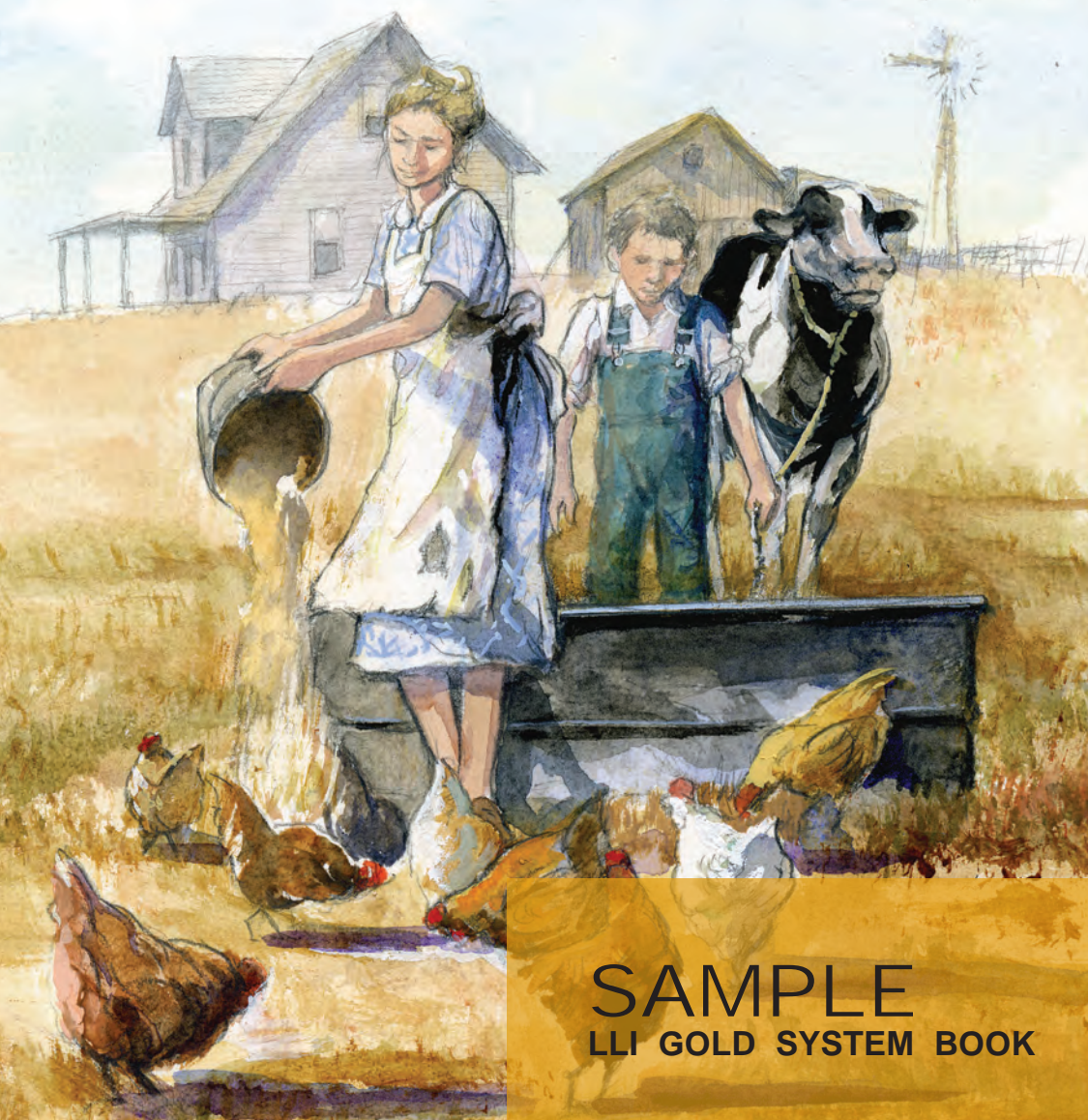


The Old Knife

by Sharon Fear

illustrated by Ron Himler



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The morning Alex's father left, he and Alex's mother held each other for a long time.

"Do as your mother says. And think before you jump!" said Father, looking pointedly at Alexander. Three months shy of his twelfth birthday, Alex could be impatient and hasty. Like a flea on a hot griddle, his father said.

Father gave Alex a hug. “When I get back, we’ll have money to buy you a new knife, son. A man needs a good knife.” Just days before, Alex had foolishly broken his knife’s handle.

Father picked up his bag, hesitated, then set off down the road.



