

Christmas in Cascade Falls: Follow the Star

Despondent over multiple losses, Wesley and Hattie had decided to forego Christmas this year. But then a delivery shows up at their door on Christmas Eve, a delivery from the Underground Railroad. They receive the Christmas they didn't want, but maybe needed.

Grace loved it at Josie's house, especially before Christmas when Josie's Grandma made Christmas sugar cookies. Her sugar cookies were the best, big and fluffy and melt-in-your-mouth delicious. The smell of Josie's Grandma's cookies always filled every nook and cranny of the home, and that was saying a lot. There was an abundance of great hiding places in Josie's home and they had explored them all.

Grace would hide under the steps with Josie and pretend they were waiting for messages sent by owl, like Harry Potter. Grace only got to play in the crawl space in Josie's parents' bedroom when they weren't home. Josie's mom didn't like them playing in her bedroom; but sometimes, when they were gone, Josie's grandmother would let them hide in there. They pretended they were fairies living in the walls, or little people who only came out when the grown-ups were gone. Now they could play Underground Railroad.

Grace had been excited about her latest school assignment. She had raced to the computer, even forgoing her after-school snack, and clicked on Google search, "Underground Railroad," then on a *Wikipedia* page. She had anticipated pictures of an actual railroad under the ground, like a subway. Or something magical like the train that took Harry Potter to Hogwarts. What she found disappointed her. It wasn't even a railroad at all.

The assignment had been to get information on the Underground Railroad in general, then in Cascades County in particular.

"Ask your parents and grandparents what they know about it," her teacher had said.

After her letdown, she looked up Underground Railroad, Cascade County, Michigan. A few articles surfaced. Nothing of much interest. Grace logged off then told Jacob the computer was free.

"What was so important anyway?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me. Sixth grade. Did Ms. Simpson give you that lame assignment about the Underground Railroad?" Grace refused to answer. "I could have told you all you need to know. All you had to do was ask me."

Like that was going to happen. No way would she ask her annoying brother for anything, much less something as important as this.

"So, Grace, how was your day? Learn anything interesting in school?" her dad asked her over dinner.

"No, Dad."

“She’s learning about the Underground Railroad,” Jacob said. “Thought it was a real railroad, didn’t you, Gracie? Thought it was a magic train like in Harry Potter,” he taunted.

“As did you when Ms. Simpson gave you the assignment in sixth grade,” his dad reminded him. “That’s great, Grace. What did you find out?”

“What Jacob said,” Grace hated to admit Jacob was right. “That it’s not a railroad at all. It’s just people taking slaves in wagons and buggies and hiding them in their homes.”

“That’s better than an actual train, better than magic. People risked their lives and livelihoods to help the slaves, for something they believed in. That’s pretty powerful. Better than any made-up magical train. It’s real.”

“You think so, Dad?” Grace asked.

“I know so. It took a lot of courage to accept slaves into your home back then. If you were caught you could have gone to jail.”

“What about the slaves?” Ashley joined the conversation. “What about the risks they took? They risked everything. If they were caught, they were brought back and beaten, maimed or killed.”

“That’s right,” her dad said. “They risked everything for freedom. Some things in this world are worth fighting for, worth taking risks for. I’m glad Ms. Simpson teaches about the Underground Railroad every year.”

“We’re going on a field trip Thursday to see a home that was part of the Underground Railroad,” Grace said.

“That’s Ms. Simpson’s aunt and uncle’s home. Her great grandparents were part of the Underground Railroad. There were a number of stops in Cascade County. You’ll learn about them. I think Josie’s home is one of them.”

“Really, Dad?”

“Ask her parents,” her dad told her.

Grace grabbed her dad’s cell phone after dinner and hid in her room to talk.

“Josie, did you ask your parents about the Underground Railroad?” Grace didn’t wait for Josie to answer before posing her question.

“Not only that, the house we live in was part of the railroad.”

“I know. My dad told me.”

“My grandmother said her great, great grandmother had been an abolitionist.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone against slavery. She says the space under the stairs and the crawl space in my mom and dad’s bedroom were hiding places for escaped slaves. She said they were abolitionists, that meant they wanted to get rid of slavery completely, taking slaves away from anyone who had them.”

“Wow.” Grace loved going to Josie’s house, not just because her grandmother made the best sugar cookies, though that was a factor. Josie’s grandmother told the best stories.

“Did your grandmother have any more stories?”

