



THE BEST LESSON OF ALL

Ellie Ray Spivey

“Everything I know I learned from dogs.”

— Nora Roberts

It was going to be a great summer. As I drove to the small seaside community, I thought about how much fun my best friend and I would have.

The most exciting part was that Annie had just adopted a beagle named Buddy.

Pulling into the driveway, I noticed a lump of fur lying under the house, attached to a chain, with nothing but a tin bowl for food and water. There was no sign of a bed or even an old towel, making me wonder where he slept at night. He raised his head as I approached. He seemed friendly, but I saw a sadness in his eyes, and there was a distinct odor about him.

I had a hard time believing that this was Annie’s Buddy. He looked lost and neglected. “Poor Buddy,” the neighbors whispered as they walked by the house.

After unpacking and settling in, I asked Annie about Buddy. Every dog Annie had as a child had been kept outside tied up on a rope. Her father’s philosophy was that animals got tougher if they lived outdoors; less spoiled too. That antiquated way of thinking had been passed down to Annie. Unfortunately, Buddy was paying the price.

I convinced Annie that she needed to start anew. I smiled and said, “Let’s move Buddy into the house and into your life.” After purchasing a comfy bed, a handsome red collar, and a matching leather leash, we welcomed Buddy into the living room.

Buddy looked a bit confused but totally happy with his new status. He loved his bubble bath and gobbled down his much-improved nutritious food. He looked like a new dog with his sprightly step and sparkly eyes.

The more time I spent with Buddy, the more I realized that he had potential to be more than just a pet. He put a smile on people's faces and made them laugh. An idea slowly took form, and I suggested to Annie that Buddy would make a great therapy dog. I explained that once he passed the test, he could be a registered therapy dog and visit nursing home residents, hospital patients, or even listen to children read in libraries.

Annie decided that we could try, and so I registered Buddy to take the International Therapy Dog Test a few towns over. I knew that two weeks was a rush, but there wasn't anything to lose except the fee and, if he didn't pass, Annie would have an even better dog by the end of the summer.

Every day we worked on sit, stay, come, and the other commands Buddy needed to know to be registered. To my surprise, he already knew many of them. Even so, it was a stretch as there were twenty-five elements in the entire test, each requiring complete mastery.

The morning of the test, we were as ready as we could be in that short length of time. As we entered the large room, I counted at least forty teams of dogs and their owners, many of the dogs professionally trained. What had I gotten myself into? Feeling totally intimidated, we took a seat next to a snoozing, unassuming Saint Bernard.

Hours later, we walked out with an official therapy dog certificate. As we walked to the car, Buddy puffed out his chest, lifted his nose to the sky, and bayed to the world. He seemed to know that he had accomplished something great. Folks nearby laughed and clapped. A rock star was born.

From that day on, every time I'd open the closet to get his therapy vest out, he'd do a little doggie dance. He knew he was going to

“work.” He loved his job and did it well. He loved wearing his “I work for kisses” vest.

The neighbors no longer said, “Poor Buddy,” as they walked by. Instead, they would point to the house and say, “That’s where Buddy the beagle lives. He’s the only therapy dog in town.”

That summer Buddy learned how it felt to be loved and respected. I learned how it felt to accomplish a big goal, and Annie, well, you judge for yourself. She looked up at me one day while feeding Buddy said, “Thank you for teaching me how to love my dog.”

That was the best lesson of all.