

Chapter 2: Refuge

21 February 1863

Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac Camp, White Oak Church, Virginia

The interior of the cabin was wickedly cold. Elijah Smith was buried under a pile of quilts. Only a mess of dark brown hair, tightly shut eyes and a nose were exposed, and yet he began to shiver. He even had another person in bed with him. He was sleeping back to back with Chester Carson in the only bed in the place and still he was freezing. Opening his eyes, Eli winced at the very idea of dawn. His hair draped itself over his forehead, causing him to look like an overgrown boy. Longer than it had ever been, his hair now fell to the bottom of his collar. His beard had grown out, too, and no matter how hard he tried, he simply could not give it the tidy trimming Carson gave his own beard.

They were a study in contrasts, these two. While Carson was of a good height and fit of figure, Eli was short and heavy-set. Carson's white beard was dapper and his hair, also white and also to the bottom of his collar, waved in a way that one would expect to see on a diplomat or famous author. Eli's hair was scraggly, so was his beard. Carson possessed brilliant blue eyes. Eli's brown eyes peered out from behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Carson dressed well and was neat as a pin even during the most trying of circumstances. Eli was rumpled and disorganized even when he tried not to be. None of this, of course, went unnoticed by the portly newspaperman. When he stood next to Carson, he felt like a troll.

They were an odd pair to be sure. When they started out on their trip together, Eli needed some sort of chat to fill up the long hours and had talked about his adventures with the Sioux. As an aside he had mentioned that the Sioux not only had male and female roles but several other important functions in their society. "For instance, say a man prefers other men. For the Sioux, that's all right because they have those other spheres. He doesn't have to be a warrior, a husband or a father to be valuable to the village. Everyone is welcome to contribute regardless. They would never beat up a man just because he wasn't like other men."

He had been completely taken aback when Carson heaved a sigh. "Ah. Then perhaps I should have been born a Sioux."

After an awkward pause, Eli found the courage to say, "Does that mean you like men?"

"I should have remained silent. I fear you will feel uncomfortable around me henceforth."

Eli had blinked, thought for a moment and then sputtered, "No. Hell, no! I don't care if you like men."

Carson smiled knowingly. "I see. Just so long as I do not like you, I presume?"

"Well, yeah. Damn it, man, I like women. I'm married to one."

Carson chuckled. "Have no fear, my friend. I do not find you at all appealing," which left Eli wondering whether he should be insulted or relieved. However, a few months on the road together had erased any qualms Eli might have entertained about

being around, let alone sharing a bed with Carson. Instead, the time spent with each other had forged a brotherly friendship, which included bickering.

Eli shivered again in the icy cabin. "It's cold as hell."

"Hell is not cold."

The morning light was peeking anemically through the chinks in the walls.

"Wonder if it snowed again." Eli scratched at his beard and then put his hand back under the quilts where things were at least marginally warmer. He wrinkled his nose. "Phew. It's starting to stink in here. One of us needs a bath."

"Yes, you do."

"How do you know it's not you?"

"Because I had one three days ago. You, my dear fellow, are way overdue. Go into town and visit the baths today or you shall sleep on the floor tonight."

"You're not my wife, Carson."

"Nor do I wish to be. Our delightful Maggie is a saint."

"She's not your Maggie, she's mine." Irritably pulling a quilt around him, Eli got out of bed and limped toward the door. "I've got to see a man about a dog."

"Take your cane. We can't have you falling over."

The words nettled Eli. "You know, I think I *will* sleep on the floor tonight. You're starting to nag."

"Sleep where you wish. I wouldn't touch you with a stick regardless."

Irritated, Eli shoved his feet into his boots and picked up his cane. When he stepped out the door, the bitter air smacked him in the face and he groaned. *Bell-fired weather*. He had never been so cold. Clutching the quilt around him, he found his way over the snow-covered ground to a nearby group of trees. The two men had built the cabin when they realized the army was going to be encamped at White Oak Church for the winter. They thought they had done a pretty good construction job, too...until winter arrived and proved otherwise. It turned out the cabin had a few disadvantages: wind whistled through the cracks, the fireplace smoked when the breeze blew in a certain direction, and their one room was only big enough for a bed, a rough table and a couple of camp chairs. Eli now understood what people meant by the term "cabin fever."

