



Buddy's Tail

Buddy Boutonniere, a big-hearted Standard Poodle, subsists in the featureless backyard of a tract home in the desert city of Yucca Dunes under the care of clueless, greedy Warren Swindell. Three years before, Swindell grudgingly acquired the dog for his step-daughter, Brianna, not realizing how big Standard Poodles become. Lulu Swindell insisted the dog be kept outside away from her precious furniture. Brianna entered college, leaving Buddy behind, and now he is alone except for his canine friends. MacKenzie, a Border Collie, who specialized in ridding golf courses of migrant birds before striking out on her own, and Javier, a Chihuahua escape artist with foot issues, keep him company.

MacKenzie's take-charge attitude from her career woman days, coupled with her herding instincts make her a natural fixer and instant mother figure for anybody in trouble. She is her own dog, a practical canine, who does not believe in miracles, only brains, planning and hard work. Mac brings Buddy food when the thoughtless Swindells neglect to provide for him, and assists other neighborhood dogs, including Dumb Derek, a Rottweiler, brain-damaged from working as a guard dog in a chemical facility, whose orange feet glow in the dark. She is constantly on the lookout for a black Hummer driven by an evil man who ran over Howie, a sweet, laid-back, but arthritic Golden Retriever who was part of their circle.

When the Swindell family puts their house up for sale, Buddy meets, Deedee Holmes, a wonderful older woman who accompanies her relatives on a real estate tour. The silver-haired lady is the first human who shows Buddy compassion. His heart swells with yearning and he wants more than anything to live with Deedee. Warren Swindell plans to sell pedigreed Buddy for big bucks, and arranges a series of deals that end badly for the poodle, because he does not know how to behave indoors. After the third disaster, Buddy is dumped off at the tract house, but the Swindells have left to finalize the purchase of their new home in another town. A heat wave ensues, Buddy's has no food, little water, and his only lifeline is MacKenzie.

Returning from bringing Buddy dinner, MacKenzie saves Derek from the Hummer, but is struck herself and dies in the street in front of Javier's place, the Borrego family home. Because she is a stray, nobody pursues the cruel driver. MacKenzie's dying words are an entreaty to Javier to provide for Buddy. Because he is too small to carry much, Javier enlists Derek, but the ruined Rottweiler has trouble remembering where Buddy lives and that he must not eat the food he is carrying.

MacKenzie awakens in a dazzling white desert and meets Sonny, the Good Shepherd. Gently and patiently, Sonny brings MacKenzie to understand she is dead and now in Haven, the part of Paradise set aside for dogs. Sonny explains how marvelous Haven is, especially for an unloved dog like MacKenzie who always had to fend for herself. Dogs have everything they desire, but there is one important rule that must never be broken, the Rule of Equi. After a lifetime of being man's best friend, protector, guide and companion, the canine's role of subservience comes to an end after death. Dogs no longer do human work. In Haven, they make their own decisions. Their sole remaining responsibility is guiding their own kind to this celestial place and seeing that each arriving dog's transition goes smoothly.

Sonny explains that humans have free will. It is a mystery why any human would hurt a dog, but some do. Such people go through the crack in the earth and across the Bitter Sea to the Island of Lovelessness. In contrast, all dogs, especially those who are mistreated, and even those who have behaved badly are welcome in Haven. In recognition of this difference, dogs must not intervene in the affairs of humans in Paradise or back on earth.

This sounds too good to be true to MacKenzie. Moreover, she resists accepting her new privileges, powers and mission because she can't abandon Buddy to his fate. At the risk of ostracism and expulsion, MacKenzie refuses to begin her training and asks to return her wings. Astounded by this unprecedented request, the Good Shepherd summons Howie to persuade his old pal. Zen-like Howie comes up with the perfect compromise solution -- the shepherd will intervene on Buddy's behalf, and, in return, MacKenzie will acquiesce.

Back on earth, Javier fails to get Derek to deliver food to Buddy. Javier is apprehended by the Borregos and locked up at home. Without food and water, Buddy loses strength. Javier, finally manages to escape, but too late, and he sits helpless, keening his grief to the stars as he watches his friend fade away.

