

Chapter 2: 17 April 1855

It took Eli over a month to raise the funds to finish paying Nate for the supplies and work he had done while building the flatbed press. All during that time the mystery of the locked cellar door retreated to the back of Eli's mind. He had other things to do and think about.

He quickly found employment in the form of two jobs. One was working in the train station's storage room. The other was at the livery stable cleaning the horses' stalls and seeing to their feed and water.

During the month, he also put in the work needed to make the Old Caretaker's House habitable. Maggie graciously told him that doing repairs to the building would take the place of his rent.

The result of it all was that Eli was busy from sunup to well beyond sundown. Fortunately, even though he was a portly man, he was strong and had stamina. By the end of the day, he fell, completely exhausted, onto his bed at the boarding house and slept soundly until the next morning.

But it was all worth it, for suddenly he found himself at the end of his work. Or more accurately, at the end of *that* kind of work. Getting his newspaper up and running would be his next task.

As Eli looked around the building, he felt a rush of energy and excitement. He was going to have a newspaper again. Finally!

Oh, he knew that as soon as he published his first issue, he would need to hit the streets and sell the paper to whomever he met. That would be a taxing activity, too, as would chasing down and writing up stories of interest. But it would be worth it, all of it. Journalism was his love, and he was a newspaperman through and through. In fact, he strongly suspected that if he pricked his finger, it would bleed ink rather than blood.

Encouraged, Eli left the boarding house, marched to the livery stable, and announced that he regrettably would be resigning. However, he did not do the same with his job at the depot. He realized that he would need a source of income for a few more months at least.

He then walked victoriously to the Second Street Boarding House, enjoyed the usual delicious noon dinner, and proclaimed to one and all that this was the day he would be moving into the caretaker's house, which, he hoped, soon would become known as a print shop.

As he was throwing his meager belongings into his carpet bag, Maggie Blaine appeared in the doorway to his room.

Eli grinned up at her. "I'll be out of here in another minute, Mrs. Blaine. Then you may look for another boarder for this room. One that, I hope, will pay you."

"Oh," she replied, "I'm not bothered by that. Besides what you did for the caretaker's place was worth more than many months' rent."

Impressed by her generous spirit, he stopped working and turned to face her. "You're an astounding woman, Maggie Blaine." Then he chuckled, adding, "But you're a *terrible* businesswoman."

She smiled. "I'm not sure whether to be honored or insulted by that."

"Be honored." Eli closed his carpet bag. "Well, I'll be on my way."

"I'll miss you," she said. She was smiling, but the smile was a bit sad.

He laughed. "Don't worry. I'll be taking all my meals here and probably will join the household in the parlor or out on the porch in the evenings – when I have the time, that is."

"Oh, I hope you do have the time. Otherwise, those evening chats just won't be the same."

Her words touched him. She was saying that he was valued and needed. He had something to offer and was part of the boarding house now, whether he lived there or not. He liked that about Maggie. She had a heart. A big one.

"Thank you," he replied. "I'll try to make the time. I promise."
And he was off.

###

Eli's first night in his new home filled him with optimism. So much so, that he sat down at the old table in the first floor's room and, opening a notebook, began sketching out ideas for news

articles. When the sun set and the room grew chill and dim, he started a fire in the stove and lit the lamp on the table.

He was so absorbed in his work that he lost track of time, only coming to himself when he heard footsteps and the faint murmur of voices outside. They sounded as if they were coming from the street in front of the boarding house.

Frowning, he removed his wire rim glasses, rubbed his eyes, and wondered what time it was. After taking a battered old watch from his waistcoat pocket, Eli blinked at the face until it came into focus.

“Ten thirty,” he muttered. What were people doing running around outside at that late hour?

Shrugging the question off, Eli returned to his notebook and worked until his ears caught the sound of more voices. This time, though, they were coming from... where?

He paused and listened.

It didn't sound like they were outside.

So, where were they?

He frowned.

Then he said aloud, “The cellar?”

The mystery of what lay behind the locked door suddenly popped back into his consciousness.

People were in the cellar! His cellar.

But the only entrance Eli knew of was from this room.

How could that be? How could people be in the cellar?

Eli sprang to his feet. But before he could take a step, he was interrupted by knocking on his front door.

