

Prologue - Lucy / Philadelphia / 1849

Lucy McKim's father often came and went from their Philadelphia home. To the office, home for dinner, back out for a lecture, back home for correspondence and sleep before doing it all again. One day, a Black man came home with him. He was hungry, tired, and needed a bath. Six-year old Lucy didn't need to think this was strange. People she didn't know came to their home all the time.

This man, it turned out, was special. Her father James Miller McKim had known the man, Henry Brown, would be arriving, but wasn't sure when. How Brown actually made it to Lucy's father's office was a story anyone would remember: he had arrived in a box from Richmond. Earlier in 1849, Lucy's father had heard that there was a man in Richmond trying to escape slavery, and he would ship himself in a box to Philadelphia. So McKim and other members of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society said they would sign for the crate and help Brown with his escape. In 1849, Brown might be able to find freedom in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. But even getting from Richmond to Pennsylvania—182 miles straight north—could have been disastrous if he tried to walk or take a carriage or boat. Men were paid to hunt down runaways. As William Still, one of Lucy's father's colleagues said, Brown decided would be better to lock himself in a box with only water and crackers for twenty-six hours than remain in slavery.

McKim told the story of what happened next. He knocked on the lid and asked, “All right?” A voice said back, “All right, sir!” McKim, Still, and a few others got the box open and Brown stood up, put out his hand for a handshake and said, “How do you do, gentleman?”

McKim brought him home for breakfast and a bath before taking him to the home of another abolitionist friend, Lucretia Mott. Henry Brown, who people would start calling Box Brown, told them his own story. His job—the job he was forced to do without pay—was to twist dried tobacco leaves into knots, which would have made his hands sticky and covered in resin. A year earlier, he’d lost his wife and three children after their owner sold them. Even worse, the owner had said Brown could buy them, but then sold them to another man. With nothing to lose, Brown made his choice to escape.¹

The story of Mr. Box Brown was like an anti-slavery story, something Lucy might read in a book. A man hides in a box to escape an evil man. He gets turned upside down and right side up until finally he arrives, and is freed from his box to a land of promise.

Books taught Lucy about abolitionism. *The Abolitionist Alphabet* appeared three years earlier at the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society’s Christmas fair, which her mother helped organize. The first page read:

A is for Abolitionist—

A man who wants to free

The wretched slave—and give all

An equal liberty.²

Lucy knew she was an abolitionist, a woman who wants all enslaved to be free with equal liberty.

The Young Abolitionists, or Conversations on Slavery was a novel for young readers published just a year before Box Brown came to the Anti-Slavery Office in Philadelphia. In the book, Jenie, Phil, and Charlie's mother tells them about the realities of slavery. "Charlie says that in this country there are slave men and slave women; they don't make slaves of little children, do they, and burn *their* faces, and whip *them* till the blood runs?" Jenie asks her mother. "Yes, my daughter," her mother responds, "the slaveholders make slaves of just such little girls as you are."³ It was true, children as young as Lucy or the fictional Jenie could be enslaved, but Lucy also knew that she couldn't be a slave. In the alphabet, B was for "a Brother with a skin Of somewhat darker hue." Slaves were Black. Mr. Brown was Black. Lucy had brown hair, gray eyes, a nose she considered a "snub," and pale skin. She was white, and in this country, it was Black people, people whose ancestors came from the African continent who could be enslaved.

Only what happened to Brown wasn't a story, and Lucy and the children of abolitionists didn't need made up stories to teach them the realities of slavery. A man—or a woman, or a child—took these desperate measures to escape slavery and they might show up at her home, runaway from a life of abuse, shackles, and bondage. Abolitionists who were willing to risk their own safety, including Lucy's father, Mr. Still, and Mrs. Mott, took the escapees in. They also did more; their whole lives, from what they wore and ate to what they said and did, was supposed to be in service of the anti-slavery cause.

On the last page of the alphabet, Lucy would have read that this was her calling, too.

Y is for Youth—the time for all

Bravely to war with sin;

And think not it can ever be

Too early to begin.

Chapter 25 - Charlotte / Port Royal / Christmas Day 1862

“Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” Charlotte heard the chorus of voices around Oaklands ringing out as they knocked on her window. It would be a merry day. Soon, she’d be handing out red dresses to the babies, aprons and oranges to the children, and apple pies to the workers on the plantation, and picture-books and dresses and material for clothing to the boys and girls at the school. When she was that age, her whole family would gather at her grandmother Charlotte’s house in Philadelphia as she and all her cousins wished their grandmother a Merry Christmas. They’d wait eagerly for their Christmas presents and the big family dinner, and today, Charlotte could see the same anticipation on the faces of all her students, who’d she started calling her children. Since she was a teenager, it had amazed Charlotte to think that across the country and world, people gathered together on the same day to celebrate Jesus’s birth.⁷⁹

One week from today, her new friends here in South Carolina and her friends and family across the North would be gathering to celebrate freedom. Seeing the happiness of this Christmas and feeling the anticipation of the coming week, Charlotte’s heart swelled. Had her students ever dreamed of a Christmas like this? She didn’t think so. But she had. She had dreamed of a new generation where slavery vanished into liberty.⁸⁰ In less than a week, the Emancipation Proclamation would go into effect and the people who had once been enslaved on these Sea Islands—and were now called contraband of war—would be free.

