

## CHRISTMAS EVE 1863

Frankie Blaine was frustrated. She punched down the bread dough with a vengeance – but it still didn't make her feel any better. Unruly, wavy strands of red hair had escaped her braid and she irritably pushed them from her face, leaving traces of flour on both as she grumbled, "This is not Christmas."

"You're right," her sister Lydia replied from the stove. Her brown eyes crinkled as she teased, "It's Christmas *Eve*."

"Oh, you know what I mean." Frankie continued to pummel the dough. "We're practically down to our last penny. We can't make a decent Christmas pudding. We can't afford presents. I couldn't even scrape up enough to buy yarn to knit socks! And now the children are sick."

Lydia lifted the lid to a pot of chicken soup and sampled it with a spoon. "Well, at least this soup tastes good."

Frankie stopped what she was doing to glare at her sister. Why was it that Lydia's brown hair always stayed neat, regardless of whether it was in a bun or a braid? "I remember when Mama ran the boarding house, there were times when we hardly had any money – and we still had a real Christmas dinner and afterwards we went to help those less fortunate."

"There wasn't a war then," Lydia replied. Her heart contracted at the words. There hadn't been a war and Edgar had been alive. She shook herself out of it. She was done with crying.

"Eighteen sixty-three has been nothing but trouble," Frankie grumbled. "Copperheads burned down our home. Papa moved us to Gettysburg. Edgar. The battle!" She slammed her fist into the dough. "I can't wait for 1864 to get here. It's got to be better than this."

"Try looking on the bright side, will you? We still have one another." *Everyone except Edgar*, Lydia's mind sneered.

Frankie suddenly fell quiet, gently patting the mound of dough before her. "Oh, Liddy, they've got fevers. What if the fevers turn into something else?"

Lydia knew very well what a fever and a cough could turn into in young children. She had seen enough of it. "Don't worry," she finally said. "Just keep praying."

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Upstairs, Maggie Blaine Smith sat beside the cradle in her bedroom. She stared down at her daughter. Faith's nose was stuffy and she was running a fever. Maggie worriedly laid a hand on the baby. *Oh, Lord*, she prayed, *have you brought our little one this far only to have her leave us? Must my heart be broken yet again?*

Maggie didn't want to think about what such a thing would do to her husband's heart. Eli's first wife and infant son had died within hours of each other. This baby and their adopted son, Bob, meant everything to him.

But life did not come with guarantees. Maggie knew that all too well. A woman could die in childbirth. An infant might never live to see its sixth birthday. There were fevers, diseases, and accidents. And now there was a war. The world was perilous. Anything could take a child, or an adult for that matter. Her first husband John and her son Gideon had died of rheumatic fever in 1850. Miraculously, her two daughters had not taken ill and lived to become young women. Faith though was not even five weeks old. Would she be strong enough to fight a fever?

Her mind drifted to the room next door where six-year-old Bob and three-year-old Natey, the son of her good friend Emily, were confined. Both had congested noses, coughs, and fevers. Maggie tried not to dwell on the reality: a cough and a fever could turn into a deadly inflammation of the lungs and pleura in the blink of an eye.

Maggie put her head in her hand and prayed again. *Oh, God, on this the eve of your Son's birth, please remember these children. Please give us joy. We have suffered so much.*

It was true. They had suffered. Her family had been in Gettysburg while the battle raged. They had been worn down, their hearts torn out, and their faith tested. Now her diverse family could not even be together for Christmas because someone needed to stay in Gettysburg to keep watch over the infirmary for women. Chester Carson and Jim "Grandpa" O'Reilly, the other members of her extended family, had volunteered to stay at the house on West Street so the midwife could tend to the patients, and Frankie and Lydia could spend Christmas with their mother and stepfather. Despite the men's generosity, Maggie missed Mr. Carson and Grandpa, too. She was missing so many things these days.

She missed the boarding house she once had owned in Blaineton, New Jersey. It had been a difficult life, but the house had been filled with love and with people who had become her family. Now that was gone, too, having been burned down by a gang of youthful Copperheads who did not appreciate Maggie's friendship with people of color and who suspected the boarding was a station on the Underground Railroad (which it was). Maggie was stunned that such hatred and anger could be directed at her and those she loved. In order to protect them, her husband Eli Smith had moved the entire family to Gettysburg, where they stayed in his old family home and helped his Quaker sisters assist fugitive slaves and refugee freemen.

