

**Strudel's
Forever
Home**

Strudel's Forever Home

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In memory of
my family's dachshund,
Max,
a big dog in
a little-dog body.

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One



To look at me, you would never suspect that I was once a shelter dog.

Not to brag, but I am in the prime of life—healthy, good-looking and sleek. I don't have fleas. I don't have bad habits. I can sit up and shake paws. I can roll over with the best of them.

But just over a year ago, a calamity happened in the night. It drove me away from my happy home and human. It drove me out into the street.

For a long time, all I remembered was this: I fell asleep on a soft, familiar pillow, the air around me perfumed by the scent of premium dog food. And I woke up on an unfamiliar doorstep—sniveling and soaked through, every part of me hurting and exhausted, even my tail.

What woke me were gentle but unfamiliar human hands. They lifted me. They brought me indoors. They towed me off and cleaned me up. After that, another human placed me in a kennel with a bowl of water and a dish of

kibble. It was an inferior brand. “Wait! I don’t belong here!” I whined.

“That’s what they all say,” muttered a beagle-cross in a nearby kennel.

The dog in the kennel beside me was kinder. “How are you feeling?”

Her woof was mild, but I jumped as if she’d howled in my ear. “I’m sorry, what? I’m a little shaky.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “I heard the humans talking. Are you feeling any better?”

My nice neighbor was a black cockapoo whose smell reminded me of the sugary tea my human sipped before bed. She had bright eyes and a delicate nose. She was elderly and elegant, with a white muzzle and a slight quaver in her voice. Later I would learn her name was Maisie. That morning I knew only that she was sympathetic.

“I feel rotten,” I said, “like I’ve been dunked in a cold river and run over by a bus.”

“My, my.” The cockapoo looked at me through the wire grid separating our kennels. She was lying down, her head resting on her paws. “And *were* you dunked in a river and run over by a bus?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I can’t remember a thing.”

“Hmm,” she murmured. “Perhaps you’ve suffered some kind of trauma. I think your memory will clear up eventually—if you want it to.”

“I just want to go home,” I whined. “That is, if I even have a home anymore.”

The cockapoo made sympathetic noises. “Do you know where you are now?” she asked.

I didn’t, and she explained. I was in the small-to-medium-size-canine room of an animal shelter. The shelter manager, Shira, had found me on the doorstep when she

came to work. This was in late August. Maisie herself had been in residence for a month, ever since her own human passed away.

“To put it bluntly, no one wanted me after that,” she explained. “I’m like all of us pets here at the shelter, abandoned.”

“But I’m not abandoned!” I insisted. “My human loves me!”

“Then he will come for you,” said Maisie.

Only he didn’t. Days passed, and then a week and then another. Had my human been hurt in the calamity? Hurt . . . or worse? And my happy home, was it gone forever?

Settling into shelter life wasn’t easy. There was a continuing rotation of new dogs to get used to, some of them brash and ill-mannered, some of them loud, some of them hardly more than puppies. Every day I expected my human to come, and every day I was disappointed. Through it all, I relied on Maisie to keep my spirits up.

I had been at the shelter about a month when one afternoon Shira brought a boy to meet me.

“I found this fellow on our doorstep one rainy morning,” she told him. “He was soaking wet, banged up, no collar.”

“You mean he just showed up here?” the boy asked.

Shira nodded. “With dogs, it happens more often than you’d expect. My theory is their super-sensitive noses pick up the smell of food and other dogs inside. So they plop themselves down on the stoop and wait, hoping for a chance to join their new pack.”

“Weird,” said the boy.

Shira laughed. “Not so weird. Dogs are pretty smart when it comes to survival. Anyway, we haven’t been able

to find this one's owner. At first he was scared of his own shadow, but now at last he's settling down. I think a little extra TLC—tender loving care—would do him a world of good.”

The boy, let's face it, needed grooming. He was skinny, with dark eyes and shaggy black hair. His smell was appealing, though, like earth and tuna fish and packaged cookies. “He's a wiener dog, right?” the boy said. “Does he bite?”

Me? Bite? I have never been so insulted!