Alex felt panic rise up in his chest. Suppose Dad didn't come back? Sometimes fathers who couldn't provide for their families just ran away, didn't they?

He took a deep breath. His father wasn't like that. Three months' work, road-building—for cash money, something they desperately needed—then he would be back.



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The next morning, Alex climbed out of bed before light and quickly dressed in his work clothes. He was determined to do his dad proud. He splashed ice-cold water from the basin onto his face. He could hear his mother stoking the kitchen stove.

Alex lit a lantern. He laced up his boots and went out to the barnyard, where he broke through the ice in the stock tank with a rock. Watching the water well up from below, he thought about how he'd broken his knife.

"Don't use your knife to break ice," his dad had said. But he had.

"Don't pry up the cellar door with your knife."

"Don't whittle with that good knife."

He'd done those things, too.



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In the barn, he put a forkful of hay in the manger, and Sweetie stuck her head between the posts and began to eat. The sounds—the cow’s munching and the *swoosh* of milk going into the bucket—were soothing. He leaned close to her big body for warmth.



When the milking was done, he let Sweetie out to drink at the tank. It was dawn now. Mother was scattering feed in the chicken coop as Alex put out the lantern and carefully carried the bucket of milk to the house.



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There was ham with biscuits for breakfast. Dad had butchered a hog and left them with plenty of smoked ham, bacon, and chops. With their own eggs and milk and the garden vegetables that Mother had canned, Alex calculated that they had enough food for the winter.

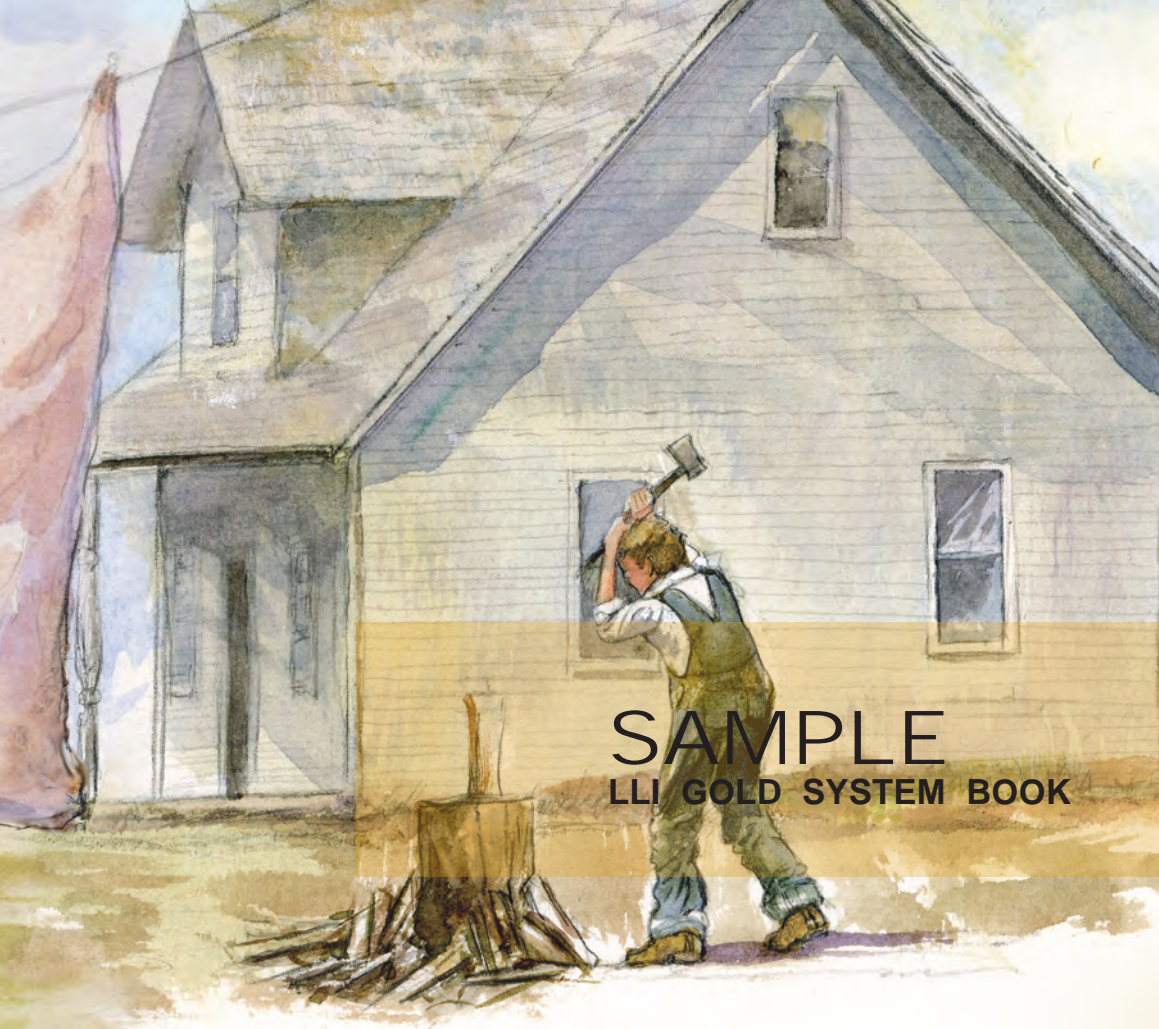
At least he hoped so. He had never had to worry about such things before. That was Dad's job, he thought, and he felt a stab of resentment.



