

WHITE AS SNOW

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☞ A CHRISTMAS STORY ☞

Donna Westover Gallup



CLADACH
Publishing

To
Daddy, who taught me to love the old west ~
Mama, who taught me to love the Lord ~
and my husband, who brought me to Colorado, where I love both.

WHITE AS SNOW : A CHRISTMAS STORY
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Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

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THE SOUND OF THE WIND SENT CHILLS up Charlie's spine. He crouched inside his grandpa's barn, trying to ignore the haunting sounds that never used to bother him. He'd been living with his grandparents on this ranch since he was three years old. It's true that some things had been different since Grandma died, but as long as his big, strong Gramps was with him, Charlie wasn't ever afraid. Everything was different now, though. The old man hadn't woke up for two weeks. He just lay there in his bed with his eyes closed and his mouth open. Now Charlie shivered as the wind wailed round the corners of the barn.

The small ranch, with its cabin, barn, corral and out-buildings was nestled at the base of a hill and shadowed by a great mountain range that separated the entire Colorado territory northward. Charlie felt as if his home stood on the boundary between two different worlds. Eastward stretched the open prairie. Like a sea of rolling grasses dotted with rafts of scrub oak and prairie brush, it tossed

its unmanned crafts through fluid green waves, eventually cascading over invisible cliffs of the blue horizon. In contrast, westward rose tree-covered hills, rolling and climbing upon themselves, silently erupting into the majestic Rocky Mountains, whose solid, snow-covered pinnacles ever pointed skyward.

As if determined to join the two contrasting scenes, the wind often swept across the prairie and whistled through the trees. A fellow could imagine the sonata of a lone wolf rolling up through the hills. Or he'd hear a mysterious siren song call across the grassy waves and intertwine itself in the limbs of the dark evergreens and golden aspens, then build to an eerie crescendo, only to fall to a sigh of rustling leaves and then recede, pulled back by an invisible tide. Catching the wind in their branches, the trees would sway and moan, as if mocking the wind's futile attempts to join prairie and mountains.

It wasn't just the crazy sounds that scared Charlie. There was something else in the wind. These days the gusts carried a threatening chill. Winter was coming, getting closer every day now.

Charlie stood up straight, heaved a big sigh and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He picked up one end of a heavy wooden beam. He'd have to start being the man around here and figure out how to do all the things that Gramps always did to prepare for winter.

"This is the last one," he muttered. He lugged the beam out the barn door, past the well, to the corral just as he'd done with the other six beams, leaving another furrow in the

dirt behind him. Chickens fluttered and squawked in protest of the interruption to their endless pecking. Undaunted, Charlie continued his mission. At the fence, he jerked the end of the rail up with both hands and wiggled it back and forth until it finally slid into the notch of the fence post. Then he did the same thing at the other end.

“Done,” he said and wiped his forehead again, looking at the fence with some measure of satisfaction.

Off in the distance, thunder rumbled as clouds thickened. Then lightning flashed and within seconds, thunder drummed across the prairie again, rolling up through the hills, then fading into the coldness of the dark clouds overhead. With the thunder following so close on the heels of the lightening that time, Charlie knew the storm had nearly reached his door. He scrambled to pick up the tools and run them to the barn. Then, just as he reached the cabin door, the sky opened and released the rain that had been building all day.

Rain pounded the little window of the cabin. Rivulets of water ran down the glass pane. Wincing at the pain in his hands, Charlie struck a match on the side of the fireplace and lit an oil lamp to get a better look at his blisters. His grandpa’s work gloves were so big that he had opted not to wear them while he repaired the fence. But now he had to pay the consequences. Blood blisters nestled between his fingers and bubbled onto his palms, and wood splinters had embedded themselves deep into his skin. He went to the cupboard and, using fingertips and elbows, managed to pull down a tin box.

Charlie rummaged through the buttons, pins, and thread spindles until he found a large sewing needle. Grasping the eye he rested the sharp end on a hot cinder at the edge of the fireplace. Within seconds the tip glowed bright orange and he knew it was clean. He sat at the table and, taking a deep breath, began to dig into the skin of his palm with the sharp, blackened needle. Sometimes he had to open blisters to retrieve the tiny daggers, causing him to yelp out loud. Then he'd allow his mind to wander back over the day.

