

The Christmas Angel by Shari Mann (copied from the Kid in a Dog Suit, Painting by Christina Clarke).



It had taken awhile to coax the whole story out of her, and at the end of it, I could almost see why. She said later it was my obvious reluctance to consider her application for a Rescue Bully that persuaded her to expand.

Rescue gets a form filled out when someone inquires about getting a dog, and that had come back to me in the middle of December, legibly printed with the bare bones information we start out with. Belinda Malvern of Palo Alto, California, and her six-year-old daughter Barbara lived in a rented house with fenced yard and no other animals. They wanted to adopt a young white female if possible, but were open to adopting just about any Bull Terrier. So far, so good. It was the follow-up phone call that produced the doubts.

“Hello, Mrs. Malvern?”

“Yes.”

“This is Shari Mann, Barbary Coast Bull Terrier Club. I’ve received your application. Is it convenient for you to chat for a bit?”

“Sure, please call me Belinda.”


“Okay, first tell me why you want a Bull Terrier.”

“That’s easy. We had one a couple of years ago, and we just loved her. Since we lost her, we’ve been wanting another. But puppies are expensive. I’m divorced, and we don’t have a lot of money. My daughter still misses Angel, and talks about her all the time.”

“What happened to Angel?”

There was too long a pause. Belinda then told me Angel loved to ride in cars, would get into any car with an open door. Someone had left their front gate open, or it had been on purpose, and two-year-old Angel was gone. Intensive searching had produced no leads. Belinda concluded Angel had been stolen, and had finally given up.

I went on with the questions: “Will your landlord be willing to provide a letter saying you can have a Bull Terrier? Do you mind if your rescue dog is neutered



before you get it? That you have to \$150 adoption fee? Where will the dog sleep? Where will it stay while you are at work? Do you mind a house-check?"


The answers were satisfactory, but the lost or stolen Angel bothered me more than a little. This small family still lived in the same house, after all. What was to prevent the same thing from happening again? Bolting and locking a front gate isn't always practical, unlocked gates can be opened. Bull Terriers are stolen, especially since "Spudsmania" has increased the price of the puppies, and brought the breed to the public's attention. Then there are the dog fighters, always with an eye to the main chance. Angel had been spayed, a point in the favor of the Malvern's. But thieves don't generally check reproduction ability before nabbing an animal.

It was a neat, small house, set in the middle of a small, fenced lot. It was not the best of neighborhoods. Misgivings remained. But my Bram liked both Belinda and the charming Barbara. They took to her, getting right down to the dog level to play, with no hesitation or reservations. It's a good idea to take a real, live Bull Terrier on a house check. They tell you more about the people than you could ever learn alone.

In the kitchen over coffee with Barbara out at play, the rest of the tale came out. There had been a husband in the household when Angel was a pup. Harry, absent for long periods, drank when he was at home, and smacked his wife around. Harry hated Angel, for the very good reason she had bitten him twice. Belinda hadn't held it against Angel. In fact, she quite liked the dog for defending her. The first time, Angel had gotten a good hold in Harry's calf and wouldn't shake loose. Belinda had had to pry Angel's jaws open, and had to restrain a certain impulse to giggle. Harry's mood toward Angel festered right along with the wounds, but both eventually healed, at least to all outward appearances. The next time Harry went after Belinda, he tried to kick Angel out of the way first, only to find her clamped to his shoe. So much for foresight. Enraged, he'd broken three of Angel's ribs kicking her loose. They'd told the veterinarian she had tumbled down the stairs.

The divorce had been final for over a year, but Belinda still embarrassed to admit to this wife beating lout of an ex-husband. She feared I'd think their first dog had been mistreated, and of mean temperament into the bargain. She had always been convinced that Harry had stolen Angel himself, or that he'd put someone up to it. Yes, in spite of knowing how much this little daughter doted on the dog.

That information put a much better face on the situation. Belinda's would be a poor but loving home, much better than a rich but uncaring one. A Rescue dog



wouldn't be too apt to get into trouble destroying the fine possessions here, there weren't any. It's good to see a bit of linoleum and metal table about a place. It's Persian carpet and Hepplewhite legs that give you the willies in Rescue.

So, with the lecture that goes "You understand your Rescue dog will be a new dog, not your old one. You have to be ready for a new relationship, and ready to solve new problems." I went off about my business, the place meeting my approval.


On the morning of Wednesday, December 19, my telephone rang. It was Janet from Sonoma Humane Society. They had an older white bitch picked up stray. She'd been kept in isolation for a week. Malnourished she was, with cracked pads, split nails, ear infections in both ears, runny eyes and nose, but not, evidently seriously ill. Whether she was in rough shape because she'd been running stray in our once-in-a-decade cold snap or from a neglectful owner was impossible to tell. But no owner had inquired for her. "When," Janet wanted to know, "can you pick her up?"

Well, you know how it is around Christmas. No one has a spare minute or even a spare square inch of space. Not your friends, club members, and most especially not the professional kennels. There is most decidedly No Room At The Inn. A shelter fifty miles north of home, no housing in sight, and a week to go until Christmas! Could I keep her crated in my cold basement for a couple of days until an appointment could be made for her spaying? Was she well enough for that, and did she have anything communicable that my own nearest and dearest could contract? Would she howl the house down, inspiring my neighbors to call the law? How could the time to go get her be found?

A fellow rescue worker agreed to go get her on the promise he could bring her to my house and not have to keep her at his own. My long-suffering partner agreed she could stay if she left before Christmas Eve, which by this time was three short days away. I said yes to everything and she was delivered to my door.

She was thin, she was dirty. She looked a sorry sight. After a light meal and a bit of a walk she was bedded for the night with warm blankets and a promise of a bath in the morning. Not a peep was heard for the balance of the evening. At least she appeared to be quiet.

I called Belinda after I put the little creature to bed. "Look," I said "I'm really stuck. We don't normally do this, but as you're staying home for Christmas, do you suppose you could look after this little Rescue bitch that's come in suddenly? You haven't any other animals and she doesn't seem as if she'll be much trouble. She needs more than a few good meals, her ears seen to, and her eyes washed. It's



Christmas and all the kennels are full. I most solemnly promise to find somewhere else to house her while we clean her up and figure out who she is, after Christmas.”

Belinda not only agreed to take her temporarily, she volunteered to come and get her, and she'd do it Sunday, December 23. That left more of my Christmas plans intact than I had hoped for. Saturday, the Rescue bitch had her promised bath, her ears were cleaned, nails clipped, cracked pads oiled. She seemed biddable and sweet, and grateful for the attention. I even thought she was beginning to look a bit better. They always do when you start to care for them, though. Her personality was a bit of a mystery. She slept quietly for most of her time with me.

When Belinda and Barbara showed up at the door Sunday morning, the Rescue bitch was quietly resting in her box in the basement. My two Bully girls performed their “greet friends” ritual which is not a quiet one, with much enjoyment all around. And then the Rescue bitch began to bark. And bark, and bark.

I thought, indeed, we all thought, that there was something wrong. So frenzied was the barking. She'd got a paw stuck in her crate door, or a mouse was parading in front of her, taunting her caged state. Surely, something was happening.

We three tripped down the steep back stairs to the less than cozy basement, I opened the kennel door. The little Bully flew out, flew to Barbara, then to Belinda; frantically wagging her body, yelping short, sharp sounds. “Angel?” they exclaimed together. “Angel?” in disbelief.

Yes, it was Angel, their very own Angel come home again in time for Christmas Day.