

10 March 1855

The locomotive's brakes squealed in complaint as it pulled the train up to the platform.

"Blaineton!" the conductor bellowed. "All off for Blaineton! Blaineton!"

A short, dark-haired man in his mid-thirties hopped to his feet and, standing on his toes, reached into the overhead rack to grab a faded carpet bag. It fell into his arms, one corner grazing his head on the way down.

"Ow!" he squeaked. He took a breath to steady himself, pushed his wire rim glasses back up his nose, shrugged on his coat, and made his way to the car's exit.

Outside the air was chilly, which was as it should be. He was in New Jersey, after all, and it was early March. Overhead, slate gray clouds threatened to discharge their load of snow any minute. As the man looked around, he took note of the piles of slush pushed to the sides of the platform.

Turning to the conductor, he said, "Excuse me. I have a crate in the baggage car." He paused briefly to dig through various pockets until, with a satisfied grunt, he produced a card and handed it to the conductor. "Would it be possible for me to store it here until I'm ready to continue my journey to New York City?"

"Of course, sir." The conductor glanced briefly at the card. "We have a storage room here, Mr. Smith. When you're ready to claim it, please go to the front office, present your ticket, and we will place your property in the appropriate baggage car for you."

The newcomer nodded his thanks and started down the platform toward the street. He wondered if the town had an inn. Then he wondered if he could afford an inn. His first mission therefore was to find a place in which to take shelter for the night. If worse came to worse, he could always sneak into a barn and sleep there. He had done it before. A barn would be warm if animals were present. And even if there were no animals, he could always burrow in the hay.

The little town of Blaineton, New Jersey was comprised of a quaint collection of buildings: some from the pre-Revolutionary era and many from the earlier part of the current century, with a few more up-to-date structures sprinkled throughout for good measure.

The man came to what he figured was the center of town – houses, businesses, a large white church with a tall steeple, and a courthouse – all arranged around a parklike area of trees and field. The snow coated its ground and would have been a pretty sight, had it not been disrupted by all the tracks made by the community’s adults, children, and animals.

As the stranger exhaled, his breath turned into a chill, white vapor. It was cold. He was cold.

Blaineton was, from all appearances, a nice little town. Perhaps he could pick up a job or two, earn a bit of money, and move on to his true destination of New York City. And yet he had mixed feelings about returning to the place he had left nearly fifteen years earlier.

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than he was besieged by every unwanted memory he had stuffed down. There they were: joy and love, heartbreak and depression, success and failure. It made him wonder why he wanted to go back to New York after all. Then again, he had to go somewhere after what had happened in Ohio.

Puffing out another cloud in a sigh, the man turned to his left and strolled down the block, pausing at the very next cross street. After making a quick decision, he turned, walked down it and headed south.

The first house that sat directly on the square turned out to be part of a large parcel that extended to the street behind it, the street on which he now stood. The property had the usual outhouse, a small barn, a woodshed, and a henhouse. The man made a note to return to the barn after dark if he couldn’t find an inn to accommodate his miniscule budget.

Then his eyes landed on something interesting: a compact, two-story outbuilding that faced the street he was on. It seemed to be part of the other house’s property. Raising a dark eyebrow, the man first checked to make sure he wasn’t being observed, and then casually approached the structure.

It looked uninhabited. He went to the least public side of the building and used the sleeve of his coat to rub dirt from one of the windows so he could peer inside.

He saw that the first floor had a room with a pot belly stove, a table with two – no, three – chairs around it, and a cupboard. On the right side of the room was a door that led outside. Another door was

at the back of the room. He figured this most likely led to the cellar. The front door, the one that faced the street, was to the room's left. A stairway leading upstairs bisected the building, thus creating a tiny parlor close to the front door with narrow hallway between it and the kitchen.

The place looked uninhabited.

Pursing his lips, the man nodded in approval to himself. After taking another quick glance around, he walked to the back door and experimentally turned its knob.

"Locked," he hissed. "Damn!"

"Whatcha doin', mister?" a little voice abruptly piped.

Startled, he turned to find a small girl. She was dressed in a dark blue coat that was way too big for her. A mass of wavy, red hair plotted to escape from under her homemade, knit bonnet. This was tied under her chin in a sloppy, lopsided bow. Her large, green eyes blinked, and she repeated, "Whatcha doin', mister?"

