaden's arm to remind him that he needed to turn off the computer. Then I nosed open the door and went upstairs by myself. Dad held a plate with hamburger patties. I knew what would happen next. He would lay them in a hot box on the deck, and they would come out cooked to perfection. When I'd first come home, I may have snatched one or two off the plate. But I was far too well-trained to do that now. I used self-control. Besides, Dad always guarded the plate.

Mom entered the kitchen, washed her hands, and pulled something less interesting out of the refrigerator—green stuff that tastes like grass. I followed Dad outside as he put the

hamburgers in the hot box. I couldn't help it. Pools of saliva collected in my mouth and dripped off my lips onto the deck. But Dad didn't seem to notice.

He opened the box and flipped them over, but none of them flipped in my direction. A short time later, Dad scooped the hamburgers onto a clean plate and carried them into the house. The door banged shut inches from my nose. I peered in the window.

Mom set plates and glasses on the table. When she called Kaden and Sloane to come for dinner, The Girl emerged from her bedroom carrying The Varmint. She set it down and filled that little pink dish again. Dad, Mom, The Girl, and even Kaden stood and watched as The Varmint ate. No one saw me standing patiently at the door.

The family sat and held hands as Dad prayed. Then I could hear the faint clink of their silverware on the dishes. I barked. Loudly. Kaden looked over at me, and I could see his shoulders move as he sighed. He scooted his chair back and opened the door. "What are you doing outside, Hank?"

I padded in and went to inspect the pink dish.

"No, Hank!" The Girl shrieked as she grabbed it out from under my nose.

I jumped backward. I just wanted to smell the empty dish.

I moved to the family room and lay down on the carpet. The Varmint curled up on the couch, but I pretended it wasn't there.

Kaden chewed and swallowed a bite of his hamburger. "Dad, will you sign me up for basketball? I want to be on Liam's team again."

"Sure, son. We'll sign you up. But I can't promise you'll be with Liam. You can't request to be on the same team as a certain person. They randomly group the teams and try to include equal abilities on each."

“Okay. I still want to play.” Kaden made his napkin into a ball and shot it like a free throw toward the trash can. “And I need to practice.” He stood, retrieved the napkin from the floor, and threw it away.

Kaden and The Girl cleared the table after they ate. No one offered me a crumb of their hamburger. Not even a bite of green stuff. Kaden filled my bowl with dog food and gave me an offhanded pat on my head.

The whole family prepared to watch a movie. Dad chose one from Netflix, Mom grabbed a drink, and Kaden bounced around a little before he finally took a seat on the couch. The Girl sat and set The Varmint on her lap. It promptly curled up and made a noise like the grass-cutting machine Kaden and Dad used last summer. The animal was clearly defective.

I wedged myself into the small space between Kaden and the end of the couch. People moved and jumped on the big TV screen, making me dizzy, so I laid my head on Kaden’s leg and fell asleep.

I woke up a while later and felt a bit cramped. I raised my head and stretched out my legs. What was this? My head bumped against something soft and furry. I turned to see The Varmint curled up on my boy’s lap, and I pushed it with my nose.

The thing exploded. Its fur stood on end, it made that awful hissing sound, and then it reached out and raked its claws across my nose.

I yelped and slid off the couch. Mom hopped up with a tissue. “Hank’s bleeding. Can’t let it drip on the carpet.” She blotted drops of blood from my nose, seeming more concerned with the carpet than my poor scratched snout.

The Girl grabbed The Varmint and stroked it. “It’s okay. I won’t let Hank get you.”

No. It is not okay. That thing hurt me.

Kaden motioned to me. “Down, Hank. I can’t see the TV.”

With a bit of a humph, I lay down on the floor with my nose on my paws. I’d never felt so rejected.