



The Reluctant Shepherd By Kathryn Haueisen

'Twas the week before the week before Christmas. St. Mark youth director Skip Everson and matronly office manager Lisbeth Andrews labored to prepare restless children for the annual Sunday-before-Christmas pageant.

"Why do I have to be a stupid ol' shepherd again? Why can't I be a wise man? I'm old enough. It's not fair!"

"Are you done whining now, Randy?" asked his exasperated mother. Being the St. Mark office manager, she tried hard not to give preferential treatment to her freckle-faced ten-year-old son. She agreed with him that after four years of playing a shepherd, he was probably ready to graduate to the role of a wise man. However, Skip had already given those parts to three older boys to keep them from boycotting the pageant. It wasn't fair, but then not much in life ever is.

Randy didn't answer. He shuffled to the costume rack and waited for Skip Everson to hand him a shepherd robe. Skip, halfway age-wise between Randy and his mother, clapped the boy on his shoulder to commiserate with his reluctance to be a shepherd for his - was it five years? Six? After a while, the pageants all ran together in his memory.

"Don't you have sandals?" he asked as he stared down at Randy's untied, ragged sneakers. "I specifically told all the parents of the shepherds to bring sandals. "Lisbeth!" he called across the room to where Randy's mother focused on corralling a group of three-year-olds into sheep, goat, and donkey costumes. "Where are Randy's sandals?"

"Oh, Randy!" she exclaimed. "I gave them to you before we left the house. What'd you do with them?"

"I dunno. Musta left them in the car."

"Well, go get them!" She handed him the car keys and turned back to the task at hand.

* * *

Randy found his sandals on the floor of the backseat. As he was getting out of the car, he saw an old, beat-up, faded red pickup truck pull into the church parking lot. St. Mark was a small congregation. While Randy didn't know *every* vehicle of the regular St. Mark folks, he was sure this truck didn't belong there.

He left the back door ajar, so as not to make any noise, crept out of the car, and ducked down next to the passenger side tail light. He peeked around the car so he could observe without being seen. The truck was pretty beaten up. He counted three dents and a rust spot near the rear bumper.

His heart raced when the driver got out. Maybe he was going to rob the church! Maybe he was looking for someone - someone just like him - small and no match for his huge, muscular body-builder type frame - to kidnap. Randy felt panic prickle up his mid-section. Curiosity kept him watching. He figured if he had to, he could beat the man to the church door and safety.

The man wore faded denim overalls and a red and brown plaid flannel shirt. He had a scraggly-sandy-brown beard and long-greasy hair tied back in a low ponytail. In three long steps, he reached the truck bed and lifted out a large brown cardboard box.

He carried the box to the bushes by the church's main entrance and pushed it under one of the shrubs with his work boot. Then he raced back to the truck, climbed in, and drove off.

Randy waited until he couldn't see the truck anymore, then ran to inspect the box. He dropped his sandals when he saw what was inside. A brown and white puppy about the size of a loaf of bread looked up at him. It started thumping its tail and whining. The pup had short hair and shivered, though the temperature was a typical northern Texas mild December afternoon. Randy pulled the poor thing out and held it up to determine - yes! A he dog. A boy should have a boy dog. Just made sense.

He clutched it to his chest, but it wiggled so hard he had trouble hanging on to it, so he gently put the dog back in the box. He put his sandals in with it, whereupon the puppy started chewing on one of the straps.

"No, no! Don't do that. I'll get in a heap of trouble." He retrieved his sandals, latched them together, and tossed them over his shoulder. He carried the box to the fellowship hall door, put it down to open the door, and - just his luck. It was locked. He banged on the door with one fist and rang the doorbell with his other hand.

His mother appeared within a couple of minutes. "What on earth? Where'd you get that dog?"

Randy pointed to the bush where the man left the box. "Some guy just dropped him off in the bushes. Can I keep him? Please, Mom? Please! I promise I'll be the best shepherd St. Mark's ever had. I'll feed him and clean up after him and, and, and - pretty please?"

Lisbeth smiled at her earnest son with his pleading green eyes. As they walked down the hall she said, "Sweetheart."

Randy knew that meant 'no.'

