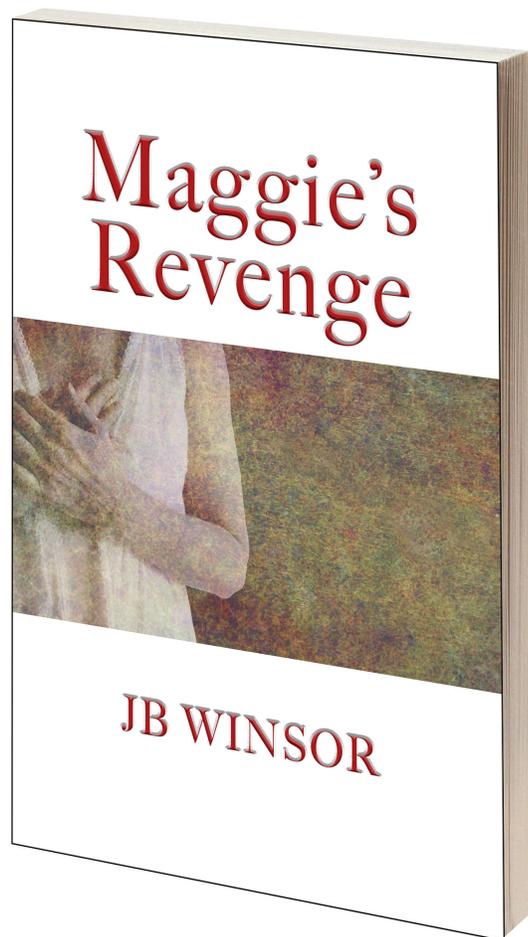


Maggie's Revenge©



Chapter 1

March 1864

Boonville, Missouri

Mrs. Margaret Hartstone, owner of *White Haven* Plantation, social and cultural maven of the Civil War frontier town of Boonville, frustrated by the law's inability to deliver justice, and ignoring all considered advice, decided to take matters into her own hands.

She snatched a wool bonnet from the four-poster wedding bed George had made from the walnut trees on their land. She'd trimmed the edge of the hat with brown cotton tape and added a long one-inch wide matching ribbon. Careful not to disturb the shining black braids coiled tight around each ear, she settled the bonnet on her head.

She shouted, "Come get my trunk, Sam. We're going to be late."

Turning in an impatient circle, she tied and retied the ribbon into a large bow. It complimented broad stripes that ran down the light gray dress and sleeves.

George appeared, leaning against to her armoire, but now was not the time to talk.

She heard footsteps running up the stairs. Sam appeared and knocked on the doorframe.

"Don't just stand there and stare, Sam. Take my trunk to the carriage."

"You looks mighty pretty today, Miz Maggie."

George nodded.

“You like this gray dress better than black?”

“Yes ma’am,” Sam said, walking to her trunk. He began to pick it up but straightened and looked at her with tight lips that covered his usual bright smile.

“What?”

“I want to go with you.”

“You can’t.”

“Is somebody else going with?”

“No.”

“Not safe for a beautiful lady to travel alone.”

George, standing behind Sam, nodded with vigor.

“I’ll be with other people,” Maggie said.

“There is bad people out there. Scallywags. I need to come to keep you safe.”

“You would be a big help, Sam, but I need you to stay here to take care of the place.”

“When is you coming back, Miz Maggie?”

“Sometimes, you are impertinent, Sam. Go on now.”

“Yes ma’am.” He picked up the trunk, walked toward the door, then stopped and turned to her.

“Is that good or bad?”

She spun toward him, swatting her skirt as if swatting a pesky fly. “Is what good or bad?”

“That word – impertinent.”

“It means you ask too many questions, Sam.”

“Un-huh.” He disappeared through the door.

She smiled. She’d miss Sam.

She turned to talk with George, but he had vanished.

Holding her parasol in one hand, the railing with the other, she hurried down the curving stairway. She avoided the gaze of portraits of their ancestors that lined the walls. Their faces were solemn, eyes critical and disapproving of her decision.

She’d sewn greenbacks into the dress lining, before hemming up the front, so she wouldn’t trip walking upstairs or down a gangplank. She’d also shortened the skirt so it wouldn’t drag in the mud.

