

A Collection of Three Christmas Novellas

A GIFT
for all **TIME**

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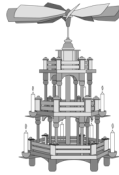
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ONCE LOST
now
FOUND

Tonya B. Ashley

*To Papaw Bradford and Papaw Rebel, who cherished my words and
saw something special in me.*

I



December, 1845

Van Buren, Arkansas

The rough-hewn door of the blacksmith shop creaked open at Levi Snow's light touch, breaking the morning stillness. He needed no lamp to guide him through the pre-dawn darkness. As though part of his very being, he knew every rut in the dirt floor and the location of tree stump stools, work table, anvil, and tools.

Crossing to the sitting area, he paused before lighting a fire in the potbellied stove. A winter chill had settled in the workshop. He laid his hand atop the stove, the cold surface a rarity for someone who worked with hot metal every day. The temperature had dropped more than thirty degrees following the previous day's severe storms.

He tossed a match into the woodstove. *Whoosh*. The sound of the fire catching conjured images of churning clouds and fierce winds from the previous afternoon. What kind of losses had folks experienced up and down the river? What kind of

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help would they require? He pushed the thought away—no need to worry about that now. Someone would find him if he were needed.

Leaving the stove door open provided a little light. Levi started a pot of coffee and sat at the small, makeshift table near the stove. He hadn't wanted a sitting area in the smithy because it would encourage folks to drop by throughout the day. Sam Mooney agreed to take orders at the mercantile, which Levi picked up regularly. While collecting requests for new orders from Sam, Levi dropped off completed projects. However, customers with metalwork orders too large to deliver to the mercantile came to the forge, often too early. With no sitting area, they invaded his workspace with idle chatter. So, at Sam's suggestion, he provided two tree stumps, a table, and a deck of cards, which kept most occupied while preserving the peace and order he cherished.

Levi lit a stubby candle, providing a slight halo of warm light. Then, taking pieces of paper from his pocket, he unfolded them and spread them on the table. Stars, holly, wreaths, bows, candy canes, and Christmas trees. Though he had little regard for Christmas, he pulled these sketches out every December. This year, Sam requested Christmas-themed bells and the usual tree ornaments. Unfortunately, folks were too impatient to order catalog ornaments.

Levi closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The cool winter air mingled with ribbons of heat from the stove. He preferred sitting with an idea before sketching a design to scale. He pulled a blank page free from the others and grabbed the sketching pencil tucked over his ear. The tip of the pencil slid through his calloused fingers to the paper. The door creaked. His hand slipped. The lead scrawled across the page. He pursed his lips, exhaled roughly, and dropped the pencil on the paper.

Mahala Hogue appeared in the doorway, her oil lamp

flooding the room with light. “Levi? Levi Snow? Are you at it already?”

Levi rubbed his palms over his face and shielded his eyes. “Yes, Mrs. Hogue. Up and at it before dawn, as usual.”

Entering, she closed the door behind her. Lamplight exaggerated faint creases under her eyes and laugh lines framing her mouth. She fisted a crocheted shawl tightly at her neck.

“I have news—”

“Extinguish the light, please.” Levi picked up the sketching pencil.

“The light?”

“I spend early morning hours in candlelight only.” He waved a finger overhead, indicating the intrusion of light. He’d grown accustomed to the low light that allowed him to see the subtle details or flaws as he worked glowing hot metals. “Lamplight after coffee.”

“Of course.” With a nod, Mahala extinguished her lamp. “A young man brought news from the river. The *Resilient* didn’t make shore before the storms hit. It’s run aground on a sandbar.”

Turning the paper over, Levi began to sketch again. “Survivors?”

Mahala joined him, setting the darkened lamp on the table. Pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders, she rubbed her arms vigorously. “A rescue launched a while ago. The *Valiant* should be arriving with the passengers sometime this morning.”

“Any word of Captain Cobb and the crew?”

“Nothing definite. The young man said they expect to bring in the *Resilient* later today. Can you go to the wharf to help?”

“I’ll make time.” His hand glided across the page with quick strokes. Levi habitually responded to a crisis because he

often gained work from it. “Have someone send for me when you get word of the *Resilient’s* arrival.”

“You misunderstand. Help is needed now to prepare the landing to receive the rescue boat.” She patted his hand. “I know you’re just interested in the work, but your ability to think and act quickly is well known. This town can’t have a crisis without Levi Snow to set it to order. I’ll wake Justin. He can go with you.”

“What about Mr. Hogue?” Levi asked, hoping he could gain a few hours in the forge. “He’s every bit as good in a crisis as I am. Better, I’d say.”

“Down in his back.”

“No need to wake Justin.” Levi rubbed a hand over his hair. “He’s tending the horses. Should be here any minute to begin his apprenticeship work.”

“Have him stop by the kitchen before you go. I’ll gather some food for you.”

He nodded, followed her to the door, and relit her lamp with his candle. Justin stepped out the stable door as Levi waited for her to disappear into the boardinghouse.

“Was that Ma? What is she doing out here so early?”

“Hitch up the wagon. We’re going to the landing. Don’t know how long we’ll be there.”

“Trouble from the storms?”

Levi nodded.

“Once the wagon is hitched, get the coffee off the stove and take it to your Ma so it doesn’t go to waste. She’ll have food for us.” Levi paused, eyeing Justin. “Comb your hair, tuck in your shirt. Your Ma doesn’t say anything but worries when she sees you looking unkempt. I’ve got a sketch to finish, and I’ll start loading tools.”

Justin nodded and went straight to work. Returning to the workshop, Levi resumed his sketching. Quick strokes

completed the image of a bell with a border of holly leaves trimming the bottom. He collected the papers and placed them in the order box on his work table. Other designs would have to wait until he and Justin returned.

Levi gathered tools—handsaws, axes, rakes, hoes, whatever might be helpful. Justin reappeared with two flour sacks of food. Levi smiled and shook his head. “How long does your Ma think we’ll be gone?”

Justin chuckled. “You know Ma.”

“Yes, I do. Did she get her hug?”

He nodded. “She must be worried. I got a peck on the cheek too.”

Levi knew Mahala Hogue would want to hug her son goodbye even though he was twenty-two and she saw him daily. Their relationship intrigued him. Mrs. Hogue wasn’t intrusive but made time whenever Justin wanted to talk, and she never failed to greet him or send him off with warm affection. Would he have such a relationship with his mother if she hadn’t died so young?

“Best get going.” Levi climbed into the buckboard wagon, taking the reins. His coat, gloves, hat, and scarf lay on the seat. “Did you do this?”

Justin nodded as he climbed up. “I know you tolerate the cold until the forge gets heated, so I figured you might not think of these until we got down the road a piece.”

Levi donned the winter garments. “Good man.”