"Guess I shoulda tried to cut more firewood instead," he said, "but if I didn't fix that fence the cows coulda found their way out and prob'ly been ate by a grizzly or somethin'. Then Gramps woulda been disappointed in me for lettin' our money supply go to waste."

Each fall, Gramps sold a bunch of cattle, then soon after that he'd hitch Bessie to the wagon and he and Charlie'd take the day's ride to Pueblo and buy what they needed for the year in the way of farm tools, food supplies, dry goods, boots and jeans. Any extra cash went into a tin canister to be saved for "a rainy day." He and Gramps had sold forty head of cattle a few weeks ago, but they hadn't taken their trip to town yet, because Gramps got sick. Charlie sure hoped Gramps would wake up pretty soon. He didn't know what supplies they needed for winter, or how to hitch Bessie to the wagon, or even how to put a saddle on her.



CHARLIE FROWNED AND DUG DEEPER with the needle. This splinter was a bugger. The hole in his hand filled with blood until he could hardly see what he was doing. He gritted his teeth and kept digging until the needle finally brought out a tiny piece of wood. He stared at the culprit. How could such a little thing cause so much hurt?

The day the soldiers came to buy the cattle had been the last really fun day Charlie could remember. The sergeant and his men were from the 9th Kansas Cavalry stationed at Fort Collins up north. Charlie was so excited to see real soldiers in their uniforms and all on fine horses; he followed them around and found out all he could.

The sergeant walked with a limp. Charlie overheard the sergeant telling Gramps that he'd been injured in a battle in Arkansas, and the army had transferred him to the outpost of Camp Collins to protect travelers using the Overland Trail as they headed farther west. Seems there'd

been some trouble between the Colorado Volunteer Regiment and the Cheyenne around Sand Creek. Before the sergeant could tell the story in details too graphic, though, Gramps had scooted Charlie back towards the cabin, out of earshot. But Charlie managed to lollygag and he heard every word about the bloody massacre.

Now Charlie stopped digging with the needle and sucked the blood out of the hole in his hand. He smiled to himself, remembering how he had sat on the cabin doorstep and watched the cattle negotiations. Gramps had folded his arms across his chest, dug in his heels, and refused to accept the army's low offers for his good beef. The soldiers soon learned that the old man wouldn't wear down easily. Growing frustrated, they slapped their hats against their legs and thrust their arms into the air like geese on a frozen pond. Although he was just beyond earshot, Charlie was pretty sure the soldiers were uttering words that would never be repeated in *this* house. But Gramps had remained calm. Eventually, they came to terms and settled on a fair price, sealing the deal with handshakes. The soldiers gave Gramps the cash on the spot and agreed to come back next fall.

After the price had been settled and paid, Gramps let Charlie perch himself on the top rail of the corral and watch the soldiers round up the small herd of Herefords. The white faces of the cattle bobbed up and down in a sea of brown prairie grass as puffs of steam bellowed from their nostrils into the cool, fall air. They moaned low and sorrowful-like.

The sergeant limped over and leaned against the rails of the corral next to Gramps and Charlie. "It's good to do business with you, Mr. Smith. And after travelin so far, me and the men appreciate the hospitality you've extended."

Gramps wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "I appreciate the business, Sarge." Gramps tilted his hat back. "It's quite a trip down here for you and your men. Can't you find beef from a rancher somewhere up north, closer to your camp?"

The sergeant pursed his lips, giving thought to the question. "It's not too settled up around those parts yet. Lots of folks pass through, headin' out to Oregon mostly, but a few squatters stay in the area, and they usually do settle pretty close to the army posts—Fort Vasquez, Fort Morgan, Camp Collins—actually, we just moved the camp to a new location and changed the name to *Fort Collins*. Comin' up in the world." The sergeant winked at Charlie, then continued his explanation.

