

THE NEWCOMER, PART 2

“Perfect!” Eli announced as he and Maggie entered the house’s first floor. “There’s enough room for a flatbed press. That table can be my desk. I’ll use the cupboard for supplies. And that stove’ll come in handy next winter.”

“There’s another little stove upstairs,” Maggie told him. “I’m afraid neither one is large enough to do anything other than fry an egg or boil coffee. I encourage you to take your meals with the other boarders. Your rent will cover that.”

But Eli had thrown open the doors to the cupboard and was busy surveying its interior. He heard Maggie say something but did not catch what it was.

“Beg pardon?”

“You’ll be eating with us, I hope,” she repeated with a smile.

“Oh! Yeah.” He shut the cupboard doors and turned to face his new landlady. “I’m a terrible cook.”

“I’m glad. I mean, not because you’re a terrible cook, but because that way you’ll be able to get to know a few people.” Maggie gestured at the cupboard. “So, do you think you’ll be able use that for your paper and other supplies?”

He nodded. “It’ll do fine. More than fine! May I see the upstairs room now?”

The second floor contained a bed and bedside table, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. Eli thought the wardrobe could always do double duty and hold additional supplies if, by some strange chance, his newspaper started to boom.

He heard Maggie say, “Of course, this room wants a good airing out and a coat of paint. I’ll ask Nate Johnson to check the roof and windows for leaks.”

“Thanks.” Eli sat tentatively on the bed to test it out.

It promptly sank.

He flailed wildly, to no avail, to stop his disappearing into the mattress. Fortunately, Maggie hurried to his side and held her hands out. He grasped them like a drowning man.

“Hold still,” he told her. “Let me get my footing and pull myself up.”

Maggie braced herself. She was strong, having done her share of manual labor, and it took but a second for Eli to get out of his predicament and stand beside her once again.

She giggled in amusement. "I daresay the bedframe's ropes need a great deal tightening!"

"I think the mattress needs to be stuffed, too, while we're at it," Eli added, with a grin.

Maggie released his hands. "I warned you that this place needed fixing up."

"And fix it up, we shall!"

The two returned to the narrow flight of stairs and descended to the first floor.

Eli gestured at the extra door in the kitchen. "That leads to the cellar, right?"

"It does. However, I must insist that you refrain from going down there."

Eli's dark brows arched upward. "Why? What's down there? Skeletons?"

She laughed.

He thought it was a pretty sound.

"Heavens, no," she said. "We have nothing to hide. It's just we use it for storage. Also, the steps are rather in need of repair, and I would hate to see you fall through."

"Fair enough."

But Eli's newspaperman instincts were alerting him to a story the way a hound alerts to a scent.

"Now..." Maggie indicated the little house's back door. "Allow me to show you to your *temporary* quarters."

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The room in the boarding house was exactly as Maggie claimed it would be - comfortable, full of light, and airy. Eli set his carpet bag on the bed and, before unpacking, took a moment to gaze out the window at the square. Once spring got fully underway, he realized, the view would be lovely.

Maggie left to help Emily with the noon dinner, and, for the next half hour, Eli busied himself with putting away his few clothes and

other items. He even tested the mattress on the bed, found it to be quite comfortable, and stretched out on it.

When he heard the dinner bell ring, he went down to the formal dining room, the place where Maggie had told him the noon meal would be held.

He was the first one there. As he stepped into the room, Eli took in the starched, white tablecloth, the silverware, the old, well-used china, and the water glasses, some of which had a chip or two in them.

As he strolled along the table toward a likely seat, he noticed a mended spot on the tablecloth. Eli smiled to himself. He was dealing with thrifty and humble people.

Well, good. He liked thrifty and humble people. There were far too many strutting, self-important bullies loose in the world.

Footsteps on the hallway's wood floor told him that other boarders were arriving. Eli took a seat and waited.

The first one to enter was a white-haired gentleman with a dapper moustache. He sat beside Eli and smiled welcomingly, blue eyes crinkling at their corners.

"You must be the new boarder," he said. "I'm Chester Carson."

He offered Eli his hand. Eli took it and they shook.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Carson. I'm Eli Smith."

"My pleasure, Mr. Smith."

The others in the household came in shortly: James O'Reilly, a thin, old Irishman; and Arthur Graham, a young man of no more than 20 years. Then there was Nathaniel Johnson, Emily's husband. He was a man around 30 years of age and was possessed of dark brown skin, black eyes, and short cropped hair.

