

The Hunting Dog
When Nikki met Snooper
a short story by rita monette

“Got me a fine hunting dog,” Papa announced as he burst through the screen door, letting it slam behind him. We lived in a houseboat that sat in a small bayou in Pierre Part, Louisiana, on account of Papa being a fisherman and needing to move around a lot.

“What kind of dog?” Mama stirred the iron pot on the kerosene stove.

“A beagle. He’s a young one, but Mr. Lowry said he’s from a good blood line and already trained.”

It was 1952, and I was only six at the time, but the word *dog* caught in my ears like a catfish on a hook. Nothing else he said mattered, especially the part about it being a hunting dog.

“Where is he?” I shouted as I ran to meet him.

“Slow down Tadpole.” He kicked off his boots and picked up his cup of coffee mama had set on the kitchen table.

Papa had called me Tadpole every since I could remember, but Mama called me by my rightful name, which was Nikki...Nikki Landry to be exact.

"He's in a cage. You can't let a good hunter like that run loose. He's liable to get a hint of a rabbit and take right on off."

“I want to see him.” I jumped up and down. “Is it a boy dog or a girl?”

“It’s a he,” Papa said then took a sip of his steaming drink.

I ran out the door and crawled into the rusty bed of Papa’s old pick-up truck, where a small crate sat.

The dog put his nose to the wire cage and whined. I opened the little door, and he scooted to the back of the pen. I dragged him through the opening and squeezed him against me.

“You are the prettiest dog I ever did see,” I told him, while passing my hand over the big bump on his head.

He stuck his nose up to my shirt and sniffed, then he put his nose in the pocket of my worn overalls and sniffed again.

I giggled. “I don’t have any snacks in there, fella, but you sure are a snoop. I think I’ll name you Snooper. Do you like that name?” I hugged him tight one more time. He didn’t seem to mind it at all.

“Nikki, don’t mess with the dog,” Papa yelled from the doorway.

“I ain’t messing with him Papa, I’m just lovin’ on him.”

“You don’t love on a hunting dog. He has to stay disciplined. He’s been trained to track and hunt.”

“Can he stay in my room?” I asked. “He doesn’t like it in the cage.”

Papa walked over to the truck, took the dog from me, and put him back into his crate. “I’m going to build him a bigger cage tomorrow, and no, you can’t keep him inside. Your Mama would be fit to be tied.” He lifted me out of the back and plopped me on the ground.

My face twisted up into a pout, and I folded my arms across my chest. Then I stomped one bare foot on the hard clay.

Papa turned and walked away, shaking his head.

Hmph. That always worked before to get what I wanted. Papa seemed more interested in having a hunting dog than anything I wanted. I chased behind him toward the dock and followed him inside.

“I’m taking him out first thing in the morning to see what he can do,” Papa said as we sat down to a supper of gumbo and rice and potato salad.

“Can I go?” I asked.

“No, you can’t go hunting,” Mama said. “You’re not old enough.”

“I am too,” I blubbered to myself. “I even have my own gun.”

Papa had gotten me a BB gun for Christmas last year, but he said I couldn’t use it until I was six.

Now I’m six and he hasn’t taken me hunting yet. It’s all Mama’s fault. She says Papa is trying to make me into a tomboy ’cause he wanted a boy when I was born. But I reckon girls can hunt and fish just as good as boys can.

After supper, I went to my room and took out my drawing book and drew pictures of Snooper and me chasing a rabbit through the woods.

The next morning, after breakfast, I watched from the deck while Papa drove off with Snooper in the cage in the back of his truck. I stood there watching until he was out of sight, then ran back into the house.

“Mama, Can I go play with Lydia? I want to tell her ’bout my new dog.”

Lydia was my best friend in the whole wide world. She lived in a regular house down the road apiece. She was in my first grade class and didn’t even make fun of me for not wearing dresses like the other girls. Her daddy built her a tree house in their yard, and that’s where we shared all our secrets and kept our treasures.

“Don’t be getting attached to that dog, Nikki,” Mama said as she cleaned up the breakfast dishes. “You can’t make a pet out of a hunting dog.”

I put my hands on my hips. “I am already attached to him.”

Mama smiled and shook her head. “Go play with Lydia.”

