

# Twice Bitten

By John Stark

**G**OLDIE HAD BEEN IN THE shelter for more than two months. Despite her runway looks—short golden coat, long snout, Cleopatra-lined eyes and athletic build—no one had adopted her. “She’s very sensitive and isn’t eating. If you don’t take her, she’s going to die soon,” a shelter volunteer told me.

The woman who surrendered Goldie told the shelter that the dog—who was six years old, weighed 80 pounds and was 75 percent Doberman—had bitten her infant son.

As I petted Goldie during our meet and greet, she couldn’t have been sweeter, even pulling her lips up in a submissive doggie smile. Since I’m single and have no kids, I decided to adopt Goldie. I liberated her on Bastille Day.

Knowing her bad shelter rap, I was careful not to let her near children. But as time went on, I began to let my guard down. She never seemed happier than when kids would approach her.

“So this is the dog who can’t be with kids?” people would say as Goldie licked their faces. “What gives?”

According to friends in the rescue community, people who bring dogs to shelters don’t always ’fess up to the fact that they just don’t want the responsibility of taking care of them, so they’ll say the dog is a biter. But biters rarely find new homes.

While rifling through a desk drawer last winter, I came upon Goldie’s adoption papers, which I had never carefully read. The words “Surrendered by” jumped out at me.

I rushed to my computer and Googled the woman’s name on the signature line. She was a professor of astronomy at a New England college. Her profile was



on Facebook. Her photograph showed her to be in her early 30s, petite, with dark hair.

But I knew that. Whenever Goldie sees a woman of that description, she starts yelping and trying to get to her.

For several days, I debated whether I should contact Goldie’s former owner. What would I say to her?

In the end, I just wanted her to know that the dog she gave away hadn’t disappeared into some black hole. Goldie had found a great home. So that’s what I emailed her. A week later, I got a reply. Nervously, I opened it: “I’m crying as I write this” were her first words. She apologized for taking so long to get back to me, but my message had been a lot for her to process. She told me of her and her husband’s love for Goldie. “We hiked and walked with her every day. She was a wonderful dog. Every day, we wonder how she is and if she is in a good place. We loved Goldie with all our hearts.”

She even volunteered an explanation for taking her to the shelter. After she had a baby, the family dynamics changed. “Goldie loved the baby, and would kiss him forever if allowed,” she wrote. But then, as the child became a toddler, “he was not the most gentle

petter or steady walker,” she confessed. Whenever the child came near Goldie, she would growl. “And I don’t blame her,” she wrote. But then Goldie bit the boy, breaking his skin. And shortly after that, she bit him again.

People who adopt shelter dogs usually have no clue about their past. I couldn’t wait to glean more information, such as when and where Goldie was born. “How happy and sad it makes me to hear your stories of Goldie,” the woman wrote after one of my emails. “Her muzzle is getting so gray,” she said after I sent her a photo of us together. “I love seeing that.”

One day I opened my email to find she had sent me Goldie’s baby picture. “I hope you enjoy it,” she wrote. Now it was my turn to cry.

Finally, I asked the woman if she’d like to see Goldie again. I was comfortable with that. After three years, I felt Goldie was secure in her new home. By now, the woman’s son would be older, steadier. Wouldn’t it be nice if Goldie could stay with her former owners when I traveled? We didn’t live that far from each other. Maybe we’d all be one big, happy, dog-sharing, extended family.

But there’s been no reply, and almost a year has gone by.

Has she finally let Goldie go?

The other morning, Goldie and I had barely made it out of our front door to go for a walk when she starting yelping. Before I could restrain her, she made a mad dash off the porch and down the steps to where a woman—petite, dark-haired—was getting into a Nissan. Goldie was jumping all over her, trying to climb into the car. “Sorry,” I said, “She thinks you’re someone else.” **B**