And then the battle: three days of confusion, terror, and gore. Maggie had been pregnant at the time and, almost as soon as the fighting was over, Eli had packed her up and moved her yet again – this time seven miles north to Middletown, Pennsylvania, where they now sojourned.

*And for what*, she wondered tiredly. What was it all for? Death and grief seemed to follow them. She wondered when or if they would ever go away, whether they would pause even for a little while, and whether she would ever feel a sense of peace again.

The door to the room opened. Maggie looked up to see Eli. She smiled but he did not see it. He was looking at the floor as he and his cane thumped their way across the room.

Eli had been a newspaperman. He also had been raised as a Quaker. Even though he no longer was connected with a Meeting, he retained a strong dislike of violence and war, as well as a desire to see the waters of justice roll down for the poor and the outcast. In addition, Eli was a free-thinker, someone who preferred to analyze, evaluate, and make up his own mind with regard to the issues of the day. He did not have – or more correctly claimed not to have – any firm religious beliefs. And yet somehow he had married pious Methodist Maggie. Her generous heart, kind hazel eyes, and quiet smile had won him over the first minute he met her.

Maggie loved Eli every bit as much as he loved her. He was not much to look at: short, portly, bespectacled, and no matter how hard he tried, rumped. But he had a friendly grin. He also had a sense of humor, something that proved crucial to his survival. Three years earlier he had been the victim of a shooting, the most serious wound resulting in a painful and unstable left leg that forced him to navigate with a cane. Despite this, Maggie rarely heard him complain. Instead, Eli had developed an arsenal of self-deprecating jokes about his need for assistance.

"How's Fay?" he quietly asked.

"Still feverish."

Eli sighed. "Has she nursed?"

Maggie nodded. "But not very long." She gazed back down at their daughter. "What if she stops feeding, Eli?"

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "She won't. Let's not think about that."

"I'll try not to," she said. "Have you seen Bob?"

Eli sat down on the edge of the bed. "Yes. No change."

"I suppose no change is preferable to getting worse. I want to see him."

"Please do. He'd like that. I'll watch the baby."

Maggie stood and gave him a kiss. In response, Eli put his arms around her and held her for a moment. They both were in their early forties. The children they had were particularly precious in light of the fact that Maggie most likely would not conceive again, having attained the age at which most women ceased childbearing. They both feared what might happen to the children. They both knew tragedy stalked them like a wolf.

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Upon entering the boys' room, Maggie found Emily humming a spiritual as she rocking her son Natey. Emily and her husband had tried for years to have a child, but suffered miscarriage after miscarriage. When Natey finally arrived, they were delighted. But his birth carried an additional meaning for them. Emily and Nate were black. Nate had been raised in New Jersey and Emily had been brought north by her family in a daring escape from slavery. Natey therefore was both their beloved child and a symbol – a symbol of hope that someday their family would thrive and no longer face hatred and bigotry.

The little boy was sleeping in his mother's arms now, but it was a fitful sleep. As Emily lifted her amber eyes, Maggie could read the pain in her friend's heart. She gently touched the boy's forehead.

"Still feverish," Maggie sighed.

Emily nodded.

Distressed, Maggie went to Bob's bed next. When she sat down, he stirred and opened his eyes. "Hello, Bobby," she said softly, a smile on her face.

"Hello, Mama."

"How are you feeling?"

"Terrible."

"What can I do for you, love?"

"Would you sing a Christmas song?"

His simple request touched her heart. Maggie glanced at Emily who nodded and waited. Maggie took a breath then began: "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed. The little lord Jesus lay down his sweet head."

Emily now joined her voice with Maggie's. "The stars in the sky looked down where he lay; the little lord Jesus asleep in the hay."

As they sang, Lydia entered with a tray. The aroma of chicken soup filled the air. She set the tray on the bureau.

Frankie was right behind her sister. The two listened until the older women finished the song then Lydia said, "Why don't both of you go downstairs? We made some soup. There are bread and butter and apples and a pot of tea, too. You need to take a rest."

The other women agreed. Frankie gently lifted Emily's sleepy son off her lap and carried him to the bed, and they left the room.

A few seconds later, Maggie and Emily found relief in the warmth of the kitchen and the inviting fragrance of soup and fresh bread. Maggie went to the big stove and lifted the lid on a big pot. “Mm,” she sighed and looked up as the kitchen door flew open with a bang.