"There's some farmers growin' crops, but not much cattle yet. I 'magine it's only a matter of time, though, with all that open grassland available, and the buffalo startin' to dwindle."

Gramps wiped a bead of sweat from his temple. "How many men do you have at your camp, er fort?"

"Two hundred. And they've gotta eat," continued the sergeant. "Guess we could hunt buffalo, but we're not too keen on goin' out on the prairie, with the Indians all riled up."

"Can't say as I blame you," muttered Gramps.

The sergeant relaxed against the fence again and looked around. "Just you and the boy here, huh?"

"Yep, that's what it's come down to now, just me an' the young'un here." He reached his big hand up to Charlie on the fence and ruffled his hair, then he looked back at the sergeant. "We came out from St. Louie in '42, just me and my wife, Beth, and our boy, Teddy, who was this boy's pa.

The sergeant nodded and glanced around again at the neat, snug little ranch. He turned back to Gramps with respect in his eyes. "You've done wonders with this place, Mr. Smith. I'm sure it wasn't easy for a woman to live out here, though, raisin' a child and all."

"Naw, but Beth was tougher than she looked." Gramps stared at the prairie, lost in thought. "I tell ya what, she was a pretty little thing. Met her at a church social when she was just seventeen. I was twenty-one and not much to look at. But for some reason she looked twice and the rest is history."

The sergeant smiled and nodded.

Gramps continued, "She really didn't wanna leave all the family she had in St. Louie, but I'd had enough of the city. It was sprawlin' and encroachin' on our fam'ly farm, and I needed more breathin' room. She took care of the young'un and worked hard right alongside me for all those years and helped make this place what it is now."

"It's quite a legacy to leave your grandson someday. And I'd say he looks like a right handy little ranch boy."

"That's right, he sure is." Gramps grinned at Charlie, then turned back to the sergeant. "I thought my son'd take

to this life, too, but he didn't want any part of farmin'. Grow'd up and went back to St. Louie, went to school, got married, and settled down there."

"Well, the frontier life's not for everyone. My home is in Kansas City, and my wife and daughters like it there just fine, but they say that's far enough west for them. I'll feel better about them being there, though, when the confederates stop their bushwhacking along the border."

"I'm sure you will. I know a couple of men in Pueblo who headed back to their home states in the east to fight for the union. No one's heard any word from them for months. I sure been prayin' ev'ry day for Mr. Lincoln and U.S. of A. When the war's finally over, then maybe Congress can give more attention to makin' this territory into a state."

The sergeant nodded, looking serious as he stared at the fluffy clouds traveling across the blue sky. Maybe he was remembering the battles he'd taken part in before being sent to Fort Collins.

The soldiers had herded the cattle out into the open and were ready to hit the trail. Their shrill whistles split the air as the cattle bemoaned the trip ahead.

The sergeant gave his men an answering wave of his hat, then turned back to Gramps. "Just one more thing, Mr. Smith."

Gramps raised his bushy eyebrows in response.

"My commanding officer, Colonel John Humphries, asked me to offer you his greetings and condolences."

Gramps thought for a moment, then a wide grin spread

across his face slow and easy. "You don't mean Johnny Humphries?"

The sergeant cleared his throat and transferred his weight from one foot to the other. "Yes, sir, he's Colonel John Humphries now."

"Well, I'll be," Gramps exclaimed. "Sure, I know Johnny. I met his pa in Georgia back in 18 'n 12 when we served t'gether in the Creek War. Slim 'n me still get word to each other once in a long while, but I ain't seen his little towheaded Johnny in a month of Sundays. Colonel, huh? Not doin' too bad, then, I reckon."

The sergeant nodded and glanced over at his men, who looked anxious to get going, trying to keep the herd together while they waited. He stood a little stiffer and limped to the fence post and untied his horse's reins, preparing to mount. "Yes, Colonel Humphries is doing just fine, Mr. Smith. He's the one who suggested we come down here and inquire about your cattle. Seems his pa mentioned you had a small ranch and we should consider buyin' from you."

