



The Gift

A Holiday Short

J.K. HOGAN

The Gift (*Frost* #0.5)
A holiday short by J.K. Hogan

My Dinah was never supposed to have been bred. Joint problems due to a childhood case of physitis and her chronic anemia would've made it risky to carry a foal to term. Yet there I was, on a dark and stormy night even, walking out to the barn to check my pregnant mare.

Dinah had been a gift from my brother, and she was the only thing I had left of him. I'd be damned if I was going to lose her just because some idiot boarder had forgotten to latch her stallion's stall. Said stallion had impregnated three mares that night, my precious Arabian among them. I'd calmly asked the boarder to vacate the premises a week later.

Exiting from the side door of The Manor, the primary residence at Twisted Oak Ranch, I started down the long, winding path downhill to the main barn. Rain pelted me from all sides, somehow sneaking underneath my raingear in places and chilling through my skin down to my bones. A loud clap of thunder made me jump, and it was immediately followed by a brief but intense spark of lightning, eerily illuminating the world as if the sun had risen and set in the span of a second.

I guess I should've considered myself lucky it wasn't snowing.

Another boom, another flash accompanied by a deafening crack that stopped me in my tracks. An ominous creaking sound rent the air, and then my world filled with the noises of splintering wood and screaming horses. I picked up speed, tearing down the hill at a break-neck pace, my galoshes slipping and sliding in the mud.

Lightning blazed across the sky.

Hooves pounded.

Somebody was loose.

Who was it? I practically tumbled down the last portion of the hill until I finally made it to flat ground. At a dead run, I vaulted over the paddock fence and landed relatively smoothly on the other side. From that vantage point, I could see the damage. One of the giant oaks that surrounded the barn had been struck by lightning. Half of it had broken off and crumpled the end of the barn.

My heart stopped for so long I thought I might have to start giving myself compressions. The foaling stalls were at both ends of the long rectangular barn. The one that housed my Dinah was halfway underneath the monolithic tree.

"No!" I shouted, though there was no one around to hear me.

As I neared the carnage of my barn, I noticed that the tree had compromised the door frame, and the stall door hung open at an awkward angle. Steeling myself for the worst, I peered inside. There was nothing in the stall but a pile of splintered wood from the collapsing wall and ceiling, and a mound of bloody straw bedding.

It wasn't enough blood for a serious injury, thank God, but it was strangely diluted... Then the tumblers clicked into place. A scenario I hadn't even imagined came to mind, and the only thing worse would've been if Dinah was still inside the crushed stall.

The foal was coming. I couldn't be sure the blood was from Dinah's water breaking, but deep down, I knew it. Maybe she'd already been ready to drop the foal before the storm, or the trauma of the tree falling on her stall had jumpstarted it. Either way, that foal was on its way, and Dinah was stampeding through the woods in the middle of a gale.

Never mind the dangers of foaling in the inclement weather, between the darkness and the flooding, Dinah could just as easily go sliding down the side of the mountain. A cold sweat trickled down the back of my neck as I looked around frantically, trying to decide what to do. Another peal of thunder galvanized me into action.

Heading toward the center aisle of the barn, I pulled out my keys and unlocked the tack room. I turned on the receiver to our walkie-talkie system, grabbed a handset and a spare just in case, and the keys to the Kawasaki Mule we kept on site for checking the trails. I dashed to the back of the building where the Mule was parked and I leapt inside, starting the ignition and peeling off before I was even firmly in my seat.

The vehicle fishtailed for a few tense seconds before I got it under control. I flicked on the headlights and accelerated to the highest speed I could get out of the heavy ATV. Gripping the wheel with one hand, I used the other to unclip the radio from my belt. There were only two live-in employees on the ranch besides me, and it was doubtful they had their radios on in the middle of the night on the day before Christmas Eve, but I figured I might as well let them know what was going on just in case.