She felt matronly. Replacing the whalebone stays in her corset with gold coins added weight and bulk, destroying her still-girlish figure. That was good; she’d look less attractive and draw less attention from scallywags.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, standing in the wide entrance hallway, and broke her vow not to look in the parlor at her beloved Erhard piano. Its front leg had snapped in half. The keyboard, missing several teeth, dug into the hardwood floor. White and black keys had scattered across the floor. A part of Maggie’s soul perished with the piano that night.

She shook her head and walked past the chest in the foyer where Captain Eppstein discovered the cockade that George had worn before the war to show his support for the Southern cause. That’s when freedom of speech was the law of the land.

She turned and strode out the front door where her housemaid Sally and cook Cissy waited to say farewell. She thanked them and gave each a gold coin.

They were speechless. It was more money than they could have expected to see in their lifetime. Their loyalty had earned the bonus. But with all that money would they, like several slaves on neighboring plantations, make a run to freedom in Kansas?

Sam walked Maggie through two-story porch columns and down the steps toward the open carriage. The mule brayed.

“Would you like the top covered, Miz Maggie?”

“No. I’d like fresh air.”

He steadied her when she climbed into the tufted leather back seat. He placed a dust cover over her lap. She gripped the edge and pulled it high while he climbed into the driver’s seat.

“You ready to go, Miz Maggie?”

She fought the impulse to scream *no*. Any rational person would not go. She should listen to the people she respected who warned her against going, saying, “*You’ll end up killing yourself.*”

“I can’t be late. Let’s go, Sam”.

He slapped the reins against the mule’s haunches. It raised its tail, passed gas, and then stepped out in a slow walk down the lane toward the Rocheport Road leading to Boonville.

The plantation house looked sad and worn, yet when she saw the table and chairs on the side porch, her spirits lifted. The porch had been one of their favorite summer places. Each morning, after George rode back from inspecting the fields, they would sit in its cool shade. Sally would bring them hot tea and

sweets. They would talk and laugh, and there were beautiful times they would retire to the bedroom for some pre-noon intimacy.

“Can’t you get that darned mule to go faster, Sam? I don’t want the boat to leave without me.”

“Yes ma’am.” He flicked the reins against the mule’s butt until it picked up the pace.

She glanced back at the house. George and Jenny stood on the second-floor portico, and he held Jenny’s waist with his good arm. Maggie waved. They seemed indistinct, as if she was looking at them through a mourning veil. Would she ever see them again?

She turned and picked up her favorite possession, other than the piano, of course. It had been the very best birthday gift from her father.

The parasol.

She slid it from its cover and opened it, once again admiring its brilliant colors and tiny bells on the fringes that jingled to the rhythm of the buggy. She spun it and watched a kaleidoscope of red and yellow and blue reflect the sunlight. She held the parasol over her left shoulder and listened to the music of the bells sing counterpoint to the sound of the mule’s hoof-beats.

No matter how difficult one’s life, one’s appearance shaped perception, and perception spoke louder than fact.

Soon after turning right on the Rocheport Road, she saw Tracy’s old schoolhouse, used as a hospital after the first battle of Boonville.

“I hope I didn’t embarrass you there, Mother.”

Maggie spun at the sound of Jenny’s voice. Her daughter sat next to her.

“I can’t stand the sight of that dress. Can’t you appear in something else?”

Maggie asked.

“I am what you remember.”

Maggie didn’t want to remember.

“You took me to help at the hospital. The smell of burned flesh and the flies and the moans made me sick.”

“You were a big help, especially with Jeff McCutchen.”

“I’ll never forget his final words.”

“It was the Reverend Painter’s fault.”

Sam turned in his driver’s seat. “Is you talking to me, Miz Maggie?”

“You never mind. I’m just talking to myself.”

“Lately, you’ve been talking to yourself more and more. Think maybe you should put off the trip?”

“It’s none of your business, Sam.”

“Surely is,” he muttered as he turned back toward the road, slapped the reins hard against the mule’s butt, slumped his shoulders and shook his head.

Later, in front of Boonville’s Thespian Hall, a long caravan of ox driven wagons blocked the intersection.

Sam reined in and set the brake. “Looks like we’ll be here a while, Miz Maggie.

“Pull ahead a few more feet so those drivers can see we need to cut through. Someone will let us through.” She looked at the four story high Greek revival building built by the Thespian Society.

How many posters had she posted on its columns to announce upcoming arts performances? Maggie missed being the driving force to make Boonville the cultural heart of Little Dixie.