Gramps rubbed his chin. "Well, if that don't beat all." He chuckled. "You tell 'im ol' Stuart Smith said howdy."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. "I will." He extended his hand. "You and the boy take care of yourselves, now." Charlie jumped off the fence and stood at attention. The sergeant smiled and returned his salute. "At ease, soldier," he said, chuckling. Holding the horn of his saddle, the sergeant hesitated a moment before mounting, looking down at Charlie thoughtfully. An idea seemed to strike him.

“Maybe when this boy gets a little older, he can ride along and help us drive the cattle up to the fort,” the sergeant said. Then with a nod he mounted his horse and rode over to join his men.

Charlie had watched the dust of the trail billow behind the knot of cattle and cavalymen, and he had felt a frivolous excitement. But that was three weeks ago. He’d just been a child then. Life had become more serious now. A cattle drive might be something he’d have to give some real consideration. Selling beef to the army brought in a reasonable amount of money for him and Gramps. But what if he had to start fending for the two of them, alone?

Charlie finished digging at splinters and cleaned his hands the best he could. They felt stiff, angry, and unremorseful. He hadn’t protected them earlier, and they wouldn’t shield him from pain now. He guessed that was fair. He’d have to grin and bear it. He tried bending his fingers but couldn’t move them much without it hurting a lot and pulling at the blisters. These hands wouldn’t do him much good today.



CHARLIE ATE A CUP OF RABBIT STEW, then he ladled some of the brown broth into another cup and took it into the bedroom. The gray head of the old man rested on the pillow and his mouth was open. Charlie sat on the chair beside the bed. The room was silent except for the sound of his grandpa's shallow breathing.

"Hi, Gramps. I had my supper; now it's time for you to eat yours," Charlie said, but there was no answer.

The boy clumsily began spooning drops of the luke-warm liquid into his grandpa's mouth. He often had to chase a drop with a ragged napkin as it dribbled down the old, bronzed chin.

Then Charlie just sat there watching his grandpa sleep. *Stuart Smith*. Charlie liked that name. It sounded distinguished and respectable, which fit his grandpa. He was a lanky man, over six feet tall. People often described him as "thin around the waist, but broad in the smile." His gray hair framed keen brown eyes and high cheekbones that

rolled down to a square jaw on which rested his famous smile. He proudly claimed his Cherokee blood from his grandmother's side, and he honored that heritage by training himself to be an expert hunter.

Gramps was strong and worked hard maintaining fences and fields, herding, branding and feeding cattle, cutting and splitting firewood, repairing buildings and tools. But his strong arms also knew how to give gentle hugs that assured Charlie he was never alone in this empty, friendless land. Charlie closed his eyes and imagined Gramps ruffling his hair, as he often did.

"Come back, Gramps." Charlie choked back tears.

The spoon clanked inside the empty cup as Charlie sat it on the bedside table. He couldn't stand the silence, so he filled it with talk. "Fixed seven of them rotten rails in the corral fence today, Gramps," he said. "It was a hassle, but now the cows'll be safe and secure." He looked at his grandpa, hoping for some response, but there wasn't any.

"The fat robin that was hoppin' through the yard all summer's nestled high up in a tree now, waitin' it out for spring. I guess she heard it's gonna be a cold winter, but right now ev'rythin's still as colorful as it was in May, despite the weather that's comin' in. And the chickens are wantin' to stay inside more, too. I gathered ten eggs this mornin', though. Can you believe that, Gramps? The hens are suppose to stop layin' so much this time of year, but I guess this is sorta like their last hurrah. You gotta hurry up an' get better 'cause I can't eat all them eggs by myself."

He giggled, but in the gloomy room his laughter

sounded hollow. The boy didn't mention his blistered hands or his bruised legs, his worries about the dwindling woodpile, or how he lay awake at night shuddering at the wailings of the wind.

He watched his grandpa's chest heave up and down. Then he slowly slid off the chair to the wood floor. How long had it been since Gramps fell sick? Seemed like ages. One day he was fine, laughing and working as usual, and the next day he was complaining of a headache and running a fever. Then for several days he had lain on his bed taking in large gulps of air. One morning he simply fell asleep. Charlie knew he hadn't died, because he could still hear the rasping sound coming from his chest. But he was gone all the same.