She rustled his red hair and continued, "You know we're not allowed to have pets where we live now. Maybe when Dad and I can afford to buy our own home."

Randy stuck out his lower lip and dropped his head to his chest.

"But you can show the puppy to the other children. Maybe one of their families will take him."

* * *

Skip whistled loud enough to be heard over the excited kids' jabbering and shoving for a chance to hold the little fellow. "Order!" he yelled when they all looked up. "I cannot let one of you have the puppy and disappoint everyone else." He reached down, pried the puppy away from Susie Carter, and cradled it against his shoulder. The puppy thanked him by licking his neck.

He gently placed the furry distraction back in the box and turned to the children. "Listen up. I want you to walk slowly and quietly into the sanctuary. This little guy will stay here for now. When you get in the sanctuary, sit in the first few pews and wait for me. I'll catch up with you all in a minute."

He trailed behind and whispered to Lisbeth, "I think I know the perfect new home for our little furry friend. Remember me telling you about my neighbor, Janie Waterford?"

"The older woman who moved here a few months ago?"

"That's right. She came to church a couple of times, but she isn't ready yet to face the music. Literally. Her husband was a church musician in Victoria. He got cancer and

died last summer. She moved back to Mansfield because she grew up here. I think she thought it would help her get over her husband's death."

"That makes sense. I bet a dog would help in that department. They have a remarkable way of comforting grieving people."

"Right. She could really use some comfort. Her dog died a few weeks ago. She was pretty upset about it. She asked my wife to go with her to the vet to have it cremated. That dog was her support system through her husband's illness."

"Oh, my goodness. That poor woman. How awful."

"I tried to get her to come to church, but she says it's just too hard."

"Giving her the puppy sounds like a match made in heaven," confirmed Lisbeth.

Skip stood in front of the children, now wiggling and squirming in the pews. "All right, all of you - back to work! We go live with the best St. Mark Christmas pageant ever a week from tomorrow. Lisbeth, if you can keep them rehearsing, I'll go call Mrs. Waterford and see if she's ready for a new roommate."

* * *

Janie opened the door seconds after Skip rang the doorbell. She clapped her wrinkled hands in delight, reached for the puppy, and squeezed him so hard he yelped. Stroking the puppy with one hand while holding him firmly against her chest with the other, she invited Skip to come in. They sat at her kitchen Formica top table. "Now tell me again, how did you find this dog? And what's its name?"

Skip told her how Randy saw a man drop off the dog off at church.

"So, there's no way to track down who that man was? I'd hate for him to change his mind," she said while stroking the animal's back. "I couldn't bear it if I let myself fall in love with another dog and then lost him."

"I don't see how he'd ever know where the dog ended up. Even if the man did notice Randy, he certainly doesn't know I brought the dog to you. As for a name, I think that's up to you."

"I believe I'll call him Randy J. - Randy, Junior - in honor of Randy finding him." She cuddled the puppy as tears formed on her cheeks."

"Janie, is something wrong? I thought you'd be happy to have a new puppy friend."

"Oh, I'm thrilled." She held Randy J away to inspect his stubby nose and floppy ears, just as the little guy relieved himself all over her blouse and skirt. Skip jumped up to retrieve the dog, but Janie chuckled.

"Never you mind. It'll all come out in the wash, and he'll learn soon enough to ask to go out. But I wouldn't mind if you held him a minute while I change clothes." She handed Skip a towel to place between himself and the dog and left to change.

She returned a few minutes later in a fresh outfit and took the puppy and the towel back from Skip. She kept Randy J on the towel on her lap. "Now then, you mind your manners." She shook her finger at the puppy, then scratched his head. "I'll take you out for a walk soon."

She turned to Skip. "Oh dear. I gave away all of Buster's things. I couldn't bear to keep seeing them. I don't have a collar or leash or food bowl or anything."

"Tell me what you need, and I'll go get the things and bring them back later today. I don't want Randy J to miss out on a walk for lack of a leash." He pulled a small notebook and pen out of his pocket, prepared to write down the list.

“You are so kind.” She rattled off a half dozen dog-related items and then began to weep again. She dabbed at her eyes with the edge of the towel she’d put on her lap.

