

Chapter 1: The Fire

21 February 1863

Blaineton, New Jersey

She stood watching the flames lick upward. The air outside was bitterly cold as snow fell thick from a starless sky. And yet the heat coming from the house was strong – strong enough to make her sweat even though she was in the middle of the square.

Maggie Smith clutched her adopted son, Bob as if she was afraid the fire would shoot out and snatch him from her arms.

How did this horrible thing happen? Bewildered and strangely numb, she could only stand and watch as the Second Street Boarding House was swallowed up.

Standing beside Maggie and cradling her young son Natey, was Emily Johnson. For years, she and Maggie had stood side by side as they worked, laughed, and cried – something the town did not understand because they were different colors. How could a white woman and a black woman be friends? But the answer, incomprehensible to many, was that they found union in their similarities and understanding in their differences.

The acrid smoke burned Maggie's eyes. She wiped at them with a hand and sighed. Ever since the war started, she and her two daughters had found themselves in their pre-1860 existence. Lydia's husband, Edgar and Frankie's beau, Patrick had both enlisted, and Maggie's husband Eli, owner and editor of the town's newspaper, the *Blaineton Gazette*, had left to report on the war. He took his reporter/photographer Chester Carson with him, leaving Maggie to edit and print the paper on her own. She now relied on Grandpa O'Reilly to help with the printing press. Sixteen-year-old Frankie who was teaching at the town school also assisted with writing and editing the *Gazette*.

Maggie and her girls had made their own way in the time between her first husband, John Blaine's death in 1850 and her 1860 marriage to Eli. This time, however, they found themselves working in a boarding house nearly devoid of men. The war had taken most of them, with the exception of Grandpa O'Reilly, who was too old to enlist, and Emily's husband Nate, who was a man of color. Nate had become eligible for service by an act of Congress in July of 1862. He wanted to join the fight, but so far the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, formed in January 1863, was the only black regiment. Nate was hoping New Jersey would create a black regiment of its own.

The departure of most of Maggie's boarders had an economic impact, too. The Second Street rooming house now struggled to bring in a modest income. It was kept afloat by Nate's job at the Beatty Carriage Manufactory, the *Gazette*, Frankie's salary as a teacher, and Lydia's income as Dr. Lightner's assistant. New boarder Matilda had started taking in mending to help out. Survival was not easy, not that it ever was.

"And now this," Maggie whispered, as the roaring, powerful flames devoured the only thing that truly had belonged to her.

Emily wiped a tear from her eye and sniffed. "Nate says the *Gazette* office is gone, too."

"Oh," was Maggie's faint reply.

“Let me take Bob,” Frankie said in an unusually soft voice. “He must be getting heavy.”

Bob wiped a runny nose on the sleeve of his nightshirt. “That fire is hurting our house.”

“I know.” Frankie lifted the five-year-old from Maggie’s arms and gave him a hug. “We’re going to be fine. It looks scary. But we’ll be fine. You’ll see.”

As she walked away from her mother, a neighbor offered a blanket. Frankie, like the rest of her family, was wearing only nightclothes, slippers, and a dressing gown. She thanked the women and gratefully wrapped the quilt around herself and her brother.

Emily watched the exchange. “I wish I had Frankie’s confidence.”

“Thought you might need these,” a voice interrupted. It belonged to Matilda Strong, the escaped slave who with her daughter Chloe now lived with them. She passed a quilt each to her friends.

As Maggie wrapped the covering around her shoulders, she realized how cold she was. She shivered.

Matilda’s dark eyes watched the flames leap hungrily upward. “I knew something was coming,” she murmured. “I heard him. Always walking the hall at night.”

Maggie knew what she was referring to. Noises she once had attributed to creaking floor boards and a settling house slowly began to sound like someone pacing the hallways. And then, this morning about one a.m. she had been awakened by an insistent pounding on her door. As she struggled out of bed, Maggie had noticed a glow out her bedroom window. When she parted the curtains, she was horrified to see the *Gazette* shop engulfed in flames. When she realized that the smell of smoke was coming from within her own house, she understood that the boarding house was afire, too. Grabbing her robe, Maggie thrust her feet into her slippers and threw open the door.