“Mr. Smith,” a voice urgently whispered. “Mr. Smith, it's Maggie Blaine! Open the door, please! Hurry!”

Confused, he strode over, threw back the bolt, and opened the door to let her in.

As she rushed past him, Eli shut the door and bolted it. When he turned to face her, he found Maggie, keys in hand, striding toward the cellar.

“What's going on?” he asked.

She stopped at the cellar's door and began sorting through the keys. “Oh, Mr. Smith, I prayed this wouldn't happen.”

“What?”

“Put out the light, first. Please.”

Eli turned to the lamp on the kitchen table and did as requested.

Maggie found the appropriate key, thrust it into the keyhole, and opened the door.

“Up here!” she called quietly. “Hurry!”

In the next second, two young men of color, both wearing ragged clothing and one holding a lantern, entered the kitchen.

“Mrs. Blaine, what on earth is going on?” Eli repeated.

Maggie blinked at him. “My dear Mr. Smith, considering your support of abolition, surely you must *know* what’s going on.”

Eli stared at the two men standing by the potbelly stove. And suddenly it was all too clear. But he had one more important question. “How did these men get in my cellar?”

Maggie took a breath. “Back when my Aunt Lettie’s family owned this property, they built a tunnel leading from the caretaker’s house to the main house. It was used during inclement or snowy weather.”

“And now you use it when slave catchers show up uninvited.”

“That’s right,” Maggie concluded hurriedly. She turned to the man with the lantern. “Tom, would you please put out that lamp?”

Tom nodded and in a second the room was in darkness.

“Mr. Smith, please take these men upstairs to the bedroom. I must lock the cellar door. I’ll be up shortly. Once you’re in the bedroom, you’ll need to move the wardrobe. There’s a door hidden behind it. Don’t light a lamp or you’ll give us away.”

It was all too familiar to Eli. He remembered well the scurrying about his family did when slave catchers showed up on their property.

He gestured absently to the men and said, “Follow me, gentlemen. Watch your step on the stairs. It’s pretty dark in here.”

“We don’t mind, sir,” Jim, the other man, replied. “We’re used to getting around without a light.”

Once they were upstairs, Eli opened the door to the bedroom and led the men in. The three surveyed the room – it was bathed with faint moonlight coming through the window. Spotting the wardrobe, they went directly to it.

Eli hurried over to help them push the furniture aside. Sure enough, once it had been moved, he saw the secret door in the

wall. It was about three feet high. He wondered how much room the hiding place had.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of light footsteps on the stairs.

Maggie rushed into the room and turned to Tom and Jim. "They're outside boarding house. You'd best get inside."

Without a word, the two dropped down and crawled into the opening.

Maggie leaned over to speak through the doorway. "I know it is close in there and dark, as well, but please be still until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom said. "Don't worry. We've been in lots of tight spots."

"I imagine you have." Maggie stood up, shut the door, and turned to Eli. "You must not say anything about this to anybody."

He grinned. "I wouldn't worry, Mrs. Blaine. My family not only were Quakers but were station masters on the Underground Railroad line."

She exhaled with relief. "Then you understand."

"Of course. Tell me about your work."

"Emily and Nate are the station masters for this stop. I had suspected such for some time. Recently, though, they took me into their confidence and allowed me to help with their work. My boarders all support and know about our activity. We make sure all newcomers to our home are sympathetic, since it is safer for us and our guests if they are. Sometimes it's difficult to hide what we are doing, as you well know."

She brushed stray wisps of hair back from her face. Eli noticed that her hair was in a braid. She must have dressed quickly. Perhaps she had gone to bed fully clothed in anticipation of the slave catchers.

She nodded at the closed door in the wall. "Shall we move the wardrobe back into place?"

No longer had they done that, than they heard voices nearby.

"Oh, dear," Maggie whispered in a panic. "They're right outside! Shut the bedroom door, Mr. Smith. Quickly!"

Eli did as he was told. "How do you figure the slave catchers suspected your house?"