Finding a likely tree, he exposed as little of himself as possible and took care of nature's call. He thought of how much he missed Maggie and wondered if he wasn't completely mad to follow the Sixth Corps. But he had been lucky. The powers that be in Washington had approved his application to go with the Sixth Corp, and Eli wasn't about to let the opportunity go. Too bad absolutely nothing happened war-wise in winter. Regardless of Carson's literalism, winter *was* hell.

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Blaineton, New Jersey

Maggie slept very little the night of the fire. When daybreak arrived, she arose, carefully folded the blankets upon which she had been sleeping and in which she had been wrapped, and put them away behind a counter holding the displays of thread and yarn. Yawning, she found a pile of clothing donated by the neighbors. She lifted the dress on top and held it up. The pink floral frock was made of cotton, which was too light for a winter day. The next item was more promising: a brown wool skirt. Maggie held it up to her body. Although it seemed a bit too big, she figured she could pin the waist to make it fit. The pile also contained a brown jacket that matched the skirt and a white bodice. The ensemble was dark and very plain but workable, and it

looked as though it could be worn without a corset and hoops, two things Maggie was only too happy to do without.

Madame Louisa, in joyous generosity, had gifted all of them with new undergarments. Maggie picked out a pair of drawers, a chemise, petticoats, and a pair of wool stockings. Since the front of the shop was not the place to bathe or dress, she gathered her belongings and hurried into the kitchen. No one was up yet, so Maggie was able to wash from a large bowl and put her clothes on in peace. She had woven her reddish hair into a braid before going to bed. Now she loosened her hair, vigorously brushed and rearranged it into a bun, and fastened it with a snood. Next, Maggie tried on a pair of donated boots. They were rather big, but would fit if she stuffed a bit of newspaper in the toes. Luckily, the bodice was a perfect, although the skirt was, as she suspected, too large at the waist, so she had to pin it. Finally, she shrugged on the jacket – also too big. No matter. Now all she needed were warm gloves, a bonnet, and a shawl.

Once decently clothed, Maggie quietly opened the front door of the shop and stepped into the bracing air. The square was quiet as she made her way through the snow, hiking her skirts so her progress would not be impeded. People would be out and about soon, so she wanted to look at the remains of her beloved boarding house before the others saw her and offered sympathy, assistance, and questions.

Her heart ached as she approached the dark remains. The scent of smoke was sharp and strong, much stronger than the usual smell of household fires on a cold morning. She knew her former home was the cause of the odor.

Maggie paused in front of the wreckage. Where to begin? She ventured cautiously to what had been the new wing, now an immense pile of rubbish made up of charred boards, piles of bricks, broken beams, and indistinguishable bits of this and that.

Maggie heaved a sigh as she circled the ruins and made her way to the backyard. It seemed as if nothing had been spared. And then she saw it near the area where her bedroom had once been. An upside down washbowl, partially buried under four inches of snow, was lying about three feet from the building. Maggie squatted, brushed the snow away and gently lifted it. She gasped. Hidden safely under the bowl were her journals.

“How?” The word came out in a croak. Stunned, she picked up the books. They had been completely unharmed by the fire. More amazing still, the area under the bowl was dry.

Clutching the three little journals to her chest, she stood up. The back of her neck tingled as she took in the skeletal remains of her house. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and asked, “Is it you, sir?”

Silence.

“Is it you, Jeremiah?”

More silence.

The tingling spread down her back and she shivered – but not from the icy air.

Maggie cleared her throat and spoke once more. “If it is you, Jeremiah, I wish to give you my thanks. You saved our lives. And now this...my journals, my story.” Tears burned the corners of her eyes. “Oh, my friend, please listen to me. You no longer have to watch over us. You said you were certain you would go to Heaven. My dear, you must go now. Your work is done. You have saved the lives of nine souls and thus more than paid your debt. Go with God, please. Go with God.”

There was more silence. This time, though, the tingling in her neck and spine melted away. Maggie brushed tears from her cheeks with the back of a gloved hand.

