

# CHRISTMAS OF THE CHERRY SNOW

## PROLOGUE

My granddaughter, Cassandra Jo, snuggled against me as we rocked slowly in the recliner.

"How's my favorite four-year-old?"

"Most five, Grandpa," she said, burrowing under my arm. "Read me a story."

"What's the magic word, Cassie?" I asked.

"Puleez," she said, drawing it out like warm taffy.

I retrieved a stack of books from the lamp table. "*Which story do you want? Hop on Pop? Green Eggs and Ham?*"

Cassie shook her head vigorously, sending her pigtails flying. I ducked to one side to avoid being slapped in the face. "The Christmas one, Grandpa," she said, sorting through the pile of books until she found *Twelve Tales of Christmas*.

"Why Christmas, Cassie Jo? Christmas was over a month ago."

She pointed her little sausage-like finger at the patio window. "Cause it's snowing, Grandpa."

The flakes were so large they looked like cotton balls drifting from the pewter skies. We rocked slowly in silence, watching the flakes quickly coat the deck behind our house. A great feeling of peace came over me as we sat comfortably together in our secure cocoon.

"It's pretty, Grandpa."

I nodded my head. "Yes it is, Cassie. Yes it is." I reached down and picked up the afghan that lay folded beside the chair. "Cold?"

Cassie nodded her head, and I spread the afghan over my legs and tucked it around my granddaughter. She sighed contentedly and snuggled against me. After a few minutes of silence rocking, the book dropped from her fingers, and I heard her breathing become more and more regular.

As daylight drifted into dusk and the snow continued to fall slowly and silently, we sat and rocked, and I thought of another Christmas and another snow from nearly fifty years before.

## CHAPTER 1

Robert, I need your finger," my mother said. Dutifully, I put my index finger on the shiny red ribbon she had wrapped around the Christmas gift, slipping it out as she pulled the knot tight. "Just one more to go." She completed a bow on top of the gift and handed it to me to place under the tree,

Our Christmas tree was a blue spruce my dad and I had cut a week before on our annual trek up Dry Fork Canyon. As usual, after getting it home in the back of our pickup truck, we'd had to cut nearly two feet off the tree to fit it in our living room. Once it was amputated to the right height it was placed in our ancient red and green stand. While Mom directed, Dad slid the tree back and forth in front of the living room window until it met her specifications; then it was secured with tie wire to a couple of nails driven into the floor on each side of the tree near the baseboard.

"Done," said Dad as he rubbed his hands together and cupped them around his nose. "Ah," he said as he inhaled the fragrant odor of spruce gum on his hands, "that's Christmas. Now all we need is snow." He stuck his thumb and finger together and pulled them slowly apart, watching the gum lift the skin of his thumb toward his finger.

There had been one brief snowstorm in mid-November, but within a day or two all the snow melted, even the snow that huddled in the shade of the trees in the orchard. Several times the skies looked threatening, but all that developed were a few squalls of rain. With the rain came mud in the hundred acres of orchard that surrounded our house. The orchard clung to the gentle slope of the foothills to the east of our home. On the west of the house, in the heavier soil, were the pears - Bartletts and moonglows. And the apples - red and golden delicious, Granny Smiths, and Jonathans. On the east, where it was sandier, Elberta and Hale havens peaches hugged the fence line. Next to the house were the cherries - Bings and Lamberts for eating, Vans for pollinating and Queen Anns for pies.

The well-being of our family was tied inexorably to the well-being of the orchard. If the weather was kind and water was plentiful, we lived a life of relative prosperity. If we were cursed with late frosts and too little water, the harvest was poor and so was our family. This past year has been a good one. Our trees had produced an abundant crop, and due to a late frost in the north-west part of the country, there was competition for our fruit, driving the prices up.

My Mother handed me the final gift, and I reached to place it with the others under the tree.

"Plug in the lights," she said as I straightened up. She flicked off the light switch, plunging the room into darkness as I probed for the plug. The multicolored lights from the tree bathed the walls and ceiling of our living room in their rosy glow.

Dad turned from where he had been standing at the window and looked at the tree. "Beautiful, just beautiful. Now where's the snow?"

"Worried?" asked Mom.

Dad shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, we've had late winters before, but if we don't get snow up in the hills, we're going to be in trouble by the end of the summer."