“You’ll have to hear them from her. Can you sleep over this weekend?”

“Sure. I’ll ask Dad.” Grace was certain her dad would say yes. He always said yes to her.

“Grandma, why didn’t you tell me about the Underground Railroad?” Josie asked as they decorated the sugar cookies.

“You never asked, child. I guess I didn’t think about it.”

“Tell us more, Grandma.”

“Not a whole lot more to tell. I told you about your great, great, great ... Oh, dear. Too many greats. Let me think. My mother, your great grandmother, was born in 1920. Her mother was born in 1900. Her mother was born in 1880 and her mother was born in 1860 or thereabouts, and her mother before her. So that’s great, great, great, great, great ... five times great grandmother. Is that right?”

“That’s okay, Grandma. Let’s just say one of my ancestors,” Josie suggested.

“That’s right. Your great grandmother Hattie and your great grandfather Wesley. No, that’s not right. Grandma Hattie was born in the 1840’s. Or maybe that is right. They married young those days. Her parents, Jedediah and Elizabeth Alexander were part of the Underground Railroad, out there in River Junction. And your great grandfather Wesley’s grandparents, Josiah and Mary Whitcomb, and his parents Edward and Isabelle, were all part of the Underground Railroad, though Isabelle not so much.

“Edward published two newspapers. One quarterly abolitionist paper, the American Freeman, and the other weekly, the Cascades Press. When people didn’t like what he wrote, they burned down the paper. Edward rebuilt with the help of his father, Josiah. Josiah was a local lawyer. He served as a judge for a while, too. Must have been difficult, being an abolitionist, breaking the law by helping slaves to freedom, him being a man sworn to uphold the laws of the land. I believe he said there was a higher law involved. I think the local sheriff was involved in the railroad too. Or, if not, he looked the other way.

“Wesley, he was hiding slaves in their wagon and transporting them along the railroad when he was twelve or younger. Continued until the slaves were finally freed during the Civil War.”

“Grandma, how do you remember all that?”

“I wouldn’t remember it if my grandma hadn’t written it down for me. And then I looked up more on Ancestry.com. We’ve got ancestors going all the way back to James Madison,” her grandmother asserted with a nod. “Oh, and it helps that the local historical society took an interest in that time period. I told them what my grandmother told me and they added to it. You can look it up. They talked about making this place an historical site. I told them no. I didn’t want to live in a museum. This place is still a living, breathing home with people living here. That’s the way I want it. Maybe someday when I’m dead and gone, you can turn it into a museum if you want.”

“You’re so lucky,” Grace told Josie. When Grace had asked her grandmother, she had been disappointed to learn her great grandparents had moved here after World War II.

They drank cocoa and ate cookies while Josie's Grandma told them more stories about the Underground Railroad.

Cascade Falls – 1859

“There'll be no Christmas this year.”

“But you love ...” Wesley started then tried to swallow the words back into his throat and relegate them to the land of unwelcome words. Hattie's face told him all he needed to know.

“What will we tell our families?”

“Tell them whatever you want. Tell them I'm sick. I might as well be.”

“Okay.” Wesley recognized there was a sickness in her soul, her spirit, usually so light-hearted. No family gathering at their home this year. Wesley wasn't sure how they had become the repository of all things Christmas, or more accurately their home. He figured it came with the house. Shortly after Hattie had her first pregnancy, his parents had opted to move into town.

“We don't need such a big house, not now that all of you children are grown and gone. Now that you are starting a family of your own, you will need a bigger house.”

“I can always add on a room,” Wesley had protested. He and Hattie had been living in the small house on his parent's farm that he had built before they married. Small, but it had provided all the space they had required during that first year.

“Nonsense. No reason to add on a room when you have a perfectly fine house here. With your dad's work at the newspaper, it just makes sense to move to town. No more drives through snow and ice during the winter. And if it gets too hot in the summer, we can always come stay in your old house for a spell.”

So, it was settled. Wesley suspected his mom had just been waiting for the right time to abandon the home and farm she had never loved. Not the way he had loved it. Not the way Hattie loved it.

Hattie was a true farm girl from the start, one of the many things he loved about her. They shared the same values. And he loved her spirit. He had even been willing to consider becoming a Quaker, accepting her family's faith, had Hattie not chosen to join his family at the Methodist church in town.

“It's only fitting that I join my husband and his family at their church,” she had proclaimed before he could make the offer, though Wesley suspected it had something to do with Hattie's spunk and her ability with a shotgun.

