

Doggone Dead Excerpt

Zachary proudly took his new puppy's leash out of the cabinet. I held our newest member of the family, Butch, a twelve-pound weimaraner. We opened the front door and stepped out into the smothering Texas heat of late June. Zach had received Butch for his tenth birthday after weeks of parental harassment. I had relented, finally, hoping that Zach was ready for the responsibility of a dog. He promised me on bended knee that he would feed him, bathe him and walk him.

"Zach, we need to be careful walking him. He's so little, but he's strong, so he can for sure wriggle out of that collar." As if to illustrate my point, Butch started squirming as he felt the constraints of the collar and leash. He had used his entire weight to pull loose from the contraption.

"I know, mom. Don't worry," Zach reassured me, his voice reflecting the impatience he must have been feeling. He reached down and patted Butch on the head. "It's okay, boy, we're just going for a little walk."

As we headed down the driveway, Butch immediately responded to the fresh air rushing around him, and he was spurred to freedom.

"Hold on tight, Zach."

"I am. I am. He's really pulling me hard. Slow down, boy!"

Zach, arm outstretched, reached the curb of our street. Butch, blissfully unaware of the dangers of cars, plowed out on to the road, pulling Zach along behind him.

I heard it before I saw it. The low rumble of an engine going at a high speed increased in volume as I spotted a shiny red Corvette coming around the corner. A young man, biceps bulging out of his black sleeveless T-shirt, was behind the wheel.

Zach was now in the middle of the street with Butch heading toward the other side. My heart exploded as I ran into the street directly into the path of the car, swooping up Zach and causing the two of us to fall into the grassy lawn of the neighborhood playground. As I felt my knees pound into the dirt, the horn blared from the car. Its owner had hit the power windows and yelled, "Keep your stupid kid out of the road!"

I jumped up ready to yell something back that wouldn't be listed as an appropriate response by the parenting magazines when I heard Zach yell behind me.

"Mom! Butch got away!"

I turned back to Zach to see little Butch skittering through the sand under the swings and then hightailing it across the park to the other side.

There were two distinct sides to our little playground. Most of the homes on our side were three- or four-bedroom ranches, nice driveways, lawns cut by the owners and plenty of kids. The other side of the play area was a newer subdivision that had been built in the last ten years when Charlie Loper, a faded cowboy star, had sold off the land around his house in town. Even though he had acreage out in the country, the home in town became a storehouse for many of the props he used in the score of old-time Westerns he had starred in during the '40s and '50s.

Now that the subdivision had been built around the elegant structure, most of the houses on that side of the playground were two-story red brick, with short driveways and high mortgages. They were beautiful to walk through, and their manicured lawns, well-placed flowers and trees and fresh paint

could be seen and envied from our side of the swing sets. Our newest family member was bound and determined to move up in the world and had headed for the shinier side of the street.

Zach and I ran after him, yelling out his name. I was amazed that anything with such short legs could move so darned fast. Butch zipped across the street on the other side of the park. I grabbed Zach by the shoulders, stopping him before he ran out into traffic for a second time.

“Look both ways!” I blurted.

Zach obediently jerked his head in both directions then up at me. I nodded back and we ran across the street together. Unfortunately, my bout of parenting gave the dog an even bigger head start on us. His little butt wiggled as his wagging tail seemed to propel him down the street. Butch looked all around, happy to be exploring. He came upon the biggest house in the neighborhood, the old Loper home, and shimmied under two giant wrought-iron gates that joined the large segments of gray brick walls surrounding the house.

“He went in the cowboy house!” shouted Zach.

“Butch!” I yelled out, now grasping the black curlicues of the gate.

“Butch! You get back over here. Bad dog. Bad dog!”

Butch, not feeling the guilt, went right on taking time to pee on the historic fountain, a bronze depiction of Charlie Loper on a bucking bronco with his six gun shooting into the air. Once he’d finished tagging the statue, he happily scampered around the back of the house.

I shook the gate, the sound of metal rattling in our ears. There was a black box with a speaker and a button near the bottom. I pushed the button.

“Hello?”

No answer.

I tried the latch on the gate. It was locked. God forbid someone from the other side of the park should get in to experience opulent cowboy luxury.

I hit the buzzer again. “Hello, is anyone in there? I’m sorry, but our dog just crawled under your fence.”

