



INTO THE WHITE

a short story by
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Into the White

There was a knock at the door.

Crash Calloway groaned as he sat up, joints popping in protest. The fire in the woodstove was long dead, leaving the cabin cold enough to see his breath. He swung his legs off the bed, feet thudding against the floor hard enough to rattle the stove pipe and wake the two Boston Terriers asleep on the bed.

Beans, older, one-eyed, and sporting an eye patch, gave a sharp, irritated bark and trotted toward the door.

Cheddar, rounder, younger, and morally opposed to mornings, let out a half-hearted woof from her nest of blankets. If it wasn't breakfast, she wasn't interested.

Crash rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Mid-thirties, tall, and solid, he still looked like the college tight end he used to be, though the glory days felt farther away every season. Shoulder-length curls, a growing beard, and a face weathered by too many miles in the backcountry gave him the look of someone half-wild himself.

The knock came again, sharper this time.

"Yeah, yeah," Crash muttered, rubbing his eyes.

He unlatched the door and opened it to find Deputy Clay McCord standing there, bundled in his department-issued winter coat, snow dusting the brim of his hat. McCord looked

him up and down.

"You sleepin' off a drunk, or just hibernating early this year?"

Blinking into the strip of daylight, Crash stepped back to let him in. "What time is it?"

"Time for you to answer your damn phone," Deputy McCord said, brushing snow off his shoulders as he stepped inside. "Sheriff's been trying to reach you all morning. Got a situation out past Pahaska Teepee, missing hiker. Kid, maybe twelve. Storm's movin' in fast."

Crash scratched his beard, the weight of it all settling in with the cold. "Kid alone?"

"Was with his uncle, some big-shot from Cheyenne who thought he could play Lewis and Clark. Lost him somewhere near Jones Creek last night. Sheriff wants boots on the ground before noon. Says he needs you."

Crash looked over at Beans, who was already waiting by the door, tail twitching. "Let me grab my gear."

McCord smirked. "Guess that's a yes."

Out in the white breath of the morning, Crash swung open the red '73 Bronco's back hatch, hinges groaning like they hadn't seen oil since the Bush administration. The weather was already shifting, snowflakes mixing with sleet, wind cutting harder now through the bare aspens behind the cabin. Jones Creek would be colder still, higher up and exposed.

He crouched and cinched Beans into her Carhartt harness, worn but solid. She tolerated it with the resignation of a veteran.

Cheddar flopped onto her side with a sigh, playing dead until Crash rolled her upright and fastened the chest strap. "You'll thank me later," he muttered, tightening the last buckle.

The dogs hopped into the passenger seat, Beans taking her usual perch by the window, Cheddar curling into a lumpy donut

and immediately fogging the glass with her breath.

Shutting the hatch, Crash gave it a whack to make sure it held, then opened the driver's side door. He pulled on a pair of scratched-up aviators, dropped into the seat, and tugged the bill of his faded University of Wyoming ball cap low.

McCord was waiting in his Ridge County Sheriff's Department Tahoe, engine idling, one hand on the wheel and a smirk on his face.

He eyed the passenger seat. "What, those two your trackers now?" he asked, nodding at the dogs.

Crash rolled down the window. "Something like that."

McCord gave a mock salute. "Try to keep up, Hoss."

By the time the Bronco and the Tahoe rolled into the parking lot at the Pahaska Teepee Lodge, snow swirled around press vans, search trucks, and a red-and-white rig from the Billings Search and Rescue team. Camera crews in parkas jockeyed for position, their lenses snapping toward the sheriff's badge as Deputy McCord stepped out of his vehicle.

Crash killed the engine, popped the back hatch, and grabbed his pack from the cargo bay. On the passenger side, he opened the door.

Beans jumped out first, nose to the ground before her paws even hit the gravel. Cheddar followed, slower, less enthusiastic, her harness already dusted white with blowing snow.

Pack over one shoulder, he crossed toward the knot of officials near the lodge entrance.