Her heart felt lighter now. She would never know for sure whether the discovery of her journals had been an incomprehensible accident or the work of ghostly hands. However, in her heart, she believed Jeremiah finally had done his penance and was able to move on.

From the house, she wandered to the *Gazette* office. That too stood in ruin. As she gazed upon the collapsed heap of debris, she could make out the shape of Eli's faithful bed-and-platen press lying amid the mess.

"Looks like that's seen its last days," a deep, familiar voice said. "If we salvaged most of the type and other metal, I think I could build a new wood frame for Eli."

Maggie turned toward Nate. "Maybe it's a blessing in disguise. Eli has wanted a new rotary press for some time. He says it is more efficient. Do you know sometimes he dreams of a steam-operated rotary press?" She took a deep, resigned breath. "Ah, well. It seems we still shall have to start over, shan't we? But with what money?"

Nate shrugged.

"Our business has been destroyed. As of today, there is no *Gazette*."

"Don't underestimate your man, Maggie."

"I don't. I know he will start another newspaper. But if we rebuild, I can't help but wonder if we might not face the same thing all over again."

"We might. It's obvious someone has been up to no good."

"Yes. The same people who beat you, no doubt."

"No doubt." Nate kicked at a charred piece of clapboard and said softly, "You know, Maggie, it's got so I just don't feel safe here anymore. All these folk are complaining about my people and how we'll take away their jobs and houses. It's as if they're afraid we're going to destroy their lives or something. And now Mr. Lincoln says he's gonna draft men into the army. Let me tell you that will not sit well with white folk. Already they're grumbling about being sent to fight for the Negro." He lifted his dark eyes to meet hers. "Maybe I should just do what most of Water Street has done. Maybe I should pack up my family and find a safer place – if there is one."

Maggie laid a hand on his arm. "My dear brother – for you *are* a brother to me – I don't want anything to happen to you, Emily, or Natey. I would miss all of you if you left, but I would understand it if you did."

He chuckled. "Oh, now, you're just making the decision all the harder, being so kind. No wonder Eli calls you Saint Maggie."

"His name, not mine," she demurred with a blush, "and I suspect he uses it more to tease me than anything else."

This made Nate laugh outright. "Oh, my Maggie-girl! I wish you'd learn to take a compliment now and then. It wouldn't kill you." He inhaled deeply. "Mm, smells like someone's frying up bacon. Why don't we go see about breakfast and leave picking through this mess for later?"

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Maggie's Journal, 21 February 1863

Nate and I returned home from our tour to find Madame Louisa's house abuzz with activity. Emily, Louisa, and Matilda were making breakfast in the little kitchen. In the parlor, Grandpa was fitting Bob with a new set of clothing and Lydia was altering a dress for Chloe. All the while Chloe and Frankie, still clad in their nightdresses and dressing gowns, were laughing and sorting through a great pile of donated items. One would never have suspected we had suffered a profound loss. I am continually amazed

at the resiliency of the human soul. God has indeed given us strength and power to look toward the future, rather than mourn the past.

Since the kitchen was small and three cooks were already too many for its confines, I picked up a needle and endeavored to begin altering a dress for Frankie, as she would need something decent to wear for teaching on Monday.

A short while later we were enjoying a fine breakfast of eggs, ham, biscuits, jam, butter, and tea. It tasted so good! I do not know whether I enjoyed it so much due to my early morning exercise or from a sheer sense of relief. My family and I had narrowly escaped with our lives, but we are safe. Our neighbors are kind and generous. We had lost nearly all our possessions, but we are strong and healthy and able to start again. And, more than anything else, we love one another. God has truly blessed us in our loss.

One further blessing met us as we women sat sewing in the parlor. And, Journal, I must confess my mouth dropped open when I saw who Madame Louisa was ushering into the room.