Emily’s husband Nate came in with an armful of wood, his kinky black hair covered with a sprinkling of snow and his dark skin glowing from the water left by melted snowflakes.

“Woo,” he exclaimed as he kicked the door shut with his foot. “It is cold out there!” He laid the wood on the pile beside the stove.

“And snowing, I see,” Emily joked with a weary smile.

Nate dusted his hands to clean them. “Yep, and coming down mighty hard.”

“Would you like some soup?” Maggie asked. She was ladling rich chicken broth and noodles into a bowl.

“I’ll have it later, thanks,” was Nate’s reply. “I want to check on my boy, if you don’t mind.”

As he left the room, Maggie passed a bowl to Emily then filled one of her own. At last they sat down to eat, but not after saying a brief prayer over the food. No matter how bad things were, they always said grace.

“Mm,” Emily said as she sampled the fare, “those girls of yours are becoming good cooks.”

Maggie buttered a thick piece of brown bread. “Well, Mrs. Johnson, I must say that is only because they had you as a teacher.” She grinned, passed the bread to her friend, and buttered one for herself next. After a moment of silence, Maggie decided to be brave. “Emily ... do you think they’ll be all right?”

“Children take ill.” Her friend sighed. “Can’t expect it never to happen.”

“I know. It’s just ... Faith is so tiny.”

They were interrupted by an abrupt rapping at the door. Maggie and Emily exchanged confused glances. After a hesitation, Maggie rose.

Upon opening the door, she was hit by a blast of icy air and pelted with snow. Maggie quickly blinked the water out of her eyes and squinted into the pitch dark. She was surprised to find a little old man standing there. He was huddled in a dark coat, a hat covered with snow perched on his head and a tattered scarf wrapped round his neck. But his eyes ... Even though they were shielded by a pair of eyeglasses covered with drops of icy water Maggie could see that they were piercingly blue. They gazed into hers the way a close friend might. The man smiled and said in accented English, “Good evening, Madam. Would you be needing any ribbons or cloth? Some pans or pots perhaps? Or a bit of lace maybe?”

Peering into the dark beyond him, Maggie could just make out a hand cart nearby. Unable to help herself, she exclaimed, “Good heavens! Whatever are you doing out on a night like this?”

“Business is business,” was his reply.

“And freezing is freezing,” was her retort. “Please come in and take supper with us. We have some good, hot chicken soup.”

The little man smiled. “I wouldn’t say no.” And he followed her into the house.

Emily stood up, confused that they had company in the midst of such a fierce storm.

“May I take your coat?” Maggie was asking the man.

He shucked his things off and she hung them up to dry. As Maggie turned she said, “Emily I’d like you to meet ...” And suddenly she realized she didn’t know his name. Helpless, she looked inquiringly at their visitor.

“Oh!” he laughed. “I beg your pardon! I am Ira Glickberg, purveyor of all manner of cloth, finery, and kitchen utensils.”

“Well, then, please sit down, Mr. Glickberg.” Maggie quickly dished up a bowl of soup and placed it before him. “Would you care for some tea?”

“I would. Thank you.”

“My name is Margaret Smith, but everyone calls me Maggie.” She went to the stove and began to prepare the teapot. “And this is my friend Emily Johnson.”

Ira nodded at Emily. “I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Johnson.”

“Likewise,” Emily replied, still looking baffled.

Smiling, Ira cut a piece of bread then closed his eyes and recited, “*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz.*”

When he looked up, he found that the two women were staring at him. “An old Hebrew prayer,” he explained, “it means, ‘Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth.’” With that he picked up the bread and took a bite. “Mm, delicious!” Ira tucked into the soup next. Eyes twinkling, he glanced up at Maggie. “So you are Mrs. Smith?”

She nodded.

“The soup and the bread, Mrs. Smith, are delightful. Just the thing on a cold night.” He turned to Emily next. “And you are a Mrs. as well?”

“Yes, sir.”

As he accepted a cup of tea from Maggie, Ira said, “Please, Mrs. Smith. Sit. I interrupted your meal. I would hate for your food to go cold.”

Maggie sat down.

Ira lifted his head and listened. “This house is so quiet. Where is everyone?”

“Upstairs,” Maggie replied.