I held down the talk button and had to yell over the deluge of driving rain. “Hey, it’s Rush. Not sure if anyone’s switched on, but here goes. A tree fell on the barn, Dinah’s loose and I think she’s in labor. I’m heading out on the Mule to chase her down. I’ll check in when I find her. Over.”

There was nothing but silence on the usual channel, so I took that to mean everyone was sleeping, radios having been switched off when they punched out. I wheeled the Mule around the side of the barn and hit the most accessible trail from the paddock. The rain had slowed a tiny bit, and Dinah’s deep hoof prints were clearly visible in the mud. “Small favors,” I muttered.

The trail guides had nicknamed the main trail Rattlesnake—I hoped it was more due to its serpentine nature than its resident reptiles, but I didn’t know. Owning Twisted Oak Ranch had been Caleb Calder’s dream job, not mine. When I found out after my brother’s death that he’d willed the place to me, I’d almost sold it. Almost. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I moved to Sugar Hollow, Tennessee, and took over the running of the ranch. While I’d been around horses all my life, I still had a lot to learn.

I jammed down the Mule’s accelerator, and tried to squeeze out just a little more speed. The vehicle was made for durability and power over rough terrain, not high speed chases, but it was all I had available. It had four-wheel-drive and all-terrain tires, so at least the sliding was minimal.

The tree canopy quickly converged on me until I could no longer see the lights from the barn. The thunder was coming fewer and farther between, and I thought I could just make out the sound of panicked hoofbeats from down the trail.

For a few heart-stopping minutes, I thought I’d lost my way, the Mule fishtailing wildly around the switchbacks. In an instant, my headlights swept across a copse of trees and I saw her. She was down. Once a horse went down, it was a race against time to get her walking again before her own mass began to crush her organs.

I threw the Mule in park and left it running, with the beams of light pointing in the direction of Dinah, who was huddled in a small clearing. Even from a few feet away I could see the whites of her eyes; she was terrified and in pain. I approached swiftly but with due caution, as we could both be hurt if I spooked her now.

“Easy, girl,” I crooned. “Daddy’s here now.”

Dinah was lying on her side, her great barrel chest and distended abdomen heaving with her labored breaths. She let out a groan as her legs stiffened and muscles rippled in her belly. She craned her neck to nip at the offending area with her teeth.

When I made it to her, I ran my hands along her neck, her body, and her legs, checking for any injuries from her panicked flight. I found nothing but a few cuts and abrasions, nothing that wouldn't heal if I got her through her labor. The problem was I knew nothing about foaling. I ran a trail ranch, not a breeding farm. My foreman and trail guides took care of any medical issues that didn't need the vet.

The vet. I pulled out my phone, thanking God for the waterproof case, and dialed Dr. Taylor, our regular vet. After six agonizing rings, he finally answered.

"Somebody better be dead or dying."

"Doc! It's Rush Calder. We've had an incident here at the farm and Dinah got out. She's out here on the trail trying to push out this foal."

"Lead her back to the barn and I'll get there as soon as I can, son."

"I can't! She's down and she isn't getting up. She seems like she's in a lot of pain. Can you come?"

"I'll head out, but I heard there were a couple of trees down on the main road. That, plus it bein' so close to Christmas, will probably make it slow going. I'll let you know how it goes. Meantime, you need to keep trying to get her up unless that foal's ready to drop right now."

"Is there anything I can do if I can't get her up?"

"Feel her belly and check under her tail, see if you can determine what position the foal's in. That way I'll know what we're dealing with. And try and keep her calm."

"Thanks, Doc," I murmured after he'd already hung up.

Before I started messing with Dinah, I radioed an S.O.S. one more time, on the off chance someone might hear. I really didn't want to get kicked in the head and have no one know where the hell I was. "Rush here. I'm about halfway up Rattlesnake Road, just off the trail in a clearing. Dinah's in labor—she's down and struggling. I could use some help if anyone can hear. Over."