Finally, little Frankie stomped in. She plopped down onto her seat and wiped her nose on the back of her hand

She was followed by a taller girl, who appeared to be about twelve or thirteen years of age. And she was chiding her little sister.

"Oh, honestly. Do use your hankie, Frances!"

This girl's hair was brown, as were her eyes. Yet Eli still could see her resemblance to Frankie and Maggie.

That's got to be Maggie's other daughter, he thought. Then he wondered if any more children were about to appear.

As the others at table chattered among themselves, Mr. Carson leaned over to Eli. "Those are Mrs. Blaine's children. The youngest is Frankie. The eldest is Lydia."

So, there were only two and both girls.

"I've met Frankie," Eli said as he watched the two sisters.

Lydia currently was engaged in pushing Frankie's elbows off the table.

"She's quite a character, isn't she?"

"Oh, she is indeed," the other man replied. "A bit of a hoyden, yet one can't help but love her. Mrs. Blaine has her hands full, to be sure, especially since she is a widow."

For some reason, this took Eli aback. He had assumed that since Maggie was a "Mrs." there was a Mr. Blaine somewhere.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he murmured. "A woman as nice as she is ought to be married."

Mr. Carson took his napkin out of its ring and placed it upon his lap. "I agree. The poor fellow died of rheumatic fever in '50. So did their little boy."

At this news, Eli felt a familiar pang in his heart. He hated loss, whether it was his own or someone else's. Sometimes it felt as if he had experienced nothing but loss throughout his life. The bad times were interspersed with good times, to be sure, but the difficulties left an indelible mark.

He wondered if that was how it was with everyone. And did the pain and sadness ever go away?

He sighed inwardly. *Enough thinking about that.*

Fortunately, he was distracted by Maggie and Emily's arrival. Emily was bearing a tureen of stew. This she placed at the head of the table and then hurried out again. Maggie, meanwhile, set a bowl of butter and a plate piled high with hearty slices of bread in the middle of the table. As Maggie went to take her place at the head, Emily returned with a steaming pot of coffee.

It all smelled so very good. Eli scarcely could wait.

Maggie said, "Mr. Johnson, would you do us the honor of saying grace?"

"I'd be happy to, Mrs. Blaine." Nate turned to the others. "Everybody, please bow."

All heads looked down at hands folded on the tabletop.

Eli surreptitiously peeked up to watch Nate. The man had large, calloused hands – powerful hands. Maggie said he was a carpenter, which made Eli wonder if Nate knew how to build a flatbed press.

“Our Father,” the carpenter intoned, “bless this food and bless the hands that prepared it. May it fill us to go out and do thy will the rest of this day. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone chimed.

Finally, it was time to eat!

Eli happily received his bowl of stew, took two pieces of bread, liberally buttered them, and dug in. Everything was delicious and filling. When the coffee pot came his way, he poured himself a cup and added to it cream and two lumps of sugar. His first sip made him feel as if he might pass out from joy. The brew was strong and flavorful, just the way he liked it.

Later, they sat over more cups of coffee and a dessert of fried apples with cream.

Eli heaved a contented sigh. “Mrs. Johnson, I have to say that was the best meal I’ve had in a long time.”

Emily smiled. “Why, thank you, Mr. Smith.”

Young Arthur Graham asked, “What brought you here, Mr. Smith?”

“Oh, a train,” Eli joked.

Everyone laughed.

When they had settled down, he continued, “Truthfully, my plan was to return to New York City after a sojourn in Ohio and the Sioux Territory.”

“Sioux Territory,” Nate commented. “That’s quite a trip.”

Eli nodded.

Frankie piped up, “Did you live with Indians, Mr. Smith?”

“I did indeed,” he replied.

The child was enthralled. “What were they like?”

Eli sat back in his chair. “Oh, very much like you and me, Frankie – only they do things a little differently.” He grinned. “Actually, sometimes they do things a *lot* differently. But despite that, they’re people who have needs, hopes, fears, and feelings just like we do.”

“I’d like to meet them some day,” she said.

“Well, maybe you will. Someday.”

“But not too soon,” Maggie put in.

“Aww, you always say that, Mama,” Frankie muttered and shoveled a forkful of fried apples into her mouth.