He remembered how they had met, years ago, through their families' work with the Underground Railroad. He especially remembered that day, six years ago, when he had decided she was the one for him. He had been on his way back from delivering a runaway to Detroit.

Detroit to Cascade Falls – 1853

Wesley clucked to the horses and tugged gently on the reins. They set off at a slow trot through the pre-dawn streets of Detroit. He wanted to have the city well behind him by the time the sun came up. After a short respite for his team of horses – hay for them, coffee for him – he was back on the road. He wouldn't push as hard on the way home. His cargo delivered, he could now drive during the day, again stopping at safe houses on his way home. His hound dog, Blue, relieved of his charge, slept in the back lying on the burlap that was used to cover the false floor of the wagon. The hound had done well during the long nights, sitting up next to him and alerting him to danger. Wesley remembered how Blue's head had popped to attention last night, letting him know something was afoot. Blue could hear the sound of riders in the dark long before Wesley heard the clop of horse hooves.

“What is that, Blue?” Wesley had asked the dog. “Someone coming?” He had looked for a place to pull off the road and hide the wagon. Best to be safe. Could be anyone riding the road. It was unlikely that it was bounty hunters after his cargo. The plan was to have him in Detroit before anyone knew he was gone. Still, horse hooves at night usually didn't bode well for travelers. He had pulled off the road behind a clump of trees and waited, scratching Blue about the ears as he listened.

“Don't you worry none,” he whispered to the apparently empty wagon. “Blue heard something. Best to hide out here until we see what it is.” He figured Nathaniel would be worried about the buggy stopping but Nathaniel knew better than to make a sound from where he lay under the false floor of the wagon. In the distance Wesley caught the sound of horse hooves.

“Good dog,” he said. “Good ole dog,” he added and patted the dog on the head.

Wesley had watched two men ride by, in a hurry to get somewhere, or get someone. He didn't know their business and didn't care to know it. Even if they weren't looking for his particular cargo, it was better not to engage anyone on the road at this hour of night. If not bounty hunters, they were likely to be thieves. Wesley had been riding these roads at night since he was twelve, though he usually only went as far as the next safe house, six miles, then made it back under the cover of night. But, under the circumstances, it had been decided that it would be best to go all the way to Detroit and get Nathaniel to Canada as soon as possible, rather than take the chance of him being caught at a safe house. The more miles between Nathaniel and his owner, the better. Wesley drove through the night, stopping periodically to let his horses rest, then staying at safe houses or hiding in forests or glades during the day. It had been a hard, three-day journey.

Once Nathaniel was safely stowed in Detroit, Wesley was on his way after a quick meal. The woman at the safe house had invited him to stay and rest. Wesley would have liked to accept the woman's offer, take a nap and give his horses a longer break, but he knew his ma would be worried and waiting. Besides which, he had a reason to keep him awake and keep him moving. He was going a'courting. There was a girl he wanted to see. The more miles he could cover each day, the sooner he would see his girl. He figured he could stop at her house and pass the day before heading home.

As he drove, he dreamed of his future. He knew she was too young to marry just yet, but in a few more years, he'd be eighteen and she'd be sixteen, a right marrying age. His ma wanted him to go to school, be a lawyer like his grandpap, but that didn't interest him. All he wanted to do was farm. Someone needed to run the family farm since Pa was busy with the paper and Grandpap had his law business. He reckoned he could build a home on the property for him and his gal and he'd run the farm. Let his sisters get the schooling.

He stopped at safe houses on his way home, getting up early each morning and driving as far as his team would allow each day. As the sun warmed up the air about him, Wesley resisted the urge to pull over and sleep a mite on his final leg of the journey. Plenty of time for sleeping once chores were done. He couldn't resist the urge to see his sweetie, though, and so he pulled into the Alexander's farmstead. Theirs was the last safe house before Cascade Falls. Many a night he had brought slaves through to this house. That was where he had first seen Hattie. They had exchanged slight pleasantries over the years and over time he decided she was the gal for him. He was surprised when there was no one outside, no one to greet him. He pulled up to the side of the house and stretched his legs. He smiled as Hattie's face appeared at the window.

"It is just Wesley, Pa," she said as she ran out the door to greet him.

"Just Wesley? Now is that any way to greet a man who drove all this way to see you?"