First, I grasped Dinah's halter and put all my weight into trying to pull her upright. If I got her head up, the body might follow. All that got me was a groan and an eye roll, coupled with an angry tail flick. Then she twitched the leg closest to me in warning. My girl wasn't getting up.

I moved slowly so that Dinah could track what I was doing, roaming my hands over her taught, swollen belly. I felt a hard nub of a tiny hoof and when I put pressure on it, it moved. I couldn't tell what position the foal was in just by feeling, but at least I knew it was alive.

Dinah grunted as another contraction ripped through her. Standing up, I went to the other side of her, away from thrashing limbs, trailing my hand along her quivering back so she would know I was there. I carefully lifted her tale and saw the one thing I'd hoped I wouldn't. The foal was breech.

If not handled correctly, the situation could mean death for both Dinah and her foal. "What do I do? What do I do?" I muttered to myself. I could try to help pull the foal out but I had no idea what I was doing, and I could end up hurting them both more than helping.

Though we'd been having an unseasonably mild winter, both Dinah and I were soaked to the skin and starting to shiver from the cold. Time was running out. I had to help Dinah or I was sure to lose her. I gathered my courage and knelt directly behind her, hoping I was still at an awkward enough angle for her not to be able to kick me during a contraction.

In that moment, I heard hooves pounding down the trail, rapidly getting louder. I gasped when a horse and rider burst into the clearing, silhouetted in the beam of my headlights. It was *him*.

Miller Frost, the live-in foreman that Caleb had hired to run the day-to-day operations of the ranch, was the last person I would've pegged for a cowboy. He had shoulder-length brown hair that he usually pulled back in a half-ponytail, a lip piercing and God knew what other ones, and tattoos all over his arms. Of course, when he wasn't on a horse, he was on his Harley. The only things that bespoke his cowboy nature were the snakeskin cowboy boots he always wore under his frayed jeans.

Frost was not my biggest fan. He hadn't been happy when I'd inherited the ranch and moved there. He was used to doing things his way, as Caleb had deferred to him on pretty much everything. I was the first one to admit I was a little rusty with all the equine stuff, but no way was I going to own a business that I didn't have a hand in running.

Still, there he was riding the biggest, meanest bastard of a horse we had. Black as sin, thickly muscled, standing almost seventeen hands high, the Tennessee Walker's given name was Celt, but the trail guides affectionately called him Widow-Maker. Celt's attitude was even more piss-poor than Miller Frost's, so it wasn't a surprise that the two of them got along.

Miller swung off of Celt's back and left him in a ground-tie. For me, the big bastard would've been halfway to the barn the moment I turned my back, but he stood here and huffed steam from his nose when Miller Frost told him to stay.

"Heard your S.O.S. How long has she been in labor?"

"I don't know if she was in labor when the tree came down or if the trauma got it started. It's been about half an hour since she got loose."

He walked over, knelt down beside me and cursed when he saw what I'd seen. "Gotta get this foal out." His deep voice rumbled in his chest.

"I don't know how," I said, not liking the high-pitched fear I heard in my own voice.

"I do. You sit over there by her back, lean over and put your hands on her belly. When I give you the go ahead, I need you to press down and try to guide the foal towards me. You got it?"

I nodded and did as he said. I couldn't see exactly what he was doing, and I was pretty sure I didn't want to. I assumed he was slipping his hands in alongside the foal so that he could pull.

"As soon as her next contraction starts, you're going to push and I'm going to pull," he said. Almost as soon as he spoke the words, Dinah began shuddering, her body tensing all over.

Miller gritted his teeth and groaned as her muscles clamped down on his forearms, but he didn't complain. He leaned back as he put all his strength into easing the foal out. "Okay, push! Not too hard, just steady pressure down and towards me."

If felt like seconds, it felt like a lifetime, but after what was probably more like five minutes of the push and pull, Miller fell backwards. The foal was out up to her ribcage and Dinah easily delivered the shoulder and head on her own.