Now Thespian Hall served as a Union hospital, its basement used as stables for officer's horses. And now, with the war, all her efforts to create a civilized society on the frontier had been destroyed, along with everything and everyone else she had loved.

“Sam, we have to cut through that line of wagons, or we'll be late.”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Well, do something.”

Sam stood and waved to an oncoming wagon driver. He waved back.

Maggie looked at the Presbyterian Church across the street and remembered the times when Reverend Painter tried to squelch her rage at God for allowing the killings.

The Reverend's counseling of forgiveness changed after his beloved relatives died at the Battle of Vicksburg. Still, his insistence the Good Book contained the solution to her bitterness caused her to pack her family Bible, even though she found nothing in it to ease her anger. In fact, she now questioned if God existed.

Sam watched the wagon driver pass without allowing them to pass. “Not enough space between the wagons. Guess we'll have to wait.”

The entire wagon train came to a halt with the sounds of creaking leather, the clanking of chains, and hee-hawing of mules. Maggie was blocked.

“We will not wait.” Maggie threw off the dust cover and stood up and shouted at the oncoming wagon driver. “Please halt and let us through.”

“Army business, lady. You’ll have to wait.”

“I’ll miss my boat.”

“Union business first.”

Maggie folded her parasol and stepped down from the carriage. She walked toward the driver’s lead mule and stood next to its nose. She waited.

“What’da doing, woman?”

The wagon in front jerked and rolled forward.

Before the driver could move his mule team, Maggie shoved her parasol in front of the lead mule’s nose. She snapped it open in a flare of color and tinkling of bells. The frightened mule shied away from the umbrella. Rearing and kicking, its legs tangled in the chains of traces of its mates. One mule lost its balance and toppled, leaning against the other. The wagon couldn’t move.

The wagon in front continued forward, creating space between them.

“What the hell?” the driver shouted.

She waved Sam through the open space and then turned to the driver.

“Don’t you dare use foul language in front of a lady!”

“You’re not a lady - you’re a bitch.”

She hurried to the carriage and climbed in as the swearing wagon driver climbed down to untangle his mules from the traces.

As they drove past the wagon driver, Maggie said, “You wouldn’t know a lady if she sat in your lap.”

Chapter 2

Sam urged his mule to hurry away from the conflict with the Union wagon driver. He twisted and looked at her with a big grin. “That was sure something, Miz Maggie.”

She concentrated on calming her breathing as they drove past two-story brick commercial buildings toward the river. They hurried down the dirt main street crowded with wagon trains, freighters and buggies. People scurried across, jumping mud puddles and animal dung. Her nose wrinkled from the stench.

Wounded veterans wearing ragged clothes sat on the wooden sidewalk or leaned on homemade wooden crutches. The bare stumps of legs and arms evidence of the horrors of war. The wounded begged for money or food or other kindnesses from the same people they had terrorized.

Maggie avoided eye contact. The injured needed help, but there were so many of them and she was only one woman. What could she do, other than hate the politicians who started the war and destroyed the lives of thousands?

Near the river bluff, they passed the Trigg building. Maggie wished George had been as smart as Dr. Trigg, who closed the bank he'd started in 1847 and moved his family to New York to escape the ravages of the war.

Sam reined the mule to a slow walk as the buggy reached the end of Main Street at the edge of the bluff. He stopped as the street plunged down to the river's edge.

Maggie saw the north edge of the river brown with silt and on the far side plowed fields and beyond them the timbered bluffs where the guerrilla, Quantrill, was rumored to hide out during the winter.

“You ready, Miz Maggie?”

She braced her leather walking boots against the facing seat. “I’m ready now.”

“Hold on tight, hear?” Sam urged the mule over the edge.

The iron buggy wheels screeched and sparked against cobblestones as Sam maneuvered it down the steep road toward the steamship. The odor of rotten fish, damp earth, decay, and stench both human and animal enveloped her. Heaving and sweating Negro slaves loaded the ship, chanting monotonous river melodies.

Her fingers tightened on her parasol when she spotted that blockhead Union Captain Eppstein, who had threatened to imprison her. He waited next to the gangplank. Two blue-coated soldiers stood at attention by his side.

Would he arrest her? On what grounds? Treason? Had one of her friends informed on her?

She’d openly criticized the latest Union martial law order to shoot armed civilians on sight. It would have been easier to have lied and supported the rule. Still, she hated liars and had been open about her opinion.

