

Chapter 1: Girls on the Roof

Maggie's Journal, 5 August 1864

The smell of smoke still permeates our town. Only five days ago the Great Fire swept through Water Street, down Fifth Street, and then onto Main. And yet, Journal, I am grateful. I am grateful that, in the mere space of days, teams of people have organized and begun to repair and, in the case of Water Street, to rebuild homes damaged by the fire. Best of all, it is being done with a sense of civic duty and simple decency. People, both black and white, are working together, something that is rare indeed. I thank God for this, and I pray that we may continue to be one community, rather than two.

It would have been helpful had a few people opened their homes to the six displaced Water Street families, but that did not happen. It is fortunate, though, that we at Greybeal House have enough room for them - although not without a good deal of crowding. You see, I have learned that while compassion, love, and hospitality are admirable virtues, they may cause their practitioners a bit of discomfort. This is now the case with us. Our home is enormous, but even so we are as my husband says, "stuffed to the gills."

And yet, even with the crowding and occasional confusion, we quickly have developed a routine. The men leave for their occupations in the morning and then, as soon as their work is completed, hurry to join the teams rebuilding homes on Water Street. Meanwhile, we women prepare noontime dinner and take it to the workers. Of course, we also see to the usual domestic chores, including the never-ending and nearly overwhelming task of doing laundry.

And yet, despite these challenges, I believe that Greybeal House has become a happy, but crowded commune.

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5 August 1864

Depot Street

Eli Smith, Maggie's husband, was rushing out of his office. He had finished most of his duties as *The Register's* editor-in-chief and was eager to get to Water Street to help with the construction. He was hampered by a bad leg, brought on by bullet wounds suffered a few years earlier and now was forced to use a cane for support. Just the same, he found ways to adapt, and because of this he now was part of a work team.

As he stepped out of the newspaper's office and onto the road that late morning, he spotted his occasional rival, Josiah Norton, striding toward him. Satchel in hand, Josiah was headed away from the train station. It amused Eli

that the industrialist had named two of the businesses he owned in Blaineton after himself: the Norton Mills and the Norton Arms Hotel. Eli considered this a prodigious display of self-importance.

“Back from a trip?” Eli called as Josiah drew near.

The other man heaved an exasperated sigh. “I had been but was called back.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“My mills in Paterson needed some attending to. I scarcely had got the job done, when a telegram arrived informing me that one of the cooks at the Arms’ restaurant had quit in a huff.”

Eli leaned on his cane. “D’you know what caused the huff?”

Josiah’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think I ought to divulge that information. Especially to you. You never know where it might end up.”

Eli considered this. “Astute observation. However, *The Register* only reports things of importance in the town.”

“You’re being insulting now, Smith.”

“No. I’m being honest. An angry cook quitting is hardly a worthy news story.”

Josiah sighed. “Oh, very well. If you must know, it was the cook who handles breakfast and tea.” He took an aggravated breath. “Now I need someone else for the job and in a hurry.”

Eli offered up a friendly smile. “I’m sure things’ll be fine.”

“I do hope so. It seems I never get a chance to relax these days.”

“I’m not surprised,” was Eli’s easy reply. “You’ve got quite a little empire going: three mills, a uniform factory, and a hotel. You oughta hire managers to lift some of that burden off your shoulders.”

Josiah rolled his eyes. “I’ve *got* managers. And they’re completely useless.”

The other man laughed. “Guess it’s hard to find good workers.”

“It is, indeed. Well, good day, Smith.” Josiah turned and started back down the street.

A smile playing on his lips, Eli watched the other man for a moment. Then, with a shake of his head, he continued his journey toward Water Street.

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Water Street

Home to most of the people of color in Blaineton, Water Street was abuzz with activity. The sound of hammering and sawing filled the air, punctuated by the voices of men talking and shouting to one another.

The work teams on the street included people whose ancestors had come from Europe, as well as those whose people had been kidnapped from Africa and brought to North America as slaves. Such mingling did not usually occur in Blaineton, but Maggie’s persuasion after the fire had put them voluntarily, albeit temporarily, on the same footing.

Eli had been at work on one house for an hour. He paused and, with a satisfied grunt, surveyed the group’s progress. Just days earlier, a charred skeleton had been razed by teams of workers from Blaineton and other towns.

Bones of a new house quickly arose on the old foundation. Now the bones were receiving siding and a roof.

Eli's stepdaughter Frankie, reporter Edward Caldwell, and Edward's fiancé Rosa Hamilton had come to the site early that morning. The three young people now were working on the roof with a few others, while Eli pounded nails into clapboards with James "Grandpa" O'Reilly, and head reporter Chester Carson. Richard Hancock and his two sons, whose house it would be, were on the other side of the building.