Again, no answer.

Zach now slid in front of me and pushed the speaker button. “Hellllllllooooo ...” He elongated his greeting as if yelling into an empty canyon. Feeling his approach might work, he repeated it.

The black box rustled. “May I help you?” a clipped British accent came over the airway. Not exactly the voice you would expect to hear while staring at a statue of a man on a bucking horse. Whoever this guy in the box was, he didn’t sound pleased we were pushing his button.

“Yes,” I answered. “Our puppy crawled under your front gate, and I’m afraid he’s running around on your grounds.”

Silence. I waited for around ten seconds until Zach pulled at my sleeve, urging me to push the button again.

“Are you there?” I asked. “Sir?”

More silence.

“Sir? Did you hear what I said? Our puppy has ...”

“I heard you,” he cut me off.

“Have you seen him?”

“No. I have not. Please leave.”

I pushed the button, ignoring the black box’s command. “Are there any other ways out besides this gate?”

“I have not seen your puppy,” the increasingly perturbed voice said. “You are at the only entrance and exit of the estate. You must have been ... mistaken. Good day.”

We had been dismissed. Zach breathed in deep and exhaled with a cry. “Where’s Butch, Mom?”

“I don’t know, baby. Let’s walk down the block and call for him. Maybe he got out the other side somehow.”

“But the guy said ...”

“I know what the guy said.” Upon looking at the grounds inside the fence a second time, I noticed overgrown foliage around the house. There was also a line of rust around the fountain. From the street all you could see was the fountain and paved area around it, but once you looked inside the gate, the façade of Hollywood elegance fell flat. The grass was too high, the shrubs looked like monsters from a second-rate horror movie, and there were no flowers. They might have an uptown butler, but the place was looking ragged.

“You know, there could be a hole in the fence somewhere,” I suggested. “We’ll check all through the neighborhood, okay, pal?”

“Okay.” Zach clutched the little blue leash with the empty collar to his chest. We called for Butch as we walked down the street. After a half hour with no luck, I knew we had to head home.

“What do you say we talk to Dr. Springer, the veterinarian? Maybe because Butch was a rescue he has a chip in him or something.”

“A rescue?”

“Uh ... yep. That’s the case. A lot of little dogs need homes, and we were the ones for him.”

“Do you think he went back to his old home? Do you think he went to find his mom and dad?”

I was never sure if getting a dog was a good idea and had put Zach off for years. Now it was lost, and I would move heaven and earth to get it back. As we walked along, Zach talked about how the science of the microchips in dogs worked because obviously the older generation would know nothing of modern technology. As we crossed the street back toward the playground in front of the Loper estate, I heard something. Something faint.

It sounded like a tiny whimper.

I turned around as Zach ran to the swings to jump on. Could I have mistaken it for something else? I tried to isolate the sound. Zach called to me from across the park.

“Mom? Come push me.” Zach stopped pushing his toes into the ground and stood up in front of the swing. “Do you see Butch?”

“I don’t know. I thought I heard something.”

He jumped off the swing with a thud. “Was it Butch?”

My eyes scanned the estate and up and down the street. The whimper seemed to have faded. My neighbor’s dog barked on our side of the park. That must have been what I’d been hearing.

“No, I guess not. We’ll head over to Dr. Springer’s office.”

“Can we go right now?” he urged.

“Sure,” I said, glancing back. The cowboy on top of the fountain looked back at us blankly. Who lived in that house? Charlie Loper was long dead, and I wasn’t really sure who lived there now. He had been known as the best shot in the West and the best tenor in Texas. Did his widow still live there? She would have to be pretty old by now. I hadn’t really thought about it. I would have to ask Maggie. Whoever it was, they didn’t hit the town haunts like the beauty parlor or the barbecue joint. Why live in a town if you never left your own house? I also would have picked up on a guy with a British accent shopping at the grocery store or ordering at the counter of Earl’s Java.

That gray brick wall had effectively shut the rest of us out. Why did anyone need that much privacy? It wasn’t exactly as if the dead Charlie had any groupies.

“Mom? Let’s go.” Zach pulled at my arm. “We have to get Butch back.”

I looked back one last time to see an upstairs light come on in the Loper estate as the afternoon sun was fading.

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