

## 'CHRISTMAS WITH TUCKER'

### SYNOPSIS

George McCray is a 13-year old boy coming to terms with the recent loss of his father in a tractor accident on their Kansas farm. George's mom Jill is dealing with the accident in her own way: She's moved to Minnesota to be closer to her folks and George's two sisters, Trisha and Hannah, who are in college. Jill reluctantly agrees to let George stay behind with his grandparents Bo and Cora until after Christmas, about six months down the road, because he isn't quite ready to leave.

George and Cora are in the cozy kitchen of the McCray farmhouse one afternoon in late November when Bo comes in with some news: Their troubled neighbor Frank Thorne, who was once a friend of John McCray, George's dad, has been arrested again for drunk driving — and this time he's going to jail. What Bo says next surprises Cora even more: He's brought Frank's unnamed dog to stay with them. Bo has never allowed dogs in his home before and this one is known for barking madly at passersby.

Warily, George goes outside to see the dog sitting in Bo's pickup truck. To his surprise, the canine is very friendly. Within minutes, the two of them are chasing each other in an energetic game of tag. Watching the pair make Bo and Cora smile. It's clear they're becoming fast friends. Cora lets George keep the dog in his room on two conditions: He gives him a bath — and a name. George decides to call him Tucker.

Bo asks George to do the early morning milking of the cows so that Bo can clear the roads with his snowplow. George wonders who will help Bo with this job when he's gone to Minnesota. Hours after his 4:30 a.m. chore, George's friend Mary Ann finds him asleep on the school bus. She wakes him up when they arrive at school.

Later, George gets a call from his mom. She feels bad that she missed Thanksgiving with her son and says she can't wait to bring him home after Christmas. George misses his mom but feels connected to Bo and Cora...and Tucker. He's not sure he wants to leave.

As the weeks go by, George continues to be a big help around the farm and Tucker proves himself to be a smart dog, quickly learning the tricks George teaches him. The two of them are inseparable and Bo is proud of the way his grandson has been caring for the dog. But soon, Frank is out of jail and it's time to give Tucker back.

Driving by Frank's house twice a day on the school bus, George notices that Tucker is kept alone outside. He's convinced the dog would be better off with him but when he asks Frank if he can have the dog, he is gruffly refused. Mary Ann suggests that George offer to buy Tucker. Meanwhile, more snow is on the way. To help clear the roads for their neighbors, Bo teaches George how to drive the snowplow. At the boy's request, Bo gives him an advance. With that money, as well as some savings and some from Mary Ann, he revisits Frank and clarifies that he wants to buy Tucker but is again rejected.

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Early the next morning, a blustery wind blows snow across the yard. The weather is getting worse. George walks to the barn and sees his grandparents pouring milk into containers to share with neighbors. With phone lines down and roads blocked, folks are short on basics so Bo and Cora are stepping in to help. Bo sends George out on the snowplow with milk and eggs and tells him to knock on every neighbor's door to make sure folks are OK. When he arrives at Frank's place, George discovers both Tucker and the man inside the cold, messy house. Frank makes George a deal: Get him the "medicine" he needs from old Tom Turner and then maybe they'll talk about Tucker being for sale. George senses something shady about this request but he's torn: He wants Tucker. He reluctantly agrees after seeing a picture of George's dad and Frank in an old, broken frame.

George heads to Tom Turner's dilapidated trailer. Once there, Tom, a shady character at best, hands him two jars filled with muddy brown liquid and warns him not to tell anyone else about the transaction. Still having doubts about his role in all this, George returns to Frank's house. At the last second, jars in hand, he decides he's not going through with it. Frank confronts him, however and snatches the jars away. While George has unwittingly upheld his side of the bargain, Frank does not, telling George that his dog isn't for sale. Undaunted, George returns the next day, determined to get Tucker. This time, there's no sign of dog or man anywhere until he discovers Frank crumpled on the floor, unconscious, one of the empty "medicine" jars next to him. George finds Tucker in a small crawl space, cold and shivering. George takes the dog to the snowplow, cranks up the heat and waits for the ambulance to arrive.