It was a lovely day. A bright blue sky was host to an occasional fluffy cloud. The sun was strong, as it could be in August, and sweat was pouring down Eli's face, as well as everywhere else. He craved a drink of water from a nearby bucket and ladle but was determined to finish his task before he paused to refresh himself.

"Papa!" It was Frankie's voice.

Eli squinted up at her. The eighteen-year-old was peering over the roof's edge at him. He could see her wavy red hair escaping from under her hat.

"Would you bring the ladder over, please? We're almost finished."

Laying his hammer down, Eli replied, "Yes, milady."

"Thank you, my good man," she shot back with a saucy grin.

Before getting the ladder, Eli took a moment to stretch his back. As he did, he noticed a stranger approaching from the direction of the train depot. The man was a bit portly, like Eli himself, although somewhat taller. He wore a wide-brimmed black hat and sported a light brown beard sprinkled with white hair. The beard, Eli noted, needed a good trimming. The man's clothing was faded and his shoes well-worn.

"Hello, friend," the newcomer cheerfully said as he approached. "My! This is a busy street. Looks like you folks suffered a fire."

"We did." Eli eyed the guitar strapped to the man's back and the small carpet bag in his hand. "Just arrived?"

"Yes, sir. Blaineton has a nice ring to it. Sounds like a pleasant place to sojourn for a while, so I got off the train."

Eli grinned. "You know, that's exactly what *I* said. Nearly *ten years ago*."

"Then that bodes well for me. Maybe it means I'm in for a long stay."

"Maybe." Eli thrust out his hand. "I'm Elijah Smith. Call me Eli."

"My name's Shelby. Shelby Garrison."

Eli's dark eyebrows shot up. "Any relation to William Lloyd Garrison?"

"Wish I was, but no, I'm not. However, I am fond of reading *The Liberator*.¹" Shelby smiled easily. "That is, when I can afford it."

"I understand not being able to afford a newspaper. I've been in your shoes more than a few times." After a pause, Eli added, "Shelby's an interesting first name, by the way."

"It's my mother's maiden name. She was from a family of four girls and no boys. She didn't want the family name to die out, so I carry it for her."

¹ *The Liberator* was William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, published from 1831-1865. Using faith as its basis, the paper was anti-slavery and promoted women's rights.

“Papa!” A petulant female voice interrupted. “We need the ladder. *Now.*”

Shelby tipped his head and gazed up at the roof. “Is that your...” He faded off, not sure of what he was seeing.

“Stepdaughter,” Eli finished as he trudged over to the ladder. “And she can be exceedingly pushy when she has a mind.”

“I heard that,” the voice chided from above.

“The girl on the roof...” Shelby marveled, as he helped Eli lift the heavy wooden ladder from the ground. They toted it over to the spot where a small, elfin face was scowling down at them.

“Does she do that often? Climb on roofs, I mean.”

“She does these days.”

Together the men set the ladder in place. Eli held it steady as Frankie proceeded to descend. She had borrowed old clothing belonging to her beau, Patrick McCoy, who currently was in the army. On her feet, though, she wore an aged pair of her own boots.

Eli politely averted his eyes as she climbed down.

Shelby though was fascinated and continued to stare up at the girl.

Eli noticed. “Hey!” he hissed.

Confused, Shelby turned his blue eyes to the other man. “Beg pardon?”

“*Don’t stare.* She’s wearing *trousers*. You can see her... *derriere.*”

“Oh!” Shelby quickly looked away. “Sorry. I was thinking about what a dandy song I could write. The girl on the roof!”

“So, you’re a songwriter?”

“I am. That’s how I earn my bread and butter.”

Frankie leapt off the third to last rung and turned to face her stepfather and Shelby.

“So, young lady, what causes you to be up on that roof?”

Frankie burst into laughter at Shelby’s question. “The fire, of course! What else?”

Coming down next was Rosa Hamilton, also attired in Patrick’s clothing. She was followed by Edward Caldwell.

Shelby took in Rosa’s attire. “Are there any more girls up there?”

Rosa smiled, black eyes sparkling and teeth showing white against her dark skin. “Nope. I believe we’re the only ones in the whole town.”

“And the whole town’s probably talking about it.” Frankie took off her hat, freeing her mass of wavy, red hair so that it cascaded down past her shoulders. “But we’re used to that.”

Shelby chuckled. “Well, I’ll be...” he murmured to himself. “*Two girls on the roof.*”

The sound of wagon wheels abruptly rumbling up the dirt road caught his attention. The noise presaged a minor parade made up of a buggy, two wagons, and a line of women marching behind.

