

{ ONE }



As I sat in the sun on the wooden dock that jutted out into the pond, I knew this to be true: my name was Buddy, and I was a good dog.

The fur on my legs was as black as the rest of me, but down at my paws it had, over time, become tinged with white. I had lived a long and full life with a boy named Ethan, spending many lazy afternoons on this very dock, here on the Farm, enjoying a swim or barking at the ducks.

This was the second summer without Ethan. When he died I felt a pain inside me much sharper than any other I'd ever felt. Now the pain was less, more like a stomachache, but I still felt it all the time. Only sleep soothed it away—in my sleep, Ethan ran with me through my dreams.

I was an old dog and knew that someday soon a much deeper

sleep would come, as it had always come for me before. It came for me when I was named Toby, in my silly first life, when I had no real purpose but to play with other dogs. It came for me when I was named Bailey, when I first met my boy and loving him became my whole focus. It came for me when I was Ellie, when my job was to Work, to Find people, and to Save them. So when the deeper sleep came for me next, at the end of this life, as Buddy, I felt sure that I would not live again, that I had fulfilled my purpose and there was no reason for me to be a dog anymore. So whether it happened this summer or the next didn't matter. Ethan, loving Ethan, was my ultimate purpose, and I had done it as well as I could. I was a good dog.

And yet . . .

And yet as I sat there I was watching one of the many children from Ethan's family striding unsteadily toward the end of the dock. She hadn't been walking very long in her life, so every step was a wobble. She wore white puffy pants and a thin shirt. I pictured jumping in the water and pulling her to the surface by that shirt, and I let out a soft whimper.

The child's mother's name was Gloria. She was on the dock, too, lying motionless on a reclined chair with bits of vegetables placed on both of her eyes. Her hand had been holding a leash that went to the little girl's waist, but the leash had gone slack in Gloria's hand and was now trailing behind the child as she headed for the end of the dock and the pond beyond.

As a puppy my reaction to a limp leash was always to explore, and this little girl's response was just the same.

This was Gloria's second visit to the Farm. The previous time was in the wintertime. Ethan had still been alive, and Gloria had handed the baby to him and called him Grandpa. After Gloria left, Ethan and his mate, Hannah, said the name Gloria out loud

many times over many nights, with sad emotions underlying their conversations.

They also said the name Clarity. The baby's name was Clarity, though often Gloria called her Clarity June.

I felt certain that Ethan would want me to watch over Clarity, who always seemed to be getting into trouble. Just the other day I had sat by miserably while the baby crawled under the bird feeder and stuffed handfuls of fallen seeds into her mouth. It was one of my main jobs to terrorize the squirrels when they did this, but I wasn't sure what to do when I caught Clarity at it, even though I knew that for a child to eat birdseed was probably against a rule. And I was right about that—when I finally barked a few times, Gloria sat up from where she had been lying face-down on a towel and she was very angry.

I glanced at Gloria now. Should I bark? Children often jumped into the pond but never when they were as young as this little girl, though the way she was going it seemed inevitable she was going to get wet. Babies were only allowed in the water with adults holding them. I looked back toward the house. Hannah was outside, kneeling and playing with flowers up by the driveway, too far away to do anything if Clarity fell in the pond. I was pretty sure Hannah would want me to watch over Clarity, too. It was my new purpose.

Clarity was getting closer to the edge. I let out another whimper, a louder one.

"Hush," Gloria said without opening her eyes. I didn't understand the word, but the sharp tone was unmistakable.

Clarity didn't even look back. When she got to the edge of the dock, she teetered briefly and then fell straight off the front.

My nails dug into the wood as I lunged off the side of the dock and into the warm water. Clarity bobbed up a little, her little limbs

working frantically, but her head was mostly below the pond's surface. I reached her in seconds, my teeth gently snagging the shirt. I pulled her head out of the water and turned for the shore.

Gloria started screaming, "Oh my God! Clarity!" She ran around and waded into the water just as my feet found purchase on the mucky bottom of the pond.

"Bad dog!" she shouted as she snatched Clarity from me. "You are a bad, bad dog!"

I hung my head in shame.

"Gloria! What happened?" Hannah shouted as she came running up.

"Your dog just knocked the baby into the water. Clarity could have drowned! I had to jump in to save her and now I'm all wet!"

The distress in everyone's voices was very plain.

"Buddy?" Hannah said.

I didn't dare look at her. I wagged my tail a little and it splashed the surface of the pond. I didn't know what I had done wrong, but clearly I had upset everyone.

Everyone, that is, except Clarity. I risked a glance at her because I could sense her straining in her mother's arms, her little hands reaching out toward me.

"Bubby," Clarity gurgled. Her pants were streaming water down her legs. I dropped my eyes again.

