

Chapter 1: Good News

1 June 1864

The door to the *Blaineton Register* flew open; newsboy and general helper Daniel Coopernall stomped into the reception area shouting, "Mail!"

Frowning, Editor-in-Chief Elijah Smith stopped his conversation mid-word with receptionist Andy Randall. He had taken both Danny and Andy off the streets, where they once had a promising career in petty theft and a possible future behind bars. Now they festooned his newspaper office with adolescent shenanigans and high spirits, which he found both amusing and annoying. On this day, Danny's behavior was firmly in the "annoying" category.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to shout in the office?" Eli grouched.

"Sorry." But the thirteen-year-old was not the least bit sorry. He grinned, passed the batch of mail to the portly middle-aged man, and clomped off to attend to his second job, helping Mr. Larsen with the rotary press.

Andy laughed. "I don't think he'll ever change, Mr. Smith."

Eli grunted. "Suppose not." His leg was killing him. He leaned against the wall behind the reception desk for extra support. Ever since he had suffered a bullet wound during an incident in 1861, he had been forced to use a walking stick to get around. Somedays he was pain-free. Others, like this one, were uncomfortable. If only he hadn't tried to talk that crazy girl with a gun from firing upon him and his wife. If perhaps he had tried to overpower her instead...

Eli briefly rued the non-violent values instilled in him by his Quaker mother. It was the desire for peace and non-violence that also had caused him to leap between two men in a foolish attempt to stop one from stabbing the other. Eli had received the knife in his side as a reward. Fortunately, the blade was short and his girth wide. As his stepdaughter, physician Lydia Lape so bluntly put it, his fat had saved his life.

"Never again," he muttered, rubbing his side.

"What, sir?" Andy asked.

"Nothing." With a sigh, he pushed his wire rim spectacles up his nose and began sorting through the mail: a thick pile of varied correspondence comprised of newspapers, letters to the editor, bills, and personal mail for himself and his family. As he shuffled through, Eli frowned and lifted one of the pieces.

Andy noticed. "Something wrong?"

"Another letter from Captain Philip Frost. For Lydia."

Eli's oldest stepdaughter, who would turn 22 years in another month, had developed an on-going friendship with Frost and Eli wasn't sure he liked it.

Theoretically, he could understand the relationship. The two had medicine in common. Frost, a doctor in the military, served at Harewood General Hospital in Washington, D.C., while Lydia worked at the new hospital just outside

Blaineton with the town's doctor, Frederick Lightner, who was her supervisor and advisor.

Lydia and Frost had had met during the Smith family's sojourn in Gettysburg. As if being chased out of Blaineton by a group of Copperhead¹ ruffians in 1863 had not been enough, Eli's wife, family, and friends were present in Gettysburg during the battle of July 1-3 and its heart-wrenching aftermath. After the battle, Capt. Frost paid the Smith House a visit. He was charged with moving soldiers from numerous impromptu hospitals – schools, churches, and private homes – to Camp Letterman General Hospital, a new, temporary facility built just outside the town. Frost made friends with Lydia, who had been taking care of the wounded lodged in the Smith house.

Despite the many things the two young people had in common, Eli found the relationship between Lydia and the Captain to be a head-scratcher. After all, Lydia's husband Edgar had been killed only a year ago at Chancellorsville. From all indications, she still was in mourning. Furthermore, she and Frost had fought like cats and dogs while in Gettysburg once the Captain suspected that a Confederate soldier, who had been in Lydia's care, was missing.

The resulting bruhaha was one Eli wished he could forget, mainly because the controversy and confusion had resulted in him being thrown in jail and hauled up before the District Provost Marshal.

Fortunately, imprisonment and/or hanging were the bullets Eli had managed to dodge when the case was dismissed.

After the dust had settled, Lydia and Philip were able to mend their disagreements. Now Frost seemed to be pursuing her romantically.

Eli could understand that, too. His stepdaughter was an intelligent young woman and a gifted physician. It also didn't hurt that she had shiny coffee-colored hair, deep brown eyes, a fetching smile, and a curvy figure.

Yes. Frost's attraction to Lydia was clear. It was Lydia's response that baffled Eli. She appeared to be holding the Captain off with one hand and beckoning him with the other.

Eli took his position as a stepfather seriously –sometimes too seriously according to his wife Maggie. She claimed that he didn't know when to intervene and when to step back.

However, Lydia was legally an adult, so Eli generally followed a "her business is her business" policy.

