

Boy

Boy pricked his ears at the faint hum. The hum turned into a rumble. He lifted his head, eyes alert, but sighed and dropped his chin back onto his paws. It wasn't the right noise. Even the bang of a car door wasn't right. There was no high-pitched squeak designed to hurt his ears.

Scrapes approached the steps outside – three thumps up, two thuds across the boards and loud bangs on the door.

'Coming.'

Boy rolled his eyes towards the big one and they followed her as she hurried down the passage to open the door. Since the new voice wasn't familiar, Boy ignored the yabbering, closed his eyes to wait. It had been longer than usual. Never before had he had to wait so long. He'd been ordered to stay so he stayed. The new voice ceased. The door closed and footsteps neared. At the pause he lifted his tail, gave it a thump and sighed.

'You okay, Boy?' A soft hand ran down his back but it wasn't the right hand. This one didn't edge under the collar to scratch and massage. This one wasn't big and rough. Long splayed fingers didn't run down his spine to ease away the ache.

'You haven't eaten.' The pellets rattled as his bowl was shoved close to his nose. He sniffed, opened his eyes, glanced up, shifted his snout away and closed his eyes with a sigh.

'You must eat, Boy. Grandpa would want you to eat.'

At the word Grandpa, he twitched his ears around, lifted his tail and gave it a good shake. He got up on all fours, gave a deep whine and searched the area. Hopeful. But there was only the big one, squatted down beside his bed, her dress hanging on the floor. A sniff at the bowl but it smelt all wrong. The wrong scent covered the food. This was the little one's aroma. He circled the worn cushion three times, pawed to soften a lump and flopped down with his back to the bowl. With his tail curled around his rump, he dropped his nose onto his paws and closed his eyes to wait. He'd not had water for two days, hadn't eaten, but it wasn't hunger that gnawed away at his innards. Why hadn't he come?

'I'm sorry, Boy. Wish I could explain. Wish you could understand.'

He trailed her sounds with his ears as she rose and padded away back to the kitchen. Normal noises followed. Pans rattled, the oven door opened, the fridge too. Water splashed - dishes echoed from the metal sink. The noises were comforting but didn't ease the deep pain in his innards.

Where was he? Two afternoons now, he hadn't come in. Two mornings now, there'd been no walk down the long drive where he could sniff and explore the sparse shrubs: where he could lift his leg to leave his scent. There had been no ride on the front seat with the window down so he could hang his head out to absorb and enjoy all the scents in the wind. No sticks

or birds to chase, no sheep to round up, no treats from the hidden pocket, no pats, no dropped pieces of meat under the table. No nothing. No Grandpa.

The little one pelted through the back entry, her excited voice echoing even before the bang of the door as it bounced from the wall. Relief at the familiar voices eased the pain a little. A brief period of normality brought calm and renewed hope. Grandpa usually came in not long after the little one. Eager to greet him at the back door, Boy rose, lapped at the water bowl to ease his thirst and bounded along the short passage. He rounded the doorway and stood in front of the little one who sat at the table. She smiled, dropped her hand with a sweet biscuit held between her fingers, waved it at him. He edged forwards, sniffed and wrapped his lips around the treat. Hungry, he swallowed it whole as he trotted to the closed door and sat.

Boy dropped to his haunches and whined with his nose high. When nothing happened, he twisted his head, eyeballed the big one and yipped.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked the little one.

‘I think he’s pining for Grandpa. He hasn’t eaten.’

The little one giggled. ‘He just ate my biscuit.’

‘At least it’s something but sweet biscuits covered in sugar aren’t good for him.’ At last, the big one opened the door.

The wind held scents he liked: familiar scents but the strongest came from a pair of boots lined up on the boards. He sniffed and saliva drooled. Maybe if he searched, he’d find Grandpa. Nose to the ground he followed the beloved scent even though it was a bit faint. He repeated the trail he’d taken two days ago. At the first bush, he paused, sniffed, lifted his hind leg and squirted. Relieved, he searched for a fresher trail, found none so followed the old trail back to the boots.

Familiar – the right scent. He squatted on the rough coir mat and panted, stuffed his nose in the gnarled leather. More content, he dropped to his belly with his chin sagged across the boots to wait for the owner: to wait for Grandpa. Soon he will be here.

As he waited, he dozed with one ear pricked, alert for the right footsteps. When the chill of darkness seeped under his fur, he rose and shook. The ache of hunger took hold. He put his nose to the ground and trotted, pausing long enough to leave his mark on another bush as he searched for the meaty bone he’d been given before Grandpa disappeared. Because it was too raw he had buried it. Now, the meat had ripened, making it easy to find. With claws spread wide he pawed at the ground, scraped away the red earth and grasped one end of the bone between his teeth. A gentle tug and it came free. To make sure the meat was ready, he dropped the bone, sniffed and licked. Happy, he wrapped his teeth around the middle and trotted back to the boots. Front paws held the bone while he gnawed, stripping all the flesh and gulping it down. Hunger sated, he stretched on the mat with his nose over the boots and slept.

Heat from the sun had dried up the night damp by the time stirrings came from inside. Boy stretched and left the warmth of the mat to find a place to relieve the pressure of last night's meal. On his way back to the boots, he paused when the door opened and out came the big one and little one, both dressed in the clothes they wore when they disappeared for a long time and came back with overflowing bags. He sat and whined.

'Boy, where have you been?' said the big one.

He cocked his head to one side, tongue lolling from the edge of his mouth, and stared.

'Maybe we can sneak him in,' said the little one.

'What? No way. They wouldn't let a dog inside.'

'But he's so sad and lonely. Maybe if he sees, he will understand. Grandpa would want it.'

Grandpa. At the right word, Boy padded closer, sat, lifted his head and stared.

'Look at his eyes, pleading. Okay, get his lead, we'll give it a go.'

The little one squealed and ran, returning with Boy's lead. At the sight, he stood and swept his tail from side to side. The little one led him to the wrong vehicle but he leapt on the rear seat and shuffled over when she climbed in next to him. Even though he left a trail of moisture on the glass, it didn't go down so he could get his head out. Frustrated, he finally dropped his belly to the smooth, cold seat and pressed his snout on his front paws with his eyes on the little one until the hum of the engine stopped.

Boy leapt out, stood and shook. Weaving his head from side to side, he sniffed but didn't like the scents. The little one tugged on his collar. He followed but balked at the door to the building. The scents on the other side were like the place where sharp things were jabbed into his scruff. The door opened. The scents overwhelmed him. The little one tugged until the collar tightened so much he couldn't breathe.

'Come on, Grandpa would want this.' At the magic word from the little one, he crept forward, hunched low, ears twitching, eyes swinging – down a long passage, chairs along each side. He resisted the urge to growl but whined instead – a soft whine of fear. He didn't like this place. Danger lurked. He quickened his step, slunk against the familiar legs of the little one and trotted next to her feet. They paused at a door. The door opened.

Boy sniffed, yipped and his tail whipped from side to side so hard his backside followed. His feet scrabbled at the ground, trying to find traction on the slippery floor. He couldn't help the excited leak before he took off and leapt – up – onto the bed where he licked the beloved face. A big familiar hand crept under his collar and scritchd. Long splayed fingers ran down his spine to ease the ache. Hands came either side of his face and rubbed. He spread his lips in a smile of joy.

'Hey, Boy. What's this I hear about you not eating?'

Boy nosed into the chest, sniffed and licked, absorbing the aroma and taste. He lay along the legs, dropped his head on his front paws and stared. Grandpa.