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Madama Louisa's House

Miss Tryphena Moore, a gaunt, dour woman in her late sixties, was feared by the people of Blaineton. Although female, she exercised undue power within the little Methodist Church and the town itself. Even the men were wary of her. Her words could cut more deeply than a whip and her glare could freeze hearts solid with a glance. Maggie had experienced more than her share of Tryphena's attention over the years. The woman disapproved of nearly everything Maggie did. Things had grown especially tense during the crisis over Jeremiah Madison – a rift that grew so deep Maggie had walked away from the church she had called her spiritual home since childhood. For a while she had attended the Johnsons' church, but when the Rev. Mr. Arthur of the African Methodist Episcopal Church left town with most of his flock, the harness shop that had housed the little congregation ended its life as a place of worship. Thus, Maggie had lost yet another community of faith. At that point, with no little trepidation, she had ventured back into the small white-washed Methodist Episcopal Church. Most of the people had welcomed her back unconditionally and Maggie made it a point to exchange only the occasional strained but polite word with Miss Moore.

Now her heart began to thump wildly as she watched the older woman enter the parlor. She dreaded what Tryphena might have to say.

To everyone's surprise, though, Tryphena stared down at the floor, cleared her throat, and then quietly said, "Good morning. I came to beg your forgiveness, for I have not treated you well." When she lifted her eyes, they were amazed to see tears in them. "Since my dear sister, Tryphosa joined my parents in heaven this past September, God has been schooling me – and the lessons have been harsh indeed. I miss my sister dreadfully. Yet, during our life together, I often treated her poorly. In her absence, I realize I should have spent more time telling her what was in my heart, rather than criticizing her small imperfections and teaching her to do the same to others. I was the older sister – and I did not do my job."

"Will you not sit down, Miss Moore?" A moved Maggie gestured to an empty chair.

Once Tryphena was settled, she began to speak again. "The fire last night was another of God's lessons. You see, I always felt your establishment was an eyesore on the Square if you will excuse me for being blunt. But as I watched the fire I saw the truth in its smoke and flames. You had been doing exactly what Our Lord commanded – loving the poor and the stranger. There is no Jew or Greek to you, no male or female..." Here she added with emphasis, "no slave or free." She removed a lace handkerchief from her sleeve, dabbed at her eyes, sniffed and took a stiff breath. "You have been treated unjustly by the one who set the fire. And I realize that I also have treated you unjustly. My dear mother named me Tryphena in the hope I would be one who labors in the Lord, just as the biblical woman of the same name labored with the Apostle Paul. If it is not too late, I wish to make good on her hope. So I am giving you this." She opened her black silk reticule and removed a packet. "I have just been to the bank. I know you have scant resources." There was silence as Tryphena stood and walked to Maggie's chair. "This is for you. Do what you wish with it." She held the packet out.

"Oh, no," Maggie stammered. "I couldn't possibly..."

"Of course, you can. All my money will do me no good when I am dead. I wish to see it put to use. You are a sensible woman. Thus, I know you will use it well."

Flabbergasted, Maggie took the packet and got to her feet. "My dear Miss Moore, I cannot thank you enough."

A smile softened Tryphena's usually severe demeanor. "You have already done so by accepting my offering, Mrs. Smith." She cleared her throat. "Now enough sentimentality. I expect to see you and your family in church tomorrow." Tryphena looked pointedly at Matilda and Emily. "That includes you, too – all of you. And if anyone complains, they will have me to answer to. Good day." With that, she turned and, head held high, strode out of the parlor.

When she was gone, Maggie opened up the gift and gasped. "Oh, my! This is a great deal of money!"

"And she just invited five colored folk to your church," added Emily.

"This is not what I expected." Maggie stared at the packet in her hands. "Not what I expected at all."

"Me either." Emily chuckled. "Us in the Methodist Episcopal Church? What if people object?"

"You heard Miss Moore," Matilda said. "There's no 'what if' about it. Ain't no one gonna mess with that woman. She do what she want."

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About 2:00 in the afternoon, a well-appointed sleigh pulled up in front of the dry goods store. Maggie's brother, Samuel, alighted and walked briskly to the door.

Maggie and her daughters were in the shop, still altering clothing but doing it now by the light of the store's large front windows. Madame Louisa, who was busily dusting the shelves, saw Samuel approach. "Ah," she observed, "I believe this customer is for you, Maggie."