With a resigned sigh, he placed the letter on top of mail from his sister Becky and a packet for the family from friend Matilda Strong, a woman who had lived with them after freeing herself and her daughter Chloe from slavery in Virginia. Matilda had been reunited with her husband and sons, and now she and Chloe lived with them in Canada.

"Well," Eli mumbled to no one in particular, "I don't know. Two letters from Frost in two weeks. Who knows what that means?" He pushed his wire-rim glasses back up on his nose.

¹ See NOTES & REFERENCES section

He lifted the final letter. But when he read the address, he exploded. "Oh, Egad!" And he angrily slapped it on top of the pile.

"Ah," Andy observed, "is that from Patrick McCoy?"

"It is," Eli said between clenched teeth. "And it's for Frankie."

Frankie, whose given name was Frances, was Maggie's youngest daughter from her marriage to the late John Blaine. Headstrong, outspoken, redheaded, and impulsive, the young woman would turn eighteen in a few days. She was the one Eli worried most about.

In 1862, Frankie had cut off her hair, donned men's clothing, traveled to Camp Fair Oaks in Flemington, and attempted to pass as a boy, join the army, and fight at new-recruit Patrick's side.

Fortunately, Patrick had managed to talk some sense into her, and when Eli and Maggie finally arrived in Flemington, they did not have to do any convincing. Their errant daughter was already wanting to go home.

Even though that escapade had proved to Eli that Patrick possessed a bit of common sense, he kept an eye on the young man, just to be safe.

"Well," Eli allowed, "I shouldn't complain. He's been promoted to Sergeant. The fella's got some sense and talent. But, does he need to write Frankie a letter every day? That's madness! When I was a war correspondent, I didn't write to *Mrs. Smith* that often!"

His own words immediately called up the tension that had plagued his marriage in 1863, and he felt a pang of regret. "Maybe I *should* have written to her more." Then he added, bitterly, "Or maybe I should have just stayed home."

"Mr. Carson says that's water under the bridge and you should let it go, Mr. Smith."

Eli's dark eyebrows knit in a frown over his brown eyes. "Really? And how is it Mr. Carson feels free to discuss my life with you?"

Andy shrugged. "I dunno."

"No, you wouldn't, would you?" The truth was Dr. Stanley at the hospital had given Eli the same counsel. He realized that Carson, who was like a brother to him, was probably right. It was flattering that his friend was concerned, but to talk it over with a pup of a boy? What was wrong with that man?

Eli grunted to himself. He'd just have to take that up with Carson. Of course, Carson would only give him a withering look, so what was the use? Why waste the time and the energy?

"Why're you so upset with Patrick, anyhow?" Andy persisted. "He and Frankie are in love. Have been for a long time."

Telegrapher and reporter, Edward Caldwell – a bespectacled young black man – suddenly poked his head through the window that connected his office with the reception room. "I agree, Mr. Smith. You can't stop *that* romance. It's a runaway train."

"Who asked you?" Eli grunted.

"Sorry, sir, but your conversation carried into my office."

Eli sniffed. "You didn't have to listen to it, did you?"

"Some things can't be helped, Mr. Smith."

“Huh. That so? Well while I’m apparently spilling the corn to everyone in this place, let me finish with this: I don’t want Frankie running away from home again or doing anything untoward until she and Patrick are legally married.”

The two young men guffawed.

“Good luck, Mr. Smith,” Andy joked, “You’re talking about Frankie.”

Edward grinned. “She does have a mind of her own, sir.”

“I know. I just hope she doesn’t break her mother’s heart, that’s all. Conversation over.” Eli tucked the letters in his jacket pocket. “Andy, go get the others, it’s time for dinner.”

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Greybeal House, located just outside of Blaineton, New Jersey, had been home to the Greybeal family since the 1700’s and had grown with the family’s size and prosperity, until it was comprised of the original wing (built of local stone in 1732), and two wooden additions, built in 1816 and 1840.

Recently, the Greybeal family had moved to other locales, leaving only old Mrs. Greybeal in the cavernous building. When her son insisted that she come to Trenton to live with him and his family, the old mansion went up for sale.

Seeing her chance, Tryphena Moore, owner of the *Blaineton Register* and ally of Eli and Maggie, purchased the home with money from the sale of the lot on which Maggie’s boarding house had once stood.

