



GOLD

★ “Action-packed, highly suspenseful, and deeply moving. Perfect.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

# GOOD DOG



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THE HONEST  
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**GOOD  
DOG**



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SCHOLASTIC PRESS /  
NEW YORK

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ISBN 978-1-338-52875-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1     19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40  
This edition first printing 2019

Book design by Nina Goffi

To all the good dogs I've been lucky to know.  
Maggie, Jake, Corona, Annie, Tommy, Sophie, and Odie:  
This one's for you.



# CHAPTER ONE

Brodie didn't remember the exact moment that he died. But he did remember the exact moment that he woke up afterward.

When he woke up, he was already running.

The grass was wet under his paws. It felt cool and clean and new. Like morning.

The muscles in his legs flexed and stretched and bounded. They were strong. They were *fast*.

His tongue flopped as he gulped mouthfuls of sweet air.

He barked, a free and wild bark, up at the blue skies above him. It was a *yes* bark, a *hooray* bark.

He wasn't being chased. He wasn't afraid. Or tired. Or hungry. Or hurting.

He was . . . *happy*.

The word floated into his head and stayed there.

*Happy*.

It was his very first word. Just like that, he had it, in his head, and he *knew* it. He knew what it meant. He knew what it felt like. The word sizzled in his head like a piece of hot-from-the-pan salty bacon in his mouth.

*Happy*.

His tail was all wag.

*Tail*. That word was next. Then, *wag*. And right after it: *running*.

He barked again, a *happy* bark, loud and joyful.

And then another bark answered him.

He turned his head and saw a dog, running beside him. She was long and lean, with short brown fur the color of good wet mud. *Dog*. That was an important word, he knew. It was *him*. He was *dog*. And then: *mud*. Yes. That was a truly wonderful word. *Mud!* That word made him so happy that he barked again, a high playful *yip*. He felt the word *mud* in his head, sloppy and slurpy and squishy, and he barked out how much he liked that word.

The other dog barked back.

She was matching him stride for stride, her ears bouncing, her eyes shining. Everything he saw put new words into his head: *Eyes*. *Ears*. *Shining*.

She stretched out her long legs and got her nose just ahead of Brodie's.

*Play!* The word shouted itself into his understanding.

He pushed his muscles harder and added length to his strides, as he added two words to his growing collection: *race* and *faster!*

Brodie turned his eyes forward and the world filled in around him. When he'd woken, it had been only the grass under his paws and the sky above his head and then *her*. But now, like a fog was blowing away, he saw a great green field stretching down before him to a river, blue and sparkling. Here and there were clumps of trees and bushes. And all around him and in front of him and beside him were *dogs*. Dogs running. Dogs jumping. Dogs chasing and barking.

Dogs rolling in that sweet soft grass. Dogs splashing in the river.

They were all sizes. All colors.

And all the tails were wagging. And not a single lip was pulled up in a snarl.

Happy.

All those dogs, each one of those wonderful running splashing playing barking dogs, were *happy*.

Brodie and the brown dog raced down a gentle slope and toward the river, taking turns being first. His charging legs ate at the ground with great galloping bites. His muscles were a celebration as they churned. *Running!*

They thundered down the hill and splashed through the muddy shallows of the river, romping and kicking up the water between them.

And as they ran, more and more words rose up and took root in Brodie's mind. *Tree, bush, teeth, leaf, after, before, rocks, sunshine, claw, water, follow, splash, sand. Friend.*

They ran fast, and faster, and fastest, and his legs never got tired. His lungs sucked at the air but never came up short of breath.

Finally satisfied, they flopped down together on the edge of the river, half in the cool flowing water and half on the grass of the shore.

Brodie looked down at the smooth blue water and saw a dog looking back up at him. *Reflection*, his mind whispered. *You*. He saw short white fur, with a dark black spot around

one eye. He saw one ear that perked up, another that flopped forward. A wet, black nose. *Me*, he thought.

The brown dog lapped at the water, drinking in big, gulping swallows, then looked up at him with smiling eyes and a dripping snout.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” she asked.

Brodie cocked his head. His tail stopped wagging. Her question startled him.

It wasn’t the words. Yes, they were new, but as soon as she asked them they were there, in his head, and he knew them.

No. It was her voice. It didn’t come from her mouth. She didn’t bark her words, or growl them.

The words—and her voice—were just there, in his head.

“Oh, you *are* new!” she said in her soundless voice that he could nevertheless hear. “You’re still getting your words and everything!”

For the first time since waking, Brodie felt something less than happy.

He felt confused. Scared, even.

His tail slowed, then drooped.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said, straightening up. “Really. It’s all good.” She stepped forward and nudged her chin under his nose, licked at the corners of Brodie’s mouth. She was telling the truth.