Broken-hearted, Javier leaves, vowing to bring the Hummer man to justice. In another reckless pass through the neighborhood, the Hummer knocks Juanita Borrego from her bike, severely injuring the girl. Javier scours the neighborhood and discovers the domicile of the evil one. Although he is terrified of boots, he must approach the police and draw them to the house of the guilty man. He attracts the

attention of two officers, one of whom was at the scene of MacKenzie's death, and lures them to the place. Hummer man is arrested for the hit-and-run and nearly torn apart by angry residents.

The Good Shepherd does not wait for Buddy's soul to leave his earthly home. He alights in Buddy's prison of a backyard and grants Buddy a wish. Buddy asks to go live with the wonderful lady, Deedee. Sonny says he will grant the wish, but that Buddy must understand he will only live with the Holmes family twice as long as he has lived in the hell hole of a backyard, for the Good Shepherd is only delaying his journey. Buddy accepts with joy. Buddy is revived by a huge rain storm and a power company technician who gives him a sandwich. The technician also reports the neglected dog to the authorities.

The Swindell family returns. Pressured by animal control officers, Warren plans to surrender Buddy to the pound, but remembers that the Holmes family offered to take the poodle, and figures he still can get some money for him. He delivers Buddy to their home. They next years of Buddy's life are fabulous. Deedee teaches Buddy how to be a good 'inside" dog. He meets Skootch, the patriarch of the household, and wins the old curmudgeon over. He finds Leroy in a field dying and brings him home to join the family. He entices abused, frightened Roxanne over the fence to join his clan. He saves Skootch after a fall in the pool. On Skootch's fifteenth birthday, a big party is planned and Buddy is excited to be part of the surprise. But this is the sixth year and the Good Shepherd returns to claim him. He goes, tearful, but grateful he had the time he did with his wonderful family.

Buddy excels at guiding new dogs to Haven. He brings Skootch in his seventeenth year, a wonderful reunion, and an opportunity to see his beloved Deedee, although she can't see him. He is promoted to handling difficult cases. He is sent to bring back a bomb dog from Afghanistan. Buddy journeys to the battle zone and finds the dog, a Labrador, lying in a minefield. The dog's spirit refuses to leave the scene. Clinging to the dog's body is a dying marine, his handler, blinded and crying out the dog's name, Badge. Buddy knows that he is not to aide humans, but he waits with the loyal bomb dog for the marine to breathe his last and, against the rules, brings the man and Badge back to Paradise.

All canines are furious with Buddy for breaking the Rule of Equi. Buddy is stripped of his cherished role as a guide and his wings. Buddy is exiled to the perimeter of Haven and ostracized by the community. There, he meets a little girl, a recent arrival, the victim of a disease. The little girl regrets that she was never allowed to have a dog because of her condition. Buddy offers to be her pet. This act is viewed by many both in Haven and in human Paradise as yet another violation of the Rule. Buddy is brought before a joint tribunal. Old Solomon serves as Chief Justice and represents the humans, Hephzibah the Hierophant, the feline high

priestess, represents animals, Holy Oak represents the plant kingdom, and Minerva Goldbrick, represents the elements.

The Good Shepherd lays out the case against Buddy. Mac is on the defense, advised by Howie and Skootch. They argue that the Rule of Equi is not unbalanced by an act of spontaneous goodness. In a flash of insight, Mac realizes that the balance of the Rule flows from dog receiving the gift of free will upon death and thus becoming equal with humans. He argues that in befriending the girl, Buddy was exercising his free will. The panel votes to reinstate Buddy. Moreover, Old Solomon decides to give him a reward. In an unprecedented move, he is to be allowed to bring Deedee to Paradise because it is her time. Because of the panel's wisdom, Mac is reconciled to life in Haven. Before he leaves the court, Holy Oak summons Buddy and, winking his knotty eye, passes his great bough over the dog's tail three times.

When he goes to pick up the Deedee, she is lying in her bed, surrounded by her daughter and niece, and Leroy and Roxanne. They cannot see Buddy, but Deedee can, and she realizes he has come for her. Once again, she tells him how much she loves him. His tail lights up like a handsome flower. Her soul rises and follows the flower to Paradise.

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