“I suppose I should explain myself. I told you about my husband’s cancer, and you know I lost Buster a few weeks ago.”

“Certainly, two good reasons to cry,” said Skip.

“What I never told you,” she paused and looked down at Randy J, caressing the puppy behind his ears. “I never told you the real reason I moved back here.” She sighed and looked up at Skip.

“I’m listening,” encouraged Skip.

“I came back hoping I might find another Randy.”

Skip scrunched his forehead and asked, “Another Randy?”

“We have - that is we had - well, maybe I might still have - I just don’t know - one son.” She reached for a paper napkin from the holder on the table and blew her nose. His name’s Randolph. He was in a bad accident fifteen years ago on December 23. Worst Christmas of my life, that one was. Randolph was in the hospital and rehab for months. He got better, except he got hooked on the painkillers they gave him.”

She squeezed the puppy closer and looked out the window. Skip reached over to put one hand on her wrist.

“We tried for years to help Randolph. In and out of rehab. He just couldn’t get off them, and stay off them. He started stealing money from us. We never knew when he’d show up again.”

Her hands were shaking. The puppy, apparently sensing her distress, began licking her hand. She wrapped the pup in the towel and held him up to her chest like an infant. “Then one day he stormed out of the house after we told him we wouldn’t give him any more money. I haven’t seen him since.”

She put the puppy back on her lap and reached for another napkin to wipe away her tears. “The phone number I have isn’t good. His e-mail doesn’t work. My letters all come back. Last I saw him was here in Mansfield before we moved to Victoria.”

Skip nodded. “You thought if you moved back, you might find him?”

She nodded and blew her nose again. “But that seems like the wishful thinking of an old lady. Of course, I haven’t seen him. Where would I even look? We looked for him for years, but,” she stopped talking.

Skip stood and put his hands on her shoulders. “I know Randy J can’t begin to replace your dear son. But maybe this little fella can keep you company.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am for this little furball. We’re going to be good friends.” She stood up and moved toward the brown box. “I’ll just put this towel in the box, and we’ll call that his bed for now.”

She gently put the puppy and the towel in the box. Randy J started chewing on a corner of the towel. “There you go, little guy. Chew away. Plenty more where that one came from.”

She went to the sink to wash her hands and turned to Skip. “If you’d be so good as to buy the basics to get started, I’ll whip up a batch of cookies while you’re shopping. I feel like celebrating a little.” She went to retrieve her purse from a hook by the back door.

“No need for that,” Skip insisted. “Consider it an early Christmas present.”

“Well, then. Thank you. All the more reason to celebrate.”

After Skip left, Janie rooted through her pantry, rounding up ingredients to make peanut butter cookies. She spread everything out on the counter, turned on the oven, and turned on her CD player with her favorite Perry Como collection of Christmas carols. She sang along with Perry while mixing the cookie dough and putting tablespoons full of dough on cookie sheets. When she opened the oven door, the oven was cold. She checked the stove settings. She'd definitely turned the oven on, but it wasn't heating up at all. With a large sigh, she pulled Randy J out of the box and took him out in the backyard. The puppy squatted and came running back over to her. She picked him up, went back into the kitchen, and plopped down in the chair.

"Little guy, I'm sure glad you're here."

* * *

Skip returned an hour later with four large bags full of doggie delights and basics. Janie looked up from the phone book she had open on the table in front of her. "Do you know any appliance repairmen?"

Skip shook his head 'no,' and set down the packages. "Not really, but my wife had to call someone out a couple of months ago to repair our dryer. What needs repairing?"

She pointed to the open cold oven door.

"That constitutes a full-blown emergency! Let me call her and ask who we used."

After a few minutes, Janie was listening to an appliance office secretary explain that the man they asked for was out of town for the holidays, but they had a new employee who just started. "Should I send him out?"

"If he can fix an oven, why yes, that would be wonderful."

"Ah, ma'am, I think I should warn you. He's, well, he's a bit on the scruffy side. But he's gotten good reviews from other customers."

"Send him out. Do you have the address?"

"Yes ma'am. I wrote it down. He'll be there in about a half hour."