"Hattie Jane, you get back here right now." Hattie's father came out and called to Hattie as three riders came over the horizon. "Get inside. You best be getting inside, too," Mr. Alexander told Wesley.

"If there is trouble brewing, I am not going anywhere," Wesley stated as Hattie went inside.

"Very well then. Get behind me." Mr. Alexander walked away from the house to meet the riders. Wesley stood behind him, to the right, ready to help if needed. Blue started to howl from his perch on the wagon as the riders approached.

"That's okay, old boy," Wesley told him. "We see them a coming." Blue continued to keep watch over the wagon.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" Mr. Alexander asked them as they rode up.

"I here tell there are runaway slaves hereabouts. You know anything about it?" the front rider asked. One of the riders headed to the barn, the other went over to the wagon where Blue growled at him. Wesley went over and held the dog.

"No runaway slaves here. If you would like to join me and my family for something to eat, you are welcome."

"These horses look like they have been driving a long while," the one at the wagon called out.

"I had to make an early morning delivery," Wesley explained.

"What kind of delivery?" The man pulled off the burlap and pulled up the false floor.

"What you hiding, boy?"

The third man came from the barn. "Nothing, Slade. I don't see any sign of them."

“Well, appears to me that that wagon was used in the commission of a crime. By rights we can confiscate this property,” Slade said.

Mr. Alexander put up his hand to keep Wesley back. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“Seems you got trouble a plenty. Aiding and abetting the escape of runaway slaves.”

“You have no proof. It won’t hold up in a court of law.”

“Won’t it now. You can tell that to the judge, or you can let us have this wagon and team of horses and we will be on our way.”

Mrs. Alexander came out of the house. “Mr. Alexander, where are your manners? Invite the gentlemen in for a bite to eat,” she chided her husband.

“Lizabeth, go back inside. Let us men folk handle this,” Mr. Alexander said.

“You have a right pretty wife,” Slade said. “Maybe we should take her up on her offer.”

They heard the sound of a rifle being cocked as the Alexander’s farm hand came around the corner.

“You heard the man. There are no runaway slaves here,” he said. “You best be on your way.” He aimed at Slade.

“There are three of us and only one of you.”

“But you will be dead before they shoot me.”

“Make that two.” Hattie came out of the house with a shotgun.

Slade thought for a moment. “Come on, boys. Nothing here. Time to move on,” he said. “Thank you kindly, Ma’am, for your offer. Maybe we will take you up on it someday.” He tipped his hat at her before turning his horse around and heading back the way they came.

The man with the rifle continued to keep the barrel trained on him as the three men rode off.

“Vance, you know I don’t tolerate guns on my property, least not ones trained on men,” Mr. Alexander said. “And you, Hattie, you know better than anyone my thoughts on guns. Get back inside.” Hattie quietly slipped back into their home.

“I’m no Quaker, and it’s a good thing. No telling what kind of mischief they might be up to,” Vance answered.

“And you, Lizabeth. I told you to wait in the house.”

“And let those men run off with Wesley’s wagon?”

“I had it under control.”

“Yes, husband. What you say.” Lizabeth said. “Wesley, you will be joining us for lunch.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Thank you, Ma’am,” Wesley said. “Soon as I get my horses some feed and wash up.”

“I will be going to town,” Mr. Alexander told her. “Seems there is more nonsense afoot. I will be home in time for dinner.” He saddled his horse and rode off toward town.

“What was Mr. Alexander referring to?” Wesley asked over lunch, in between sneaking looks at Hattie. If there had ever been any doubt about her being the right one for him, they were gone now.

December 1859

It had been a while since he had heard his wife's lilting laughter echo through their home, filling all the small spaces with light and joy.

Hattie had loved Christmas. She happily took on the responsibility for hosting the day, welcoming her family as well as his.

After her first miscarriage her joy and laughter had returned.

"You're young," her mother had assured her. "There's plenty of time for children, lots of them. Sometimes these things just happen.

"Soon your home will be filled with the sound of children," her father had assured her after her second miscarriage, before being hushed by her mother.

"That's not what the child needs to hear right now," she told him.

"But it's true."

"Not now." Hattie's mother had pushed him out the door.

It had taken longer for the laughter to return after the second miscarriage, but return it did. This last time though ... it seemed all life had been sucked out of his wife's body so that he wondered what had happened to the girl he had married. Was she gone forever?

"I just can't do it, you see that, don't you?" she had asked that night while cuddling under the covers. "I can't bear to see my sisters and their children filling this empty house that was supposed to be filled with our children."