Gloria blew out some air. "Hannah, would you mind taking the baby? Her diaper's all wet and I want to lie on my stomach so I'll be the same color on both sides."

"Sure," Hannah said. "Come on, Buddy."

Thankful we had *that* over with, I leaped out of the water, wagging my tail.

"Don't shake!" Gloria said, dancing away from me on the dock. I heard the warning in her voice, though I wasn't sure what she

was trying to tell me. I shook myself from head to tail, ridding my fur of the pond water.

“Yuck, no!” Gloria shrieked. She sternly lectured me, pointing her finger and using a whole string of words I didn’t understand, though she did say “bad dog” a few times. I lowered my head, blinking.

“Buddy, come,” Hannah said. Her tone was gentle. I followed obediently as we went up to the house.

“Bubby,” Clarity kept saying. “Bubby.”

As we reached the front steps to the house I paused because of the odd taste in my mouth. I’d had it before—it reminded me of the time when I pulled a thin metal pan out of the trash that was lined with sweet flavors and, after licking it clean, experimentally crunched up the pan itself. The metal tasted bad, so I spat it out. This particular taste, though, I couldn’t spit out—it sat on my tongue and invaded my nose.

“Buddy?” Hannah stood on the front porch, regarding me. “What’s wrong?”

I wagged and bounded up onto the porch, leading the way into the house when she opened the door.

It was always fun to walk through that door, whether it was going inside or heading out, because it meant we were doing something new.

Later I stood guard while Hannah and Clarity played a new game. Hannah would carry Clarity to the top of the stairs and then watch while Clarity turned around and went down the stairs in a backward crawl. Usually Hannah would say “Good girl,” and I would wag my tail. When Clarity got to the bottom step I would lick her in the face and she would giggle; then she would raise her arms to Hannah. “Mo’,” she would beg. “Mo’, Gramma. Mo’.” When she said this Hannah would lift her up

and kiss her and then take her to the top of the stairs to do it again.

When I felt satisfied they were safe I went to my favorite spot in the living room, circled, and lay down with a sigh. A few minutes later Clarity came over to me, dragging her blanket. She had the thing in her mouth that she chewed on but never swallowed.

“Bubby,” she said. She dropped to all fours and crawled the last few feet to me and curled up against me, pulling her blanket against herself with her tiny hands. I sniffed her head—nobody in the world smelled like Clarity. Her scent filled me with a warm feeling that nudged me into a nap.

We were still sleeping when I heard the screen door shut and Gloria come into the room. “Oh, Clarity!” she said. I blearily opened my eyes as Gloria reached down and snatched the little girl away from where she’d been sleeping. The place where Clarity had been snuggled against me felt oddly cold and empty without her there.

Hannah came out from the kitchen. “I’m making cookies,” she said.

I eased myself to my feet because I knew *that* word. Wagging, I went over to sniff Hannah’s sweet-smelling hands.

“The baby was sleeping right up against the dog,” Gloria said. I heard the word “dog” and, as usual, it sounded as if I had made her mad. I wondered if this meant no cookies.

“That’s right,” Hannah said. “Clarity cuddled right up against him.”

“I would just prefer it if my child not sleep next to a dog. If Buddy had rolled over, Clarity might have been crushed.”

I watched Hannah for some clue as to why my name had just been mentioned. She put her hand to her mouth. “I . . . all right, of course. I won’t let it happen again.”

Clarity was still asleep, her little head against Gloria’s shoul-

der. Gloria handed the baby to Hannah, then sat with a sigh at the kitchen table. "Is there any ice tea?" she asked.

"I'll get you some." Holding the baby, Hannah went to the kitchen counter. She got things out, but I didn't see any cookies, though I could sure smell them, sugary and warm in the air. I sat obediently, waiting.

"I just think it would be better if, when Clarity and I are visiting, the dog stays out in the yard," Gloria said. She took a sip of her drink as Hannah joined her at the table. Clarity was stirring and Hannah patted her a little.

"Oh, I couldn't do that."

I lay down with a groan, wondering why people always did this: talked about cookies but didn't give any to a deserving dog.

"Buddy is part of the family," Hannah said. I drowsily raised my head to look at her, but still no cookies. "Did I ever tell you how he brought me and Ethan together?"

I froze at the word "Ethan." His name was mentioned less and less often now in this house, but I couldn't hear it pronounced without thinking about his smell or his hand in my fur.

"A *dog* brought you together?" Gloria replied.

"Ethan and I had known each other as children. We were high school sweethearts, but after the fire—you know about the fire that crippled his leg?"

"Your son may have mentioned it; I don't know. Mostly Henry just talked about himself. You know how men are."

"Okay, after the fire, Ethan . . . there was just something dark inside him, and I wasn't old enough, mature enough I mean, to help him deal with it."