“Well, I’ll be,” Shelby repeated.

The buggy pulled up alongside the house where Eli’s team was working. The rest of the parade passed by, on its way to serve those working on other houses.

Eli pointed. “That buggy comes from my house. My wife’s the driver.”

As if on cue, Maggie hopped out. She was followed by her best friend Emily Johnson and apprentice cook Moira Brennan. All three carried pans of food as they walked toward the worksite.

Frankie and Rosa sprinted toward them to help.

Eli glanced up at the sun. It was high in the sky. “Yep. It’s dinner time.” He turned to Shelby. “Care to join us?”

Shelby’s mouth was already watering as an array of aromas hit his nose: chicken stew with biscuits, apple crisp, broccoli casserole, and more. “I’d be honored.”

The other workers were descending from the roof and coming around from the side of the house. Soon they were improvising tables from sawhorses and planks. The women, meanwhile, brought over more food, cutlery, plates, and napkins and began to lay everything out as soon as they had table space.

Eli took a pan from his wife and said, “Maggie, this is Shelby Garrison. Shelby, this is my wife, Margaret Smith.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Garrison.”

“And I, you, Mrs. Smith.” Shelby removed his hat.

Eli was surprised to see that the other man was bald, save for a halo of light brown hair encircling the sides of his head. “Mr. Garrison has newly arrived in our fair town.”

Maggie smiled warmly at the stranger. “Have you found a place to stay yet?”

“No,” Shelby replied, “not yet. But I’ll gladly work in exchange for room and board.”

“I’m afraid there’s no room in *our* particular inn at present.” Eli reached for a biscuit, but Maggie slapped his hand away.

“Not until we say the blessing,” Maggie teased with a small grin.

“You always make me wait,” he teased back.

After a moment of contemplation, Shelby returned to the earlier topic, “Excuse my asking, but do you have a barn?”

Maggie looked up from putting plates on the table. “Yes, we do.”

“Well, I’d gladly sleep in the loft, Mrs. Smith. That is, with your and Mr. Smith’s permission.”

“Wouldn’t sleeping in the loft be uncomfortable?”

Shelby laughed. “No, ma’am. I’ve found hay makes a fine bed.”

“It does indeed,” Eli agreed.

Richard Hancock stepped beside the trio. “Looks like a fine meal, Mrs. Smith.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hancock,” she replied. “All it needs now is a blessing.”

“I’d be pleased to do that.” With that he called the crew to order, they all bowed their heads, and Richard prayed, “Lord, we give you thanks for this good food placed before us. May it nourish our bodies and enable us to complete our work today. All this we pray in the precious name of Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Everyone started filling their plates, then went to sit or stand on the grass to enjoy their dinners.

Maggie put a healthy dollop of mashed potatoes on Shelby’s plate. “Mr. Garrison, if you don’t mind staying in the barn, then you’re welcome to do so.

The good news is that we shall have plenty of empty rooms once most of the families return to living on this street. You'll have your choice of chamber then!"

"Wonderful! By the looks of things, I'll be in the house way before snow falls." Shelby indicated the building before them. "Seems to me you're making great progress."

"We are," Eli replied around a mouthful of chicken. "Our friends should be able to move in soon."

Maggie noticed the guitar still strapped to Shelby's back. "Pardon my asking, Mr. Garrison, but do you play?"

"I do, ma'am. It's how I earn my keep. I've played for weddings, funerals, parties, and all manner of gatherings."

Frankie abruptly interjected herself into the conversation. "Would you play something for us tonight after we're done working, Mr. Garrison?" She inelegantly shoveled a giant forkful of succotash into her mouth as she awaited his reply.

Shelby grinned, charmed by her youthful disregard for manners. "I'd be delighted, Miss."

Rosa, who had been listening in, quickly swallowed her bite of chicken and biscuit. "You know what would be fun? If we could have a dance! I haven't danced in ages."

"Oh, that would be grand!" Moira Brennan's green eyes sparkled. "I think we could do with a bit of fun, don't you?"

Frankie turned to Maggie. "Oh, Mama, may we?"

Maggie glanced at Emily, who was standing across the table from her. "What do you think?"

Emily broke into a smile – a smile that her husband Nate always found so beautiful. "I think a dance might be just what we all need. Have you played for dances before, Mr. Garrison?"

"Ma'am, I'm able to play reels, round dances, polkas, two-steps, quadrilles, and anything else you could possibly wish."

"Well, then," Maggie said, with a laugh, "it seems we are to have a party!"