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead.

"It's not forever," she assured him. "Just for now." She moved closer into his arms. "I need to accept that it's just not meant to be."

"What do you mean?" his heart ached at the resignation in her voice.

"Children, it's just not to be."

"But you're still young ..."

"No, better to accept it. It hurts too much to keep hoping and having my heart broken."

"If that's what you want."

"It's not what I want, but maybe what I need."

Wesley had continued to hold her tight till his head nodded in sleep.

Christmas was to be like any other day. No church service, no gifts, no small tree set on a table in their living room, no guests, no turkey dinner. They would do their chores and eventually the day would be over and they would continue on with their life. At least that was what they planned till the quiet of the night was broken by a rap on the door on Christmas Eve.

"So sorry to bother you, it being a holiday and all, but I didn't know where else to go." Wesley vaguely remembered the man, Ethan, another Quaker, part of the Underground Railroad, but not someone on his route. He knew all of the people along his route, the ones who brought deliveries, and the homes where he took deliveries. "We have a delivery," the man whispered.

Wesley knew what that meant. But what about his wife? Would she be up to receiving anyone this night? On any other night there would be no question."

“What is it, Wesley?” Hattie joined him at the door.

“A delivery,” Wesley told her.

“On a night like this?” It was a Michigan winter night. Snow blowing, wind cutting like a knife across any part of bare flesh exposed.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. We were supposed to be further along by now, but the cold and ice. Our horses ...”

“Where are they?” Hattie jumped into action.

Wesley threw on his coat and helped the man with his cargo. A family group of three. A couple with a small child.

Hattie set about brewing coffee and seating the family around the fireplace to warm up while he tended to the horses. By the time he came back they were wrapped in blankets and sipping hot coffee.

The woman clutched the child to her chest.

“It’s all right,” Hattie assured her. “You’re safe here. No one will come out on a night like this.” She continued to clutch the baby close. “Here, this will warm you up,” Hattie held out the warm cup.

Slowly the woman lowered the child. Barely old enough to stand on its own, the baby clung to her knees. The child appeared to be healthy, though not plump like her sisters’ babies. “Thank you,” the woman whispered.

“Would you like some warm milk for your child?”

“No, thank you, Ma’am. My child still gets warm milk as long as my body willing.” She set her coffee down and lifted the child to her breast. Wesley saw Hattie flinch at the sight, as if something had yanked at her heart. “But I would take some milk myself, if it no bother.”

“No bother at all.” Hattie got up and went back into the kitchen. Wesley followed her in.

“Here, let me help with that.” He stoked the fire in the cook stove while Hattie poured milk. “Are you okay?” he asked as she placed the pot of milk on the stove.

“I’m fine.”

Wesley knew the lie of the words but refrained from saying more, his fingers lightly brushing against her as she moved about the room, pulling out bread and cheese for a make-shift meal for the group.

Hattie remained silent as the men talked. There wasn’t more to say. Wesley and Hattie had heard it all before. So many sad stories of lives lost, families separated, dangers, cruelty at the hands of the slave owners. Wesley could see Hattie didn’t have the heart to hear more.

“You must be tired,” Hattie said once each had had their fill of the simple fare and a chance to warm up by the fire. She reached into the fireplace for two large stones, wrapped them in heavy clothes and gave them to the young couple. “Here, these will help warm your bed.

“We don’t want to impose. The barn ...” the man started.

“Nonsense. It’s far too cold to stay in the barn. You’ll stay here in the extra bedroom.”

When the man started to protest, Hattie added, “No one will come looking for you on such a night. You’re safe here. And if someone does call, there’s a hiding place in your room. I’ll show you. Go on up and get settled. I’ll be up once I get your driver settled.”

Hattie took another stone out of the fireplace. When she started to hand it to the driver of the wagon, he waved it away.

“No, thank you, Ma’am. I’ll be on my way now that the snow has stopped and the wind has died down.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“I promised my wife I’d be home for Christmas. It’s our first Christmas together.”

“That’s a promise not worth keeping, that is if you want to have more Christmases together.”

“You don’t know my wife.” He looked over at Wesley and smiled. Wesley returned the smile. Now that the driver had his hat off and the large overcoat he could see how young he was. Not much older than Wesley had been when he had married Hattie. He remembered those days of young love. How he could hardly bear to be away from his new wife for an hour, much less a day. And miss a night sleeping in their warm bed ...? Never.