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“Get changed for school,” Mother said. “You can finish your chores tonight. And dress warmly. Temperatures are dropping, and you could freeze your toes or worse on that long walk.”





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There were plenty of chores after school: milking again, gathering eggs, mucking out the barn, chopping kindling and bringing in wood and the washing. Mother would be baking, cleaning, or making and mending clothes.

This was now the shape and content of their days. Work and worry. It was hard not to get impatient and angry at the drudgery of it.



But for Alex, over time, swinging the axe, hauling wood, and carrying buckets of water all got easier. “You’re growing,” said Mother. She altered a pair of his dad’s pants for him. He didn’t tell her that he’d stopped wearing two pairs of socks because his boots were feeling tight.

Then came the letter. He hoped to be home for Alex’s birthday, Dad wrote, and he enclosed a postal money order.

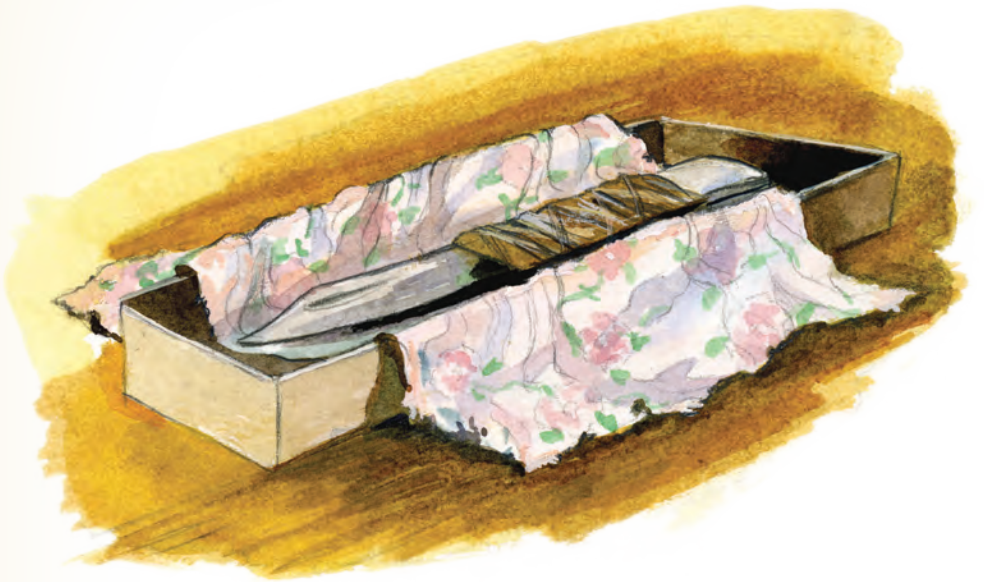
“It’s just like money,” said Mother. “I take this to the post office, and they cash it. We do need flour.”

“And chicken wire,” said Alex.

“And birthday gifts,” said Mother, smiling.



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But on the morning of Alex’s birthday, Dad still hadn’t arrived.

“Alex.” Mother handed him a box, long and thin. Hopeful, he opened it. But it was not a new knife. It was his old knife—repaired, but his *old* knife.

Alex hugged his mother so she wouldn’t see the disappointment on his face. Then he grabbed the knife and his coat and hurried out.

“Alex,” she said, “there’s. . . .”

He ran through the barnyard and all the way up the hill, far into the woods. He climbed up into a big oak tree, and stood in the fork, panting and seething. He *deserved* a new knife. After all his hard work. . . .