Once in the hall, she had heard feet pounding on the stairs. She glanced up to see Emily, Nate, Frankie and Lydia running down from the second floor. Nate and Lydia had sleepy, crying children in their arms.

Relieved that her family was downstairs, Maggie rushed next to the kitchen in an effort to reach those living in the old wing of the building. But flames blocked her way. Adrenaline pumping, she had turned to the family and shouted, “Go out the window in Mr. Madison’s room!”

Following her command, they all pushed into the room. In 1860, the chamber had housed the Rev. Jeremiah Madison, minister of the town’s Methodist Episcopal Church. Now it was used for storage.

Nate reached the window first and passed Natey to Emily. Then he threw open the sash, ushered everyone outside, and followed them. When Maggie saw him step safely into the frigid night air, she shouted, “We have to find the others!”

Nate had hollered back, “Wait here!” He sprinted to the old section of the house. Maggie barely took a breath all the while he was out of sight. Suddenly he jogged back around the corner. “They made it!”

Throwing a prayer of thanks heavenward, Maggie had run to meet Matilda, Chloe, and Grandpa as they made their way toward the new wing. Crying with joy, she threw her arms around them and escorted the entire group to the safety of the square.

By the time they were free of the house, neighbors roused by the commotion were coming out of their own homes. Maggie remembered seeing a man dash across the square and into to the Presbyterian Church. Within a few seconds, the church’s

bell began to toll a message understood by everyone within earshot: *There is trouble. Come help.*

Maggie's neighbors and the town's small volunteer fire department were now struggling to keep the blaze from spreading to the surrounding buildings. Clearly the boarding house and the *Gazette* shop could not be saved. Men and women frantically pumped and threw water onto neighboring rooftops. The sound of their shouts rose over the fire's roar.

"That's a dreadful blaze," someone at her side said.

Turning, Maggie saw Lemuel Opdyke, the son of one of the Methodist Church's prominent members. "It is." She did not care much for him. Lem possessed a nasty attitude and always gave the impression that he knew more than he was saying. What he knew usually was equally nasty and the result of something he had done.

"Gideon and I came out here to see if we could help, but it looks like there's not much we can do," he spoke only to Maggie, ignoring Emily and Matilda's presence.

Glancing over her shoulder, Maggie saw Lemuel's brother, Gideon engaged in a conversation with Frankie, who was still holding Bob. He appeared to be trying to console her while Frankie appeared completely uninterested. After giving him a distracted smile, she walked away to return to her mother's side.

Lemuel smirked as Frankie joined them. "You must be cold, seeing as how you're in your nightclothes."

"Not at all. I am very warm, thank you. As you can see, I have a blanket and my little brother." She eyed him with disdain. "And, for your information, once having been informed of the unfortunate lady's comfort, a gentleman should walk away so she is not embarrassed further by his gaze."

With another smirk, Lemuel tipped his hat at mother and daughter and skulked off.

Frankie heaved a disgusted sigh. "His mother is nice enough. I just don't know what happened to Lem and his brother. Guess they got it from their father."

Frankie had never been one to mince words. Taming her opinions and comments was a full-time job for her mother. Maggie said quietly, "I think perhaps you should remember you have an innocent child in your arms. Regardless of how we may feel about another person, it is always best to try not to gossip or complain when children are present."

Although Frankie accepted the criticism with a nod of her head, Maggie was not sure she would take her advice. But that was the normal state of things, and Maggie did not dwell overmuch on it.

An exhausted Nate Johnson abruptly emerged from the crowd and dragged himself across the square. When he came to where they were standing, he threw himself to the snow-covered ground. Sweat poured down his face and the tang of smoke enveloped him like a cloud.

"How did this happen?" Maggie asked. "How did both buildings catch fire?"

His dark eyes snapped. "It was no accident, Maggie, believe me."

Emily frowned at her husband. "You mean someone set it? Why?"

"You know why."

Maggie was stunned. "I don't understand. Who would do such a thing?"

"Whoever beat me, that's who."

