Solace in Winter

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JACK

A mile or so outside of Solace there was a sharp bend in the road with trees either side; a blind corner in other words, no problem provided you knew it was there but lethal to strangers or those who'd spent the evening in the bar in town. In the winter it was a hazard to everyone, but at least there were no tourists around then, so serious accidents were rare. This particular year, though, there were two mishaps in the space of a couple of weeks and in both cases the first person on the scene was Jack Gallagher. Unless you believed in fate, which Jack didn't, you'd have to accept it was pure chance.

The first incident took place a few days before Christmas and was just a foretaste of what was to come. It was mid-afternoon, and the patches of lake that weren't frozen over glinted flint-grey through the trees. A scattering of snowflakes drifted down. They were just foretastes too.

Jack was walking back from town, shoulders hunched, collar turned up, a shopping bag in each hand, when he saw what looked like an old coat, though he knew it wouldn't be an old coat, lying in the road near the bend. The light was fading and he couldn't quite make it out. Too small for a deer, too big for a porcupine. Maybe a wolf, though it was rare to see them nowadays.

When he got close he saw it was a dog. He gave it a

shove with his foot, thinking he'd move it off the road – it was icy, if a car hit the body or swerved to miss it, it could skid off and hit a tree – and the dog opened its eyes.

Jack set his bags down carefully – along with the week's groceries there was a bottle of Scotch in one of them – and squatted down. He did that carefully too, his knee was giving him trouble.

He didn't know what kind it was; just a dog. Its eyes were closed again and its breathing was shallow. From time to time a shudder ran through its body. He reckoned it was very near death, and suffering.

Nothing for it, he thought, feeling vaguely sick; he stood up and looked around for something to finish it off with. A few yards away there was a large rock; he fetched it – it was heavy, which was what was needed. He crouched down again beside the dog, knee protesting, considering the best angle to hit it from. The back of the skull, probably. One good blow should do it. He felt decidedly sick now, and disgusted by his own squeamishness.

Putting down the rock for a moment, he reached out and touched the dog's head awkwardly in a kind of apology; he wasn't a dog lover, but even so. 'It'll be quick,' he said, partly for his own reassurance. It opened its eyes again and gave its tail a faint thump. The thump took him by surprise. In the circumstances there was something near-heroic about it.

He stood up again and looked back towards town, pondering distances. If he'd had the truck he'd have loaded the animal into it and taken it to the vet, but his truck was out of action. It was now snowing in earnest; when he looked back the dog was already mottled with flakes. There was a narrow, black, dog-shaped border of wet ground surrounding it where the heat from its body was melting the snow.

Jack picked up his shopping bags, carried them over to a scrub of juniper bushes and stashed them there. As an afterthought he removed the bottle of whisky, opened it, took a couple of hefty swallows, then returned it to the bag.

Then he went back to the dog. Cautiously he slid his hands under it and started to lift – it yelped sharply and he paused, hands still under the animal, and reconsidered. His knee hurt. It was cold, getting colder; in an hour it would be dark. It was a good half-mile back to the vet and the movement would cause the animal further pain. Plus the dog was heavy. He was a big man and once upon a time he wouldn't have given it a thought, but now he wasn't sure he was up to it. But it was either that or kill it.

'Well,' he said aloud after a minute, 'either we do this or we don't.' He heaved the animal up, ignoring its cries, and headed back towards town.

Until recently there hadn't been a vet in Solace, or rather there'd been one some years previously but he'd arrived just before winter set in and only lasted three months. Nobody was surprised. He was from Southern Ontario and had spent childhood summers in the North and fallen in love with the lakes and forests and beautiful whale-shaped rocks, all basking in the warm summer sunshine. 'I've dreamed of living up here ever since,' he said to everyone when he and his pretty young wife arrived. 'I'll bet you people don't appreciate how beautiful it is. You probably don't even see it anymore.'

He stopped seeing it himself round about the middle of February. The winter had taken him by surprise; he'd thought it couldn't be worse than winters in Hamilton but he was wrong. The cold and the never-ending snow were unbelievable. His patients mostly lived on farms at the end

of long, rutted, unploughed tracks. His pretty young wife spent a lot of time in tears. His parting words as they drove away for ever were, 'Why does anybody live up here? It's just ridiculous.'

But now there was a new vet who, according to rumour, had grown up in North Bay so presumably knew what he was in for. Jack hadn't met him; he knew most people in Solace by sight and a few by name, but he spent as little time as possible in town. He knew where the vet lived, though – in an old house this side of town with a shiny new sign outside saying *Veterinary Surgery* and a big black arrow pointing round the back.

A battered truck was in the driveway, fresh tire tracks in the snow. Jack, whose knee had harassed him every step of the way, stumbled around to the back and having no hands free, kicked the door several times with his boot. It was opened by a tall, thin, dishevelled young man in the act of taking off his coat.

'Ah,' the young man said, looking at the dog. 'Right. Come in.' He was wearing very muddy boots and had snow in his hair.