“Rumors,” she replied. “I am friends with the people of color who live up on Water Street and, well, I’m also outspoken about my feelings on slavery. One of the Water Street contacts rode down and alerted us about the slave catchers. Like I said, my sympathies are well known throughout the town, so I’m sure some of the copperheads hear have mentioned us to the slave catchers. They would love to see us given a fine we could not pay and therefore thrown into jail.” She smiled proudly. “But no one has ever caught us.” She peeked out the window. “Good! Mr. Carson is with them. He’ll try to keep them away.”

Unfortunately, the voices outside abruptly became argumentative and angry.

“Regardless, of what you claim, you cannot simply burst in there,” Mr. Carson boomed. “This is private property!”

“Then go get the sheriff,” a male growled. “By the time you get back, we’ll have searched the place.”

“I must object to this, sir!”

“Get outta our way,” another man snapped. “We know those two darkies are here somewhere.”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about.” Emily’s voice was firm and unafraid. “You can’t search that home. One of our boarders lives there!”

“We can do what we want,” the first man replied. “Say, where’re you from, anyway? You ain’t one’a them, are you? If y’are, we could take you back and forget about all this.”

Mr. Carson snapped, “Leave her alone! Does she speak as if she had been a slave? As if she had lived in the South?”

“I’ll run for the sheriff, Mr. Carson.” It was Edgar Lape’s voice.

“Thank you,” Mr. Carson replied. “Bring him immediately.”

The front door clicked open.

“I should go down there,” Eli whispered. He could tell Maggie was nervous as a cat. “Maybe I can stop them from going further.”

But she shook her head. “They’re sure to come up here no matter what you do. Then they’ll find me. And when they do, they’ll search the room.”

They could hear the men checking the first floor.

“We must do something,” Maggie murmured, eyes wide. “Oh, Mr. Smith, I don’t know what to do.”

After a moment's thought, Eli said, "We'll distract them, that's what."

And, without warning, he put an arm around her waist and pulled her close. His hand could feel the armor of her corset, and the barrier her skirt and two petticoats between their bodies. He hadn't been this close to a woman in years.

"Mr. Smith," she hissed, putting her hands against his chest as she tried to push him away. "What in heaven's name are you doing?"

Her indignant scowl was almost amusing.

"Calm down," he replied. "We're going to create a distraction."

"A distraction? *Like this?*"

"Yes! Like this. Now, please, don't take this personally, Mrs. Blaine."

Footsteps sounded at the bottom of the stairs.

"Take *what* personally?" Maggie was thoroughly confused, as well as frightened.

"*This!*" Eli wrapped his other arm around her and planted a kiss firmly on her lips.

She broke away, squeaking in protest. "*Mr. Smith!*"

"Shh!" With a touch of agitation in his voice, he added in a hurried whisper, "When they come in the door, they'll see us kissing. And when they see us kissing, they'll forget about searching the room."

The light finally went on in Maggie's head. This time, she did not protest when he kissed her. In fact, she snaked her arms around his neck for good measure.

The bed chamber door banged open.

"What the hell?" a man gasped in surprise.

"Maggie?" a shocked Emily exclaimed.

"Well, lookee that," another fellow commented.

At this, the couple broke their kiss.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Eli said, "I don't know what you want, but you picked one hell of a time to show up. Can't a man and his lady have a little privacy?"

The men – three rough-looking characters – immediately backed clumsily out of the room amid a chorus of:

"Sorry!"

"S'cuse us."

“Beggin’ yer pardon.”

Then the slave catchers hurriedly retreated down the stairs with Mr. Carson nipping at their heels and chastising them all the way down.

“There! Are you satisfied now? I suppose you’ll go chattering about what you saw, thereby ruining my dear landlady’s reputation.”

In another second they were gone, slamming the front door behind them.

Maggie and Eli simultaneously blew out relieved sighs, disengaged from their embrace, and turned to face Emily who, glowering and arms akimbo, was standing in the doorway. “Margaret Blaine! I never in all my born days would take you for a –”

“For a what?” Eli cut in with a cheeky grin. “For a woman who goes to great lengths to protect people?”

Emily continued to frown. “I hope that’s all that was.”

Eli chuckled. “Really? Am I such a terrible man as all that?”

“No, sir. Not at all. But you’re new here. We don’t know you yet. It just seems a bit – too familiar too soon.”

At this, Maggie burst into laughter. “Oh, Emily! Sometimes we have to do things we normally would not do in order to save a life.”