Confused, Maggie put her work down in time to hear the bell chime and see the door open. She burst into a wide smile at the sight of her brother as Lydia and Frankie leaped happily to their feet. "Uncle Samuel!" Frankie cried, throwing herself at him in utter joy.

He laughed and wrapped his arms around his niece. "My dear girl!" He kissed her on the cheek. Samuel's attention turned to Lydia next, whom he also kissed. "I am so relieved to find you here and safe."

Maggie took her brother's hands in hers. "We thank God we were able to escape. The fire was dreadful."

"But you are well and that is all that matters right now." His eyes searched the shop. "And where is young Bob? I brought some sweets for him."

"He and Chloe are playing in the back yard. I will call him in shortly." Maggie indicated the door at the back of the shop. "Won't you please come with us to the living quarters?"

"Actually, Margaret, I have come to take you to Miss Amelia's Tea Shop. I thought we might talk there."

Delighted, Maggie grinned. "Thank you, Samuel! I could use a rest from sewing." She went behind a counter to fetch the bonnet and shawl she had used earlier. "A cup of tea sounds most agreeable."

Frankie frowned. "What about us?"

"Oh, do be polite," Lydia hissed. "Uncle wishes to speak privately to Mama."

"Well, then, I suppose I must go to the kitchen for my cup of tea." Grinning impishly, she pecked her mother on the cheek. "Enjoy the tea shop. Patrick and I went there in August just before he left. Miss Amelia makes wonderful cakes and cookies!"

Minutes later, brother and sister were sitting across a table from each other with a pot of steaming tea and a plate of delectable cakes between them. The tea shop was located on the first floor of a small house built of local stone. The two rooms facing the square were used for seating, each room containing four tables with four chairs at each. The two chambers at the back were a kitchen and storeroom respectively.

The room in which Maggie and Samuel sat had bucolic paintings on its white plaster walls and lace curtains at the windows, making the environment relaxing and intimate.

Brother and sister were completely at ease with each other. However, this had not always been the case. Once upon a time, a rift had developed when Maggie eloped with John Blaine, the son of her family's business competitors. The two young people's impulsive act of love resulted in their disinheritance from both families. Fortunately, John's formidable Aunt Letty had taken them in and eventually willed her house to Maggie. After John died, the building became a boarding house and its income helped Maggie and her girls survive. Samuel, though, had been appalled at his sister's contentment with and acceptance of a life of constant work and a house full of people whom he considered ungentle at best. And he was outraged that Maggie deigned to share her life, home and work with Nate and Emily Johnson. Not only were they not kin, but worst of all they were not white. What on earth had Maggie been thinking? What would other people think? They most certainly would think the worst of her, that's what. Samuel was right about how others would perceive his sister, but he did not understand just how strong Maggie was. And so their feud had gone on for years until the tragic death of Samuel's daughter, Leah had brought brother and sister back together.

Now Maggie was pouring tea into Samuel's cup. "I do not know how I will tell my husband about the fire and the *Gazette*."

"Eli is a direct man, so tell him directly. You should wire him as soon as we are finished here. Where is he now?"

She added a bit of cream to her brother's cup. "He is still with the Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers near Falmouth, Virginia. He said they shall be encamped near Falmouth throughout winter. I shall send the telegram there."

"Yes, do so." With a teasing smile, Samuel added, "Although, I do not know whether or not the telegrapher will send Eli's reply. His words most likely will be rather strong."

Maggie laughed. It was true. She worked with great energy to remind Eli not to cuss, especially in public. But five months following the army no doubt had erased all her efforts. She added a liberal amount of sugar to Samuel's cup and passed it to him.

"How did the fire start?"

"For one thing, it was not an accident." She poured tea into her own cup and added a dollop of cream. "One might think at first that it began at the *Gazette* shop, perhaps due to a spark from the stove or the chimney. And indeed, that was what I thought when I saw the flames at the shop." She met her brother's eyes. "But, Sam, our house was burning too – and burning just as well as the *Gazette*. How could two accidental fires start simultaneously?"

Eyes darkening in anger, her brother took a sip from his cup. "Well, if that is the case, then it was a criminal act and the perpetrator should be brought to justice."

"Sheriff Miller is investigating."

