

GIRL MEETS DOG

by Lulu

She had almost arrived safely back in Dawson when she found it, in a ditch beside the road. It was still a pup but almost too heavy for her to carry. It yelped and snapped when she lifted its bloody body, but it didn't bite.

Jenny had already lowered it onto the passenger seat of the truck when she remembered the burlap bag in the back, wedged under the spare tire. She should slide it underneath the dog. But lifting the pup would cause it pain. What did it matter, a blood stain on the worn seat of an old truck? Her boyfriend Tory, who owned the Dodge, would be grumpy. At the dump she would find something to cover the seat.

The old truck shuddered and made the dog whine. It was panting rapidly, as if fanning a fire inside that kept it from dying. Jenny wondered why she had to be the one who rescued it? What if she left it for someone else to find? Yet Jenny knew that she hadn't simply found the dog. She was meant to stop where she did, to find it.

In the early morning she'd dropped Tory off at the mine and driven six hours to Whitehorse. She'd left right after her appointment and been on the Klondike Highway long enough for the freezing to be gone from her jaw. As she was closing in on Dawson, Jenny envisioned the Epsom salts she'd pour in the tub, felt the heat as she swirled the hot water. At her off-grid cabin there was no running water but Tory had said she could have a bath at his place.

Then she'd felt the need to pull over, that she urgently needed a break. She got out and stood on the shoulder. There wasn't a vehicle in sight, coming or going. The willows were already losing their summer maturity. Wind in the black spruce. A raven in a tangle of willows yelled a greeting.

A single yelp, short, sharp. She peered down the bank, across the ditch but didn't see anything. Then she spotted it. The dog was in the alders as if it had been hurled there. It lay all misaligned, like it didn't know how to pull its limbs into the right positions.

In the truck, Jenny patted the puppy's head. It earned her a lick. There was a softness to the dog's features that told Jenny it was a female.

The Vet didn't know the dog, had no idea who the owner might be. He guessed it was less than a year old. Since there was no other vet for over 500 kilometres, he figured the dog may have been new to the area.

"Strays end up here all the time. Mushers aren't the problem. Sure they shuffle dogs when they're putting a team together. The problem is people who think animals don't have feelings. Like gamblers with nothing left to bet but their dog."

The Dawson clinic didn't have the equipment to do a proper assessment. Jenny would have to take it down to Whitehorse. He could call ahead. Or, and he touched her arm as he said this, "I can do euthanasia. Whatever you feel is right for your dog."

The least she could do was take it to Whitehorse, see if it could be fixed.

The Vet wouldn't charge for the consultation but – and he nodded towards the jar with a sticker on it: X-ray Machine – Donations. When he was washing his hands, she stuck twenty bucks in the jar. He offered to carry the pup out to the truck, but Jenny felt she knew the dog

better and would cause it less hurt. As he opened the truck door the Vet said, “You need someone with you so you get there in one piece.”

Tory booked off early. He accepted that the dog needed the passenger seat, twisting his big body behind the front seat, onto the narrow bench. He said, “All this for a dog that isn’t even yours?”

She drove the whole way and Tory only warned her once: “140 is too fast.”

There was nothing wrong with Tory. In fact, everything about him was right. They’d met in the Best Cocktail Bar in the North, shortly after she arrived. Tory had caught her eye and she kept sneaking glances, finding him looking back every time until they both burst out laughing. She had little experience with hard liquor, but she knew that ordering a third *Spank My Naughty Ass* would lead to a *Bloomer Remover*. So to avoid getting plastered, she headed to the other side of the bar where a dark-haired woman with a soft voice read Tarot.

The Arcana and wands and swords made no sense to Jenny. The cards were interpreted for her.

“You have difficulty making decisions. Others tell you what to do.”

Jenny had to admit that the cards were right. In fact, she came to Dawson because a friend told her she’d earn enough in one summer for two semesters of school. She took no responsibility for her life. This realization hit her like a thunderbolt right out of the bright night sky. She promised herself that from now on she’d be decisive. If she screwed up – well, that was better than handing her life over to someone else. With fresh resolve, she marched across the room, took the cute guy by the hand and led him out into the midnight brightness.

With Tory, she set the terms: their summer fling would end in September when she flew to Berlin for Botany and he drove to Edmonton for Anthropology. The expiration date gave them license to experiment, to explore each other without holding back. Tory was two years younger than her which, they discovered, was a huge gap when you're nineteen and twenty-one. They agreed that they didn't love each other, only a summer fling.

The Whitehorse Vet pointed to the X-rays to explain how she'd concluded the dog had been run over. She went through the surgical procedure step-by-step, describing how she could repair the damage. Post-surgery the dog would need a full-time caregiver to squeeze the dog's hips many times each day so it could perform. The puppy may never recover her ability to walk or function on her own.

Jenny didn't want all the gory details, but when she was handed the estimate, she realized the details were to justify the expense. Then, quietly, she was quoted the fee for euthanasia. Although it was double what Dawson charged, the cost of termination was miniscule compared to the cost of the treatment.

Left alone with the dog to make her decision, she wished the lights weren't so bright. Jars and trays held instruments to cut through flesh. The X-rays glared with their ghostly gray evidence of betrayal. Jenny felt heavy limbed from holding the wheel for 1,600 kilometres and lack of sleep.

If not for the dog's panting she might think it was already dead. She looked at it on the cold aluminum table. The eyes opened. The eyes told her to make the right decision.

All summer Jenny had worked one full-time and two part-time jobs. She'd saved more than she'd expected, enough for travel, tuition and living expenses for 8 months. She wouldn't need to work parttime and could concentrate on her studies. Her bank account held almost exactly the same amount as the estimate on the paper in her hand. Saving the dog would cost her Botany in Berlin.

The Vet frowned at her choice of name, Hit and Run, so Jenny called her dog Runny. During the weeks of changing dressings and monitoring for infection, Jenny's greatest fear was that a stranger would claim her dog. When they went outside, as they did frequently, Jenny dreaded hearing, "That's my dog!" She tied a bandana around Runny's neck, until she realized it was a lame effort to disguise the dog.

Jenny quit her jobs to care for Runny. When she informed people down south that she wasn't going to university, she didn't mention the dog. They understood *gap year* much better. Runny recovered, but with a twisted spine and damaged hindquarters. She gathered old mushing harnesses and wheels from abandoned strollers and fiddled with a design. A welding buddy made the contraption. The first time she was strapped into it, Runny caught on, racing off with her front legs, her back end rolling along behind.

The glorious summer was killed off by early frost and snow in the mountains. Tory kissed her good-bye and got into his truck. Another long juicy kiss through the truck window knocked his cap off. He slapped it against the side of the truck as he took off. Jenny felt like Mandrake the

Magician, waving goodbye to her apprentice whose satchel she'd filled with new tricks and magic potions. Tory gunned it down her long lane, Runny racing after barking like crazy.

They settled in, dog and human, claiming each other. The puppy evolved into a patient, persistent communicator, teaching Jenny about her body. They no longer felt alone in the world. Jenny felt something else too – for the first time. She had fallen in love.

She took the pregnancy test to confirm what she already knew. She was two weeks late. She'd already decided not to tell Tory, at least not yet. Now that she had fallen in love with Runny, she wanted to round out the family with a little human.