

CYNTHIA KADOHATA

A story about a heroic dog and
his best friend, from the
Newbery Medal-winning
author of *KIRA-KIRA*



CRACKER!

THE BEST DOG IN VIETNAM

One

GRRRR! FOR I AM THE ALL-POWERFUL CRACKER! Cracker spotted a bird carcass lying in the alley. She picked it up between the tips of her front teeth and flipped it into the air, growling as it sailed above her. When it plopped down, she pushed at it with a paw. She growled more, then leaned the side of her head on the asphalt, staring right into its face. It might have been dead for a week, but who cared? She would kill it again. That's how powerful she was. She hopped to her feet to attack it—and spotted a mouse! Alive! This was for real! She took off.

Somewhere in the background she heard a voice calling, “Cracker! Cra-a-a-acker! Cracker!”

The mouse had a head start, but she would catch him. She bounded forward and leapt through the

air just as the mouse slipped through a chain-link fence.

She reared up and pawed higher on the fence, pushing wildly at the metal to search for weakness. The mouse didn't move. Just sat in the dirt. Cracker whined. She even licked the fence in the place where the mouse had slipped through. She thought she could just taste his fur . . . *mmmm*.

She reached her paw into a loose area of chain near the ground, but the mouse sat just out of reach. It was as if he were taunting her now. She. Was. Going. To. Kill. That. Mouse. She stared at him as hard as she could. There was nothing in the world except for her and that mouse.

"It's just a mouse," Willie said, out of breath from chasing her. "It's dead. D-E-A-D. Dead."

Cracker started. She had almost forgotten about Willie. But he didn't sound angry. Her ears perked. She could hear Willie's mother calling. Willie picked up a stick and poked at the mouse, sending it scampering. *Huh?* Cracker looked at Willie sorrowfully: Why had he made the mouse go away?

"Oh, stop it," said Willie. Then he said, "Good girl," rubbing Cracker's head. All thoughts of the mouse drained quickly from Cracker. She wagged her tail. *Good girl!* She didn't even glance at the bird

as she and Willie trotted toward home. Who cared about a dead bird?

Willie petted her head again. "Shake!" Willie said, and she fell over . . . no, that was "play dead." She leapt up in the air and ran in a circle around him. He laughed, and they continued down the alley.

Willie felt invincible as he walked with Cracker. His mother was used to a better neighborhood and didn't like them walking through the alley in the evenings, but Cracker's muscles were stronger than any man's, and Willie always felt safe with her. Willie's father had worked as foreman of a taffy apple factory, but when he was laid off, they'd had to move to an apartment while he worked a lower-paying job. And the apartment didn't allow dogs. The landlord had given Willie's family one month to get rid of Cracker. That was twenty-five days ago. Willie felt a sharp pain in his stomach at the thought.

Cracker felt Willie's unhappiness and whined. When they stopped in front of their apartment building, Willie suddenly fell to the ground in front of her and hugged her so hard, it actually kind of bothered her neck. What was going on? "You're the best dog in the world," Willie said. "Good girl!" Willie stood up again and looked sadly at Cracker. Anxiety filled her. She jumped up and placed her

PRAISE FOR CYNTHIA KADOHATA

"Kadohata stays true to the child's viewpoint in plain, beautiful prose that can barely contain the passionate feelings." —*Booklist*

"[A] luminous new voice in fiction . . ." —*New York Times*

"Masterful in her evocation of physical, spiritual, and cultural displacement." —*Los Angeles Times*

Cracker is one of the United States Army's most valuable weapons.

She's a German shepherd trained to sniff out bombs, traps, and enemy soldiers. The safety of everyone around Cracker depends on her intelligence and keen sense of smell.

Soldier Rick Hanski is headed to war. He wants to show the world, especially his father and his sergeant, that he has what it takes to be a great soldier. But sometimes Rick wonders if he really is capable of facing the challenges of battle.

When Cracker is paired with Rick, it isn't easy for either of them. They need to be friends before they can be a team, and they must be a team if they want to get home alive.

Join a dog and his soldier as they develop a deep friendship in this unforgettable book from Newbery Medal-winning author Cynthia Kadohata.

Don't miss the
Newbery Medal-winning
KIRA-KIRA.

Learn more about
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