He stepped aside to give Jack room, quickly hung his coat on a hook by the door, kicked off his boots and ushered him in his socks through a waiting room with no one in it and into a stark, white-painted, brightly lit room.

'Found it at the side of the road,' Jack said. 'Not even sure if it's still alive.'

'Put it down there and we'll find out,' the vet said. He gestured at an examination table in the middle of the room, then went over to the sink, scrubbed his hands vigorously, dried them, came back to the table and began examining the dog. 'Alive, but not in great shape,' he said. The animal flinched as his hands moved over it. 'Sorry, girl,' he said and took a moment to stroke its head.

'It's a she?' Jack asked.

'Yeah, it's a she. She was hit by a car?'

'Probably. I didn't see it happen, just found it.'

The vet glanced up. 'I don't think we've met. I'm Tomas Mahler.' When he smiled he looked like a kid.

'Jack Gallagher. Nice to meet you.'

The vet fetched his stethoscope and listened to the dog's heart or its breathing or whatever it was they listened to, moving the stethoscope here and there. Finally he straightened up and stood, considering. The dog was doing a pretty good job of looking beyond hope.

Not wanting to hear the verdict, Jack said hurriedly, 'Anyway, I've got to get back. I left my groceries out by Black Point, need to get them home and it's a bit of a hike.'

'You walked from Black Point? Carried her here?'

He looked amazed. Jack didn't know whether to be gratified or insulted. Maybe his beard made him look older. Couple of years ago I could have knocked you flat, he thought. Probably still could.

'Truck's out of action. Gearbox.'

Tomas Mahler nodded sympathetically. 'A nuisance.' He hesitated. 'Would you mind staying for a minute? I need to phone the dog's owner and I don't want to leave her alone in case she moves and falls off the table.'

'You know who owns it?'

'I think she belongs to a farmer out along Tinder Road. She needs surgery and it could be a big job. Which means expensive. Plus I can't guarantee the outcome. Anyway, if you could wait with her for a minute while I make the call?'

Jack nodded reluctantly. He was thinking of his groceries. The shopping bags were paper and would be wet through; carrying them home without their bottoms falling out was going to be tricky. He pictured the whisky,

smashed on a rock. Mustn't happen: he reckoned he'd earned a double.

From the hall he heard dialling, followed by a brief one-sided conversation. Then the vet came back, his mouth tight.

'Like I thought. He won't pay. I understand and all that . . .'

'So what happens now?' He didn't want to know but couldn't stop himself asking. 'You going to put it down?'

'Yeah. She's suffering. Can't leave her like this. It's a shame, she's young, not even full grown yet, and she looks strong. I told him she has a chance but he said it wasn't worth it.'

Jack wished the vet would stop calling it 'she'. It gave the dog an identity somehow. Not any old dog, a young female.

Tomas was studying him. 'You don't happen to want a dog, do you?' he said hopefully. 'Possibly quite an . . . expensive one?'

'Nope,' Jack said.

'OK. Just thought I'd ask. You carried her a hell of a long way.'

Jack shrugged.

'OK,' Tomas said again. 'But could you stay while I give her the injection? Just talk to her. It would reassure her. She's taken to you; every time you speak she tries to wag her tail.'

Jack gave him a long, flat look. 'Nice try.'

The vet smiled faintly. 'It's true, though.'

'I don't want a dog.'

'Ever had one?'

'No. Because I don't want a dog.'

'If you got to know her you might change your mind.'

The vet didn't want to kill it and was trying to find a

way not to. It would be an inevitable part of the job but it must be a hard one, Jack thought, especially if you were an animal-lover, which presumably vets were. Jack wasn't, specially, but he didn't want any part of it. A lethal injection struck him as worse than a blow to the skull.

'The answer's still no.'

But it was time to get out of here, because despite himself he'd been watching the dog and sure enough, every time he spoke its tail twitched. Go home, he told himself. It's getting dark. Whisky's waiting.

He reached out and touched the animal's head again in apology and farewell, and with a clearly enormous effort it raised its head and licked his hand.

There was silence. Jack lowered his hand and studied the floor. He was embarrassed. Ridiculous to be embarrassed by a dog, but there it was. He was also moved, which embarrassed him still more.

The vet said nothing, which was smart. Possibly he was studying the floor too. His left sock was almost worn through at the toe, Jack noticed, a few frail threads of yarn stretching themselves over the skin like a bald man trying to pretend he wasn't. The socks were a startling shade of green, almost neon. A lurid colour. They looked handmade, though, which meant they were a gift, so not the man's fault. Probably made by his mother-in-law, in which case he'd have to wear them until the day one of them died. At least they were wearing out.

He stole a quick look at the dog and wished he hadn't; its eyes were open and it was watching him as if it had enough strength for only two tasks: watching this old man and breathing. As if it knew its life depended on him. Could it know that? Oh for Christ's sake, he thought. It's a dog!

But still.