Now the old place once again was filled with life. Not only did Eli, Maggie, Lydia, and Frankie live there, but so did Eli and Maggie’s son Bob and baby daughter Faith. Maggie’s good friends and co-workers from her boarding house days, Nate and Emily Johnson, and their son Natey also resided in the house. Many of the town folks were bothered by the Johnsons’ color (they were black) and by the fact that they had always been considered family to Maggie. A minority of the white people in town regarded Maggie as “eccentric” in her affection toward her dark-skinned friends but let sleeping dogs lie, especially once Nate re-started his carpentry and wheelwright business. The truth was everyone in town knew he was best in the county and were only too happy to go to him for their cabinets, tables, wheels, and such.

But the eccentric world of Greybeal House also was home to James “Grandpa” O’Reilly, an old man of no fixed job, and Chester Carson, a failed writer of fiction who had found new life as Eli’s assistant editor and chief reporter. Added to the mix was boarder and reporter Edward Caldwell, as well as two maids: Moira Brennan, who also assisted Emily and Maggie with the cooking, and Birgit Brennan, who served double duty as the younger children’s governess. True to form, Maggie treated all her boarders and employees as family.

Despite the controversy and the whispers on the outside, life inside Greybeal House was congenial.

It was so much so that Eli had completely forgotten he had his family’s mail stuffed in the pocket of his jacket until noonday dinner was over and he was about to go out the door.

“Oh!” He pulled the packets out. Like Eli, they now were somewhat rumpled. “Say, Maggie! Got some letters. One’s for Frankie, one’s for Liddy, and one is for my lovely wife and her dear friend Emily.”

Maggie received her mail and read the return address. “Why, it’s from Matilda Strong! I haven’t heard from her in months. I’ll take it upstairs and read it to Emily after we’re done cleaning up.”

“How’s the lying-in coming along?” Eli asked.

Maggie affectionately rolled her eyes. “It’s hardly a lying-in. Emily keeps getting up and insisting on working.”

Eli grinned. “Well, if she’s doing that, then I imagine Nate and Emily’s next baby will be here soon.”

“Not quite. It’s just neither of us quite know how to lie-in properly. Lounging about in bed all day seems a waste of time, something we never could afford until this year.”

Eli picked up Patrick’s letter and, with a resigned clearing of his throat, said, “Here’s the one for you, Frankie.”

She immediately was at his side and plucking the packet out of his hand. “Oh, goody,” she chirped. “It’s from Patrick!” She eagerly scampered to the sitting area to read the missive in private.

Maggie’s oldest daughter Lydia was striding toward the kitchen’s door when Eli called, “Got a letter for you, too, Liddy.”

Lydia turned. “For me?” She took it from her stepfather and glanced at the name on the return address. “Captain Frost? He never writes more than once a week. I wonder what’s going on?” But she tucked it into her black medical bag. “I’ll just have to read it later. I need to check in at the hospital.” She gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. “Goodbye, Mama.” Turning to Eli, she said, “May I ride along in the wagon?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I would like to take it to the hospital if you don’t mind. I promise I’ll bring it back to the *Register* no later than six o’clock. I’m not on call tonight.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Eli teased. “We don’t see you enough these days.”

Chester Carson smiled warmly at Lydia. “Nor do we want you wearing yourself out. You must take good care of yourself for the sake of your patients.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mr. Carson,” was her brisk reply.

“I suppose not.” Carson laid a hand on her arm. “There’s no need to return the wagon, my dear. We’ll walk back to Greybeal House. It’s a beautiful day and it promises to continue into the evening.”

Eli’s sigh caught Carson’s notice. He glanced curiously at his friend.

“It’s just...” Eli began. “Well... my leg...”

Nate spoke up. “I’ll come and get you, Eli.”

“But you’d have to hitch up the buggy.”

The tall, dark skinned man smiled. “That’s no trouble. I’ll be looking for a little air by then, anyway. I’m finishing an order of wheels for the carriage manufactory.”

“Thank you, friend.”

“My pleasure.”

Eli gave Maggie a peck on the lips. "See you this evening, sweetheart."

No sooner had the *Register* staff and Lydia gone out the door than Frankie shrieked. "Mama!!"

Alarmed, Maggie nearly tripped over her skirts rushing to her daughter's side. "Good heavens! What is it?"

"He's coming here! He's coming *home!*"

"Who's coming home? Patrick?"

"Yes! Patrick!" Frankie now was hopping up and down like an excited puppy.