“He’ll be fine, Hattie. I’ll take care of taking our guests to their next stop once it’s safe. He knows the way. Easier for his horse to pull the wagon with just him in it. He’ll be fine,” he repeated as if that would make a difference.

Hattie looked at him then stopped, whatever she had been planning to say kept locked behind her lips, like so many other words unspoken between them. Secrets his wife kept to herself. She handed the hot, wrapped stone to the young man.

“All the more reason you need this. It’ll help cut the chill if only for a short while.”

“Much obliged, Ma’am.”

Wesley wondered at the word “Ma’am.” Hattie wasn’t that much older than the young man. Still, she had, they both had, lived a lifetime it seemed since those early days of marriage that were so full of promise. He walked outside with the driver and helped him hitch his horse back to the wagon. The horse balked at the idea of leaving the warm stall for the cold night but was persuaded by the gentle touch of the young driver.

“We’re going home,” he whispered as he rubbed her back.

When Wesley returned, Hattie had already cleaned up and was prepared to go upstairs and see to their guests.

He walked upstairs with her and helped her make sure the family was settled before they went to their own bed.

“I know how hard this must be for you,” Wesley reached for his wife, wrapping his arms around her cold body.

“We’ll do what we can to make it Christmas for them,” was all she said.

Hattie was up early the next morning, brewing coffee, stocking the fire in the wood stove and the fireplace. Slabs of bacon were sizzling in the fry pan.

“Smells good,” he planted a kiss on her head.

Both turned as the woman and child entered the room, followed by her husband.

“I come to see if you needed any help.”

“You set yourself down. You are guests.” Hattie handed the little boy the orange she had found and peeled for him.

Wesley headed out the door to take care of the livestock. He paused on his way to the barn, looking across the expanse of the farm in the morning light. Sometimes this was the best part of the day, the snow glistening in the early dawn. All was new and sparkling, untouched except for the deer tracks. There was no tell-tale sign of the wagon from last night. That was good. Less chance of being found. The wind had died down and already clumps of melting snow were falling from tree branches. It looked like this snow wouldn't last. Also good. Less chance for tracks.

He needed to get his guests to the next safe house, had promised Ethan he would take care of it. But when? Did he wait a few days until there would be less discernable paths across new fallen snow? Did he dare wait for tomorrow? Certainly no one would be out tracking runaways on Christmas day? But then, chances were that those who were in the business of tracking and returning slaves weren't concerned about Christmas. They were just as likely to show up at his house today as any other day. Maybe even more.

If he were to go today, it would have to be during the day. Less chance of drawing attention to them. A wagon at night would be suspicious. But a lone driver on a wagon on Christmas day would also be suspicious.

He continued to stare across the expanse as his brain processed. Then, his decision made, he proceeded to the barn where he fed the livestock and milked the cow before going back to his home.

Hattie and the woman were sitting at the table peeling apples for pie when he returned. He paused to take it in. The baby played quietly at their feet. They seemed to have reached some type of agreement, though over what he didn't know. Her husband came in with a load of wood for the fireplace. Breakfast dishes were in the sink, soaking in soapy water. The large Christmas ham they had put back into storage was on the counter.

Hattie jumped to her feet to get him his breakfast.

“The wind has died down and it's fixing to be a fine day, though who knows how long that will last? Best to be moving on to the next safe house as soon as possible.”

“But it's Christmas,” Hattie stopped, his plate in one hand and the pot of coffee in the other.

“Christmas don't make no matter to us,” the man said. “It just another work day, double the work for Althea, she being a house slave.”

“That's right,” the woman nodded in agreement. “Though sometimes the mistress give us a ham and I get other food, leftovers from the master's table. Still Christmas, don't pay no nevermind to it.”

“All the more reason for us to celebrate today. And you, you shouldn’t be doing any work. You’ve already worked enough for ten lifetimes. Let me serve you.” Hattie placed Wesley’s breakfast on the table and poured him some coffee, before taking the knife away from Althea so she could no longer peel apples.

“I no mind.”

“But I do.” She finished slicing apples. “We can at least wait till the pie is done.”

“Yes, we can wait.” Wesley sat down and helped himself to the bacon and thick slices of homemade bread washed down with coffee. “We can take it with us.”

“We?”

“We. A man traveling alone on Christmas day would arouse suspicion. But a man and his wife, traveling to celebrate with family ...”

