

A Winter's Tale

Colin Thomas battled for control as gusts of wind fought the car as though to push the intruder off the rutted, muddy track. When he missed the sign, the detour he'd followed had rapidly become this serpentine but overgrown and diminishing trace of an usable thoroughfare.

The windscreen wipers struggled to clear the windscreen as he inched forward, looking for a place to turn around. His vision was further hampered by the leaves and twigs being torn from the large trees lining the track and flung against the windscreen.

He rounded a bend and his heart sank

The wind had uprooted a dead chestnut and it lay across his path.

He muttered an oath at his stupidity in having taken a wrong turn. In truth, his mind had been preoccupied with the events of the past two days and the anticipation of what the next few might bring.

Summing up the situation, he realised that there was no possibility of turning about on this narrow track. Trying to reverse all the way back to where he had turned off would also be futile in this storm.

Hang on a mo, he thought, didn't I just pass what looked like a farm gate a few hundred yards back?

There was nothing else to do but reverse back to the gate. It took an eternity of painstaking effort but mercifully the gate was closer than he'd remembered.

Once there, he realised that the only way he could turn would be to open the gate.

As he struggled to open the door against the wind, he was hit by a blast of driving rain that stung his cheeks and pelted him with bits of foliage.

His feet squelched into the mud as he sheltered his eyes with his hands and squished his way towards the gate.

His curse was lost in the roar of the wind – the gate was secured by a padlock and chain.

His heart sank before he remembered that the firm's toolbox was still in his boot and that it contained bolt cutters.

Like a condemned man, an overwhelming sense of relief flooded him at the chance of a reprieve.

The wind and rain were of an intensity he'd never experienced and it was difficult to open the door against the gale to release the boot. By now his clothes were sodden and heavy, and there was a considerable quantity of water and mud in the car.

The wind slammed the door as he inched towards the boot.

Bolt cutters in hand, he plodded back to the gate.

The chain gave way easily and he pushed the gate back. The wind was coming from his back so there was no chance of it being blown closed.

He struggled back to the car, clumsy and awkward in his water-logged layers of winter clothing.

He plopped down backwards onto the seat and let out an oath as the wind banged the door against his shins. He managed to push it back far enough to swing his legs into the car.

He turned the nose into the entrance and reversed back onto the road.

Wet through, he was now numb from the cold but it was with a vague sense of relief that he began retracing his route.

As he cautiously crawled along, his mind went back to the events that had triggered his departure for Abbotsville. Not wanting to build hope around the reason he was headed there in such haste, he decided that could wait.

It was a woman who had kept him from Abbotsville. What on earth had made him shack up with that bloody bitch? Hormones – of course it was hormones. She was brilliant in bed but a real bitch the rest of the time, bi-polar, beyond a doubt. He'd put up with her bitchiness for the great sex. Even then she could be dismissive. Once she'd been temporarily satisfied, she lost interest and her, "Hurry up and get finished," stung every time. What a fool he'd been.

Two days ago his world began changing. Summoned to the office, he entered the reception area. "Morning, Mr Thomas," husked the vapid receptionist, "Mr Pitcairn wants to see you right away."

Thomas was pretty sure he knew what was coming, he'd been tipped off by one of the contractors.

After a brief, icy greeting, Pitcairn accosted him, "Ah Thomas, I'll come straight to the point. I'm afraid that I've just been advised that the company is being liquidated and that the liquidator will be here to lock the doors this afternoon. I have no idea what effect that will have on salary and or redundancy payments or even the pension fund. You will of course be kept fully informed by the liquidator. Leave your contact details with my secretary."

No apology, no thank you, no up yours, nothing. Is that what I get after twenty years of service? The words formed in his head but he decided they were not worth wasting on this pompous ass.

"I'll do that," he said, getting up and walking out of Pitcairn's office for the last time.

He left his details with the crabby old goat, as miserable as her boss.

Leaving the building, a strange sense of relief overcame him.