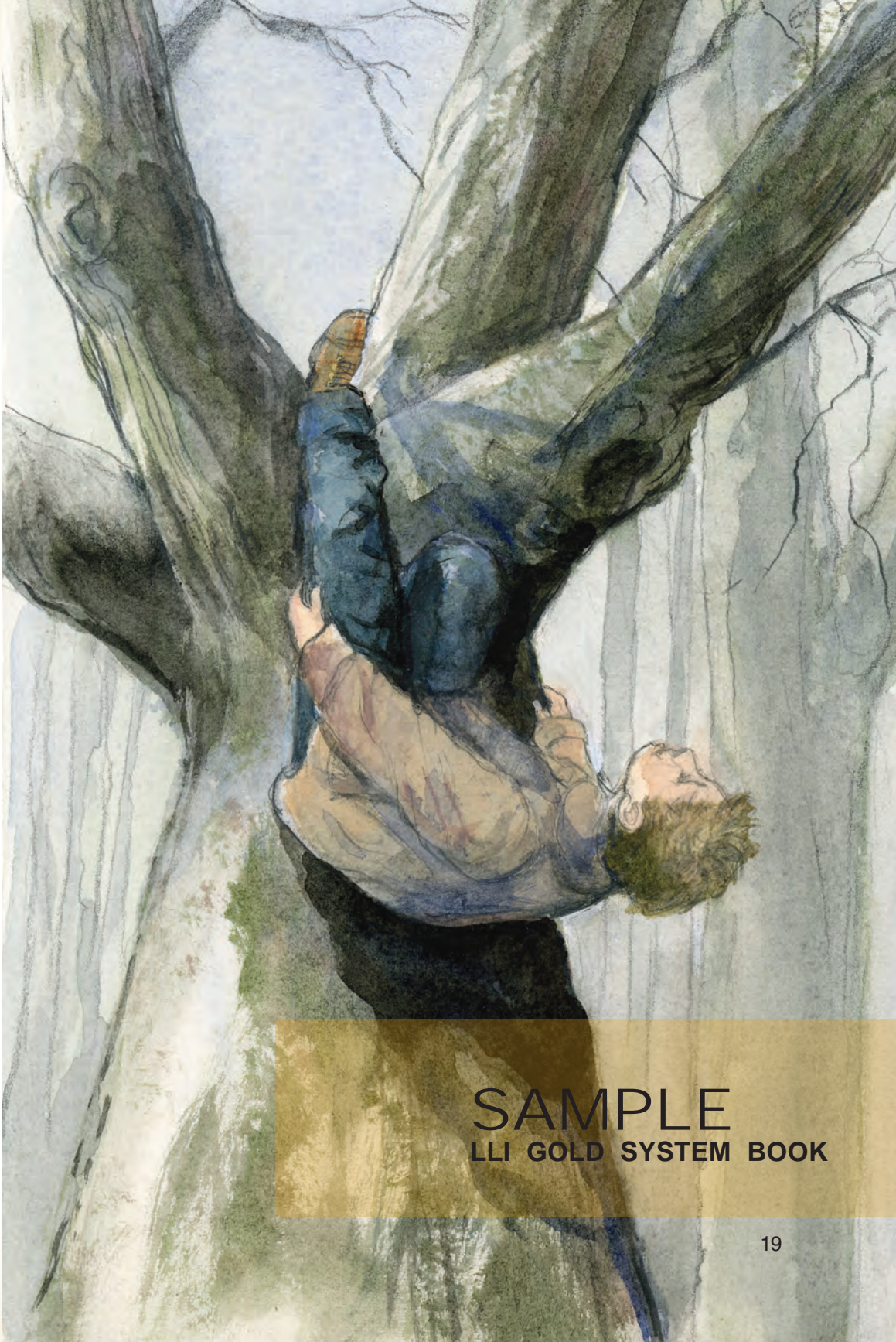


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The next thing he knew, he was hanging upside down, stunned, his head throbbing where it had banged against the tree trunk. It took him a minute to understand—in his agitation, he had fallen over backward, and his left foot was wedged in the fork.