Four days earlier Nate had been walking down Railroad Avenue on his way home from the carriage works when four men emerged from the shadows near the feed store. Two held him while the other two battered his face and abdomen, all the while calling him ugly names and warning him to leave the factory.

Maggie was not naïve. She knew many white people disliked people of color. She always opined that their suspicion and hatred came as a result of them not taking the time to get to know their darker neighbors. But it shocked her to learn that Nate had been ostracized at the carriage works even though he worked side by side with white men. She wondered if he and his fellow employees did not talk when they worked. Was that the reason they had not gotten to know Nate? And then she realized a hard truth: the reason probably was that they didn't *want* to know him.

As a Methodist who took Jesus at his word, Maggie was baffled by such human behavior, especially when those who professed to be Christians acted unkindly. After all, Jesus had sat at table with prostitutes, tax collectors, Gentiles, and all manner of sinners. He had been born in a stable. The first to receive news of his birth had been lowly shepherds, not kings or religious leaders. As Jesus hung dying on the cross he had forgiven not just the penitent criminal beside him, but also the unrepentant people who had nailed him there, as well as friends who had run away and hidden for fear of ending up on a cross. If Jesus could love all those people and if he commanded his followers to do the same, then Maggie believed she also was required to love others, including people who happened to have dark skin. Her trouble came in loving the people who hurt others by word or deed. They were neighbors, too, and thus were not exempt from the command to love. That was her real challenge.

"So my boarding house and the *Gazette* have been targeted?" She was unable to grasp the concept. "Burned on purpose?"

Nate's said bitterly, "Yep. Most likely they decided you're a nig—"

"Nate!" Emily gasped. "Don't use that word!"

He glanced at his wife. "It's what they call us, Em."

"We need to be better than that."

Taking a breath, Nate amended his sentence. "Bet they decided you might as well be colored too, Maggie."

Impulsively, she knelt on the snowy ground beside him. "I am honored to be in the same category with you. You and Emily and Matilda are the best among people."

Nate managed a grim smile. "I appreciate that, Maggie. But no matter what you do you'll always be white and I'll always be black." His eyes and voice were bleak. "People will always treat you one way and me another, regardless of what you may think or hope."

She knew he spoke the truth, nevertheless, his words stung.

"You're not completely safe either, you know. There's been talk of you and Eli and the Underground Railroad." Nate's eyes returned to the burning buildings. "When they find the tunnel and the room there's gonna be more trouble for you – and for us."

Maggie's eyes went to the fire, too. "Perhaps the rubble will keep it hidden 'til the end of the war."

Nate sighed. "That would be just too good to be true." He stood. "I've got to go back now." With that, he dragged himself across the square toward the fire.

Maggie watched him go. "I hope he's wrong."

"Now, you listen," Matilda said as Maggie stood and dusted the snow from her blanket. "Not everyone here hates us. Plenty folk been kind and decent."

"Mm, hm," Emily said skeptically. "And plenty of folk are afraid to stand up to those who aren't."

Maggie no longer wanted to talk about evil and hatred. She did not want to think about it, so she changed the subject. "Do you know, someone knocked on my door and woke me up to warn me about the fire? I thought it was one of you, but you were running down the stairs when I came out of my room."

“We thought you knocked on *our* door.” Emily frowned. “It wasn’t you?”

Maggie shook her head.

“Well, I know who it was,” Matilda said with certainty. “It was that poor young man. The one who walks the halls at night.”

“There are no such things as ghosts.” Despite her words, a chill went up Maggie’s spine.

“Begging your pardon, but there are. I seen ‘em at the plantation. And I seen ‘em and felt ‘em here, too.”

Emily pulled her blanket tightly around her shoulders. “My mama said she saw Granny’s ghost. We were living up here and Granny was in Virginia. She had been sold to another plantation and was working in the house kitchen. But Mama saw her. That’s how she knew Granny had passed.”

“Oh, come now,” Maggie argued. “Shouldn’t we leave such superstition behind?”

“This isn’t superstition,” Emily insisted. “These are just things we can’t understand. Maggie, you can’t deny it. All of us have heard those footsteps. All of us heard someone knocking on our doors tonight – and it wasn’t any of us. We know who it was.”