“Mm, hm,” Emily replied skeptically.

“Oh, do stop that! And go on home. Please. I’m fine. I shall return shortly. Mr. Smith and I just need to have a chat first.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you get yourself out of this bedroom and downstairs.”

Maggie laughed once more. “Fine, we’ll go downstairs. But let’s get our friends out of the hidey-hole first, and you can escort them back into the cellar.”

After Emily and the freedom seekers were gone, Eli invited Maggie to sit at his table while he made a pot of tea. He wondered what she needed to say but decided it was best to let her take her time. He just hoped she wasn’t going to kick him out on his backside.

His fears abated as the two chatted amiably over cups of tea laced with milk and sugar.

Finally, Eli decided that it was time to get down to brass tacks. “Mrs. Blaine, allow me to apologize for what happened upstairs.”

“Don’t,” was her surprising reply. “What you did – what *we* did chased the slave hunters away.”

He couldn’t help it. He grinned now. “Worked pretty well, didn’t it?”

“Indeed, it did.” Maggie returned the grin and took a sip of tea. As she replaced her cup on the saucer, she said, “I daresay, Mr. Smith, that you’re now part of our little operation.”

“Thank you. I’m honored.”

“I’m sure Mr. and Mrs. Johnson will approve.” She chuckled. “At least, once Mrs. Johnson gets over the shock.”

Eli smiled, looked down at his tea, and gave it a stir with his spoon. Truth be told, he had liked the kiss. He hadn’t kissed a woman in a long time. But he tossed any further ideas aside as he lifted the cup to his lips.

There was a brief silence on both their parts, during which Eli noticed how quiet Blaineton was at night. It was quite nice. He realized that he liked the silence.

“Mr. Smith,” Maggie suddenly said.

He looked up.

“I would like us to be friends.”

“Thank you. I’d like us to be friends, too.” He laughed, “Especially since... you know.”

“Yes, especially since... what happened upstairs.” Maggie smiled warmly. “But it showed me that you have ingenuity and courage in a difficult situation. Those things added to your kindness, your sincerity, and your humor have given me a clear idea of your worth as a man.”

It was high praise. But Eli knew his background and he knew who he really was.

He sighed, “Mrs. Blaine, I’m sorry to say, but I’m not all that good. I’ve been involved in considerable sheconery¹ in my time.”

She took another sip of tea and placed the cup back on the saucer. The china clinked almost musically as she did it.

“Well,” she said, easily, “then let’s just say, sir, that the past is the past. Anyway, who am I to cast stones? My point is you no longer will need to engage in such pursuits. Now that you live here and have a shop, that is.”

¹ Sheconery is a corruption of chicanery.

“Ah,” he said, not sure whether to believe her words.

Maggie’s hazel eyes met his. “You do mean to stay, do you not, Mr. Smith?”

He did not reply. Because he didn’t know. He never knew. He never really stayed anywhere these days. He had not done so for a long time.

“It all depends on what happens,” he hedged.

Maggie tipped her head.

“You know. If the paper succeeds. And,” he added with a grimace, “if no one burns it down.”

“I understand. You have had quite a journey, haven’t you?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“No supposing about it. You left your home. Where was it, by the way?”

“Pennsylvania,” he answered vaguely.

Maggie nodded. “So, you left Pennsylvania and went to New York City. Then you traveled west into the Sioux country. Then back to Ohio. And now you’re here.” She tipped her head again. “Do you intend to continue your journey to New York at some point?”

“I don’t know.” And Eli realized that he did not know.

“Well! I think it would be a pity if you ever left here, Mr. Smith. I’ll pray that your newspaper flourishes.”

“Thanks. Flourishing is kind of what I had in mind.”

Maggie smiled. “That’s good. Because...” She paused.

“Because what?”

“Because I think you’re finally home.”

Eli considered the idea. “Home, huh?”

She reached across the table and laid a hand over his. “Yes. Home.”

Her hand was warm and welcoming.

“And,” she continued, “you have friends here. Some very good ones.”

“I do,” he agreed.

“I would like you to stay.”

Her words gave him a sense of comfort and security that he had not felt in a long time. And that was when Elijah Smith knew for a fact that his wandering days were over. He *was* home.

Finally.