Boy Meets Dog #1

Marcia, Haley and Vin stood still, looking up. A white speck was sliding through the sky. It made circles around them in the air, growing gradually larger. Vin squinted his eyes and looked up at it, listening, but there was no sound coming from it. “It’s a plane,” Vin said. They continued watching and a moment later they heard the crash and squeal of the plane’s body plowing down into a line of distant trees. They felt the tremor of the violence in the ground beneath their feet. Then the awful noise stopped. For a moment there was no sound at all. Then gradually the buzzing of insects, the twittering and chirping of birds and the scuttling of small animals—the normal sounds of the field—resumed. The children stood still, staring.

“Come on,” Vin said. “We have to go. We have to report this.”

“But somebody might need help,” Marcia said.

“A plane just fell out of the sky. No one survived that,” Vin said. “There’s nothing we can do.”

The massive dog, who sat panting beside them, suddenly began to whine. They could barely see the wreckage through the thickness of the next copse of trees. The first whiff of smoke reached them. The dog stood up and started towards the woods and the wreckage, still whining. The girls started after the dog. Vin followed. Ahead, a plume of smoke rose up like a shaft out of the trees.

Inside the woods, a strip of trees and brush had been flattened. Both wings had broken off the small plane and the fuselage was half plowed into the ground against a really old, wide tree. Its door was open. The three of them stood staring at the wreckage. Marcia took a step forward but Vin put his hand on her arm. “No,” he said. “I’ll go.” His heart pounding, he walked a little closer to the wreckage. The smoke rose from somewhere near the front. He could see three bodies inside, all still fastened to their seats. All three looked dead. He backed away.

“We can’t do anything,” he said. “Come on. We have to get out here.”

Marcia nodded. She put her hand in Vin’s. The two turned to leave but Haley stood, stubbornly, staring at the crash. She had her hand on Riley’s collar and the dog continued to whine. One of the passengers in there was a boy. He looked older than her, younger than Vin. Marcia’s age, maybe. Marcia walked up to her and put her arm around her shoulders. “Come on, Haley. There’s nothing we can do.” Tears came into the little girl’s eyes. She tugged on the big dog’s collar. “Riley won’t leave,” she said.

“Yes he will,” Vin said. “Come here Riley. Come here!” The great dog turned his head towards Vin, but instead of going to him he tugged out of Haley’s grasp and loped off towards the wreckage. He put his two front paws tentatively inside the doorway of the plane and craned his neck, sniffing. The boy was seated nearest to the door, and
Riley pushed at his hand with his forehead, lifting it up and then letting it fall limply back down. He sniffed at the boy and licked him. He whined.

“Riley! Come here!” Vin called to him as he moved away from the plane. The dog was not following him. He turned back towards the wreckage, feeling suddenly frustrated and angry. The dog didn’t listen to him. He stayed with them more or less when they were all out walking together. But Vin could not control him. When the dog wanted to chase a rabbit, or stretch its legs, it did. And right now the dog wanted to check out the dead passengers on that plane. He had his great front paws up on the boy’s seat now, snuffling at his face. The thought of being so close to the dead boy made Vin feel kind of queasy. He reached for the dog’s thick collar and tugged backwards. Riley growled. “Riley! Come! Now!” But the dog lay down stubbornly across the dead boy’s feet. Vin stood, looking at him helplessly. He looked at the boy again. His chin was on his chest, and he was being held upright against his seat by a seat belt. His arms and legs were slack. Hesitantly, Vin reached out and touched him. He wasn’t cold.

He took a deep breath and put his hand on him again. This time he took the boy’s wrist in his fingers and held it lightly the way that his father, a doctor, had taught him to do. He held his breath for a moment. He shifted his fingers slightly, and waited again. It was hard to find a pulse, and what he did find was weak—but it was enough to know that the boy was still alive.

He reached down and patted the dog on the head. “Good boy, Riley!” Vin ran back to his sisters. “The boy’s alive,” he said. “We have to go get help.”
Boy Meets Dog #2

George’s father knew a man out in the country that had a kennel. “You can pick out one of the pups,” he told George. “But it’s going to be your dog. You are going to be responsible for it.” George nodded. He was excited about the dog. He was a lonely boy, and he didn’t always know how to get along well with other boys. He was sensitive, often misunderstood, and sometimes overcome by his strong emotions. Just a week before, he’d been in trouble at school for getting into a fight. “You have to be a calm, commanding presence to train a dog,” George’s father had said. “A dog will help you learn how to get along better with people.”

They parked near the chain link fence in front of the man’s dilapidated rancher. There were dozens of dogs inside, all ages, shapes and sizes. George stood gazing at them, waiting for some sign that a certain dog was meant for him. His attention was eventually drawn to one dog in particular. He was smaller than the other dogs, with a softer-shaped head. The other dogs were multi-colored and spotted, but this dog was a solid black. Where the others were square-jawed, this dog had an elongated snout and velvety jowls. He came up to the fence where George stood, his tail wagging so furiously that his nodding body seemed propelled by it. He whined, and barked, and lifted a large paw to bang on the fence. George took a step closer to him. He put his fingers out, tentatively. The dog licked at them through one of the diamond-shaped openings in the chain link. “What’s the matter?” George murmured to the dog. “Are you lonely? Do you want out of there, boy?”

In the center of the kennel, one of the other dogs, grey in the face with wild, grey eyebrows and a grey muzzle, shuffled slowly across the dirt enclosure towards George. The black dog who had been so effusively licking George’s fingers suddenly began to growl. George snatched his hand back in surprise. The dog’s velvety soft jowls curled up to reveal sharp, white canines. Tufts of hair on the back of his neck rose up into a mane and his entire body became rigid. George took a step backwards. The growl grew louder and higher in pitch and suddenly the black dog leapt at the older one with a snarl. George had been so fixated on the dog that he hadn’t seen his father’s friend step out of the wooden building and into the kennel yard. With a single motion, one of the man’s large hands shot out and grabbed the snarling black dog in midair and flung him across the kennel yard. He thudded against the chain link fence with a yelp right where George was standing.

“I’ve been afraid that was coming,” the man said. He looked at George. It was a long, appraising look. “You all right? He ain’t gonna hurt you.”

“What happened?” George said.

“Instinct is kicking in,” the man said. “He’s a year and a half old, and he’s starting to feel like fighting the other boys to be in charge. He’s the nicest dog in the world around people. He just doesn’t get along that well with his own kind.”

“I know how he feels,” George said. The black dog lay on his side against the fence, close to George’s feet. His large brown eyes looked up at the boy. It gave him a funny feeling. The dog was trying to communicate something. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew that it was true. George turned to his father. “I want this one,” he said. His father looked at his friend, who nodded his assent.
1. How does the boy meet the dog?

2. Who needs saving? Who saves who?

3. Do you think that the dog solves the boy’s problem? Why or why not?