

*Secrets
in the
Sky Nest*

Karen Meyer



GRACE & TRUTH
BOOKS

Secrets in the Sky Nest

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*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,
hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge
of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

2 Corinthians 4:6 KJV

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1

Two Mean Men

Nelly Robinson tiptoed to her front porch and perched on one of the many crates full of household goods yet to be unpacked. Her family—parents and younger sister Trudy—had just moved to the little town of Salem, Ohio. She smiled at the early-morning sounds of chirping birds, a faraway dog barking, and a light breeze in the big tree in her yard. She liked their new house on a quiet street. Papa’s new job as a newspaper editor meant exciting changes ahead, more changes than she’d seen in all her twelve and a half years.

She bit her lip. Would school bring the same loneliness as before? *I hope I find a forever friend—someone to share secrets with.*

“Nelly.” A deep voice behind her made her jump.

“Papa, you startled me.” Nelly had a close relationship with her father. He made her feel special and safe. He talked to her like she was a grown-up.

Papa chose a sturdy seat on the wooden box next to his daughter. “You’ll have many opportunities ahead in Salem. Don’t waste a single one.”

Nelly twirled a strand of her dark hair around her finger. “What will they be?”

“In Salem, many people are Friends...”

Nelly furrowed her brow. “We haven’t met them so how do we know they’re friends?”

“Friends is another name for Quakers. Quakers believe in equality, so they’re bold to disobey the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law the government passed last year.”

“They’ll help all the slaves who’ve run away?”

“Yes. Many in Salem are against slavery. Lots of Salem houses have secret rooms and tunnels.”

“Our house too? A secret room to hide slaves?”

“Maybe. Salem’s anti-slavery newspaper is shipped to other states.” Papa counted on his fingers. “Like Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana.”

“My papa, the editor of such an important newspaper. I’m proud of you. But how does that mean I’ll have chances that I shouldn’t waste?”

“Famous men and women will come to give speeches against slavery in this town, for one thing. I want you to learn from them.”

Nelly wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather help the fugitives.” She’d been to anti-slavery speeches with her parents ever since she could remember and felt lost in the swirl of inspiring words.

“You may have that chance. But it could be dangerous.” Her father put his hand on her shoulder. “You’ll need to be brave so God can use you in his great plan.”

The door behind them opened and slammed shut. “Nelly!” Trudy, Nelly’s nine-year-old sister, pushed herself between them.

Nelly groaned inside. “Trudy, you don’t need to shout.”

Trudy switched to her whiny voice. “I woke up lonesome. I don’t like having my own bedroom.”

Their father stood. “I’m off to start my first day as editor of *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*. You girls help your mother with unpacking and moving in, you hear?”

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“Yes, Papa.” Nelly stood and gave him a salute.

“We will.” Trudy poked her sister and grinned.



Mother opened cupboards in the kitchen and filled them. “This kitchen has so much storage space, I may have to buy more crockery.” Mother unpacked plates, cups, bowls, and cooking pots. “Marius will probably invite some important people to have supper with us.”

Nelly liked that idea. “Papa said lots of famous people will be coming to Salem, but he didn’t say any names.”

Mother set a cast-iron kettle on the stove. “I know one famous person who already lives in Salem—Sojourner Truth.”

Nelly and Trudy looked at each other and shook their heads. “What kind of name is that?” Nelly asked.

“She’s a brave lady who escaped from slavery, then chose a new name to show the new job God gave her.”

Trudy frowned. “Tell us her name again?”

“Sojourner Truth. Sojourner means traveler—she travels up and down the land. And Truth because she tells people God’s truth.” Mother finished putting the table linens into a low cupboard and slid the door closed. “We’ve done enough unpacking for today. Get your bonnets.”

Trudy jumped up. “Are we going to see Sojourner Truth?”

Nelly adjusted her bonnet. “She sounds like someone I’d like to meet.”

“Not today. We’re going uptown and shop in Salem.”

On the way, they passed several two-story houses and Nelly remembered Papa’s words. “Do you think our house has a secret room for hiding fugitives?”

“Probably.”

Trudy bounced up and down. “Where is it?”

Mother smiled. “I haven’t come across it yet. Hidey rooms have to be invisible since slave-catchers can search your house—if they bring an officer of the law.”

Nelly’s mind began sorting through possible places. “When we get home today, we’ll hunt.” She wanted to be ready to help a fugitive.

Her mother pointed ahead. “Look. Papa said they were installing a plank road in front of his newspaper office starting today.” A crowd had gathered around a group of men taking long slabs of wood from a wagon. “You girls may stay and watch. After I say hello to your father, I’ll shop at the Mercantile and then the butcher.”

The girls slipped closer to watch the men lift the heavy planks and set them in place. Nelly leaned toward her sister. “They don’t even nail them down!” Other townspeople were watching, chatting among themselves about this first-ever plank road in Salem.

Two rough-looking men stood nearby with their dog. *That is the ugliest dog I’ve ever seen. Look at its matted black fur. And its ears have slashes. When that lady came near, it bared its yellow teeth, like it would bite her. The dog’s owner has a face I can’t forget—with that full beard, his nose pokes out of his face like a mountain peak.*

The man wore a red neckerchief and pointed to the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* sign. “That rag has a new editor.”