“Mr. Madison,” was Maggie’s answer.

Matilda nodded. “And I’ve heard his wife weeping, too.”

“Perhaps it was the wind.”

“No, ma’am. That was no wind.”

“And anyway, if there are no ghosts then why did you turn Mr. Madison’s chamber into a storage room?” Emily stared into her friend’s face. “And why won’t you work at the *Gazette* after dark?”

Maggie was glad the shadows in the square hid her blush of embarrassment. “I don’t know. I felt uncomfortable staying in there after what happened.”

Matilda laid a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t you feel bad. That other one – that crazy mean girl – she’s in the shop. You’re right to stay away, Maggie. She bad, real bad. But your Mr. Madison isn’t. He knocked on our doors tonight. He saved our lives.”

Maggie managed a small smile and used the quilt around her shoulders to wipe the tears from her cheeks. “So...” she started to say, but her voice broke. She paused a moment to gain composure and tried again. “So what shall we do now? Everything we have is gone.”

“We still have each other, honey.” Emily put an arm around her. “And that’s plenty.”

“And,” said another voice tinged with a French accent, “you have a place to sleep.”

They turned to find Madame Louisa gesturing to a small shop on the other side of the square. “Come. You will stay with me. I have more room than I need. You may even help me in the dry goods store if you wish, *non?* You will be my guests. Do not watch this any longer. There is nothing more you can do.”

Madame’s generous offer was gratefully accepted. Everyone in Maggie’s family was physically and emotionally drained. Once inside the little house, Madame organized the sleeping arrangements on beds and floors. Twenty-one year old Lydia took little Bob and let him sleep with her in the bedroom with Madame. Frankie, Matilda, and Chloe were located in the parlor behind the dry goods shop. Emily and Natey were upstairs in another bedroom, where Nate would join them later. There was a mattress in the hallway upstairs for Grandpa, and Maggie agreed to bed down on a pile of blankets in the dry goods shop.

In truth, Maggie expected to fall into a deep sleep, but one hour later she was still wide awake. Wrapping a blanket around herself, she settled onto a chair at the front of the shop and stared out the window. What was left of the boarding house and the *Gazette* were glowing eerily. She could see dark figures of the men who remained to make sure no sparks strayed onto the other houses. Nate and Grandpa also would be there until they were certain the danger had passed. Maggie told herself she was waiting up for them, but in her heart, she knew better. She was mourning.

The dry goods store smelled of new fabric, and of beeswax regularly applied to the counters. It was safe and warm and pleasant. The bolts of cloth made her remember how Madame had given her a special price on some lovely green silk for the gown she wore when she had married Eli. Then she realized that her wedding dress had burned up in the fire. It stabbed her heart like a sharp needle. Maggie thanked God that she and her family were alive, but knew that the growing awareness of other losses meant her pain would ebb and flow for quite some time.

Thank God the fabric on the shelves and the umbrellas and parasols hanging overhead muffled the sound of the men's voices outside. They were making decisions about the remains of her home and business, and that was disconcerting. Maggie wondered if perhaps she should not be out there with them, but knew she would be chased back inside. That was men's work out there. Men were deciding things – things that would have an impact on her life. It seemed as if it were that way with everything, but particularly with the war. In truth, she did not have the strength at the moment to go outside and stand up to men and their inevitable and irritating bossiness. She wished she could take her eyes off the spot where the buildings once had been.

Maggie wanted to pray. Her soul ached with the effort. But the only words her mind could form were: *Oh, God, what are we going to do?*

She missed Eli so much. She missed his strength and his common sense wisdom. *Why did you have to go off and cover the war,* Maggie's heart asked him. *You shouldn't be traipsing around battlefields. You could get hurt. You could get killed.*

She stifled a very powerful urge to cry. Instead, she whispered, "Hang this war!"

"You are still up, my dear." Madame Louisa entered, bearing a tray set with a teapot, cups, spoons, milk, and sugar. "I could not sleep, as well." Louisa placed the tray on the counter nearest Maggie. "I thought I would make some tea for us both. I would have preferred coffee," she shrugged her shoulders, "but it is in short supply, *non?* As you say, hang the war."

