
DOG

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The dog had no name.

He'd been alive for just eleven and a half weeks, and every day had been bewildering. Five brothers had disappeared, along with two sisters: they'd simply left, without a bark of goodbye—and they hadn't come back. His mother was nearby, but in a different part of the house. He could hear her sometimes when the door opened, but she didn't come to see him. That made him lonely. He was in a cardboard box, and the only creature he occasionally saw was a long, silver cat that perched outside on the window sill, with her nose against the glass. She stared at him without blinking, and when he tried to get her attention she simply turned her back.

He lay on his side and studied his paws. There were four altogether, and they were black and white. So was the rest of him: a pattern of swirls and splodges ran right around his body and up to his ears, which flopped over his face. He flicked them aside, and played with his tail. Tired of that, he rolled on to his back, squirming on the blanket beneath him.

Was he hungry? No. There were things to chew, and he'd just had a drink. He was warm enough, too, and he'd spent part of the morning happily scratching. The problem was boredom, for without siblings there was nobody to nip, lick or nuzzle.

There was nobody to talk to, so when he noticed the spider, he sat bolt upright, and kept absolutely still. It was dangling from the lampshade over his head, and he watched hopefully as it descended. Soon, it was hovering just above his nose. The dog twitched, determined not to snap, and the creature rotated carefully. A moment later, it had landed right between his eyes, where it divided into two and grew blurred. Sixteen legs flexed and stretched, while innumerable eyes gazed with a solemn seriousness that was quite terrifying.

It was clearly a time for courage.

"Hello?" said the dog nervously. "Good morning."

The spiders said nothing. They moved back slowly, and coalesced into a single black dot. A pair of fangs appeared, and the eyes grew brighter.

"Good morning," it said. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you. And I'm certainly glad to see you, because I was wondering if I'd be alone again all day. Everyone's left me, so I was getting quite… well, worried."

"Rightly so," said the spider. Its mouth stretched into a tiny smile.

"Do you know where they've gone?"

"I do not."

"So what's happening?"

"Nothing. You're curious, though—which doesn't surprise me. You want the truth, of course—you want answers that will help you assess the situation and decide on an appropriate strategy. But before I give them to you, friend, I'd better warn you about something. Spiders never lie, because it's not in their nature: we can only deal with facts."

"Then that's perfect," said the dog. "I'm feeling quite confused, you see. I don't want to be impatient, but I'm not sure how much longer I can stand this."

"Your family's been sold," said the spider. "It happened fast."

"And who have they been sold to?"

"Different people. Money changed hands, and they're all on their way to happy new homes, where they're going to be loved and looked after. They'll be settling in even as we speak, getting to know nice families. That's the joy of being wanted, you see. The problem for you is that you were rejected. You're the one nobody chose."

"Oh. Right."

The dog sat in silence, and the spider moved up on to his forehead. It went higher, resting between his ears, before picking one of them. It squeezed under the flap, and spoke softly.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"You're the youngest and the smallest. Take a look at yourself, little dog: you're weak, and you're skinny. OK, you might put on weight in due course, but you're still lopsided and clumsy. You're out of proportion, too, and you're probably not aware of it, but when you close your mouth, your jaws don't shut properly. One

tooth remains visible, so you look awkward. Your brothers were more attractive, I'm afraid—as were your sisters. That's the law of this particular jungle: the strong survive, and the weak go under. Do you have any more questions at this stage?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Think hard."

The dog blinked again. "I suppose I do have one," he said nervously. "If I haven't been chosen, then… OK. It means I'm not wanted at the moment, and I understand that—"

"Those are the facts, and you have to face them."

"Yes. But what's going to happen to me? I can't stay here, can I?"

"No. So you've been given away. Do you remember the man who visited this morning? He picked you up and inspected you."

"Yes. He was in a hurry."

"He certainly was, but I took the liberty of climbing on to his jacket, and I heard everything he said. He was looking for a pet, and he'd hoped to get a kitten. He popped in here because of the sign on the door: 'One puppy left, free to a good home.' That's what it said, so in he came in search of a bargain. He decided to give you a try, apparently. You're going to be a gift to his son."

"But he didn't take me. He's left me."

"He's coming back, or sending someone. You'll be on your way very soon."

The dog shook himself with excitement.

"So that means I *am* wanted," he yelped. "I *have* been chosen."