The other man grinned, showing a missing front tooth. His patched overalls were two sizes too big. “Ain’t he the same man they tarred and feathered fourteen year ago in Trumbull County?”

Red Neckerchief nodded. “He quit his slave lecturin’ around the country after that.”

The other man chewed his tobacco for a while and leaned to the side and spat a stream of brown liquid on the ground beside him. “Maybe he needs a reminder lesson.”

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Red Neckerchief pulled on his beard, thinking. “Harder to get a mob together in Salem.”

The man in overalls chuckled. “Who says the mob has to be from Salem?”

Nelly clutched Trudy’s hand. Her whole body shook with fear. “When will Mother come back?” After the men wandered away, Nelly moaned. “Those men were talking about our father!”

Trudy held her stomach. “What does tarred and feathered mean?”

“There’s Mother. She’ll tell us.” The girls raced toward her and Nelly grabbed her mother’s arm. “Papa’s in danger!” Both girls began talking at once.

Trudy pulled her mother’s sleeve. “We must keep Papa safe!”

“What are you two talking about?”

Nelly shuddered as she remembered. “We heard some mean men—two of them—talking about Papa while you were shopping. They’re planning to get a mob and do something to him called tarred and feathered.”

Trudy’s lip quivered. “What does that mean?”

Mother stopped short and the color drained from her face. “Tarring and feathering—that’s an awful thing that shouldn’t happen to anyone!” She turned toward home. “Let’s hurry back and get supper started.”

Nelly shivered. *The town of Salem has a dark side.*

2

Hunt for a Secret Room

Mother stoked the fire and unwrapped five pork chops from her package. She browned them in a cast-iron skillet on the top of the big black cookstove, a much nicer one than she'd ever used before. "You girls scrub and slice seven potatoes, and set the table, please."

Nelly whispered to Trudy, "Next let's hunt for the secret room."

They raced through their tasks and began the search. They started in the cellar, where they'd just been to get the potatoes. It had a dirt floor and foundation-stone walls on all sides. One wall had shelves for crocks and jars, so they moved the jars and checked for a door behind it. Nelly shook her head. "Just a stone wall."

One corner had a wooden door, which gave them hope, but behind it they found a small room full of barrels for root vegetable storage. They opened the door to the coal cellar and found it full of coal.

Trudy raced up the stairs. "Let's try the attic." They took the steps to the second floor two at a time.

They slid a narrow ladder from the corner of the hall and climbed toward the hole in the ceiling. Nelly went first, with

Trudy holding the ladder. “I’m glad it’s still light outside. But what if the attic has no windows?”

“You’d need a candle, but Mother would never give us permission.”

Nelly called from a few steps inside the attic. “Come on up. It’s dusty and cobwebby, but there’s a window at the back end.” She held the top of the ladder steady while her sister climbed up.

The girls, ducking down to miss hitting their heads, went to investigate what the previous owner had left. They explored stacks of crockery, four broken chairs, and two sections of stovepipe.

“Look—a child’s rocking horse.” Trudy started to climb on it, but the rocker was broken.

Nelly lifted the lid of a steamer trunk and found it full of old-fashioned dresses. “If we had time, I’d like to try on this green one.”

Trudy nodded. “I love playing dress-up.”

“But we’re hunting for a secret room.”

“This attic would make a nice place to hide for short people.”

Nelly giggled. “But not very secret.” She looked around. “What if that long wall has a room behind it?” She hunched down and waddled toward the wall closest to them. She found a stray block of wood and tapped on the wall. It sounded very solid. She moved farther along the wall and tapped again. It sounded hollow. She continued tapping until the noise was solid again.

Trudy scratched her head. “If there’s a room back there, how would anyone get in?”

“Maybe a hidden knob or lever?” Nelly began to feel along the wall in the area that sounded hollow. “Nothing. But there must be a room back there.”

“Cornelia! Gertrude!” Mother’s voice from far away still commanded obedience. “Your father is home and hungry for supper. Come right away.”

The girls frowned; they knew better than to pretend they hadn't heard. Besides, they were hungry too—the delicious smell of the pork chops and potatoes reached them in the attic.

Papa had been to seminary. His prayer before supper sounded like a sermon to his daughters. He ended, "Lord, protect me and my family from evil men who wish to do us harm. Amen."

Nelly sneaked a glance at her sister—Mother had told Papa about those men in town and what they'd said. She shivered again as she remembered their words.

"Please pass the potatoes and the sauerkraut," Papa said, as he slid two chops onto his plate. He turned to his wife. "Emily, this meal makes my mouth water." He smiled at his daughters. "What have you two done all day?"

Trudy told about watching the men build the plank road. "It used to be muddy." She was about to say what the two mean men had said, but Mother shook her head.

"Papa, we've been hunting for a secret room in our attic," Nelly said. "We found a place in the wall that sounds hollow, but we can't find a door."

Papa put down his fork. "It may be disguised. The door may look like the wall. To open it, you pull down a whole section of the wall from the top using a tiny loop of ribbon."