Maggie smiled faintly at her friend's words.

As Madame lit a lamp and proceeded to pour the tea, Maggie realized that she was thirsty.

"When I was a girl of thirteen," Madame Louisa said, "there was a revolution in France. My father supported the socialist cause, and people knew this fact. Our house burned down, too, and it was no accident. Someone felt it was safe to attack us in that way. What happened to your house, my dear, also is no accident." She passed a cup to Maggie.

The hot tea laced with milk and sugar was welcome. "Why would someone hate us?"

"You know why. Because you are what they will not be." Madame fixed a cup for herself and sat down. "You have a love for all people. You do not walk away because someone is poor or old or colored or," here she smiled, "has an accent."

Maggie sighed. "I can manage the comments and the stares. I can ignore it when people turn their backs to me. But when Nate is attacked and then our home...we all could have been killed in our beds!"

“In war,” Madame said quietly, “people become ugly. In my country, friends turned against friends. It is the same here. Your nation has been split in two. Towns have been divided and families have been broken. People have great anxiety and fear. You and those whom you welcome into your home remind them of what they hate and dread.”

It was true. The attitude of the town had changed since Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had become law on January 1. The Union government hoped the law would cause slaves to abandon plantations and that the resulting loss of slave labor would weaken the South. But there was an unanticipated consequence: Northerners had begun to fear an invasion of waves of former slaves seeking housing and jobs. The scuttlebutt was that they would take jobs and housing that rightfully belonged to whites. Even before the war relations between white and black had been uneasy at best in the North, but now angry voices were heard declaring that they would not “fight a war for the Negro.”

“People hate the notion of colored people living on the square,” Maggie said, “and they despise Nate for working at the carriage manufactory.”

Maggie’s brother, Samuel Beatty, owned the Beatty Carriage Manufactory. He had received a fat contract from Washington to build wagons because of his access to sturdy New Jersey white oak, wood that made wagon wheels strong enough to haul cannon and other heavy equipment over rough terrain. While the factory still made fine carriages for the well-to-do, Samuel had invested considerable time, effort and money into enlarging the factory and dedicating part of it to the new war work. As a result, he was making money hand over fist.

Then Samuel did something rare for a white man – he had hired Nate Johnson as his senior wheelwright. Nate was known as a skilled carpenter who was also gifted at the building and repair of wagon wheels. As long as his shop was safely located on Water Street, where the majority of the town’s black population lived, Blanton’s white population was only too glad to patronize Nate. But once he started working side by side as a theoretical equal to white men things changed. They worsened when Nate was put in charge of Lemuel and Gideon Opdyke, younger and less experienced men but white men nonetheless.

The initial draft of the Emancipation Proclamation had been published in September of 1862, shortly after the Battle of Antietam. From that point on, Nate increasingly suffered harassment from the other workers in the form of snide comments and “accidental” pushing and shoving. He struggled mightily to control his temper and keep his tongue. The job paid well and he was determined to hold on to it for the sake of his family. Despite Samuel’s willingness to treat him as an equal, though, no one else was of the same opinion. Instead, they labeled Nate an “uppity colored man” who had stepped out of his sphere and threatened the community’s status quo.

So Maggie wasn’t the only one who missed Elijah Smith. Nate missed him sorely, too. A lapsed Quaker, Eli was a staunch abolitionist who had always saw Nate as a friend. Now Eli’s support was gone and, although Maggie stood by her own abolitionist convictions, she was a woman. As such, the men in town did not pay her much mind nor did they consider her opinions to be of any value – at least not in public. Eli’s gender, race, wry wit, and voice in the *Gazette* had kept the full brunt of the nastiness at bay.

Madame took another sip of tea. “Do you think your husband could have prevented this from happening?”

"I don't know." Snow was still drifting steadily down, covering the streets, the yards, and the park in the square. Maggie watched, hoping the heavy flakes would extinguish the rest of the embers. She wanted to be able to salvage whatever she could the next day.