###

Eli caught up with Nate as he was on his way out of the boarding house. “Mr. Johnson!”

Nate turned. “Why, Mr. Smith! Where are you off to?”

“The train station.” Eli found himself a bit puffy. He’d had to canter to catch up with the other man. “I left my letter case in storage at the depot.”

“Letter case? As in printing?”

Eli nodded. “I intend to start a newspaper in your fair town, Mr. Johnson.”

Nate considered the idea. “Huh. Well, I reckon we could use one.”

“That’s what Mrs. Blaine said.” He glanced at the other man, curious as to what Johnson would say in response to his next comment. “I’m renting the caretaker’s house.”

Nate stopped walking and turned to face the short newcomer. “Thought you were living in the room we had open in the boarding house.”

“I am. Temporarily. But I plan to move to the caretaker’s house. I’ll live on the second floor and use the first floor as my print shop.”

The other man pursed his lips in thought. “Huh.” Then he added, “And Mrs. Blaine approved it?”

“Oh, sure.” Eli chuckled. “I mean, she had to, since she’s the one renting it to me. Right?”

“Huh,” Nate repeated, thoughtfully.

Eli studied the dark man’s expression. “Something wrong?”

“She told you about the cellar, didn’t she?”

“As in I’m not supposed to go down there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“She said something about it being used for storage.”

Nate replied, “That’s right. We keep things down there.”

“Oh, yeah? What kind of things?”

“I don’t think you’d be interested in them.” Nate resumed walking. “Just a bunch of old stuff.”

Eli called up a friendly smile and hurried to keep up with him. “They’re that boring, huh?”

“Yep. Put you right to sleep.”

He’s covering something up, Eli thought. *What the hell is down there?*

The two men chatted about other subjects as they continued their journey. Eventually, Eli managed to turn the conversation around to abolition and informed Nate of the reason he had left Ohio in such a hurry.

Nate said, “Folks get all fired up when someone speaks favorably about anti-slavery, don’t they?”

“Do you think I’ll run into trouble like that here?”

Nate blew out a thoughtful breath. “Well, Mr. Smith, New Jersey does have a fair number of folks who think abolitionists are nothing but troublemakers.”

“Hmm.”

“And Mrs. Blaine gets her share of snubbing these days.”

Eli feigned ignorance. “Is she anti-slavery?”

Nate grinned and nudged him. “Are feathers on a chicken? Sir, Mrs. Blaine has a big heart, a heart big enough to love folks no matter what their color is. She takes Jesus at his word: love others. Of course, there’re some around here that don’t take kindly to that attitude when it applies to loving folk of another color. But Mrs. Blaine, she stands her ground and tells them slavery’s a sin.”

“She’s telling the truth. And the truth can make people angry.” Eli glanced up at Nate. “But I agree with her. For instance, you and me? The way I see it, we’re equal in every way. Except I get opportunities, and you get denied them.”

Nate gave him a smile. “You know, I think I like you.”

“Do you like me enough to build a flatbed press for me?”

Nate’s response was a whistle. “That’s a big order.”

“I need a simple one, just big enough for a penny weekly paper. I could get the plans and pay you for your work.” Even as he said it, Eli was wondering *how* he was going to raise enough cash to purchase the plans, never mind pay for the press itself.

Nate considered his offer. “If you show me the plans, I’ll see what I can do.”

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After Eli arranged to have his case of letters and leading sent to the boarding house, he returned and entered his new home with the key that Maggie had given him.

Pleased, he surveyed the first floor with a sense of satisfaction and anticipation. As his eyes swept over the little room, they landed on the door to the cellar. After the briefest of pauses, he walked slowly over, took hold of the knob, and twisted.

It barely moved.

“Locked” he muttered. “Damn!”

Eli fished the house key out of his jacket pocket and tried it in the keyhole.

It didn’t fit.

He removed the key and shoved it back into his pocket.

Obviously, Maggie did not want him, or anyone else for that matter, to go down there.

It was then that it dawned on him. His new landlady had correctly read his curiosity about the cellar. She knew he would try the door.

And she was right.

In truth, he really *wasn’t* to be trusted. But that was only because he simply could not resist a mystery.

Never mind, he told himself. *I’ve got other fish to fry.*

What was behind the door could wait because what couldn’t wait was getting a job and some money.