“And we’ll take the ham. I meant to send it with you anyway,” Hattie said.

“There’s no need to do that,” Althea protested.

“Yes, there is. It’s Christmas. A time for giving. You wouldn’t deny us the pleasure of giving.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

That settled, Hattie finished cutting the apples and placed them in the waiting pie crust. She covered them with the other crust, cut slits into the top crust to allow air to escape, sprinkled it with sugar, then crimped the edges of the crust.

“Hattie makes the best pie in Cascade County.”

“Says you.” Hattie frowned but her eyes hid a half smile.

“Says me.”

Once the pie was in the oven, Hattie set about preparing for the day, washing the dishes, giving orders and making sure everyone had adequate warm clothing for the drive.

The drive to the next safe house was uneventful. The family hid in the secret compartment in the wagon. The warm pie, wrapped in a towel, sat on Hattie’s lap while he drove, both maintaining a reverent silence. They were fulfilling a sacred duty. The winter snow made a better chapel than any church he remembered. Now and then they heard the sound of the small boy, chortling as he fed at his mother’s breast. They heard whispers as the couple spoke to each other in the privacy of the enclosed space, sometimes laughing, a backdrop to their journey. Hattie looked over at him and smiled at the laughter, the first real smile she had made in weeks.

They were warmly welcomed by the Amish couple, Aaron and Martha.

“We expected you last night, but also worried because of the weather. We are mighty glad that you made it safely here,” the man said. “Is Ethan all right?”

“He’s fine, spending Christmas day with his wife.”

The man nodded in understanding, then took the reins from him. “I’ll see to your team.”

“You all must stay for Christmas dinner,” his wife insisted.

Hattie brought forth her pie and ham and joined the woman in the kitchen. Wesley remembered the couple from previous trips. A woman was large with child; two small children played with toys by the fireplace. Wesley glanced at his wife to see how she was taking this. He

watched for any sign that she wanted to leave. Instead, she squatted down next to the children after being introduced to the trio.

“This is my daughter, Clara, and my grandchildren, Emma and Joshua.”

“What a beautiful doll,” she said to the little girl, maybe four years old. “Did Santa bring him?” The girl nodded her head and hugged the rag doll tight. “You must have been a very good girl.” Hattie added then looked at a cherub-faced boy, maybe all of two, his face surrounded by brown curls. He was playing with hand-carved, wooden soldiers. “And you too, you must have been very good.” Hattie looked back up at Martha. “What a blessing.”

“Indeed, we have been blessed. And another on the way.”

Althea sat her baby down next to the other children, then set about preparing the table while Hattie helped with the final preparations for dinner. When Clara started to get up to help, Althea insisted that she remain seated.

A young man came in with Aaron. Both shook the snow off their boots. “Your horses are rubbed down and resting in the barn,” the young man told Wesley.

“This is my son-in-law, Matthew,” Martha proudly proclaimed. He leaned over and gave Clara a kiss.

Dinner was a light-hearted affair, with stories and laughter. Hattie even joined in at times. Wesley hated to see the time come to an end but as the sun began to set, he knew they needed to be leaving. Hattie, Martha and Althea were busy cleaning up while Clara and Matthew gathered up their children to take them home. Wesley, Aaron and Sam were enjoying a second cup of coffee and a chaw of tobacco.

“This has been wonderful, but it’s time we be getting home,” Wesley stood up. Aaron put his hand on Wesley’s shoulder.

“Let me get your wagon ready. You sit and enjoy your coffee.”

Sam got up to help.

Wesley could hear the chatter of his wife with the other two women as they cleaned up, while the baby slept in a makeshift bed.

He couldn’t quite make out the words, but at one point they became serious. Wesley watched as the women paused in their work. Hattie gave Althea a strong embrace, then wiping a tear away they finished their work, poured themselves a cup of coffee and joined him. He watched his wife and this stranger who had come into their life for but a day and marveled at their strength.

They say that women are the weaker sex. They don’t know his wife. There was a strength, a womanly strength, different from a man’s strength, but strong none-the-less. He knew better than to underestimate that strength.

“Your horses are fed and ready for the ride home,” Aaron said as he and Sam joined the group.

“Are you sure you can’t stay a mite longer?” Martha asked. “I still have crumb cake and cookies left.”

“Thank you for all of your hospitality, but we need to be going.” Wesley stood up and looked at Hattie as she joined him.

“Then let me send some cake and cookies for you for when you get home.”