After a short pause, Samuel frowned. "I do not like this. First Nate was assaulted and now your home and business have been destroyed. If it was arson, the answer to why is obvious. You are supportive of abolition. You are friends with colored people – in fact, you have five of them living with you right now and they are not servants. Thanks to the war, bad feelings are coming to the surface in our country and coming up with a vengeance. Thus, you and yours are perceived to be a problem at best and a danger at worst."

The creamy golden color of tea usually soothed Maggie's spirit, but her brother's words worked against it. Samuel's assessment was correct. Maggie nodded. "It is obvious, and things will just keep getting worse. Do you know Nate is thinking of moving his family elsewhere to keep them safe? Where that might be, I have no idea. Canada, perhaps? But that is such a long way from here."

Samuel winced. "I am afraid I am to blame for his misfortune. More than a few of my employees are restive because I put Mr. Johnson over the Opdyke boys. Never mind that Mr. Johnson's skills as a wheelwright are unsurpassed in our county, if not in this state. All anyone seems to care about is that he is a colored man doing a job that many feel belongs to a white man."

"That is no reason to beat him and set fire to a home containing sleeping people." Maggie's face flushed hotly. "Our house had innocent children in it!"

Samuel laid a hand over hers. "You have every right to be angry, dear sister. What happened is an outrage. Yet you are an easy and an obvious target. There is talk that you, Eli, Nate, and Emily helped escaped slaves. And there is also the matter of Matilda Strong and her daughter. People ask where they came from and why they live with you. They believe the two are escaped slaves and that you and your friends are supporters of the Negro cause."

"Ah, yes, the Negro cause..." Her words dripped with sarcasm. "How easy it is for them to forget that the Negro cause is also the cause of freedom and a cry for all to be treated equally. Tell me, Samuel, why are such simple, basic things considered a 'cause' for colored people while white men demand them as a right?"

"I am afraid I have no answer."

“And now because of our convictions we are homeless.” Maggie took a sip of tea in a useless attempt to wash away the bitter taste of her words. “We have nothing, Sam! Nothing!”

“That is untrue.”

Confused, she glanced up at him.

His hand firmly but lovingly squeezed hers. “My dear, beloved sister, I came here today to invite you to live at my house.”

Maggie blinked. “All of us?”

“Yes, all of you. And you may stay as long as you wish. Forever, if you need to.”

“Would that not make you and your home a target, as well?”

“Perhaps. But we are well out of town. Out of sight is often out of mind. God willing, you will be safe with us.”

Maggie stared out the window as she thought it over. The cobbled street was covered with snow, tamped down by the passage of sleighs and horses. All the flagstone sidewalks had been neatly shoveled. It was a beautiful winter day with the kind of blue sky that happens only after a storm. She could see Madame Louisa’s small building across the square and knew her friend could not house her family for more than a few days. Space was tight and Louisa was used to living alone.

Maggie brought her eyes back to meet her brother’s. As warmth flooded her heart, she rejoiced that they had been able to reconcile. “Very well. I shall bring your offer to the others.”

“Excellent!” Samuel’s face broke into a brilliant, happy grin. “Now why don’t we try some of Miss Amelia’s cakes?”

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23 February 1863

Falmouth Depot, Falmouth, Virginia

Elijah Smith was not one to use profanity – at least not in front of his wife. Oh, he would let loose with the occasional “hell” and “damn,” but overall his use of saltier language had been curtailed rather successfully until following the army had destroyed all Maggie’s hard work.

Jake the telegrapher handed him a message and explained that it had come in on Saturday, February 21. Eli frowned. Why was Maggie contacting him? She never sent him a wire.

As his dark brown eyes scanned the contents of his wife’s message, he hissed, “Oh, *shit!*”

“Thought you’d say that,” Jake replied. He leaned his blue-clad arms on the window ledge and waited. He was still a private and had little hope of advancing as long as he was stuck behind the lines sending out dots-and-dashes all day. Fortunately, he had found another form of compensation. “Will there be a reply, Mr. Smith?”