"G'night, Gramps," he whispered.

The guttural, labored breaths bothered Charlie, but he didn't know what to do. Bandages wouldn't help. He softly brushed a lock of hair from his grandpa's face, then tucked an extra quilt over him. Then he grabbed the empty soup cup, blew out the lamp, and returned to the main room of the cabin.

Exhausted, but too afraid to sleep, he sat on the floor and stared into the dying fire. "How much longer will Gramps be out?" he asked himself. He didn't know if it was the chill of the evening air or a response to the question, but he shivered. Pulling a blanket from his bedroll, he wrapped it around himself and watched the red embers slowly turn black. There were only a few pieces of firewood left.

Reluctantly he reached for another log, but he moved

too quickly and raked his fingers against the rough bark. Several blisters split open. Darts of pain pierced his fingers as he tossed the log onto the grate and ran to the basin. "Eee-yow," he yelped. He sank his hands into the cool water and moaned. The swollen appendages barely fit into the bowl. "They're a mess," he admitted.

He scooped up some water and let the coolness trickle between the burning fingers and across the palm. He took turns, letting the water soak the hurt from one hand and then do the same for the other. When he was done, he shook his hands with care, but didn't dry them, not wanting to rub them against anything else.

He went to the kitchen window and folded his arms on the sill and looked out into the darkness. The rain storm had passed, leaving a clear, crisp night in its wake. Stars twinkled like ice crystals against the black velvet. The large, round moon smiled down at the cabin with a cheerful glow, scattering pools of light across the valley. How could it look so peaceful, so secure when he felt so lost and uncertain?

"God, if'n you can hear me, help me be strong like Gramps," he whispered. "I'm tryin' hard not to be scared, but I just don't know what to do, with winter comin' an' all. Will you please bring Gramps back to me, God?"

With tired eyes he explored the starry sky, seeking a sign, searching for an answer. But no sign followed; the beautiful emptiness offered no reply to his prayer. Except for an occasional crackle from the fire, all was silent. He turned away from the window and looked down at the floor. "Didn't think I'd get an answer," he mumbled.

Grimacing, he tossed another log onto the grate. He had enough wood for a couple more nights. Soon—tomorrow—he'd have to face his worst fear of all. Gingerly he took the poker and stirred the fire. The embers glowed orange then leapt up onto the logs, eventually spreading into a multi-colored fan of heat. Satisfied the fire would last the night, he pulled his bedroll close to the glow and eased himself between the blankets and comforter.

 4 

THE THICK, QUILTED COMFORTER HAD been made by Charlie's grandma a few years back. He absentmindedly pulled at its yarn ties, wishing Grandma were still here. Then a sudden, howling wind rushed from the prairie and up against the trees, and Charlie yanked the comforter clear over his head and held his breath in the darkness. A few moments later he brought it back under his chin so he could check on the fire. A gust of cold air whooshed down the chimney and the flames flickered. Briefly, the fire retreated, reminding the boy of the inevitable. Nature was sending him her last warnings. In a couple days there'd be no life or warmth left in that fireplace.

Each day brought winter closer. Ice had begun to etch intricate designs on the cabin windows, glistening in the moonlight. It wouldn't be long now before a blanket of snow would blend the hills and prairie, a feat the wind could never accomplish. That thought gave Charlie a perverse sense of satisfaction. He hated the wind.

Just then, another gust hit the front of the cabin, rattling the doors and windows like an intruder demanding entrance. Clutching the blankets, he watched the fire flicker and fight for survival. “Don’t go out,” he pleaded. The flames eventually pushed the wind aside and glowed triumphantly, if humbly.

“Gotta get the woodpile stocked, Charlie,” he told himself. “Winter’s comin’ an’ you can’t fail. If’n you fail, you and Gramps will die, that’s all there is to it.”