Sheriff Hank Sullivan stood near the doors, broad-shouldered and square-jawed, with the kind of laconic authority that didn't need a badge to be obvious. Early sixties, brown hair brushed with silver and just long enough to annoy someone, he looked like he'd been carved from the same unforgiving landscape that

stretched behind him. His weathered face, lined by sun and years in the field, was unreadable, but Crash didn't need to read it.

This wasn't some routine rescue.

Beside him stood a tall woman in SAR gear and a ranger from Yellowstone waving off the nearest camera crew.

Crash stopped beside him. "Seems like a lot of press for a lost hiker."

Sheriff Sullivan didn't smile. "Ain't a hiker. Kid's twelve years old. Name's Nathan King."

"That name supposed to mean something?" Crash asked as he glanced back at the swarm of reporters.

"Yeah," Hank said. "His daddy's Chief of Staff to Senator Halpern."

Crash gave a low whistle. "Hell."

"Uncle brought him out here for a backcountry weekend," Hank continued. "Said the kid went off trail to chase a rabbit, never came back. That was yesterday afternoon. Cold snapped hard last night."

The SAR commander stepped forward. "You must be Crash Calloway. Heard you're the best backcountry tracker this side of the Divide."

Crash gave a single nod, crouched to check Beans's harness. "That's what they tell me."

"Glad to have you along," she said. "We've got two crews sweeping Sam Berry Meadow. If you and the dogs can push up toward Jones Creek, we might catch sign before the snow gets any deeper."

Hank stepped in before anyone else could speak. "I'm going with him."

The SAR commander blinked. "Sheriff, no offense, but you

sure about that? We've already got two teams on grid sweep,—"

"I'm not asking," Hank said, tone even. "We've worked together before. He'll move faster with someone who knows how to keep up."

Crash didn't object. He tightened his pack, gave a quick whistle to the dogs, and looked to Hank. "You bring snowshoes?"

Hank tipped his head toward the truck. "Just a thermos."

"Then let's move," Crash said.

They turned toward the trailhead, the wind kicking harder across the lot as snow began to fall in earnest. Behind them, cameras flashed and murmurs picked up, press hungry for drama.

Snow fell in dry, whispering flurries, brushing the shoulders of their coats and settling on the brims of their hats. The trail followed the North Fork for the first mile and a half, mostly gentle elevation, but every step up was a reminder of what was coming.

Hank adjusted the straps on his pack and eyed the forest ahead. "You ever figure out how someone loses a kid in a place like this?"

Crash gave a shrug, eyes scanning the snowy path ahead. "Start with poor judgment, add altitude."

Hank huffed. "Probably didn't even bring a compass."

"From Cheyenne," Crash added, like that explained everything.

They hiked in silence for a bit, the only sounds the crunch of snow underfoot and the occasional jingle from Beans's harness up ahead. She trotted in loops, nose down. Cheddar stayed closer, more interested in sniffing brush piles and snacking on anything questionable.

"Hey," Crash said, yanking something from Cheddar's mouth.

“That’s a rock.”

Cheddar sat down with dramatic flair, clearly offended. Crash pulled a strip of jerky from his pocket and handed it over like a bribe. “Try chewing something with flavor.”

Hank watched with a crooked smile. “Not quite as smart as the one-eyed wonder, huh?”

Crash glanced at Cheddar, now gleefully chomping away. “Doesn’t appear to be.”

Another half mile and the trees thinned into the southern edge of Sam Berry Meadow. A low wind moved through the grass like breath, carrying something faint, animal, maybe human. Beans froze.

Crash stopped too. “Hold up.”

She circled a spot, nose pressed to the snow-crust ground. Her body stiffened, tail low but wagging. One short, urgent bark, then three steps toward the creekbed before a glance back.

“She’s got something,” Crash said. “Scent’s fresh.”

Hank tightened his gloves. “Hope to hell it’s not a rabbit.”

“Only one way to find out.”

A low whistle sent the dogs ahead, Beans focused, Cheddar bounding after her like she’d just remembered they were on a mission.