"But it would be better if he were here, *non?*"

Maggie nodded. Eli's absence was painful. As the war crept toward Maryland, his reporter instincts had gotten the best of him. There were rumors that slaves and freemen were traveling ahead of Confederate troops, and that those troops were capturing colored people and sending them south to slavery, even if they were freemen. Eli knew a story when he heard one. He wanted to allay Northern fears and encourage sympathy for the refugees. He figured if Harriet Beecher Stowe could drum up compassion for people in slavery, then perhaps he could do the same for this flood of people. The war also was having a terrible impact on town people living near the battlefields, and his Quaker anti-war proclivities told him this was another story. He needed to go, Eli had told Maggie. He had a job, a duty. And she did not argue. How could she? The conviction in his voice and the fervor in his eyes smothered her objections. However, like the embers of the house fire, her doubts, concerns, and, yes, resentment still smoldered.

Maggie's boarder Chester Carson, a man in his mid-fifties who had once been a well-known novelist and writer of short stories, had gone with Eli. Demand for Carson's work had faded in his forties and the broken and destitute man had taken refuge at Maggie's rooming house. There he continued to write, receiving only just enough on a good month to pay room and board. That is until Eli had spotted his potential and brought Carson into the *Gazette* as a typesetter and copy editor. Best of all, Carson had a camera and had developed skills as a photographer. Eli figured that between his reporting and Carson's photographs, they could tell the story of the war from a viewpoint other than that of the military.

So the two headed south and in September ran smack dab into the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest day of the Civil War. Carson's camera had caught devastating images of the dead, dying, and wounded. He captured the battle-weary faces of soldiers, as well as the shocked and stunned expressions of the men, women, and children who, once the armies moved on, had been left to cope with the destruction to their land and homes, the burial of the dead, and the care of the wounded.

Thumping along with his cane in one hand and notebook in the other, Eli spoke with people both black and white. His stories were full of compassion and yet contained anger and indignation. He asked difficult questions: Why were people doing this to one another? How would the death of soldiers and civilians make a real difference or heal the gulf between the North and the South? What made governments think killing and maiming were acceptable ways to solve differences? Although he sided with the North, or more correctly the cause of abolition, Eli abhorred the death and destruction he was seeing. He knew deep in his soul that there had to be another way.

Back at home, Maggie had dutifully printed his stories and cataloged Carson's photographs.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Mr. Carson's photographs!"

"Perhaps they survived?"

"They're only paper. How could they?"

Madame laid a gentle hand on Maggie's shoulder. "He has – what do you call them? The negatives?"

“Yes. At least, I hope he does.” She sighed wearily. “The press is probably destroyed, too. We won’t be able to print the *Gazette*.”

“Your husband, he will come back.”

“He must.” The promise was a dot of light in the darkness. “There’s no reason for him to be away if our newspaper is lost.” Maggie wanted Eli home more than anything else in the world. She had been so afraid these past months. A battlefield was no place for a man with a cane. Ever since Eli had suffered gunshot wounds – courtesy of Samuel’s unstable housemaid – he had not been the same. The arm and chest wounds had healed nicely, but the wound to his left leg caused Eli to be dependent on a cane. Maggie wondered how her husband could possibly manage walking through a battlefield. How, she asked herself, could Eli stay out of harm’s way when he did not possess his former mobility?

She did not wish to become a widow again. No woman ever did, especially a woman during wartime. Maggie wanted her husband safe and at home. A horrifying thought suddenly presented itself to her. What if something happened before she could get the telegram to him? The war was still going on. It hadn’t stopped just because her house had burned down. What if Eli got injured or was killed? Where would they all be then? Where would she be then?

“And they said this war would only last a few months.” The embers of resentment, normally quiet in Maggie’s heart, began to glow.

“They always say that,” Madame replied. “It is what? Nearly two years now.”

Absolutely exhausted, Maggie set her cup on the counter and covered her face with her hands. “I just want it to be over.” Unbidden, tears forced their way into her eyes and she sobbed. “Oh, Louisa, I just want it to be over.”

Madame enfolded her friend in a warm hug. “Cry now, *Mon cher*. You will be strong later.”