Then from deep within, Charlie heard, “Failure’s not an option, son.” How many times had he heard his grandpa utter those words but never appreciated their meaning? Failure to kill a squirrel was not a threat, because Gramps always had meat in the stockpot. Failure to gather enough kindling was no threat either, because he always had the woodpile full and ready. But now, to fail at anything was to fail at everything.

Chopping wood scared him more than anything else he had to do because to fail at that meant no fire for food or warmth, and no fire meant death. He knew how to hunt, he knew how to fish, and he could clean and cook whatever he caught or killed. But he didn’t know how to swing an ax. The boy let out a heavy sigh and closed his eyes, but as exhausted as he was, sleep would prove to be a negligent friend.

He pushed himself farther down into the puffy folds of his bedroll and tried to relax. His eyelids grew heavy. Then he heard a tap at the front door. Unsure, he opened one eye and looked. Then he heard it again. *Tap, tap.*

“What was that?” he whispered, and his eyes opened wide, searching frantically for an answer. He sat up and listened for another sound, any sound.

Waiting, he strained to hear the scratchy tap again, but after several minutes, he gave up. Hearing nothing but the rude wind, he lowered himself back into his warm blankets.

Then, *tap, tap, tap*. There it was again.

Charlie pulled the covers higher. Who could be out there? “Indians,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s Indians.” The sergeant had told Gramps that since the Sand Creek Massacre some of the Cheyenne had been on the warpath. Charlie had seen a couple of Indian braves when he was in Pueblo with Gramps one time. They were coming out of the X-10-U-8 Saloon, their brightly-colored blankets wrapped around their shoulders. They didn’t look like they’d hurt anyone, but then he didn’t really know. Maybe this was a rebel Indian.

Again the scratchy tap sounded at the door, this time a little louder and more insistent. Charlie’s heart raced. He lay wide-eyed in the darkness, listening to the howling wind, the labored sound of Gramps’ breathing coming from the other room, and the scratches at the door. “Go away. Please go away,” Charlie whimpered. He pulled the comforter over his head again to drown out all the sounds. Finally, in spite of his fear, a fitful sleep overtook him. And he dreamed.

 5 

WAIT A MINUTE. CHARLIE TRIED TO THINK. *What'd Gramps just say? Charlie slowly lowered the rifle to his side. Did I hear 'im right? His grandpa's words kept shaping themselves in Charlie's head, re-forming the command he'd just heard, or thought he'd heard, but then they'd tumble into a pile of questions. Did Gramps say to bring the sight up and aim?* The command was simple but confusing. Gramps had never gone this far with his lesson, usually reclaiming the gun long before this.

The sun beat on his back and the breeze ruffled his hair as he knelt in the tall green grass on the hillside. There in the middle of his lesson, the boy teetered between two choices: acting with uncertainty or questioning his grandpa's instruction. He knew full well neither choice was acceptable, which made the matter worse. He threw a quick glance at his instructor, searching the weathered face for affirmation. To his relief, Gramps gave a sure nod of approval, then grinned slowly and broadly.

A thrill coursed through Charlie's body from his head clear down to his fingertips and toes. This wasn't practice! This was a real hunt and Gramps was going to let him shoot his big gun. After years of lessons, Gramps must've finally realized that Charlie was a man, albeit a small one, one who could be entrusted with his most-prized and powerful possession. Charlie was overwhelmed with excitement, but now was not the time to give in to his feelings. Now was the time to hunt and prove to Gramps that he'd made a wise decision. Charlie swallowed hard then inhaled deeply, pulling air far down into his lungs, harnessing his emotions. *Hold it back till later*, he commanded himself.

Completely focused now, the boy's eyes searched from tree to tree for what Gramps had already seen, as his own eyes adjusted to the various shades of the pine forest. Finally, among the mottled shadows, there was revealed the contrasting color and shape of a large animal's beige coat. Charlie rested his sight on the target. Words from lessons past beat in his ears, "Failure is not an option, son." Well, he wouldn't fail, he'd see to that.