After a few panting breaths, Dinah halfway sat up and sort of curled around the foal, licking her clean. I glanced over at Miller and he was watching mother and baby with this beautiful, reverent smile on his face. My heart thumped a couple of times in my chest and my stomach fluttered. Perhaps there was more to the gruff biker-cowboy than I'd seen so far. He was stunning to look at, that was for sure, and he clearly loved the animals as much as I did.

"You saved her," I said softly.

His head snapped up and he looked at me, as if suddenly remembering that I was there. “I’d never let an animal suffer,” he said. Anguish crept into his expression, and I wanted to pull the man into my arms and hold on, for both of our sakes. But I didn’t—he probably would’ve punched me for trying.

However, our gazes locked and lingered for longer than what was normal. We’d just been through something together, something that mattered. I’d never forget the gift he’d given me.

“What will you name her?” he asked in a gravelly whisper.

“*Shai*,” I said without hesitation. “It means ‘gift’ in Hebrew.

Miller stared at me for an interminable moment before the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile.

Wade’s General Store was pretty much the only place to shop in Sugar Hollow. It was at the foot of Flatwood Mountain, the same mountain on which Twisted Oak Ranch sat, halfway up. I was still getting used to the fact that Wade’s was ‘The Place’ to be for miles around. Sometimes I still felt a little suffocated by not being able to just drive to Walmart or somewhere and get lost in a crowd.

The grizzled old store was owned by an equally grizzled old man, Hiram Wade. Word was, every year on the day after Thanksgiving, at 5 a.m. like clockwork, Old Man Wade hauled all the Christmas crap out of the attic and completely decked the place out. I was inclined to believe it since the place was covered wall to wall with holiday crap from garlands and mistletoe, to blow-up Santas and four—count ‘em, *four*—Christmas trees. The store that used to resemble a Cracker Barrel was transformed into one of those year-round Christmas outlets. It was like the eight tiny reindeer had gotten trapped inside and shit tinsel and glitter everywhere.

I was overwhelmed—and slightly nauseated by the convergence of odors from several scented candles, ranging from evergreen, cinnamon, pumpkin, and peppermint—but I was hoping to find something to get for Miller Frost. He’d given me the ultimate gift. He’d saved my horse, the last thing I had from my brother, and her foal. That was a debt I would never repay, but I wanted to make the gesture anyway.

I browsed around, passing over porcelain angel statues, barrels of sugar stalks, ‘kiss the cook’ aprons, and the like. I knew virtually nothing personal about Frost, but I was determined to get him a gift he’d like. What I really wanted to do was grab the man and kiss him, but that would’ve been all kinds of inappropriate. Well, a man could dream...

I wandered over to the tack section, checking over Wade’s new inventory. That was where I saw it—a gorgeous, hand-tooled leather roping saddle with custom Montana Silversmiths trim on it. It was the most beautiful piece of tack I’d ever seen in person. I knew what kind of saddle Frost had. It was made of faded black nylon and falling apart. Without checking the price tag, I walked over to the register and pointed out the saddle to Sandy, the sales girl.

“I want to buy that saddle. Can you have someone wrap it up for me?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Calder,” she said.

I handed her my credit card and she rang it up. As I was signing the receipt, I caught sight of a familiar silhouette just inside the adjacent room. Miller Frost was there. I thanked Sandy and walked in his direction, hoping to distract him while the saddle was being taken down.

Miller wore a camel colored Carhartt jacket with his signature ripped jeans and cowboy boots. He had his long hair tucked inside a slouchy beanie. As I neared him, my fingers itched to touch him, to grab on and hold tight. Between lust and gratitude, I was already so gone over him, even though I could barely stand him on a good day.

As I came up behind him, I heard him draw in a sharp breath. It was as if he knew I was there, like he'd scented me. I pressed closer without making contact, heart racing and palms sweating. I was helpless under the spell of the cantankerous cowboy who looked like a hooligan, and all I wanted to do was reach out and touch him. So I did...

The End...