He was now free to pursue the Abbotsville connection that he had eschewed for far too long. All he had to do was get the bitch out of his flat and his life.

It turned out to be quite simple. He told her he'd been fired and that he would have to give notice on the flat in the morning.

The next day, after advising the agents he lingered on in town until supper time - hoping against hope.

To his delight his hunch proved correct. She was gone. There was no trace of her. Everything she had had in his flat was gone. No note. Nothing. He had banked on the fact that she would run if she suspected he was not earning. And with all the overtime he had really lived like a king.

Now he felt - only relief - he would leave tomorrow.

He tied up a few loose ends and left later

During the afternoon the storm struck.

As he turned onto the highway the radio droned on, "*The area will be lashed by the worst midwinter gales for years. These will be accompanied by heavy downpours. Motorists in particular are warned to exercise extreme caution as power lines may be brought down and roads blocked by flooding or fallen trees.*"

He'd felt quite cosy and safe in the car on the highway – until traffic was diverted onto a side road because of downed power lines.

Reality interrupted his daydream. He rounded another tight bend to be confronted by another tree felled across his path.

“DAMN,” he exclaimed banging the steering wheel.

Wet, cold and hungry he weighed up his options. *Do I have any?*

Ah. The gate. Where does that lead to? He could find out.

He put the car in reverse only to discover a complete lack of any traction. No movement. The driving wheels merely whined and dug themselves deeper into the mud the more he gunned the motor.

Switching off the engine, he peered through the rain-lashed windows as though this might bring inspiration. The track was banked on both sides. It suddenly struck him that if another car had come at him there was no place for them to pass. The last possibility had been the gate where he had turned.

He gazed blankly at the water cascading down the windscreen. And noticed that it seemed to sparkle by some illumination to the right of his position.

What? He peered closer. *What was that to the right?*

He forced the door open and squinted through the rain. There was definitely some sort of light glinting through the trees from that direction.

Struggling out he set about challenging the gale, the rain, and the soggy ground to fight his way to the light.

Emerging from a grove of trees he was confronted by a substantial mansion, where there was a light in an upstairs window and in two windows adjacent to an imposing front door.

With renewed hope he plodded towards the door.

There were no visible means of announcing his presence, no bell, no knocker. Driven by his circumstances, he tentatively tried the door.

It swung open easily.

From a large entrance hall, an imposing staircase swept upward in a wide curve and disappeared to the left.

He walked towards the stairs and considered shouting, "*Anybody home?*"

As he opened his mouth to do so, a figure came bustling down the stairs attired in mediaeval dress and fiddling with the buttons of its coat. As it came closer he heard the words, "I'll be too late, I'll be too late."

Taken aback by the whole situation he called out loudly, "Late for what?"

The figure stopped and viewed him with a startled expression that immediately changed to one of fear, "By my oath," it exclaimed, "a ghost," as it dashed past him and out of the open door.

Colin Thomas opened his eyes and looked around him. Unless he was delirious, this was a hospital ward

A nurse walked in, "Ah... Mr Thomas you're awake."

His first response was, "How do you know who I am?"

"Your documents were in your car."

"Why am I here?"

"A local farmer found your car and his dog followed your trail to the ruins of an old mansion house. It seems that you had sought shelter there after your car was trapped on a farm road. You were semi-conscious, delirious and suffering from hypothermia. The gentleman who found you, the Earl of Abbot, has expressed quite an interest in you. In fact, he's just popped in again to see how you are. Hang on, I'll see if he's still with Dr Knight. He'll also want to know that you've woken up."

A few minutes later, Colin recognised the face that followed the doctor and the nurse to his bedside.

Colin Thomas's mind whirled as he tried to remember where he had seen it.

The Earl merely smiled at Colin, waiting for a response to the recognition.

Dr Knight was the first to speak, "From your reaction, it seems that you two have met before."

Turning his gaze from Colin, the Earl turned to the doctor, "Indeed we have, Dr Knight, indeed we have."

As he turned back to Colin he chuckled “And this time I wasn’t too late.”

Ray Hattingh