He watched the deer under the tree and his breathing quickened, sending cold beads of sweat down the back of his neck and under his shirt. Excitement raced through every vein. The breeze chilled his damp skin. He shivered. The smell of pine mingled with that of the damp earth and heightened the musk of his own sweat. These, along with the full outline of the doe, brought his nerves to the edge and sent erratic impulses through his system. But he refused to lose focus, holding tight to all he'd been taught.

He wanted to bag this prize for Gramps.

Steadily raising the rifle, he tucked it tight into his shoulder and brought the deer into its sight. Then, without warning the doe raised her head and seemed to look right at him. Gramps held up a finger, signaling him to wait. He knew he had a clear shot, but to disobey Gramps now would mean the end of his lessons, probably forever. So he relaxed the gun and waited.

Seconds slowly passed and his excitement turned to anxiety. The teacher and student knelt side by side, watching the long ears of the mule deer turn and try to hear what her nose had already brought to her attention. Her large, liquid eyes scanned the landscape, searching every shadow, every crevice for danger. Charlie held his breath, hoping the shadows that shielded their bodies from the sun would conceal their position. They dared not move—hardly even breathe—for risk of alerting her to their whereabouts and causing her to dart up the dark hills.

After what seemed like an eternity, the doe lowered her head and resumed nibbling on the dry grass beneath the pine, her ears still alert and listening. Charlie let out a long sigh. Seconds passed. Finally, Gramps nodded.

With firm resolve, Charlie repositioned the gun. The sight, once again squared with the deer's shoulder, targeted the point of entry. "Now, when you're ready," Gramps whispered, "slowly pull back on the trigger." Inhaling deeply, the boy wrapped his forefinger around the big metal hook; exhaling, he gently pulled it back towards his chest.

Boom!

Charlie's body jerked. Taut muscles bolted him upright in his bedroll. Fighting panic, he rubbed his eyes and looked around the cabin. What had happened? The log in the fireplace was still crackling, sending red shards of embers up into the flue with every loud pop. Disappointed, he recognized the truth: it wasn't the boom of the gun that had awakened him, but an exploding log in the fireplace. Staring at the fire in disbelief, Charlie was overcome by a sickening feeling of something lost. "It was only a dream," he whispered. "It was only a dream." Nothing had changed. Gramps was still sleeping and Charlie was still alone. He wanted to scream, but he dared not. Instead, he suffocated the urge by stuffing a corner of the comforter into his mouth and biting down hard.

In the dark cabin Charlie blinked and scanned the room, trying to focus on its familiarity. There was his grandpa's black powder rifle hanging in its usual place above the fireplace mantle. It was a .58 caliber, 1853 Armi Sport Muzzleloader. Grandma had given it to Gramps as a surprise for his 60th birthday. It measured almost five feet from the sparkling brass butt plate to the nose cap and the initials *S.C.S.* were etched into the walnut stock. Charlie squinted at the letters from where he lay. The barrel was a smoky blue-gray. Gramps called it "Big Blue," and he'd been teaching Charlie how to use it so they could hunt big game together. But then Gramps fell ill and the lessons ended.

In real life, Charlie'd never shot the gun. He'd never even considered it. Gramps taught him that Big Blue was a

man's gun, too much for a boy, and it would be years before he'd have the privilege of shooting it.

Charlie let his gaze drift down the mountain rocks that formed the face of the chimney and fireplace. There in the shade of the mantle, within easy reach, hung his own Hawken squirrel gun made in St. Louie. It was an old one of Gramps' that he'd given to Charlie two years ago. Charlie used it for target practice and for hunting small game, but it could never be used to kill deer or elk. A familiar lump formed in his throat. "I ain't a man yet, Gramps," he whispered, "but I'm gonna hafta be, because you're sick, and we gotta survive this winter somehow."

Closing his eyes, he bit his quivering lip, fighting the tears, but they came anyway. They trickled from the corners of his brown eyes and flowed down his cheeks, mixing with the dirt that streaked his freckled face, a face that hadn't grinned for some time. He frowned and scolded himself. "Stop crying, Charlie." He rolled over and buried his face in his blankets. The wind moaned the words of its solemn lullaby, "Tomorrow he'll be a man; tonight he's still a boy." He cried himself to sleep.