They followed the trail down a narrow cut, snow thickening as they dropped into the low hollow where Jones Creek met the North Fork. Water ran dark and fast, rimmed in ice, whispering beneath overhanging limbs. Willows tangled the bank, half-buried in white.

Crash paused at the confluence and looked west.

Upstream, the land rose hard and fast, steep switchbacks and deadfall between sharp inclines. The terrain funneled into the canyon, vanishing into the shadowed mouth of the Absarokas.

Clouds above had darkened, dragging low and heavy, and the snowfall had shifted from flurries to steady accumulation.

Hank joined him, breathing harder now, boots crusted in ice. "We climbin' that?"

Crash nodded. "He's up there. Or he was."

They stood for a moment, letting the wind move around them, cold enough to sting the skin.

Hank looked at the ridge, then at the dogs—Beans scanning the far bank, Cheddar trying to eat a pine cone.

"Well," he said. "Let's go find him."

The trail vanished in places, swallowed by drifts and windfall. Climbing west into the Jones Creek drainage, the land rose sharper with every step. Trees thinned, then closed in again, clawing at their coats. Snow came down sideways, granular and fast.

Crash pushed through a curtain of dead limbs and paused near a bend, crouching low. He brushed his glove across a patch of wind-shielded snow beneath a low overhang.

Tracks.

Not human.

Four-toed. Round. Fresh.

Hank caught up, boots crunching behind him. "That what I think it is?"

Crash gave a tight nod. "Lion. Maybe an hour ahead of us."

Beans moved in beside him, nose twitching. No bark. No panic. Her posture said it all.

Crash met her gaze and gave a slow nod. She held it a beat longer.

They both remembered the last time.

He rose and scanned the trees. "We're not alone out here."

Hank shifted his rifle strap. "Think it's tracking the boy?"

“Could be,” Crash said. “Or just hungry.”

They moved on, slower now. Beans took point, staying close to the trail. Cheddar bounded ahead, tail wagging as she dove nose-first into a drift, then emerged with a stick clamped between her teeth like treasure.

“Cheddar,” Crash warned. She dropped it, then immediately picked up another.

Hank hissed her back. “You ever think about getting a third one?”

Crash smirked. “I’ve got enough trouble keeping these two out of jail.”

A half hour dragged by. The climb steepened, the air thinned, the wind found seams in jackets. Crash adjusted his pack and kept scanning the woods for sign.

Beans stopped.

She lifted her nose, then ghosted toward a brush pile half-covered in snow.

Crash followed, crouched beside her, and tugged a clump of frozen willow aside.

There, snagged on a branch, lay a granola bar wrapper—half-buried, slick with ice, crumpled by wind. He peeled it free and held it up.

“Recent,” he said. “Still smells like peanut butter.”

Hank moved closer, breathing heavy. “Kid might’ve dropped it.”

They stepped off the path to catch their breath, leaning against a fallen pine. Wind scraped through the branches, rattling ice like bones.

Hank looked uphill. “I don’t buy the uncle’s story.”

Crash didn’t answer.

“I’ve worked enough of these,” Hank continued. “Kids get

turned around, sure. But they don't climb into a drainage like this, uphill, in snow. Not without something pushing them."

Crash glanced toward a narrow draw choked with deadfall. "You think he chased a rabbit through that?"

Hank exhaled. "Hell no."

Silence settled. Not awkward, just cold and tired.

After a moment, Hank's voice dropped. "We had a call like this fifteen years back. October. Kid from Thermopolis. We found his pack, boot prints, some blood, but didn't find him until spring."

Crash said nothing.

"I never stopped wondering what else we could've done."

Crash crouched to check Beans's paws, brushing out snow from the toe pads. "We'll find this one," he said, not looking up.

Hank just nodded, checked the load in his rifle, and started moving again.

The dogs surged ahead—Beans focused, Cheddar, for once, on mission.

Snow came harder.

And somewhere in the trees above, something else moved.

On the ridge, wind carved through their jackets and rattled their limbs. Snow whipped sideways across the slope, and visibility dropped to a ghostly white blur.

Beans veered left, ears pinned, nose to the wind. Her bark was low and urgent.