"I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't jump to that conclusion, little dog, and I wouldn't get my hopes up. It's not a good start, after all. The family lives in a small house, for one thing—and they don't have much money. The boy is called Tom, and he's just started at some fancy new school, so—reading between the

lines—I think you might be a reward of some kind, like a trophy, or a prize. There have been a few changes in the household, by the sound of it. A bit of upheaval. So the ideal pet, logically, was a safe, straightforward cat. You've been purchased on a whim: you're an experiment."

"Wow," said the dog. "I'd better be good, then. I'll need to be *better* than a cat, and make sure I don't cause any problems."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes! Of course it is."

The dog shook himself again, more anxious than ever. The spider moved back to his nose, and its smile was wide.

"Dear, oh dear," it said, chuckling. "What does the future hold, I wonder? You don't have a pedigree, so nobody knows what's in the mix. Are you a hunter, perhaps? I doubt it. Are you a guard dog? No. Are you decorative, or functional? Loving, loyal—?"

"I could be all those things!"

"Or none of them."

"I'm friendly, at least."

"You're a fool, and you're unlucky."

The dog winced. His head was aching slightly, and he was seeing double again.

"What's the boy's name? I think you told me, but—"

"Tom."

"I like that. It's a nice name, and it's easy to say. I wonder what he'll call me?"

"If it gets that far. If you don't get rejected in the first five minutes."

"I need a name!"

"Are names so important?"

"Yes! Very."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Without a name you're… nothing. What's yours?"

"I've never had one, my friend. I'm nameless, but I still exist."

"Can I call you Thread?" said the dog. "Would you answer to that?"

The spider laughed. It kicked itself into the air, and wound itself upwards, twirling happily.

"Call me what you like," it cried. "We may never meet again…"

The dog watched as it disappeared, but even as he yelped his goodbye the door was opening. There stood the woman who'd been feeding him. She picked him up, and, before he could even twist, he was in the hall, where a young man was waiting with a leather bag. The dog allowed himself to be lowered into it, trembling all over. It was happening, just as the spider had predicted.

The woman stroked his head and tickled his chin.

"Have a good life, angel," she said. "You only get one."



Tom was in the back garden.

The flower beds were thick with weeds, and the grass hadn't been cut for several weeks. The whole area was turning into a wilderness, in fact. Tom sat surrounded by sockets and spanners. An old engine lay in pieces around him: the components were on newspaper, ready to be cleaned.

The back door opened, and he saw his father.

"You're needed," he said.

"Who by?"

"There's something for you. Can you wipe your hands? It's a special delivery, I think—just arrived."

Tom stood up. There was a rag to the side, so he cleaned his

fingers. He could see Phil in the kitchen, and he still had his helmet on. As he came closer to the window he saw a bag on the table, and he noticed that his father's face was expressionless.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"What have you got for me? What's in there?"

His dad had moved back inside, so Tom followed.

"I don't know," he said. "It was on the doorstep. I was going to send it back, but then I saw it had your name on it."

"If it's from Mum, I'm not opening it."

"I don't think it is."

"Where's it come from, then?"

"I don't know. What is it, Phil? You carried it in."

"No idea. It's heavy, though, and there's something moving about."

Tom stood in the doorway, and felt his stomach contract.

Phil had taken his helmet off now, and was looking at him with a curious smile.

His dad had moved to the cooker, and his face was still blank.

The radio was off, and the only sound was a sudden scratching from inside the bag, which caused it to expand and contract. The zip was fastened, and Tom heard a soft, plaintive whine.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Maybe it's a football," said Phil.

"It's something for school, I expect," said his dad. "A nice new blazer."

"I've got one already."

"A spare?"

Tom found that he couldn't breathe. He shook his head, and

for a moment he thought he was going to choke. Swallowing, he realized that something funny had happened to his hands: they were clasped together, just under his nose, and for some reason he had tears in his eyes.

"You haven't…" he said quietly. "Have you?"

"Haven't what?"

"I'd given up asking. Dad, you haven't…"

"What's he talking about, Phil?"

"I've no idea. He's looking a bit shaky, though. Are you ill, Tom? Do you want to lie down?"

"I think we'd better get help—he's gone all pink."