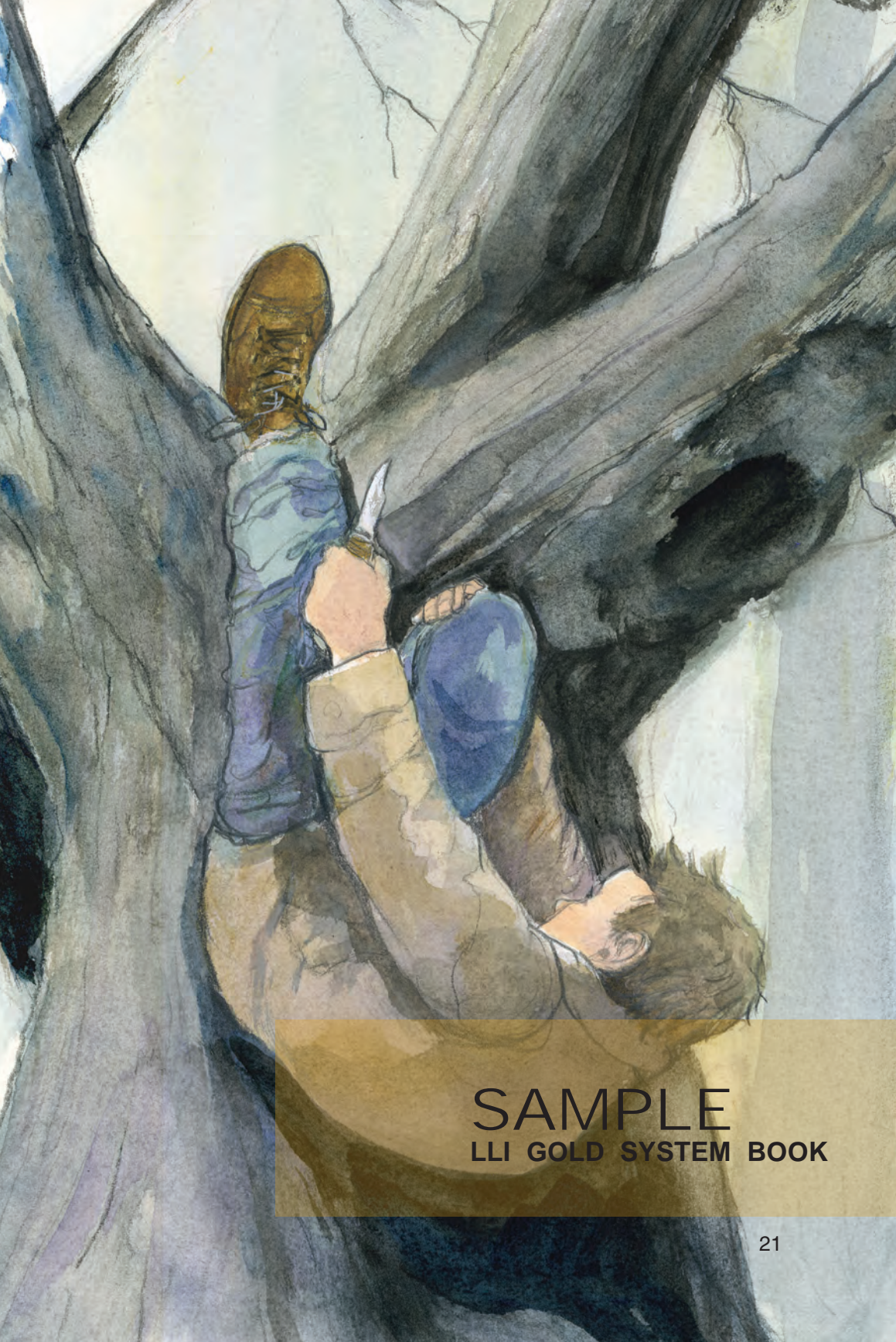
He pulled and jerked, but his foot didn't move. He twisted to one side, then the other. His boot was stuck tight.

It was no use calling for help. The house was far away. He began to feel lightheaded. And he was shivering with cold. He had run out without his cap or gloves.



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Then he remembered the knife. He took it out, and curled his body upward, reaching, reaching. The tip of the knife just touched his bootlace. He began to cut, and, after an eternity, the laces parted, his foot slipped out, and he plummeted to the ground.



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Alex limped back to the house. What he saw there made his heart squeeze in his chest. His dad's travel bag was on the porch. Alex ran inside and told him what had happened.

"Alex!" Dad said, holding him close. "That was quick thinking. You might have frozen out there! Thank heaven you had this." He looked at Alex's knife, the broken handle now reinforced by tightly wrapped leather.

"How . . .?" he asked.

"Old harness leather, twine, and plenty of glue." said Mother.



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Dad was home. He had praised Alex's "quick thinking." Mother had worked hard to mend his knife. Suddenly, Alex felt like crying.

Mother held out another box. “We couldn’t afford new boots *and* a new knife,” she said.

“There is nothing wrong with *this* knife,” Alex told her. “Not one thing.”



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