One had to be honest. Of course she had voiced her view about the stupidity of the law to shoot armed civilians. How else could innocent people protect themselves from roaming gangs of robbers and murderers?

There was no way to board the ship without confronting Captain Eppstein. She pushed her Colt Pocket revolver deeper into the concealed pocket of her dress. She looked down, hoping the gun did not produce a noticeable bulge.

Three years ago, Eppstein, a German immigrant, now dressed in Union blue, had ordered his troops to search her home for firearms and proof of Confederate support. He'd found George's cockade, the blue ribbon worn before the war to show support for the Southern cause.

Evidence of treason, Captain Eppstein had gloated. She'd claimed it had been left unnoticed by one of their guests. He couldn't prove otherwise.

She moved her parasol to her left shoulder to hide her face, and then pulled her bonnet tight. She felt the lace around her throat and touched the locket George had given her.

"Miz Maggie? Captain Eppstein is standing near the boat."

"I see him. Keep going."

Eppstein would love to find an excuse to get rid of her.

Had someone told him she was leaving? Was it someone jealous of her unofficial position as the cultural leader of Boonville and Little Dixie, and wanting to cause her trouble?

She'd learned making enemies was the curse of achievement.

What had the world come to if you couldn't trust your friends?

Halfway down to the landing, Sam stopped the mule to allow it to catch its breath. She heard wagon masters' shouts and the bellowing of oxen.

Should she risk arrest or turn back to the safety of the world she'd grown to hate?

Captain Eppstein turned and shaded his eyes with his hand to better see the buggy. Waiting for her? Did he recognize her? What proof did he have to arrest her?

Well, she carried proof. Under martial law, she thought again, any citizen caught bearing firearms were to be immediately executed. She checked her revolver. Should she try to hide it by jamming it between the seat and back cushion? She shook her head, pushed the gun further into the folds of her dress.

Sam said, "I can turn around as soon as we gets to the landing. Let's go home."

"Keep going." She opened her valise and retrieved her Bible.

There were so many ox-drawn wagons and livestock and people on the landing that Captain Eppstein might not notice them. Yet why did he look up at her buggy?

They neared the landing, and she inhaled deeply to calm her mind. The safest thing would be to flee.

She had to stop looking at Captain Eppstein, or he'd notice her.

Concentrate on the steamboat.

Captain Kinney's *Cora II* looked like a giant three-tiered wedding cake adorned by two black smokestack candles. The anchored sternwheeler faced upstream. There was no dock, just the large cobblestone landing. Two large gangplanks swung from the bow to the shore, to allow cargo and passengers to transfer.

The ship's sizeable main deck was filled with cargo: firewood for the boilers; cotton bales; barrels of whiskey; boxes of retail goods; farm implements;

cattle; mules; and chickens. Many passengers, who for the price of several dollars plus help with gathering firewood for the ship's boilers, would endure the trip in the open.

Captain Eppstein looked over the crowd at the empty road above her. He turned to the two blue-coated soldiers and said something. Then he pulled out a pocket watch, stared at it, and once again looked at the road.

Was he waiting for someone else?

Oh, God, she hoped so.

She forced herself to study the ship.

On the main deck, passengers scrambled for space near the warmth of the boilers and undercover from inclement weather, where they would sleep and eat whatever food they had brought with them.

The second deck contained the first-class cabins, a dining area, and a salon. The third – and highest, and the smallest – layer of the cake held the pilothouse.

The buggy arrived at the foot of the road.

“I’ll turn us around and go home,” Sam said.

“Drive the buggy between Captain Eppstein and the gangplank.”

“You sure, Miz Maggie?”

“Just do it.”

Sam nodded and jockeyed the buggy toward the bow of the ship through a swarm of wagons, swearing drivers, slaves hauling cargo, passengers, and well-wishers. Excited children shouted and scrambled through the crowd.

Sam ignored curses from other wagon drivers and parked the buggy near the gangplank. He pulled the brake handle to lock the wheels and jumped down to open the door for Maggie. She threw off the dust cover, handed the parasol to Sam, who held it above her as she stepped onto the cobblestones.

“Mrs. Hartstone! One word, please.” Captain Eppstein strode toward her.

No escape. Maggie turned towards him, holding her Bible like a shield against her chest, right hand in her pocket, fingers wrapped around the handle of her revolver.

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