She was a good dog. Believe me, she was.

“Here,” she said. “Start with this: What’s your name?”

*Name*, Brodie thought. He rolled the word around in his head like a toy with a squeak hidden inside. *My name is me*, he thought. *It is what I'm . . . called.*

He shook his head. He searched through the clouds in his heart, looking, trying to remember.

But Brodie? He couldn't remember anything. Not one thing. A whimper grew in his throat.

Then, out of nowhere, it came to him. Brodie's name floated right into his mind and settled there like a drifting feather. Almost like an angel put it there.

It was a name he had never said, because he had never talked. But it was a name that he'd heard a hundred, a thousand, a million times. All at once he could hear it. He could hear it being called, and laughed, and whispered. He could hear it being shouted.

"Brodie," he said, and his answer did not come up from his throat or out through his mouth but, somehow, just from his thoughts to hers. Just like her words had come to him.

"Brodie," she said, and wagged her tail harder. "Hi, Brodie. My name is Sasha."

"Sasha," Brodie said to her, and then he barked with his mouth and it was another happy bark.

He slurped at the water with a thirsty tongue, scattering his reflection into ripples. The water was sweet, and pure, and cold enough to give his mouth happy shivers. And another word appeared to him: *perfect*.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Sasha said.

“What, the water?”

She showed her teeth, happy, and raised her nose to sniff at the sunshine and the air.

“All of it.”

He looked around. At the sun-sparkled water. The green grass. At all those dogs, all those wagging tails.

“Yes,” he answered. But he kept looking. As far as he could see. He looked left and he looked right. He turned his head to look at all that bright world around him.

Brodie was looking for something. Something that was . . . missing. He didn’t know what it was. But he knew without a doubt that it wasn’t there.

Because Brodie? He had one of those hearts that doesn’t forget for long.

“But,” he started to say, but he had no words to finish. He cocked his head, confused.

“Yes,” Sasha said, and her voice was soft, serious, understanding. “I know. You’re trying to remember. And you will,” she added, reaching to tap at Brodie’s paw with her own. “Don’t worry. You’ll remember.”

“Remember what?” he asked her.

“Before, Brodie. You’ll remember Before here. You’ll remember . . . your life.”

*Life.* The word rang in his head and hung there. There were layers to that word, threads that ran through it, light that sparkled within it. And shadows around all its edges. It was a heavy, warm, humming word.

“My life,” he repeated. “My life Before. Before I . . .” He closed his eyes, his mind chasing at the words and understanding that he couldn’t quite grip, like a ball rolling always just out of reach of his teeth.

“Before you . . . *died*,” Sasha said, her voice softer than puppy fur. “Before you died *there*, and came here.” She wiggled closer to him, so that their paws were touching. “You’re dead, Brodie.”

*Dead.*

*Dead.* He knew it. Pictures flashed in his mind.

A squirrel, still and stiff, its eyes dull and open, lying in brown leaves.

A bird, its body broken, wings crooked and crushed.

A cat on the side of the road, mouth open but silent, its neck twisted.

*Dead.* Brodie knew *dead*.

His breath came fast. His ears went down flat. He whined, high and begging.

Sasha scooted even closer, nuzzling at his neck.

“But it’s okay, Brodie. Really, it is. Because dying there just means being alive here, and here is *wonderful*.”

“There? Dying *there*?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember? Don’t you remember the world, the world with night and hunger and people? Don’t you remember *people*, Brodie?”

*People.*

He did remember.

Two-legged, tall, the bringers of food. Fingers scratching

behind ears. Petting and praising and scolding. Faces and hands and shoes and smiles and mouths making sounds, sounds that Brodie now knew were *words*.

*People.*

Remembering them made his stomach twist and his tail wag at the same time. *People.* People were good. People were bad. People were terrible. People were wonderful. He remembered all those things at once, and they were all true.

Flashes of memory, dim and blurry and dark and confused, blinked and disappeared in his mind. Voices. Smells.

Brodie jumped to his feet. He turned in a circle. He whined and scratched at the ground, took a few steps, turned and came back.

“It’s all right, Brodie,” Sasha said, standing up and pressing her shoulder against his. “You can remember later. There is nothing to be afraid of. Not ever again. Let’s run. Let’s play. Come on.” She turned and trotted off, looking back over her shoulder for him to follow.

But Brodie didn’t follow her, and she came back to where he stood.

He was almost, almost, almost remembering. But the remembering didn’t feel all right. It didn’t feel easy. There were shadows. And shouts. And a feeling of leaving. Of leaving when he shouldn’t have, leaving when he didn’t want to.

And then, in pieces and bits and little broken half pictures, some memories broke through.

A house, with long grass and a falling-down fence and a car in the driveway that never moved.