“He's a dachshund,” said Shira. “And no, he doesn't bite. He seems to have been well brought up.”

Thank you, Shira. Yes, I was.

“What's his name?” the boy asked.

Shira said, “We call him Strudel,” and I cringed. One of the volunteers had given me that name. Strudel is a German pastry, and I am a German breed. I guess the name was supposed to be funny, but I didn't like it. I wanted something strong and heroic to reflect my true, proud nature.

The boy looked at me doubtfully. “Don't you got a bigger dog?”

“We have dogs of all sizes,” said Shira, “but this one needs a friend. Why don't you give him a try? And if you don't get along, you can read to a different dog next week.”

Before I knew what was happening, Shira had opened my gate, clipped a leash to my collar and lifted me up, out and onto the white tile floor, which felt cool against my paws.

While the boy listened to instructions, I looked him over. He wasn't wearing socks. His jeans were frayed and his canvas shoes were faded.

“Can I take him now?” the boy asked impatiently.

Shira handed over the leash. “He's all yours.”

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy—I get to go outside!

I was so excited I practically dragged the boy down the narrow hallway, and when we got to the sliding glass door I jumped up and pawed the glass.

“Hang on a second, wouldja?” The boy laughed, then yanked the door open. I squeezed out in a hurry.

Ahhh—the smellscape was fantastic. The shelter was built around a small concrete courtyard. The boy and I were the only ones there just then, but all the shelter dogs had visited at one time or another and left their scents behind. There were people smells, too, and regular city ones, like car exhaust and chewing gum and grease.

It was all so delicious under the warm sunshine that I was beside myself. I tugged at the leash, eager to make a thorough investigation, but the boy scooped me up into his arms and sat me down beside him on a metal bench.

Now what? A treat, maybe? I could sure use a treat!

Sadly, a couple of good hard sniffs revealed what I had already suspected: This boy was not carrying dog treats at all. Instead, he had a book in his hand. Seeing it gave me a pang. My human had had plenty of books, a whole library’s worth. He was always reading, often while I dozed on a cozy blanket by his side.

I missed my human terribly. I missed everything about that life.

But I wasn’t going to think about it anymore. I wasn’t even going to think my real name. My memories only gave me a pain behind my eyes—a pain so terrible it made me retreat, whimpering, to a corner of my kennel.

I was through with that now. Maisie might be an old dog, but she was tough, and she had encouraged me. *Summon your hound-dog nature, Strudel, she told me. Live in the present.*

“I picked out a special book for us, Strudel,” the boy

said now. “It’s one my grandpa gave me because he used to read it when he was a kid. It’s about a dog, too—only the dog is big and strong, a hero dog. It’s an old book from a long time ago, called *Chief, Dog of the Old West*. The author is Thesiger Sheed Lewis.”

Chief, Dog of the Old West

After church one Sunday morning, Chief and his family were finishing their breakfast when from out yonder there came an ominous, rattling sound.

Pierre, the French chef, rushed to the window. “Sacre bleu!” he cried. “A rattlesnake has set up housekeeping on the porch!”

Sheriff Silver, the square-jawed family patriarch, made a face. “I hate snakes.”

Chief, who was strong and powerfully built, added a comment of his own: Woof.

The widowed sheriff had a brainy, blue-eyed daughter named Rachel Mae who dabbed her lips with her napkin, took up her pencil and said, “I will devise a plan.”

Time passed. The rattling grew louder.

At last Rachel Mae proclaimed her plan complete. “The 11th Cavalry under the command of dashing Colonel Joshua Trueheart will stage a flanking maneuver thus.” She indicated with her pinkie. “A fleet of warships will steam upriver and anchor in the duck pond. Brandishing traditional weapons, our stalwart Apache allies will advance upon their sturdy mustang ponies.”

Chef Pierre looked over Rachel Mae’s shoulder and nodded. “This plan reminds me of the Emperor Napoleon’s at Waterloo.”

Sheriff Silver frowned. “You’ll correct me if I’m wrong, Chef Pierre, but I believe the esteemed French emperor lost that one.”

