

A Christmas Hero

Carol twisted in her saddle to peer over her shoulder. From atop the hill, she could see far into the clear cold distance. The scattered trees and sagebrush between her vantage point and the mountains were heavy with snow and the rocky ground was visible only in a few bare patches. She could see no movement other than the natural and constant sway from the wind. There was no sign of the animal that had cried out and gained her swift attention.

She faced forward and chucked her horse into motion, drawing herself into her jacket. The eerie cry had left an uneasy feeling low in her gut. She tried to shake it. Just focus on the task at hand, she thought with a smile. She glanced back again, but this time at her cargo. Behind her, tied down upon a travois was a lovely fir. Well, lovely in the sense of lovely for the barrens of Montana. Perhaps it would be a tad scrawny for a Christmas back east. Thoughts of her family made her smile twist with a hint of loneliness. She pictured the roaring fire deep on the raised hearth with stockings Grandma had knit hanging from the wooden mantle above. The tree decorated with popcorn strings and the glowing, painted balls that Father had brought back from the Orient. Mother in her blue chiffon with the white sash that wrapped twice and draped to her hem. She could even remember the swish of the skirt on the glossy wooden floors as Mother would gather gifts from under the tree and pass them among the sisters and brothers. Carol sighed. Interesting how a long ago memory can flow across you like a warm spring shower. The return of the cry snapped her from her reverie and her right hand instantly found the rifle at her side.

A muffled thud beside her made her jump, but it was only her big black mutt shaking snow from its hoary coat. Her released breath formed a heavy white gust in front of her face. It was getting colder.

“What do you think that was, Buddy?” He looked at her with a sideways tilt to his head as if he were deeply contemplating her question. She suspected that he was wondering when he would be getting home to James, a warm fire and a good book...Carol giggled. “No, that’s me, I guess. Your head is just full of, I don’t know, Christmas gruel?” Buddy grinned at her. She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “I need to get home,” she muttered. But then it was there again, unimaginable, and she yanked her rifle from its holder. The cry echoed and there was clipped finality to it like none she had ever heard. Suddenly, her dog bolted forward and down the hill. She called after him, but it was useless and she slammed her thigh with her gloved fist in frustration.

Following Buddy with the travois still attached had not proven as difficult as she thought it might. The dog’s progress had been slowed by the windswept snowdrifts, but he had stubbornly ignored her calls for his return. Carol gritted her teeth against the cold and aggravation she felt. Her certainty that he was leading her on a wild goose chase was only slightly offset by fear of what had caused the commotion that was drawing them off their course.

James was surely waiting back at the ranch by now, wondering what was taking her so long. He had gone into the north forty to pull in sixty head of steer. By now they were corralled and ready for the approaching weather front. Her son had then returned to the house, added enough wood to the stove to turn the sides red and started a fire in the fireplace. Now he was probably standing at the window looking for her.

Carol hoped the seventeen year old would not decide to come looking for her. He knew where she had gone because they had picked out the tree together earlier in the year, but now she was quite a distance from that area and her trail would be gone in minutes. She had heard it said that the snow on the ground in Montana was always the same snow, that it just shifted from one spot to another with the ceaseless wind. Glancing at the low clouds overhead she wished that were true. They were undoubtedly going to have a white Christmas.

The blood in the snow was a stark contrast and she slowed as Buddy followed that trail. This section of the ranch was very rough and she had rarely been into the copse of scrub trees and mounds of tailings and rock debris that had sloughed off the mountains in ages gone past.

They found the carcass of the wolf slung up against a boulder where its back had been broken. Its throat was gone, as well as its entrails and hind quarters. The prints in the snow left no question. Grizzly.

Tension coursed through her frame, and every sense sprang to life. Buddy gave no indication of imminent danger, but he stopped well short of the mangled wolf and nosed the ground leading away from the carcass. Carol scanned the surrounding trees and rocks and carefully listened for the bear. Grizzly in the area were rare, usually preferring the mountains, but this one must have been hungry. She couldn't afford a hungry grizzly feasting on her ranch. She toyed with the idea of pursuing the bear right away, but shook her head. No, it would be better to return with James and one or more of her neighboring ranchers. Grizzlies could be real nasty.

But it seemed Buddy had another idea, and she cursed silently as he barked twice and took off through the trees. She lost him almost instantly behind more boulders. She kneed the horse forward to follow.

As Carol came around the bend, she heard Buddy's growl and the hair stood up on the back of her neck. She couldn't see him, but there was more blood in the snow. A lot more. Ahead, the body of a golden brown horse lay across her path, a tremendous pool of blood beneath its saddle. It, too, was gutted and she felt her stomach turn and her vision narrow as she realized that this was the mount of one of her neighbors. And then, everything started to happen very fast.

Buddy's growl turned into a whine and he shot past her with his tail tight between his legs. She twisted towards the spot where he had emerged, sighting down the rifle she had snapped to her shoulder. The grizzly was running straight for her, with a lazy lope that carried its huge frame at tremendous speed. She held her breath, squeezed the trigger and knew she did not stand a chance in hell as the bear came on her. Suddenly, a loud cry echoed from atop the boulders to her left. The bear stopped, rotated mid-stride, and her next rifle shot took off the top inch of fur on its left shoulder, not even startling it. Above her, the man continued to shake his arms and shout. He was a big man, and bundled up for

the weather he made an imposing spectacle as he waved his arms and bellowed at the grizzly. The bear reared on its hind legs and roared. Carol could see the saliva dripping from its bloody maw as it bared fangs that could rip her in half. She sighted and aimed right at the beast's heart and with a mighty blast it was over.

Carol panted. She slipped from her saddle and made sure the huge bear was finished with a rifle shot through its skull. She could hear the man scrambling down the rocks. He came up behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"What on earth happened?" she gasped, finally beginning to relax. Her neighbor, Samuel Harrison shook his head.

"The wolf was near. I could hear it, even smell it. Didn't see it. The grizzly took it down. Happened real quick, and then it was on me. I barely got off my horse," and there he paused sadly. "She fell on my rifle. I climbed, trying to save my hide. Thank God you showed up, and that you're safe." Samuel held his arms out and Carol entered his bundled embrace.

Carol smiled, hugged him back and gave him a quick kiss. "But what brought you out here in the first place?"

Samuel grinned nervously and reached into his jacket pocket for a small package. He handed her the box. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart." Carol took the gift and opened it to discover a diamond ring. Samuel knelt before her in the trampled snow, removed his glove, then pulled her glove off as well. "Will you marry me?"

Stunned, Carol nodded her agreement. Tears welled in her eyes as he slid the ring on her finger. He stood up and pulled her into his warm arms once more.

"My hero!"

A Christmas gift for my best friend
my sister Carol
by Marilyn
1999