Chapter 21A: What is That Smell?

In 1984, after a difficult divorce, we hired a builder to construct a small ranch home. We didn't have much, but we had each other and the comfort of staying in Hathaway Springs, surrounded by familiar faces and routines. Life was about to send us on a new adventure, sparked by an unexpected question and ending in a story our family would never forget.

Fran's brother, Larry, passed away while I was downstate for work. I immediately went to their home, where Ted and Fran had gathered with the family to commemorate Larry and to plan his memorial. The conversation turned to practical matters.

"What are we going to do with Larry's dog, Brandy?" someone asked. "She's a pedigree with a superior lineage."

The room fell silent, and suddenly, all eyes were on me. I froze. *Oh no. I'm not sure we're ready for a pet.*

I tried to stall. "Let me think about it. Barb and John would be thrilled, but the expense and care are a bit overwhelming."

A few days later, "Larry's Ginger Brandy of Downey Star" was curled quietly in my back seat for the four-hour drive home. I told Barbara and John to be home for a surprise, even though it was Devil's Night and they had to forgo their usual mischief with friends. When the golden retriever bounced toward them, disappointment quickly vanished.

"Her name's Brandy," I explained.

"Well," Barbara said, scratching behind the dog's ears, "she looks more like an Alex."

And just like that, Brandy became Alex. She quickly won our neighborhood over with her

gentle, friendly ways. Our pet-friendly neighborhood, with acre lots, gave her room to roam the woods, visit neighbors, and return home, with her tail always wagging with delight.

A couple of years later, our loving Alex gave us a lasting memory.

It was an early, hectic morning as I packed for an overnight work trip to Lansing, where I was scheduled to lead a statewide meeting. My mind was already racing through the details when Alex scratched at the sliding door. She needed to go out.

I slid open the door and breathed in the crisp autumn air. The woodsy scent of northern Michigan always brought me peace. Alex bounded into the yard with her usual energy, and I figured I had at least fifteen minutes before she came back.

Minutes later, I heard her bark. I opened the slider to see her trotting toward me— head hanging, tail tucked, eyes guilty.

And then the smell hit me.

"John!" I shouted. "You better get up; I need your help."

He shuffled sleepily down the hall, rubbing his eyes. "What's going—PHEW! What is that smell?"

"Alex got into something," I said quickly. "I don't have time for this. Would you please take her into the shower and give her a good shampoo?"

John groaned but grabbed her collar. "Come on, girl. You stink!"

With that, the two disappeared into the bathroom while I dashed out the door for Lansing.

When I returned the next evening, I smelled skunk before I even set down my bags. The whole house reeked. Shampoo hadn't worked. A neighbor suggested a tomato juice bath, so we

poured can after can over Alex. The smell lingered on her red fur and on us for days, seeping into the house.

Eventually, the odor faded, leaving only the sound of laughter. As we retold the story, John and Barbara always added their own twist, highlighting how I left them with a skunked retriever while I went to work.

Looking back, that incident became a family classic. It reminds us that even hard times can lead to cherished memories.

Our 1986 Christmas Photo — Barb, Alex, John