Me and Lydia sat in her tree house and talked about her cat and my dog until I heard Papa driving up the gravel road. I ran to meet him as fast as I could. I took a quick gander into the back of his truck, then followed him inside where mama had lunch on the table. I had some more begging to do.

“I’m heading back to old man Lowry’s first thing in the morning,” Papa said before I could even open my mouth.

“Ain’t that the man you got the dog from?” Mama set a glass of milk in front of me.

“That old coot sold me a bum dog,” he said.

“A bum dog?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“Took him out this morning and all he did was lay on the ground,” he said. “Woods full of rabbits and coons, and he just laid there.”

“Maybe he didn’t feel like hunting today,” I said.

“Dog’s no good I tell you.” Papa took a big bite of fried chicken, then continued to talk with his mouth full. “He’s going back tomorrow.”

“No!” I jumped and ran outside and to the cage in the back of Papa’s truck.

The dog sat crouched in the crate.

I opened the door and reached inside.

The brown and black and white dog licked my hand. Then he scooted toward me and stuck his cold nose to my face.

I giggled. “You’re not a *bum* dog,” I said. “You’re a good dog. And I’m keeping you.” I put my arms around him and carried him up the pier and to the deck.

“Nikki,” Mama shouted as she opened the screen door to meet me.

“Where are you going with that dog?”

“I’m keeping him,” I said.

Papa jumped up and stood next to Mama. “No you’re not. I’m getting my money back for that no-count dog.” He stepped outside, took Snooper from me, then carried him back to the truck.

I ran up behind him and stuck out my lower lip. “His name is Snooper and he ain’t no-count.”

Papa glanced at me, and his wrinkled forehead smoothed out a bit. He chuckled, then his frown came back. “Tadpole, you can’t have the dog and that’s final.” He grabbed my hand and led me back to the house and the table.

I flopped down into the chair, but I wasn’t hungry. I looked sideways at Mama. “What if Mama says I can?”

Papa kept eating.

Mama kept eating too.

I glanced from one to the other for a sign of caving in.

“You can’t have a critter in the house,” she said without looking up.

“With the baby on the way and all.”

I blinked. “What baby?”

Papa stopped eating. “A baby?”

“Yes, we should have it by Fall.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?” I asked.

Mama laughed. “We don’t know yet.”

“I hope it’s a girl,” I said. “But why can’t we have a dog and a baby too?”

“This place is too small,” Mama said. “If you do keep him he’ll have to stay outside.”

“I can keep him!” I jumped up and ran for the door.

“I didn’t say you could keep him!” Papa yelled at my back as the screen door slammed behind me.

“That girl,” I heard Papa say.

“She’s of your making,” Mama said.

I carried Snooper to the door and put my nose against the screen. “Can he stay inside until Papa builds him a bigger pen? That cage is way too small.”

“Good grief, Nikki,” Mama said. “You sure are persistent.”

“I am not,” I said. “I took a bath yesterday.”

Papa laughed out loud. “Hard headed, Nikki. Your mama means you are hard headed.”

“Well can he or not?” I asked.

Mama put her head into her hands. “Just until Papa builds him a pen. And only until then. He has to be out by the time the baby comes.”

I opened the door and set Snooper down on the floor. “You’ll be sleeping in my room, Snoop.” I looked up at Papa and Mama. “For awhile anyway.”

I reached into my plate and grabbed a piece of food and handed it to him. He gobbled it up real fast. He must have been starved.

“And no feeding him from the table,” Papa said. “There’s some dog food out in the truck.”

“And you are responsible for any mess he makes, young lady,” Mama said.

“Yes ma’am!” I sat on the floor and put my arms around my new dog. “You won’t even know he’s around.”

That was four years ago.

My baby brother, Jesse, was born in November, and Snooper still sleeps with me. That is...when he's not sleeping on the floor, or the deck, or the grass. He just likes to sleep...unless he's helping me solve legends that is.

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If you enjoyed this short story about Nikki and Snooper, and would like to follow them in their swamp adventures, please look for the Nikki Landry Swamp Legends series:

- 1- The Legend of Ghost Dog Island
- 2- The Curse at Pirate's Cove
- 3- The Secret in Mossy Swamp: Legend of the Rougarou

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