I sensed something like sadness inside Hannah and I knew she needed me. Still under the table, I went over and put my

head in her lap. She stroked my fur gently, Clarity's bare feet hanging limply above me.

"Ethan had a dog then, too, a wonderful golden retriever named Bailey. That was his doodle dog."

I wagged at hearing the name Bailey and "doodle dog." Whenever Ethan called me doodle dog his heart would be full of love and he would hug me and I would kiss his face. I missed Ethan more powerfully in that moment than I had in a long time—and I could feel Hannah missing him, too. I kissed the hand petting me, and Hannah lowered her eyes and smiled at my head in her lap.

"You're a good dog, too, Buddy," Hannah said. I wagged some more at being called a good dog. It seemed very possible that this whole conversation could lead to cookies after all.

"Anyway, we went our separate ways. I met Matthew, we were married, and I had Rachel and Cindy, and, of course, Henry."

Gloria made a small noise, but I didn't look at her. Hannah was still stroking my head and I didn't want her to stop.

"After Matthew died I decided I missed my kids and I moved back to town. And one day, when Buddy was probably a year old, he was in the dog park and he followed Rachel home. He had a tag on his collar, and when I looked at it—well, I was pretty surprised to see Ethan's name on it. But not half as surprised as Ethan was when I phoned him! I had been thinking of dropping by to see him, but probably wasn't ever going to do it. Silly, but things hadn't ended well between us and even though it was a long time ago, I felt . . . I don't know, shy, maybe."

"Tell me about bad breakups. I've had plenty of those, for sure." Gloria snorted.

"Yes, I'm sure," Hannah said. She looked down in her lap and smiled at me. "When I saw Ethan, after all those years, it was as if we had never been apart. We belonged together. I wouldn't say this



to my kids, of course, but Ethan was my one, my soul mate. And yet if it hadn't been for Buddy, we might never have even met again."

I loved hearing my name and Ethan's name spoken out loud, and I felt Hannah's love and her sadness as she smiled at me.

"Oh, look at the time," Hannah said then. She stood and handed Clarity to Gloria. The baby stirred, poking a tiny fist in the air and yawning. With a clatter the cookies came out of the hot oven and there was a wave of delicious smell, but Hannah didn't give me any.

As far as I was concerned, having cookies so tantalizingly close to my nose without being given a treat of any kind was the big tragedy of the day.

"I'll be gone for maybe an hour and a half," Hannah told Gloria. She reached up to where she kept some toys called keys and I heard the metallic jangling sound I associated with riding in the car. I watched alertly, torn between my desire for a car ride and my duty to stay by the cookies.

"You stay here, Buddy," Hannah said. "Oh, and Gloria, keep the door to the cellar closed. Clarity loves to climb down any set of stairs she can find and I had to put some rat poison out down there."

"Rats? There are rats?" Gloria said sharply. Clarity was fully awake now, struggling in her mother's arms.

"Yes. This is a farm. Sometimes we get rats. It's okay, Gloria. Just keep the door closed." I picked up a little anger in Hannah and watched her anxiously for signs of what was going on. As was typical in situations like this, though, the strong emotions I sensed were never explained—people are like that; they have complex feelings that are just too difficult for a dog to comprehend.

When she left, I followed Hannah out to her car. "No, you stay here, Buddy," she said. Her meaning was clear, particularly when she slid inside the car and shut the door on me, her keys clinking. I wagged, hoping she might change her mind, but once

the car was headed down the driveway I knew there would be no car ride for me that day.

I slipped back inside through the dog door. Clarity was in her special chair, the one with the tray in front of it. Gloria was hunched over, trying to spoon some food into Clarity's mouth, and Clarity was mostly spitting it back out. I'd tasted Clarity's food and didn't blame her one bit. Often Clarity was allowed to put small bits of food into her mouth with her own hands, but when it came to the really bad stuff her mother and Hannah still had to force it on her with a spoon.

"Bubby!" Clarity gurgled, slapping her hands against the tray in happiness. Some of the food splattered on Gloria's face and she stood up abruptly, making a harsh noise. She wiped her face with a towel and then glared at me. I lowered my eyes.

"I can't believe she just lets you wander around like you own the place," she muttered.

I never had any hope that Gloria would ever give me a cookie.

"Well, not while I'm in charge," she said. She regarded me silently for several seconds and then sniffed. "Okay. Come here!" she ordered.

I obediently followed her over to the cellar door. She opened it. "In you go. Go!"

I figured out what she wanted and went through the doorway. A small carpeted area at the top of the stairs was just big enough for me to turn around and look at her.

"You stay," she said, shutting the door. Instantly it was much darker.

The steps that led down were wooden and made a squeaking noise as I descended. I wasn't down in the cellar very often and could smell new and interesting things down there that I wanted to explore. Explore and maybe eat.