Skip decided he'd better stay to make sure this scruffy appliance repair fellow did what he was sent to do, and nothing more. Skip and Janie let Randy J explore his new home while they sipped hot tea and waited.

A half hour later an old pick-up truck pulled up in front of the house. When the appliance repair man rang the door, Janie scurried to open it. She gasped when she saw the repair man with his shaggy beard and long, stringy hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Randolph? Is that you? Really? Is it really you?"

Skip came to the edge of the kitchen door to observe the scene.

"Mom? What are *you* doing here?" He set down his toolbox and latched on to his mother. Neither pulled back for several moments. When he did step back, he used the back of his hands to wipe away his tears. "I wanted to find you, but I was afraid you never wanted to see me ever again. I got this job, and I figured if I could keep it, then maybe I could hire someone to find you."

"Never you mind about any of that. You just come in here. Oh, my goodness gracious - if seeing you again isn't just the best Christmas present I ever got.

Skip picked up the puppy and sat at the table, waiting on them.

Janie led her prodigal son into the kitchen and introduced him to Skip.

Skip asked him, "Did you by any chance drop this little fella off in a church parking lot this morning?"

The man's jaw nearly touched his chest. "I didn't mean no harm. It showed up at my apartment and I'm not allowed to have a pet. I didn't want trouble with the landlady

and I didn't want to just dump the poor thing out in the country. I figured someone at a church would surely do right by it."

"You sure figured right. I'm dumbfounded at what I'm seeing. I think I should leave and let you two catch up. But don't forget, that oven needs fixing. Your mother owes me some cookies, and I aim to collect on the debt."

* * *

Skip went home long enough to tell his wife, Julie, what had been transpiring that day. Then he drove to the home of Lisbeth and shepherd boy Randy.

"It was a bonified Christmas miracle. I wish you could have seen the shock on both their faces."

"Well, Randy, look at what you started," said Lisbeth, grinning at her son.

When Skip and Randy got to Janie's house, Skip pointed to the appliance repairman man and asked Randy, "Is this the man you saw dropping off the puppy this morning?"

Randy nodded 'yes.'

"Well, you are one terrific shepherd. You've shepherded a stray puppy to a new home, and you've shepherded a lost son back to his mother." Turning to Randolph, Skip asked, "Is that oven working yet?"

The aroma of cookies baking confirmed it was. When the timer went off, Janie pulled two cookie sheets out and set them on the counter. No one waited for the cookies to cool. Skip held one of his cookies out toward the others, like a glass of champagne. "A Christmas toast to our hostess, Janie. May God bless your reunion and bless your new furry companion with a long life."

Young Randy grinned from ear to ear and picked up the puppy, which wiggled and licked him until Randy laughed so hard that Janie took the puppy away to keep him from falling.

"I'd like to come to your pageant, Randy," Janie said. Then, turning to her son, she added, "And I'd like to go to the Christmas Eve service too. Will you go with me? I know you know the way there." She winked, smiled, and held out her own cookie to join the toast.

She turned back to the younger Randy. "Would you like to do the honors of taking this little fellow for his first walk with his brand-new leash and collar?"

Randy bounded over to the bags Skip had delivered and fished out a collar and leash. It took two people to get them on the squirmy puppy. As Randy and the puppy headed to the door, Skip told him, "When you're done walking Randy J, come over to my house. My wife wants to meet our new four-legged neighbor."

Randolph tucked his thumbs in the straps of his overalls and said, "Thank you, young Mister Randy. Thank you, and Merry Christmas to y'all."

Skip and Randy left the prodigal son and his widowed mother to their reunion. The puppy yanked so hard on the leash that young Randy had to hold on with both hands to maintain his balance.

Once outside, Skip said, "The Lord sure does find strange ways to get things done. I'd say you've been used, young man. In a very good way. I'm proud of you. I do believe next year you'll be a very wise man. For this year, I can't think of a better part for you than shepherd."

"Ya, me neither." Randy walked the excited puppy over to a tree. While he squatted, Randy picked up a long branch that had fallen. Holding it like a shepherd

crook in one hand, he pulled on the leash with his other hand. “C’mon, Randy J. I gotta teach you how to walk right.”