Tom walked to the table. The bag had moved again: he had seen it jump, and whatever was inside was very definitely alive. He wiped the tears from his eyes, but his fingers wouldn't work properly—he couldn't get the zip open, and he was aware that Phil had started filming it all on his phone. The thing inside was now whining continuously, and he distinctly heard a yap. At last, he got the zip to work. Even as it split open, a pair of paws pushed their way out, followed by a furry head. There was a tangle of ears, which separated to reveal shining eyes and then a nose that rose to meet Tom's with a howl of delight.

The dog launched itself upwards like a spring, twisting in mid-air. How had it been confined in so small a space? It exploded upwards and outwards, and Tom just managed to catch it under the forelegs and lift it clear, even as it squirmed round into his arms and licked his face.

The boy staggered backwards with the dog pressed against his chest.

"No way!" he said. "This can't be real…"

Phil was laughing, and so was his father.

Tom clutched the dog to himself, open-mouthed.

"I don't believe it!" he cried. "I absolutely don't believe it! Is this really for me?"

His father was nodding.

"But you said we couldn't… I don't believe it! No!"

"He's yours, Tom. Hard work pays off, and he really is yours."

"He can't be…"

"Yours for ever. So come on, put him down."

"I don't believe this… Look at him. Oh, just look at him!"

Tom sank to his knees, and let his dog down on to the kitchen floor. There was a scrabble of claws and a quick somersault of fur as the dog launched himself upwards again. He leapt under the table and over to Phil, and then seemed to bounce off the wall towards Tom, who scooped him up again as the dog clambered on to his shoulder.

"I'm dreaming!" cried Tom. "You said a cat, if I was lucky. You said a cat, maybe, and look at this!"

"You don't want him?"

"Oh, I do! He's… incredible. What shall I call him, though? He's got to have a name! Can I call him what I want?"

"Of course," said his dad. "Now put him down a second."

"Thank you, Dad. He's the most beautiful thing in the world. Just look at his legs—he's like a great big spider. *That's* what I'm going to call him! That's his name, all right? Oh, wow—this is the best day of my life…"

"It's only what I said, Tom—listen. You worked for that scholarship, and what with everything that's happened—"

"Oh, he's gorgeous…"

"You'll train him, and look after him. You're going to be responsible for him, OK? In every way."

The dog twisted again, and Tom held him tight against his ribcage. He could feel a heart beating, fast and furious.

"Look at his coat," he said softly. "Is he a sheepdog, do you think?"

Phil laughed. "I don't think he's that. He's got a bit of terrier in him, maybe."

"A bit of hyena," said his dad. "I can see crocodile, too—look at that tooth."

Tom didn't hear them.

"He's so stretchy," he cried. "Look at his tail, and his legs—they're tangled up. It's like he's got too many!"

His eyes were still running with tears, and the dog felt one bounce off his nose. He squirmed, and managed to get a good lick at the boy's face. He could smell Tom's hair because it was long and clean—there was soap mixed in with a cocktail of oil and garden. The boy was thin, and it occurred to the dog that in some ways they looked rather similar. Tom was grinning now, and his smile was absolutely joyful.

"I'm going to call him Spider," said Tom. "Is that OK?"

"Put him down, Tom. Let's get him a drink."

"Oh, Dad, thank you so much! Thank you, Phil—thank you. Come on, Spider—let's show you round, and get you some food."

"Be careful, mate," said Phil. "He's still only a puppy."

"I'll show him the house! This is your home now, Spider. This is where you live, so you better get to know it and guard it."

The boy put the dog gently down on to his four paws, and the dog was still for a moment. He stared around the room, taking in his new family and his surroundings. Within seconds, he'd bolted for the door and found himself in the open air, racing through the grass. Tom followed, shouting, so Spider swung round and

instinctively dodged to the side, then he tore back the way he'd come. Moments later, he was jumping high, dashing between the boy's legs and turning tight circles. He snarled in ecstasy, play-biting and rolling on to his back.

"Spider!" cried Tom. "Come on, sir! Sit!"

The dog dived at his new master, barking madly.

"No, Spider! Down!"

Spider writhed again, and waved his legs in the air. He felt hands on his ribs, and right around his neck. Tom was wrestling him now, and as Spider fought he yelped in wonder. For a split second he thought of Thread, and yelped again, for the nasty little creature had got everything so totally, utterly wrong.

He had a home. He had a name. Best of all, he had an owner who needed him—and that was simply too good to be true.