Crash stopped. "She's on something."

Up ahead, the terrain fell into a narrow cut hemmed by shale and black rock. Wind-fallen branches lay half-buried in snow, and beyond them, barely visible, the mouth of a shallow cave, just a shadow in the white.

Beans stood at the entrance, body rigid, tail straight. One

short, sharp bark.

“Stay here,” Crash muttered, and moved forward.

He dropped to one knee, swept away a clump of brush, and peered into the dark. A small shape hunched against the back wall, wrapped in a sleeping bag, motionless.

“Kid’s here,” he called. “Alive.”

Crash crawled in, boots scraping stone. The air inside was stale and bitter with cold.

“Nathan?” he said, voice low.

The boy didn’t answer.

Crash reached him slowly, no sudden movements. Nathan lay bundled in a synthetic bag, face pale, lips blue, eyes glassy but open. In one shaking hand, he clutched a folding knife—the kind you buy at gas stations—blade out, useless, but clenched like a lifeline.

“Hey,” Crash said gently. “You’re all right. I’m Crash. We’ve been looking for you.”

Nathan blinked, but didn’t speak.

Behind them, Hank crouched at the cave mouth. “He responsive?”

“Yeah. He’s cold and scared. Maybe hypothermic.”

Crash pulled off his gloves and felt the boy’s hands: cold, not stiff. He slid a foil blanket from his pack and wrapped it around the sleeping bag.

Nathan flinched, then found his voice. “Don’t take me back to him.”

Crash paused. “Your uncle?”

Nathan nodded quickly, voice trembling. “He got drunk. Started yelling about my mom. I told him to stop, but he wouldn’t. I left—I just wanted to get back to the trail. Then I got lost.”

"You did good," Crash said. "You stayed put. That probably saved your life."

Nathan's eyes flicked toward the cave mouth, then back. "Something was out there last night."

Crash raised an eyebrow. "Something?"

"I heard it. Like... breathing. It didn't come close, but I felt it."

Crash glanced at Beans, still posted at the entrance.

Hank scanned the slope above. "Might not be his imagination."

Crash crawled out, stood slowly, and moved a few yards uphill. Near the treeline, more tracks: mountain lion. Big. Fresh. Snow inside not yet crusted.

He motioned Hank over, pointed.

Hank muttered, "Son of a bitch."

"It's tracking him," Crash said.

Cheddar let out a soft growl behind them. She wasn't brave, but she wasn't dumb.

Hank keyed his radio. "SAR Command, this is Sullivan. We've got the boy. Repeat, we've got him. Little worse for wear, but he's alive."

Static, then: "Copy that. Winds are too strong, bird's grounded. You're gonna have to hike him out."

Crash exhaled, breath curling. "Figures."

Hank clipped the radio back. "Let's move."

Crash handed the boy a canteen, helped him sip. Then he hoisted him onto his back using the emergency harness sewn into his pack. Nathan weighed almost nothing.

They stepped into the wind, eyes scanning the slope. Beans took point, nose low. Cheddar stuck to Hank's heels, glancing uphill.

They didn't talk. Not anymore.

Behind them, snow drifted over the cave mouth as if it had never been there at all.

The storm dropped like a curtain. Snow whipped in sideways sheets, and the trees blurred into pale ghosts. Crash kept his head low, shoulders hunched forward, Nathan still lashed against his back like a pack that breathed.

Beans led them single-file, cutting a track through the drifts with sharp, deliberate steps. Cheddar stayed just behind her, until she froze.

Her whole body went rigid. Then she let out a high, panicked yelp and bolted sideways into the brush.

"Cheddar!" Hank snapped, pulling her back by the harness.

Beans growled, a low, steady rumble. She didn't bark. Didn't back up. Just bristled and locked her one good eye on something through the snow-choked trees.

Crash followed her gaze and saw it.

A shape. Shadow on shadow. Low to the ground, moving with unnatural smoothness between the tree trunks. Silent. Watching.

Lion.

It stepped from the trees, fur dusted white, long tail twitching behind it like a whip. Its eyes fixed on the group, on the dogs, on the boy.