“Oui, it’s true, and more’s the pity,” said Chef Pierre. “Had Napoleon won, we here in Groovers Gulch might be speaking French.”

“I take your point,” the sheriff said, “but as for Rachel Mae’s plan, I see a flaw. There is no telegraph in Groovers Gulch, no means to contact either the cavalry, the Navy or our staunch Apache allies.”

Rachel Mae did not cotton to being contradicted, and might have made a pert remark . . . except for a raucous disturbance out yonder on the porch.

Unnoticed by his family, Chief had taken matters into his own teeth and paws.

The din was tremendous—rattle-thumpety-rattle-bumpety-snappety-snappety-grrrrr—and after that there fell an eerie silence.

“My puppy! I can’t look!” shrieked Rachel Mae.

“Me neither,” said Sheriff Silver.

Chef Pierre returned to the window. “The bad news,” he reported, “is that the mess is disgusting. The good news is that the snake is now in half a thousand pieces. Once again, the family canine has prevailed!”

“Huzzah!” chorused Rachel Mae and Sheriff Silver. “Long live Chief!”

“I wonder,” said Chef Pierre, “in which cookbook I might find a recipe for rattlesnake au vin.”

Two



At first, the boy wasn't sure he liked wiener dogs.

But when I turn on the charm, I am irresistible. I rolled over. I played dead. I sat up and begged. I shook paws.

The boy was awestruck. "You know all the tricks, Strudel! I wonder who taught you. It must've been someone who loved you a lot."

My human taught me, and he did love me a lot. But some calamity happened, and now he's gone.

After that, the boy came back and read to me once a week. Over time, I learned all about him. His name was Jake. He was a fifth grader. His teacher had signed him up for this program where kids read aloud to shelter animals. The idea was for the kids to get practice reading while animals got extra attention.

Jake and I both loved the stories about Chief and the Old West. They made me think that I could be a hero, too.

If I had a family of my own the way Chief did, I would save them from rattlesnakes and other mean, rotten

varmint. I would protect them from bad guys and outlaws and villains. If I had a family of my own, I would prevail over evil . . . so that peace and justice could triumph.

On a morning in late September, Shira came in and knelt by my crate. “Guess what, Strudel? I have a surprise.”

I sniffed, jumped up and wagged my tail: *Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy! Is it liver flavor?*

Shira laughed. “No, Strudel, it’s not a treat,” she said. “It’s better than that. I’ve just talked to Jake’s mom, and this afternoon when he comes, he is taking you away with him. You are getting your forever home at last!”

From the kennel beside me came a sigh that was a cross between a whimper and a moan.

Maisie?

But I was too excited to pay attention. I was going to have a home of my own! Shira left, and I rolled over twice, chased my tail and yipped, then chased my tail and yipped some more.

“Put a lid on it, wouldja?” said TJ, a miniature pinscher who was new to the shelter and grouchy.

“Sorry.” I took a breath and tried to settle down, but it was hard. My tail seemed to be wagging itself.

“Strudel’s just happy,” Maisie said gently. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“Happy?” TJ snapped. “I don’t expect to be happy again. I’m too old to get used to a new place. And humans don’t want old dogs anyway.”

“*That* was uncalled for, TJ,” said a Chihuahua called Churro, indicating Maisie with his tail.

“Aw, there’s no point any of us kiddin’ ourselves,” TJ snarled. “You gotta be cute, young and friendly to get a forever home. You gotta play the bright-eyed, wag-your-tail,

whatever-you-want-boss game that humans always fall for. Then when you do, there're no guarantees they'll be good to you anyway."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

TJ nosed his bedding around and got comfortable. "It's not all chew toys and peanut butter out there. Plenty o' humans forget to take you out, then swat you on the nose when you piddle inside. Then there's humans that'll chain you up in the cold and never let you indoors for a minute."

By this time, my tail was drooping.

I thought Maisie would tell me TJ's stories were just puppy tales intended to scare me.

Only she didn't.

"Who can say what the future holds, Strudel?" she said. "Summon your hound-dog nature, and live in the present. Your new human is only a pup himself, but I'm sure he'll try his best."