



WALTER HITCHCOCK

ON HAVING A DAD (AND A DOG)

WHEN YOUR INTERVIEW subject is eight years old, you naturally have to wait for him while he finishes his chores. Walter's family have been protective of him in the aftermath of the excitement with *Schturming*. Despite the fact that he was one of only three "Groundspeople" (if you count the recently disgraced former sheriff, Bill Campbell) to ever set foot in *Schturming* while it was in the air, *and* the fact that he piloted himself and Jael Elenava to safety in a rickety JN-4D biplane, he hasn't been allowed to provide more than a brief quote to any of the papers. I guess the fact that his dog Taos warmed right up to me is why I get to be the exception.

I wait for him on the front steps of the Carpenters' porch as he and Taos run up. Halfway between the barn and the house, he sees me and slows up. He smiles, his expression somewhere in between excitement and bashfulness. His aunt, Nan Carpenter, has already warned me he's still not exactly talkative.

Fortunately, Taos remembers me and practically jumps into my lap, licking my nose. I rub his ears and smile at Walter as he comes to sit beside me on the step.

So Taos kind of seems more your dog and than Hitch's now, doesn't he?

[He shrugs, thinks a moment, then nods—smiling all the while.]

Speaking of Hitch, he's your dad, isn't he?

[That gets a full-fledged grin. His eyes sparkle. He nods adamantly.]

That must have surprised you, didn't it?

[Another moment of thought, then a nod.]

What did you feel like when you found out?

Well. [That first word comes out a little hesitantly, like he's maybe not sure his voice is always going to work on the first try.] It felt like the best kind of surprise, like something you always wanted, but never really even knew you wanted. [He raises both eyebrows, questioningly, as if wondering if that makes sense.]

Did you ever wonder why nobody told you or Hitch before?

They did it because they thought it was best. Jael says that's how you know somebody loves you, when they do what they think is best, even if it's hard.

And do you think it was the best thing they could have done?

Yes. [He looks at me with wide-eyed innocence.] I wouldn't have had any place to live if they had told me *before* I met Hitch.

But I see you're still living here with Nan and Byron. Why is that?

It's not for always. Mama Nan says it's just for a while longer, until Hitch has everything all set.

Will you miss living here?

[Another long thought.] Yes. But I will not live far away. I will see everyone maybe every day.

What about Jael? I know you like her a lot. Now that you have Hitch for a new dad, do you think you might like her for a new mom sometime?

[His eyebrows go all the way up, a little surprised, but also clearly delighted.] But she would have to marry Hitch, of

course. Otherwise, she's still just Jael. She can't be related to us.

Sounds sensible to me. So, just one more question for you. What do you think you'd like to be when you grow up?

[He looks at me as if I am a very stupid grown-up.] I'm going to be a pilot just like Hitch.

Oh, yes, of course you are.