"Um..." he released the knob and lied, "Nothing." Glancing up at the building, he added, "Nice place. Anybody live here?"

"Nope."

"Huh." He considered the house for a moment as an idea dawned on him. "Does that mean it's up for rent?"

The little girl frowned. "I dunno. But you can talk to my Mama. She'll know if we're rentin' it."

"Does she own this place?"

The girl nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Frankie."

"What's Frankie short for?"

She grimaced. "Frances. I hate it." After considering him for a moment, she said, "What's *your* name?"

"Smith."

"You got a first name?"

He grinned. "Mister."

The child laughed. "You're funny!" Then she nodded toward the big house at the other end of the property. "Come on." With a confident gait, she began trudging through the snow.

The man grabbed his carpet bag and followed. "You live in that big house?"

“Yep.” Pausing, she turned and met his eyes. “It belongs to my Mama. It’s a boarding house. And we have a room open right now.” With that, she began walking again, saying to the air, “You can rent that, if you want.”

“Actually,” the man said, “I’m more interested in that little house back there.”

She turned. “That might cost more than a room would, you know.”

“Oh, I figured that much.” He chuckled, amused that he was dickering about housing with a little gal of – what? – eight, nine years of age?

The child began marching to the house again. Then she led him up some steps to the back door, which she flung open. Looking over her shoulder, she said, “Come on in, Mr. Smith.”

The man could smell the delicious aroma of stew and freshly baked bread wafting out of the building. His stomach growled. It was almost noontime, and he hadn’t eaten since the noon before.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Mama!” little Frankie bellowed as she traipsed through the door. “*Mama!*”

“Frances Deborah Blaine,” a stern voice shot back. “What did your Mama tell you about coming in the kitchen after she just washed the floor? Do you wanna get it all muddy?”

The man cautiously poked his head in the doorway.

A woman with skin the color of hot cocoa was standing at the stove. She was stirring whatever was in a pot. He figured it was a stew.

Lamb stew, he decided, and his stomach growled again. He hoped no one heard it. He had a good appetite and the belly to prove it.

The woman abruptly turned her head toward him, and Eli momentarily was taken aback by the beauty of her amber eyes.

“Good morning,” he said, removing his hat.

She glowered at him. “And just who are *you?*”

“Smith,” he stammered. “Elijah Smith. My friends call me Eli. I’m looking for a place to stay.”

The woman’s suspicion quickly left and was replaced by a cordial smile. “Well, how do you, Mr. Smith.” She bobbed a brief curtsy in his direction.

He politely bowed back. “How do you do. And you are?”

“Mrs. Johnson. Emily Johnson.” She returned her attention to the pot, removed the big wooden spoon from it and set it on a plate.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Johnson.”

Frankie piped up, “Mr. Smith wants to rent a room.”

“Mm, hm,” Emily replied. “That’s what the man said. Well, you know what to do, honey. Go get your Mama.”

The child scampered off

“Would you care to have dinner with us, Mr. Smith?” Emily asked.

Would he? His mouth was watering like mad. “I’d like that very much, Mrs. Johnson. What do you charge here for a meal?”

She smiled. “Nothing.”

He blinked in surprise. “Nothing?”

“That’s right. You’ll be our guest today. Mind you, it’s simple fair – stew, bread, butter, fried apples. And of course, coffee. But you’re welcome to it.”

He hadn’t encountered such open hospitality since he had sojourned with the Sioux. But that wasn’t entirely true, he reminded himself. He had experienced kindness from people with dark and light skin alike during his journey.

The trip from Ohio through Pennsylvania to New Jersey had been rigorous. He had taken a train as far as he could in Ohio, disembarked, and had worked any kind of job he could find, sleeping usually in barns or other outbuildings. His mealtime had consisted of eating either standing up or sitting in a pile of straw or even on the ground. Once he had earned enough money in one location, he would take another train to another place and repeat the process. He was tired and welcomed the opportunity to sit a table like a human being.

“I would be happy to be your guest, Mrs. Johnson,” Eli replied, meaning every word.

Frankie’s little voice came from the hallway. “He’s in here, Mama!”

The child strode back into the kitchen, holding the hand of a slender woman with skin as pale as her daughter’s, although unfreckled. Her eyes were wide and hazel in color. And she had auburn hair, from what Eli could see of the few strands peeking out from beneath the kerchief she wore on her head. Her face was rather plain, but pleasant to look at. Her dress, a worn affair of faded blue, was covered by a patched, pink gingham apron.