As the days pass, George is glad to have Tucker back and the two buddies continue to clear the roads together. George "teaches" Tucker how the snowplow works. At one point, Tucker's paw hits the radio button, which crackles with sound. Tucker barks at it. Cora, on the other end of the radio, responds. George is amused and coaxes Tucker to continue "speaking" to his grandma.

Bo and George arrive at the hospital a few days later to pick up Frank, who is lucky to have survived drinking Tom Turner's contaminated brew. Frank is thankful that George found him before it was too late. When they get to Frank's house, they discover that Cora has not only cleaned and decorated the place for Christmas but has also cooked a homemade meal. Frank is genuinely grateful for their help and vows to change his ways.

George persists in feeling guilty about his role in Frank's situation. Driving with Bo to the store, he decides to tell him everything but is cut short by a sudden crack of thunder and a bolt of lightening. It's the start of a rare kind of ice storm that makes roads treacherous. Keeping them clear will be next to impossible. Bo and George head to Hank Fisher's place and ask him to create special spikes for the snowplow that will allow it to travel over icy terrain.

George pays a visit to Mary Ann in the souped-up snowplow and decides to tell her what's been on his mind. The moment is interrupted when the radio crackles to life. It's Cora, asking George to get Doc Johnson. Bo is sick. Tucker hears Cora's voice, puts his paw on the radio button and barks.

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Back at the house, Doc Johnson says that Bo has a severe lung infection. When George returns from taking the doctor home, he goes to see Bo, who compliments him for being so helpful. George has had enough. It's time to come clean about his role in Frank's mishap. He tells Bo and Cora everything. Bo is bitterly disappointed and orders George to take Tucker back to Frank after he's finished clearing the roads for the day.

George is miserable. Working the spiked snowplow, with Tucker seated next to him, he comes across two fallen trees in the middle of an icy road. He gets out of the cab to move them, advancing slowly across the slippery frozen ground, but loses his footing and hits his head. Barely conscious, George yells at Tucker to hit the radio button and "speak" — and he does! Cora hears Tucker's frantic barking and George, before he blacks out, calling for help. Tucker jumps out, licks George's face and takes off for the farm. Meanwhile, Cora calls Frank for help, who immediately heads out to find the boy. Along the way, he runs into Tucker, who leads him back to George.

Safely at home, George is still a bit dazed but concerned about finishing his job. He's told that Frank is doing it for him and when he's done, Hank Fisher will take a shift. George is sad that he didn't get a chance to say good-bye to Tucker, who is with Frank.

The following day is Christmas Eve. When George awakens in the morning, he's surprised and happy to find his mom sitting in his room and his sisters downstairs in the kitchen. The day turns out to be one of the best in George's memory. The family thought their first Christmas without their husband, father and son would be difficult but being together has the opposite effect. They have a wonderful time and the evening is full of surprises. After dinner, Frank shows up at their door with a present for George: Tucker! It's his way of saying thank you to the McCrays for their kindness to him. Bo, who was in on the surprise, brings out a gift as well: a new collar for Tucker. The family has something for Frank, too: His picture with John McCray — in a beautiful new frame.

George is up before sunrise on Christmas morning — the cows still need to be milked. Walking into the kitchen, he sees his mom dressed and ready to help. It's the perfect opportunity for them to talk. George is still torn. He loves his mom but wants to stay at the farm to help his grandparents. Jill understands. She's been doing some thinking, she says and has come to realize that she's not supposed to run away from memories. It's more important to get through tough times with loved ones. George is thrilled to hear that she wants to move back. Later that morning everyone opens presents in the living room. Mary Ann is there, too.

Fast-forward 10 years. The family is gathered again for Christmas in the same living room, with the addition of Trisha and Hannah's husbands and three small children. George, now 23, walks in with Tucker, whose pace has slowed. They plop down on the couch, watching the scene. A beautiful 23-year old woman walks in with a present. George lights up when he sees her. It's Mary Ann. This Christmas is special, too. Not only has George moved back after college graduation to take over the farm, on Christmas Eve Mary Ann accepted his marriage proposal.

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Suddenly Bo walks in with a puppy, a miniature version of Tucker, for Hannah's ecstatic children. A minute later Cora walks in with another for Trisha's delighted son. The puppies turn and tackle Tucker, who takes it all in stride. Life is good.

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