A park. A park with swings that people rode on, back and forth, up and down. And metal slides they whooshed down with laughing voices. A park with tables you could hide under to be safe from monsters.

A room with closed curtains and a couch with too many smells and a blaring bright box full of pictures that moved and sounds that made no sense, always blaring, night and day.

And in all those splintered half memories, there was *happy* and there was *sad* and there was *scared*, all tangled and tied up together. But it was all so murky.

And right behind it all, lurking just beyond where he could see, was one growling monster of a memory. He could feel it. It had teeth and claws and a shadow, and Brodie whined just from feeling it. But he couldn't see it.

“Brodie?”

He closed his eyes, reaching and searching for more memories of that other world, something clear and strong, something to explain the pain in his chest and the desperate urgency that made the hair on his neck stand straight, like a fight was coming and he was in it.

It was important. Somehow, deeply, Brodie knew that. Remembering it was absolutely the most important thing in any world. There was something he *needed* to remember more than he'd ever needed anything.

And then he did.

A new word came to him.

It flashed like fire into his thoughts. Into his soul. And his heart went still.

*Boy.*

Boy.

And then: *my* boy.

And with the words came the memory of a face. A face he could see smiling, and crying, and angry, and sleeping, and flinching, and pulling in close to kiss his own. And then a voice. A voice laughing, and singing, and whispering, and shouting. And then a smell, a smell of skin and sweat and clothes and soap and food and boyiness that all added up to one beautiful, perfect boy. *My boy.* And Brodie's heart soared and it filled and it emptied and it exploded and it sang and it ached and bled and pounded and stopped, all at once.

*My boy.*

Something tickled at the very edges of his thoughts. An echo of a memory, of something he did with that boy that he loved. A going away, and a coming back. Away. And Back. Those words came to Brodie, but also their *meaning*, their *feeling*.

Brodie held on to the words strong, not letting go, chasing the memory behind them. And then, like a splash of water, the memory was there. It flooded his mind, soaked his soul in feeling.

*Sunlight. But fading, sideways, end-of-the-day sunlight. He was running, paws drumming on dirt and grass. Away from his boy. And then Back. Away. And Back.*

*The boy was throwing something. Round, yellow, fuzzy. Ball. It was slobbery and warm from his mouth, stained and gritty from the muddy grass. He sprinted after it and snatched it up, again and again and again, his lungs heaving and his legs burning but his heart happy, happy, happy.*

*He dropped the ball at the boy's feet for the hundredth time, his tongue hanging out through his exhausted panting. The boy was smiling his wide smile that Brodie knew, and Brodie loved.*

*At the edge of the park, a streetlight buzzed on.*

*The boy looked up and eyed the darkening skies, the coming night. His smile faltered. A thin line of worry knotted his brow.*

*"It's time to go home, Brodie," he said. He looked again at the growing darkness, then back over his shoulder. Back toward the home they would return to. He swallowed, and Brodie saw his Adam's apple bob.*

*He looked back to Brodie and propped a smile up onto his face. It wasn't as wide as before, as easy. As real.*

*"Nah," he said, shaking his head. "Let's do a few more throws, okay, Brodie?" Brodie had wagged his agreement. The boy had picked up the ball. He'd looked over his shoulder one more time, then back to Brodie. That smaller smile, sad and serious, was still on his face. That smile? That smile was just for Brodie. "Just a little longer, boy."*

*And he'd reared back and thrown the ball, a mighty arcing throw. And Brodie had rocketed after it.*

*And his boy, that sad and serious boy standing in the shadows, had cheered him on.*

*"Go, Brodie, go! Go, Brodie! Go!"*

*Brodie's legs had churned as fast as he could make them. He was pure determination. He was love with legs. He would chase that ball his boy had thrown. He would catch it. And he would bring it back, through any shadows and through all darkness, to his boy.*

*Brodie had flown.*

*Away. And Back.*

Brodie stood, tingling and breathless with the memory of his boy, of being with his boy.

But now? Now Brodie was Away from his boy. Far away. The distance and the separation pulled at him like a tugged leash, calling him back.

And when Brodie remembered him, when he remembered his boy, that darker monster of a memory growled louder and grew bigger and the coldness of its shadows made all his body shiver.

*Danger.* The word stabbed into him. Then: *need.* And then: *help.*

Across that gulf between whatever world he was in and that other world that he could barely remember, he could taste and smell and feel the words *boy* and *need* and *help* and *danger.*

He opened his eyes. His tail was still. But his body shook.

Because his heart was telling him exactly what he needed to do.

And Brodie? Brodie was one of those wonderful souls who, when his heart told him to do something, he did it. Yes, he was.

Brodie looked at Sasha and he said the desperate, crazy, urgent truth that quivered alive in his hero's heart.

“I have to go back.”