Crash shifted his weight and slipped his right hand inside his coat. Cold steel met his fingers, the grip of his 1911.

Beans didn't move. Didn't bark. She stood her ground, muscles tense. If she was afraid, she didn't show it.

The mountain lion crept closer, head low, shoulder blades rolling like loaded springs.

Pulling his pistol free, Crash clicked off the safety. "Don't do

it," he muttered.

Another step. Closer.

Beans growled louder now, teeth bared. She didn't fall back.

Taking a breath, Crash raised the pistol and fired.

The crack of the .45 tore through the trees. Snow exploded from a branch above the mountain lion. It flinched, just slightly, then turned, long tail slicing the air, and slipped back into the woods without a sound.

Beans didn't move until Crash gave a short whistle. Even then, she turned slowly, eye still on the treeline, tail high but steady.

Nathan's voice was small behind him. "She wasn't scared."

Crash didn't answer right away. They kept moving, Cheddar now glued to Hank's leg, ears flat.

"This isn't her first lion," he said finally. "That's why she's got the patch."

Nathan looked ahead at Beans, steady, sharp, unshaken.

Crash's voice was low. "Couple years back, down in Colorado. We were working a ranch, tracking cattle through bad country. Lion came out of nowhere."

He gave a slight shake of the head.

"She took the hit so I didn't have to."

He didn't say more. He didn't need to.

Beans pushed ahead through the snow like she always had, one eye sharp, the other long gone but never forgotten.

Nathan shifted slightly, listening.

"She's not scared now?" he asked after a while.

Crash adjusted the sling across his back. "Maybe. But she's not backing down."

They crested a small rise, and in the distance, through a break in the trees, Crash spotted the dark outlines of vehicles

at Pahaska. Distant voices. Movement. Safety.

Hank raised the radio. "SAR Command, this is Sullivan. We're a half mile out. Kid's stable. Coming in on foot."

"Copy, Sheriff. Medics are waiting."

Crash looked once more at the treeline, then down at Beans. She met his gaze.

"Not happening again," he said, low.

Beans gave a grunt and pushed ahead, into the snow, into the wind, into home.

The warming tent behind Pahaska was lit in soft yellow, canvas walls rustling in the wind. Inside, Nathan sat bundled in a fleece blanket, cheeks red from both cold and embarrassment, a medic checking his vitals while another handed him a hot cocoa packet.

Crash stood just outside the entrance, arms crossed, watching through the flap as the kid finally stopped shaking.

The press had started circling the moment they emerged from the trees. Microphones, flashing lenses, questions barked like orders.

Hank shut that down fast.

"Not now," he'd said, voice like gravel. One camera guy tried to push past and didn't make it far.

Now, the reporters stayed back, grumbling behind the line of parked trucks.

Somewhere nearby, someone from the SAR team was talking to the uncle. Crash didn't look. He didn't need to hear the excuses or the apology tour. That would sort itself out.

He crouched beside the Bronco and unzipped a side pouch on his pack. Beans and Cheddar sat patiently, steaming slightly from their own effort and breath, snow still clinging to their harnesses.

Crash pulled out a strip of venison jerky and handed it to Beans. She took it gently, the tension finally leaving her shoulders. He gave Cheddar two smaller pieces, one as reward, one for emotional damages.

Behind him, Hank stood just off his shoulder, hands in his coat pockets, watching the same snow Crash was.

"Hell of a thing, Crash," Hank said.

Crash didn't answer.

He just looked out at the falling snow, soft now, quiet again. The kind that blankets everything, tracks, blood, fear, and leaves behind only stillness.

Beans settled at his feet, one eye scanning the dark beyond. She didn't blink.

Crash didn't either.

About the Author

D. Christopher Bader writes western noir with a crooked grin and a soft spot for small towns, eccentric weirdos, and Boston Terriers. He lives in Arkansas, works in public service, and tells himself that late-night edits count as sleep. When he's not writing, he's probably drinking too much coffee, plotting fictional crimes, or losing arguments with his dogs.

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