Maggie heaved a relieved sigh. "Then Patrick hasn't been injured..."

"No, not in the least! He's perfectly healthy." Frankie finally brought her excitement under control. "But he *has* been promoted to sergeant! And, Mama, here's the best news: his surgeon recommended him for an opening at Mower U.S. General Hospital. He's coming to Philadelphia. He's going to be a steward!"

"What's a steward?"

"Well... it's a... a..." Frankie frowned. "I don't know."

Maggie put a hand on her daughter's arm. "Don't worry. I'm sure we'll find out as soon as Patrick gets here."

"He says he's coming for a visit on Monday and he'll have a week's leave before he reports for duty." Frankie's eyes abruptly filled with tears. "Oh, Mama! He'll finally be away from the fighting!" She pulled a handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and scrubbed her eyes. "Oh, I'm so happy! I've been terribly afraid this whole while..." And she burst into sobs.

Maggie put her arms around her daughter and pulled her close. "I know, my dear. This is welcome and wonderful news, and such a relief. Cry all you want."

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That evening, everyone had finished supper and was sitting on the porch when the family's carriage came up the drive with Lydia at the reins.

Nate and Carson stood up and stepped off the veranda to meet her and take care of the horse.

Smiling, Lydia thanked them and, black physician's bag in hand, strode smiling across the drive. Her mother met her part way and gave her a hug and kiss.

"How was the hospital?" Maggie asked as they strolled arm in arm to the kitchen.

"A bit tricky. We had an issue with a young boy who presented with appendicitis. Dr. Lightner performed the appendectomy while I assisted. It was a good thing we did it. The appendix was ready to rupture. We got it out in time, though."

"I'm glad to hear it went well," Maggie said. "The boy's family must be relieved." They entered the inviting old kitchen with its white, plastered walls. A black range and walnut cupboards sat at one end, and an enormous fireplace and sitting area at the other, separated by a substantial dining table in the middle.

Maggie said, "We had cold beef hash with bread, fresh asparagus, a cold potato salad, and rice pudding for dinner. Would you like me to fix you a plate?"

"I'm not very hungry. I would like to have some of the hash on a piece of bread, though."

"Of course." Maggie went to the icebox and retrieved the bowl. "Would you care for some of the asparagus, as well?"

"That sounds good." Lydia fetched a plate and silverware from the Dutch cupboard. As she set the utensils on the table, she commented, "I read Captain Frost's letter while I was at the hospital. He says he will be sent to Mower General Hospital."

Maggie nearly dropped the bread board she was holding. "Mower? Is that right?" She brought the board over and set it and a half-loaf of bread on the table. "That's where Patrick is going, too."

"Is he?" Lydia's face lit up. "How wonderful! They'll both be away from the fighting. I can't believe our good fortune."

"Will the Captain be able to stay with us before he reports?"

"Yes. He says he'll be here on the sixth of June."

Maggie brought the bowl of hash and a spoon over. "I'm sure you, Frankie, Patrick, and the Captain will have a good visit."

"It should be quite jolly," Lydia agreed. She spread hash over a piece of bread and began to devour it.

"Lydia do sit down, please. It isn't good for the digestion to eat standing up."

With the slightest of sighs, Lydia sank onto a chair.

Maggie followed suit. "Liddy..."

"Mm?" her daughter replied around a mouthful of hash sandwich.

"Do you think Captain Frost is fond of you?"

A pair of wide, brown eyes met Maggie's. "Well, of course. We're friends."

"No. I mean..." Maggie took a breath. "I mean, fond as in interested?"

"Oh, Mama..." Lydia presented her with a composed smile. "This isn't a time to think of that."

"No. I suppose not. I mean, he is still in the army. Do you know when he will be mustered out?"

"No."

"So, you haven't made any plans or had any discussions?"

Lydia chuckled. "Mama! Of course not. We're friends. That's all. Anyway, if we were to make any decisions at all, it would be after the war is over."

"I suppose so," Maggie allowed.

"It is the common-sense thing to do." Lydia flashed a grin at her mother. "For goodness sake, Mama, I'm not Frankie. I don't launch surprises at you every five minutes."

That was true. Lydia was loaded with common-sense. Down-to-earth and logical, she was nothing like her mercurial younger sister.

Maggie smiled at her eldest. "Yes. You've almost always been predictable."

“There. You have nothing to worry about.” Lydia tore into the sandwich once again.