“You bet your ass.” Like other reporters, Eli paid Jake – and paid him handsomely – to wire messages over what were now Union Army telegraph lines. It wasn’t unusual to bribe Union telegraphers too – or, at least, bribe the ones who found money more appealing than duty. Still, Eli was determined not to go broke in the process. He hastily folded the message and stuffed it into his trouser pocket. “Write this: ‘Coming home.’”

Jake scribbled the message on his pad. "What else?"

"That's it. Coming home."

"No, 'with greatest affection, your dear husband?'"

"Nope. Too many words, friend."

"You don't even want to tell her who sent it?"

"She'll know."

"Skinflint," Jake muttered.

Eli leaned across the ledge toward him. "Unabashedly so. How much do I owe you?"

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Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac Camp, White Oak Church, Virginia

Chester Carson sat on the steps leading into the wagon that he and Eli used as a supply closet and a darkroom. The heat from the cooking fire a few feet away wafted toward him. He did not find it necessary to crouch near the fire's warmth for the air was cold but the sky sunny.

Content, Carson lit a match, touched it to the bowl of his pipe and puffed until the tobacco glowed. Then he stared contentedly at the encampment of the Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers across the field. Log cabins were neatly lined up in rows. Smoke from campfires rose into the sky as the sound of men laughing, shouting, or talking punctuated the air. Carson was happy to be settled and away from the noise and confusion of battle, not to mention the screams and cries of the wounded and dying. And he definitely did not miss the stench of death. Such things haunted him at night. They made him all the more grateful to be documenting life at the camp during the lull. It could be boring but it beat watching soldiers die.

"Mr. Carson!"

He turned his head to see Patrick McCoy, dressed in fading Union blue, striding across the field from the direction of the camp. The older man smiled and lifted his pipe in salute. "Hello, young fellow! How goes it?"

"Quiet. Dull." Patrick climbed up the steps and plopped beside him. "Thank God."

At the beginning of the war, Patrick had traveled with his employer, an undertaker, and assisted him in embalming the bodies of fallen officers so they could be returned to their families. The occupation was sickeningly lucrative since he families who requested such service were well-to-do. But, having lived in Maggie's boarding house and being Frankie's beau, Patrick had absorbed a clear sense of duty and purpose. Disgusted, he quit the undertaker at the beginning of 1862 and returned to Blaineton, where he continued to make coffins and other furniture for the town. That lasted until August of 1862 when he mustered in with the Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers at Camp Fair Oaks near Flemington. Now, at age nineteen, he was an Army surgeon's assistant. Within the five short months Patrick had been in his new position, he had become inured to the specter of gory wounds, amputations, and death. The screams, pleading, and crying of men, however, were another thing. What kept him hanging on was the belief that he was on the side of life rather than death.

Patrick squinted as a figure on horseback approached. "Say, Carson, is that Eli?"

Carson nodded. "And he will be absolutely miserable tonight. He knows he shouldn't ride, not with that leg. He should have taken the wagon, especially since he has had a bath – I hope."

Patrick laughed. "Camp life isn't conducive to cleanliness."

"That indeed is the terrible truth of the matter."

As Eli pulled up and dismounted, Carson called, "I shan't chastise you, my dear chap, but I shall remind you of how upset your lovely wife would be if she could see you on that horse."

"Well, thanks for not chastising me, you liar," Eli joked. He tied the reins to the wagon and limped over. "Anyway, Maggie has something a little more important to worry about than my leg." He passed the telegram to Carson.

As the older man read, his white eyebrows shot heavenward. "Ye gods and little fishes!"

Patrick was looking over his shoulder. "You mean it's all gone? Everything?"

Carson puffed on his pipe. "What now?"

"We go back to New Jersey, of course. We'll start first thing tomorrow. When we get to Middletown, we'll leave the wagon with my sister's family and take the train the rest of the way to Blaineton."

Patrick hopped to his feet and disappeared inside the wagon. "Got any paper in here?"

Eli laughed. "I'm a reporter. What do you think?"

Patrick poked his head back out the door. "Mind if I use some to write a letter to Frankie?"

"Be my guest." After a pause, Eli added, "Oh, hey, try to find Edgar when you're finished. He might want to send a note to Lydia."