So, that’s Mama, he thought.

Although he knew full well that the woman was not technically a beauty (she was too thin and tired looking for that), Eli still found her attractive. There was something about her, an aura that bespoke kindness and generosity before she even uttered a word.

“Mr. Smith?” she said, in a pleasant voice somewhere in the alto range.

“Yes,” he said. “Elijah Smith.”

“His friends call him Eli,” Emily commented with a droll smile as she went back to stirring the stew.

After casting an affectionate smile at Emily, the other woman returned her eyes to Eli. “I’m Mrs. Blaine. Maggie Blaine. I understand you wish to rent a room.”

“Yes.” He hesitated and then decided to press on. “Could we speak privately, Mrs. Blaine?”

The woman glanced at her friend. “There’s nothing you can say to me that cannot be said in front of Mrs. Johnson.”

He saw Emily Johnson throw a side glance his way. He quickly amended, “I surmised as much, but you see, I’ve had a long journey, Mrs. Blaine, and I’m bone-weary and I have some questions and...”

She smiled again. “I understand. Leave your bag here and we’ll go to the parlor. Follow me, please.”

Frankie tailed them on their way out of the kitchen until Maggie turned and said quietly to her daughter, “There’s no need for you to come with us, dear. I’m afraid the conversation will take a rather dull turn from now on.”

Frankie uttered a disappointed, “aww,” but retreated obediently into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry if she bothered you, Mr. Smith,” Maggie commented as they continued down a hall. “Frankie can be quite a precocious child.”

“Actually, she’s quite a delightful child,” he replied. “We had an interesting conversation outside. She’s the one who told me that you run a boarding house.”

“Oh, she does that all the time! She fills our rooms better than our sign out front does.” Maggie paused in front of what he presumed was the formal parlor. “Here we are. Do come in, Mr. Smith and have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Eli found a comfortable chair and sank onto it.

Maggie seated herself nearby. "I apologize for my appearance, but I have been engaged in housekeeping. You see, Mrs. Johnson and I are the only ones who keep the house and fix the meals."

"So, Mrs. Johnson is in your employ?"

"Well, one *might* say that. It started out that way, but over the course of three years, she has become my friend. Mrs. Johnson and her husband, and my daughters and I live in the new wing. Our boarders live here in the old building. Their bed chambers are upstairs."

Maggie Blaine did not speak like an uneducated woman. In fact, Eli thought, if he was any judge of language, she spoke like someone of means. He wondered what had happened to put her in this situation.

"The room we have to let is quite comfortable and faces the square and catches the morning sun. It's airy and bright, and I assure you spotlessly clean. I know you will like it very much."

"Actually," Eli cut in, "I was thinking about that little place at the end of the property."

Maggie's large eyes grew larger yet. "You mean the old caretaker's house? Oh, but Mr. Smith, no one's lived there for years. It surely wants a thorough cleaning, and the roof must leak and the windows, too!"

"It'll be fine," he assured her.

"But it would be so much work for you. You'd be much happier here up in that lovely room. Really."

He wondered why she was backing away from a chance to rent an entire building, even if he hadn't figured out yet how to pay for the first few months. She almost appeared to be nervous about renting the place.

"It's no trouble," Eli replied. "I'm used to living in less than, shall we say, ideal circumstances."

"But..." She faded off.

"What?" Now he was curious, which was bad news for her. He was a natural-born truth-ferret.

"Well, it's just sometimes the building is used for *other* purposes."

"I thought you said it hadn't been used in years."

Maggie looked away from his gaze to stare at the wall behind him. "Yes. I suppose I had."

"Then what do you do in it? Raise chickens?"

“Of course not!”

“Pigs?”

She smiled faintly. “Now you’re being absurd.”

“Then what? Why are you hesitating to rent it? Is it haunted or something?”

“No!” Maggie momentarily twisted her hands, but quickly composed herself and took a breath. “Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to show it to you. But you’ll see how much work it needs. And you haven’t told me yet why you require all that space.”

Eli nodded. “Fair enough. Mrs. Blaine, I’m a newspaperman. Back in Ohio, I printed a weekly paper called *The Bugle*. But now I’m on my way back to New York City to see if I can find work at one of the papers there.”

He paused long enough for her to say, “What happened to your newspaper in Ohio?”