Wesley smiled and accepted the offer. Who was he to deny Martha the pleasure of giving a gift?

The sun was already low to the ground by the time they were on their way. Hattie shivered next to him.

“We’ll be home before you know it.”

Hattie smiled at him, wrapping her blanket tighter.

“What were you and the other women talking about while cleaning up?”

“Just women talk.”

“No, it was more than that. Back when you hugged Althea. What was that about?”

Before Hattie could respond they were interrupted by a brash voice. Two horsemen were in their path, blocking their way.

“Where are you going this time of night?”

“We’re heading back from Christmas dinner with our family.”

“Why should we believe you?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Then you won’t mind if we have a look in your wagon.”

“We do mind, but I doubt that will stop you,” Hattie said.

The rider looked over at the one who hadn’t yet spoken. He nodded his head and he rode alongside the wagon and pulled the blankets and burlap away. There was no sign of the recent guests.

“Don’t I know you?” the rider asked as he came alongside the wagon and looked at Wesley. “Or at least I know this wagon. Isn’t there a secret compartment?”

“No secret. Just extra storage space.”

“Then you won’t mind if I shoot a hole or two through the side of your wagon.”

“Only because I would have to repair the hole.”

“Enough,” the other rider said. “We’re hunting runaways. Heard tell some were coming through here. You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“If I did, would I tell you?”

“I reckon not.”

“It’s Christmas. It must be hard to be away from home on Christmas,” Hattie broke the tension.

“Christmas is just another work day. It doesn’t stop runaways.”

“At least let us share some Christmas with you. We have some cake and cookies.” Hattie started to open the package from Martha.

“No, thank you,” the leader said.

“Slade, what would one cookie hurt?”

“I said no thank you,” Slade repeated, this time looking at the rider. “Thank you, Ma’am,” he tipped his hat. “You best be moving on. It’s not safe, traveling at night.”

Wesley and Hattie watched them ride away before taking a breath.

“That was close,” Hattie said.

“Too close,” Wesley agreed. He pulled on the reins and clucked to the horses. “Back to what we were talking about.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes, that.”

“Martha asked Althea why they decided to travel during the winter.”

“In the spring and summer it’s warmer and there is more food available, but there is no escape from mosquitoes and poisonous snakes, and sometimes the heat made riding in closed compartments unbearable.” Wesley rattled off the information without looking at his wife.

“During the winter you endured bitter cold but fewer Southern slave catchers were willing to venture North in the cold months and were more apt to let slaves escape. Also, there were no snakes, mosquitoes, and bears were in hibernation, though wolves were always present regardless of the season. Each season has pros and cons.”

“I know, that’s what she said. Then she said she had lost two children. They were sold by her master. Said she couldn’t bear to lose another.”

Wesley turned to look at his wife.

“Then she asked if we had ever lost a child. That was when I hugged her.”

“I’m sorry,” was all he could say. He wanted to stop the wagon and hold her in his arms, but knew they needed to get home. “That must have been hard for you.”

“It was and it wasn’t. As hard as it was losing our babies, I couldn’t imagine having babies taken away from you and not knowing where they were, whether they were alive or dead.”

The sky was clear and stars ~~lighted~~ lit their way. They drove in silence.

“There’s the north star.” Wesley nodded in the direction of the bright star. “I wonder how many thousands have been guided by that star to freedom.”

Hattie gazed at the star. “It was a good Christmas after all. Not what I wanted, but maybe what I needed.” Hattie leaned in close, laying her head on his shoulder.

“I can’t believe you almost gave away our Christmas cake,” Wesley teased.

They drove the rest of the way in silence except for his occasional clucks of encouragement to the horses, guided by the light of the star.

Present Day

“Did Hattie and Wesley ever have any children?” Josie asked.

“You wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t. Hattie was your great, great, great ...”

“I know, too many greats.”

“... grandmother. She used to say that was one of her best Christmases. By the next Christmas she was pregnant again and eventually they had three strapping boys.”

“Did they help in the underground railroad too?” Grace asked.

“No, by the time they were old enough, the slaves had been freed. Wesley fought in the Civil War, but that’s a story for another time.” Josie’s grandmother hustled them off to bed where they stayed up late, talking and giggling.

Grace smiled as they finally drifted off to sleep. What happened to Wesley in the war? Was he wounded? Did he have to kill anyone? She knew there would be another time. Josie’s grandmother’s stories were even better than her cookies.