Trudy began spooning in bites faster than she could chew. "Let's look right after supper."

"Slow down, Gertrude Ann. Chew each bite before you take another." Mother gave her daughter a stern look. "You girls have the dishes to do tonight, remember?"

"Tomorrow is another day, and the secret room is not going anywhere." Papa winked at them. "Besides, I have things to share at family Bible time that you'll want to hear."

Later, when the family had settled into the parlor, Papa opened his Bible to Isaiah.

“Here’s what God says:

No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.”

He closed the Bible and smiled at his daughters. “You girls heard some tongues raised against me today, didn’t you?”

Nelly trembled at the memory. “We were really scared! Those men...”

Papa patted his Bible. “God says those men will not prosper. God does not approve of what they said. You heard them say something about my past. Here’s the whole story. Fourteen years ago, a gang of men did something very cruel to me.”

Mother slid closer to Papa and put her arm on his shoulder.

“I used to give speeches at anti-slavery meetings, traveling all around. One time a gang of pro-slavery men grabbed me right out of the house where I was staying. They dragged me to a field and stripped me naked. I saw the pot of tar bubbling over a fire and begged them to have mercy. They laughed as they brushed hot tar on my back. I still remember the searing pain. It hurt even more when they rolled me in chicken feathers.”

Nelly covered her mouth to keep the scream inside. Her body began to shake. Mother jumped up to comfort both girls.

“Oh, Papa!” Trudy began to cry.

“I still have scars from it. Those men stole my clothes and disappeared, leaving me in the field. A kindly farmer put soothing ointment on my back and gave me a suit of clothes. I could barely walk, but I was determined to give my speech in town that evening.”

“Oh, Marius! You never told me all those details! Those horrible men...” Mother had to dab her eyes between hugging each girl to comfort her.

“But that night I learned an important truth—one I want you girls to learn too. Slavery is a threat to the basic freedoms of everyone, not just the black man. It’s a threat to free speech, thought, and discussion.”

Mother pressed her lips together. “If I had known...”

“I didn’t tell you everything, Emily, or you’d have been furious at them. I forgave those men right away so I wouldn’t get bitter. God says, ‘vengeance is mine.’” He looked at his older daughter. “The Lord blessed us with baby Cornelia the following year.”

Nelly looked worried. “Will those men tar and feather you again? One of them said he couldn’t raise a mob in Salem. But he’d try to find them somewhere else.”

“Even in Salem some don’t think we should break the law of the United States to help those who have escaped from slavery.” He tapped the Bible. “But I must do my job and trust God. We must not live in fear.”

Trudy and Nelly sat up straighter. “Yes, Papa.”

Nelly clenched her fists together. *Maybe a mob will tar and feather Papa a second time. I never want that to happen to Papa again. I must keep my eyes and ears open for clues of who and when.*

Marius turned to his wife. “Emily, the fellow who handles subscriptions for *The Bugle* wants to move on in a few months. Do you think you could handle his job?”

Mother tucked some loose strands of her dark hair back into her bun. “I’d like working with you. How much time will it take?”

“Maybe an hour or two a day—it would probably vary. It doesn’t pay a big salary, but you’ve always been good at figures. We can use the extra money, especially when the girls start to school.”

Mother smiled at her daughters. “The Moore’s Quaker Academy has a high level of schooling, so the extra expense will be worth it.”

Nelly bit her lip. She’d put school out of her mind. “When does it start?”

Mother studied Nelly. “You look worried. School starts in early September.”

“I’m sure I’ll do fine.” Nelly pressed her lips together to keep any negative words from slipping out.

An amused look crossed Papa’s face as he remembered something. “I heard a good story today that I’d like to print in *The Bugle*. You’ve always been good at putting words on paper, Nelly. Want to give it a try?”

Trudy crossed her arms. “I wish I could write as well as Nelly.”

Nelly hoped to keep her sister from pouting. “But you’re a better artist. You could draw a picture.”

Papa leaned back in his chair. “Here’s my story. Mr. Whinnery, a Quaker in our town, was hiding two fugitives in his house. He has a large family, and always taught them to tell the truth, no matter what. That day, a slavecatcher had a deputy with him so he could search any house in town he suspected of harboring a runaway. Mr. Whinnery’s little six-year-old daughter, Sarah, was playing out front of the house, so the slavecatcher stopped and asked her, “Do you have any slaves hiding in your house?” “No, sir,” she said. The man turned to the deputy. “We don’t have to search that house. Quakers never lie.” The two men went on to search other houses in town. Later, Mr. Whinnery quizzed his daughter and she related what had happened. “Sarah, did thee lie?” “No, Father. Thee taught us there’s no such thing as a slave. All people are God’s children. So, of course, I said we had no slaves in our house.”

Mother leaned back and laughed. “Marius, that’s a great story. Of course, you won’t print Whinnery’s name. Nelly and Trudy, you can get a start on writing and illustrating it tonight before bed.”



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Nelly smiled to herself. That story will be a better one to have swirling around my mind than the tarring and feathering one. Even so, it has a slavecatcher trying to put some poor fugitives back in chains.