“Ah, well, I wrote some editorials that certain people took offense at and next thing I knew the sheriff turned up at my door. He told me some folks thought I’d look a whole lot better at the end of a rope and that I needed to get out of town. Quick.”

“Good heavens!” she gasped. “You don’t mean to say they wanted to hang you?”

“Yep. Anyway, I managed to throw my clothes in my carpet bag, grab my case full of type and leading, and hop onto the sheriff’s wagon. He got me out of town before the rowdies arrived at my place. Good timing if there ever was such a thing, huh? But, when the rowdies didn’t find me, they burned everything down, printing press and all. Guess it made ‘em feel better, especially since they were deprived of stringing me up.”

Maggie leaned toward him. “Whatever did you write to make them so angry?”

He hesitated, then said, “It was an editorial about abolition. Mrs. Blaine, I’m anti-slavery, and that pack of madmen weren’t.”

He did not expect what happened next.

Maggie’s eyes lit up like a chandelier in a ballroom. “You’re anti-slavery? So am I! Have you ever read *The National Era*¹?”

¹ *The National Era* was a well-known abolitionist publication published in Washington, DC from 1847-1860. It ran Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a serial in 1851.

Eli chuckled. "Never miss an issue." Then he added, "Well, not until two months ago, that is."

"I'm so sorry to hear what happened to you." He could tell by her tone that she meant it.

"Thank you. But I've become adept at landing on my feet. Anyway when I saw the caretaker's building on your property, I suddenly thought it would be a dandy spot to start another paper."

"Oh, I'm so glad you changed your plans. That old house would serve you very well." Enthused, Maggie added, "And you may live here in the room upstairs until you have the other place ready."

She was such a nice woman. Eli suffered a momentary pang of guilt. Then he heaved a sigh. He needed to tell her something. "Mrs. Blaine," he began, "there's one other thing I neglected to tell you."

"Tell me, please."

"I don't have any money. I mean, I *do*, but it's only fifty cents. I'll gladly give it all to you, if you'll just give me the time to repair the house, set up my press, and get a few issues out."

A frown lightly creased her forehead.

"Look, I have my typeface and leading stored over at the depot. I don't have the vaguest idea how to build a flatbed press, but I'll do it somehow. You have my word."

Maggie still said nothing.

"And," he hurriedly added, "I'll do anything else you need. I'm good at, you know, all sorts of stuff."

She held up her hand. "Mr. Smith. Stop. Please."

He did, as flop sweat broke out on the back of his neck and under his arms. She was going to send him packing. He just knew it.

And then Maggie smiled. "You may have the house."

"I may?" He could scarcely believe his ears.

"Mr. Smith, what kind of Christian would I be if I didn't help my fellow man?"

"Thank you." He grinned. "So, tell me. What kind of Christian *are* you, Mrs. Blaine?"

"A Methodist. What kind are you?"

"Oh." He played for time. Should he tell her? What would she think of him? Oh, who cared, anyway? He forged on, "I was raised in the Society of Friends."

"So, you're a Quaker."

“Was,” he corrected. “I’m, uh, not really connected to a Meeting anymore.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Faith is important.”

Now he was worried again. “But I *have* faith, Mrs. Smith. I just don’t practice it with a Meeting. I hope that won’t change anything about my staying here.”

With a slight smile, Maggie shook her head. “No. If my Savior didn’t discriminate then why should I? All are welcome here.” Her smile now became a bit playful. “Besides, I think Blaineton could use a newspaper.”

His jaw nearly hit the floor. “You don’t have one yet? Even a penny weekly?”

“No! And I think we should have one. We may be small town, but, Mr. Smith, things happen here – elections, summer and harvest fairs, fetes, church picnics, even trials. A weekly paper would be a fine thing.”

Impulsively, Eli stood up, strode over and took her hands in his. “Mrs. Blaine, I solemnly promise that I will pay back every single penny I owe and more.”

Maggie rose so that they now stood face to face. “It is a deal, sir.”

Her announcement was followed by an awkward pause, which lasted until Eli realized that he was still holding her hands.

“Oh!” At once, he let go. “I’m sorry,” he stammered, stepping back to put more space between them. “I mean, that’s splendid.”

Maggie blushed and looked down at her feet.

Eli cleared his throat. “May we take a look at the building now?”

She chuckled. “By all means. I have the key on my ring. Let’s go.”