

## CHAOS



Kaden burst in the door. “Is Uncle Hank here?” He dropped his bag in the hallway and vaulted over the couch into the family room.

Mom stepped out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel. “Yes. He and Molly arrived a few minutes ago. They’re downstairs putting things away in their room. Please take care of your gym bag and stop leaping over the furniture. You need to be an example for your little cousin.”

*Oh, boy. If she’s looking to Kaden for an example, we’re really in trouble.*

I ambled over to Kaden, and he gave me a great scratching and ear rub. He hung his bag in the mudroom as Dad entered.

Dad kissed Mom and patted me. “I see our guests have arrived.”

Mom nodded and whispered, “They’re downstairs. I hope we don’t regret this.”

Dad straightened and put his hands on Mom’s shoulders. “We covered this decision with prayer. What else could we do?”

“Can we at least talk over some family rules after supper?”

“I think that would be wise. Now what can Kaden and I do to help?”

Kaden’s head jerked up. “I think I have homework.”

“It can wait until after supper.” Dad used his stern voice.

Kaden sighed but grabbed the plates and set the table. Mom ladled soup into bowls, and Dad put sandwiches out.

We heard Shrieking Kid before we saw her. She roared up the steps. With arms outstretched, she whirled around the family room before halting at the table. “I’m an airplane. Daddy said take off, and that’s what airplanes do. What’s going on?”

Mom spoke first. “We’re going to have supper.”

“We’re all going to eat at the same time? At the table?” Shrieking Kid’s eyes were big and round as she stared at the bowls of soup and the ham-and-cheese sliders.

“Yes, we are. Why don’t you wash your hands, and as soon as your dad comes upstairs, we’ll eat.”

Shrieking Kid stood frozen. She glared at Kaden. “Who are you?”

“I’m your cousin. Kaden.”

The front door opened and shut, and a few minutes later, The Girl rushed into the room. “I’m here. Jacee’s mom dropped me off.”

Shrieking Kid stood in front of her and gazed up. “Do you live here too?”

“You must be Molly. Yes, I live here. I’m Sloane.”

“How come so many people live in this house? And a dog?”

The Girl gave her a warm smile. “And a cat. You can meet her later. Want to wash your hands with me?” Shrieking Kid followed The Girl to the bathroom.

Henry came upstairs as the girls finished washing up. There was some shuffling as everyone took seats at the table. I

found a convenient place to watch for crumbs. My bet was Shrieking Kid was a messy eater.

She sat on her knees and grabbed for a slider, nearly knocking her glass into Kaden's plate. He reached out and steadied it as Mom spoke. "Wait, Molly. We'll pass things to you. Uncle James is going to pray first."

Shrieking Kid stared wide-eyed as the rest of the family bowed their heads and Dad prayed. He thanked God for Henry and Molly and for the food. After he said "Amen," everyone talked at once. Dad asked about Henry and Molly's drive from Rose Valley, Sloane told something to Mom about Jacee, and Kaden talked about basketball to no one in particular.

Shrieking Kid began stuffing bits of her sandwich into her mouth, but sufficient quantities fell to the floor. Drool edged past my lips, but I waited.

Princess entered the hall, yawning and stretching. How could one animal sleep so much? She rubbed against my shoulder and sauntered in to check her food dish. I'd already checked it, licking out the few remaining crumbs for her so she could have a clean bowl. She didn't seem disappointed as I always did when my dish was empty but strolled past the table toward the couch.

"The cat!" Shrieking Kid bolted from her chair and descended upon the unsuspecting Princess. Snatching her into her arms, she buried her face in the fur and squeezed.

"*Yowl!*"

I didn't need a translator to know what that meant. *Help!* I leaped to my feet and shoved my shoulder into Shrieking Kid. She fell to her bottom and loosened her grip on Princess, who scrambled out and ran for The Girl's room. Then the kid shrieked like she was the one being squeezed.

Henry rushed from his chair and picked her up. “You need to be gentle with the cat. You can’t squeeze her like your stuffed animals.” The shrieking changed to wailing and then to sobbing.

The Girl stood and put her dishes in the dishwasher, Kaden bolted downstairs, and I cleaned the mess under the table where Shrieking Kid had sat. Mom stood and sighed. “Guess our family meeting will have to wait.” She cleared the table, including the dishes Kaden had forgotten. Dad wiped his mouth and helped her.

After a few minutes, Shrieking Kid’s sobs lessened. She put one thumb in her mouth and spoke around it. “I want to go home, Daddy. I want Mommy.”

Henry’s eyes were watery. “I’m sorry, honey. We live here now. And I don’t know where Mommy is.”

Shrieking Kid glared at me. “I don’t like that dog. He knocked me down.”

Henry set her on the couch and picked up the remote. “Let’s see if we can find cartoons, shall we?”

Shrieking Kid nodded and curled onto the couch as images flickered on the screen.

I went to the back door and pointed my nose.

“You want out, Hank?” Dad opened the door for me, and I trotted down to the grass. I really didn’t care if Shrieking Kid liked me or not. I’d lived here long before she’d arrived.

Movement along the fence caught my eye. I’d done a great job of eradicating the neighborhood of squirrels by simply using my fierce bark and ferocious face. Until this fall. The neighbor, Mrs. Wilson, had put up a squirrel feeder in her backyard, and the furry rodents came in by the thousands. Well, I’d seen at least five. Most of them knew better than to enter our yard. But they would crawl along the top of the fence to get to the Wilsons’ yard.

## IT'S MOLLY'S FAULT

I leaped against the fence, barking like a Rottweiler on guard duty. The squirrel scurried away, but I knew he'd be back. The lure of shelled field corn was irresistible. I would be vigilant and keep the yard squirrel-free.