The man’s bright blue eyes met hers. “Children, maybe?”

“Ill children.” Maggie contemplated her bowl of soup. “Our husbands and my two daughters are looking after them right now.”

Ira sighed. “Ah, yes. I can see the worry. Troubles have come.”

“We ain’t got nothing but troubles these days,” Emily told him.

The snow, now icy pellets, pattered against the window panes.

“What times we live in,” the little man sighed. “A war! I thought I left that behind in the old country.”

“I’m afraid evil knows no boundaries,” Maggie said.

“You ladies have someone in the army, perhaps?”

“My youngest daughter’s beau,” Maggie answered.

Ira watched her closely. “And your eldest daughter?”

When Maggie said nothing, he heaved another sigh. “I see. She is a widow. I am so sorry. I should not have asked.” He frowned. “But the both of you have seen battle, too. I can see it in your eyes. And Gettysburg is not so far from here.”

Normally, Maggie would have interpreted his words as unnecessary prying; but Ira Glickberg’s tone of voice was sympathetic and kind and his expression fatherly. She felt safe. The safest she had felt in a very long time. “We were living in Gettysburg during the battle,” she explained. “My husband is a newspaperman and was away covering the war. He thought we’d be safe in Gettysburg.” She couldn’t bring herself to say more.

Emily picked up the story. “A troop of Confederates stayed with us. We had a great many wounded there, too. Our house became a hospital. We worked for three days with hardly any sleep and little food. And ...” And suddenly she wanted to tell him what had happened to her. “Then one of the men attacked Maggie. And I went and got a pistol. I shot him, Mr. Glickberg. I shot him dead.”

The blue eyes glistened with tears. “That must have been dreadful, Mrs. Johnson.”

“It was. He was a hateful man, but it was dreadful. And now ... living with what I did ... well, it hurts. It hurts real bad.”

“You were protecting your friend, Mrs. Johnson.”

“But the Bible says ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

The little man smiled. “It does indeed. But does it not also speak of forgiveness?”

Emily’s face crumpled and to her surprise she began to cry in front of a complete stranger. “Mr. Glickberg, how can God forgive me after what I did?”

“God can do *anything*, so surely God can forgive you for protecting your friend.”

Maggie spoke up. “He’s right, Emily. And remember how Lemuel planned to take you and sell you South?”

“So you were protecting your own life, as well,” Ira concluded, “a life that God gave you to care for and to care for your loved ones.”

Emily pressed a napkin to her face.

At this Ira abruptly stood up and went to the door. “A moment, please.”

Not bothering with his coat, he went out the door. Maggie could hear the wind’s brutal keening and wondered that such a thin little man should be able to stand up in it. In less than a minute, though, Ira returned carrying a small wooden chest. He set it down at the end of the table. “Your Christmas is tomorrow, is it not?” he asked as he opened the box.

Maggie nodded. Emily pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose.

“And it is your custom to give small gifts to one another in honor of Yeshua – pardon me, Jesus. However, I have never heard it said that a man such as myself cannot give presents, as well. I think Yeshua would understand.”

“Oh,” Maggie began, “but it’s not necessary to give us gifts.”

“Oh, but it is,” he replied with a twinkle in his eyes. “Your gift to me is a warm house and a good supper. Mine to you is ...” He began to dig through the chest. “Ah, yes,” he murmured. “This will do very well.” He brought forth what looked like the horn of an animal. “Mrs. Johnson, I give this to you.”

Emily looked skeptical. “What is it?”

“A ram’s horn. My people call it a *shofar*. We blow into it to announce the beginning of Rosh Hashanah and the end of Yom Kippur. But it can also symbolize forgiveness. You should think of forgiveness whenever you look at this shofar. You should remember that you have been forgiven. I know some say that the Almighty cannot forgive a murder – but if he sees all, then he knows why you did it and thus he forgives.”

Emily took the article from him. The horn was smooth and cool to the touch. She caressed it. At length a smile came to her face. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And now a blessing: My dear Mrs. Johnson, may you embrace the Almighty’s forgiveness, leave your guilt behind, and know that you are well-loved.”

Emily felt the tears coming again. She hastily stood up, stammering, “Thank you kindly, Mr. Glickberg. I think I’ll go upstairs now.”

Once she was gone, Ira turned to Maggie. “And you,” he said quietly, “you have fear.”