This Christmas celebration couldn’t be contained inside a home, even the big plantation house at Oaklands, so Charlotte, Ellen Murray, and Laura Towne had gathered with the children

in the church.⁸¹ It was beautiful, so Christmas-like, Charlotte thought. They'd draped it with holly, pine, and mistletoe, just like the churches in Philadelphia might have been decorated. They'd also added Spanish moss and southern holly, plants Charlotte had never seen before coming to the Sea Islands.⁸²

The sun filtered through the moss on the oak trees and through the open windows of the church. The children beamed, smiles covered their faces. It was as if God knew that this was a special Christmas and signaled the coming of a wonderful new year. Which was brighter, the look on the children's faces, the sun outside, or Charlotte's own heart?

A few days earlier, her friend J.G. Whittier had sent her a Christmas Hymn written for her children. They'd learned it easily and were ready to sing it for the whole crowd gathered. They began to sing, "O, none in all the world before were ever so glad as we! We're free on Carolina's shore, we're all at home and free!"⁸³ Whittier had written the words, but when the children sang the lyrics, Charlotte felt as though the message was coming from within them.

That night, music continued to fill the air. Charlotte was exhausted by all the joy, but too many people felt too joyful to stop. She could hear the singing, clapping, and stomping from the shouts around the plantation.⁸⁴ Children came to the house to sing, and six-year old Amaretta told Charlotte all she wanted to do was sing and shout. Charlotte loved her voice and the dimples that appeared on her cheeks when she smiled.⁸⁵ Charlotte thought that now, Amaretta could shout and sing and do whatever else she wanted "to her heart's content."⁸⁶ For Amaretta, slavery would be a childhood memory, not a current reality.

Seven days later, Charlotte had to get up early, but she didn't mind. "The most glorious day this nation has yet seen," Charlotte thought. Today was Emancipation Day. Since Christmas, and Charlotte had worked and people had called on the house, but there hadn't been much excitement. Today it would be a carriage ride, a steamboat ride, and *the celebration*, and all the people, happiness, and singing in-between.

Charlotte, Ellen, and Laura had been invited by General Saxton and Colonel Higginson to the camp of the First Regiment of the South Carolina Volunteers to see the camp, but more importantly, to be there when they read the Emancipation Proclamation.

After what Charlotte thought was an impossibly slow carriage ride, they arrived at the *Flora*, a steamboat that would carry them across the Port Royal River to Camp Saxton.⁸⁷ The flags snapped in the wind and a plume rose from the smoke stack as the boat started to move. Charlotte could feel the excitement onboard. The people who would be officially freed from enslavement today had dressed for the occasion. Charlotte loved the colorful head-kerchiefs the women wore, a style that had stayed with the people of South Carolina since their ancestors had been taken from ports across Africa. Their aprons were also crisp and white, a symbol that now work would be on their own terms, not someone else's. The steamboat's engine competed for sound with the band playing aboard, and people had to talk even louder to be heard over both. The sun shone in the blue sky and shimmered in reflections of the water. If this was not evidence that God smiled on this day, what was?

Charlotte talked with Dr. Peck and his family and General Saxton's father, and as they cruised down the river, the ruins of the old British fort and large oaks came into view.⁸⁸ Then, she saw the soldiers. Their dark blue coats and red pants contrasted against the earthy tones of the

sand, grass, oak trunks, leaves, and moss. Black Union Soldiers. The only Black regiment in the whole Union Army.

The *Flora* couldn't make it all the way to shore, so Charlotte got in one of the rowboats.

"Charlotte Forten," a familiar voice rang out as soon as she stepped onto the landing and someone grasped her hand. Could it be? There, standing on the sandy shore, was Dr. Rogers. Charlotte wasn't just delighted to see a friendly face from the North, but to see someone she considered a friend. Seth Rogers was also a close friend of Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and had joined the First South Carolina Volunteers as a doctor.⁸⁹ Earlier that year, Charlotte had gone to Worcester see if a water cure could help her health, which was where she met Dr. Rogers. He had helped her "spiritually as well as physically," she'd written in her journal so many months ago now.⁹⁰ Who knew she would find him here? Delight filled her, the presence of this noble and kind man only made the day better, something that seemed impossible. He could show her around camp.

Rogers introduced her to Colonel Higginson, a man she'd heard about for years but never met. She felt overwhelmed by his presence—he had tried to save Anthony Burns from the Boston court house eight years ago and had given money and support to John Brown. No matter how well Charlotte could write when she had a pen in her hand and a piece of paper in front of her, words sometimes failed. She mumbled something and smiled in response to whatever Higginson said, immediately felt stupid that she didn't have something interesting to say, and went on with her tour of the camp with Rogers.

After they saw Rogers's make-shift hospital, the kitchens, and the rest of the camp, Charlotte took her seat on the platform the men had built under a large live oak tree. She looked

out onto the crowd of Black soldiers, officers in “their handsome uniforms,” and smiling Black men, women, and children. Never had she seen something so beautiful, she thought.

The Chaplain of the Regiment Reverend James Fowler began with a prayer. Then, Professor John Zachos read an ode before Colonel Higginson introduced Dr. William Henry Brisbane, who’s graceful and elegant voice read the proclamation that as of today, “all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be... forever free.”⁹¹ He read on, the whole Emancipation Proclamation, and at the end, the crowd erupted in cheers. Other men gave other speeches and at the end, some of the Black men spontaneously began singing, “My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty...” Higginson received flags, and more men gave more speeches and the people cheered. They sang more hymns and “John Brown’s Body.”

After the speeches, Charlotte joined Rogers at Higginson’s table for dinner. The meal would have been perfect if someone hadn’t asked her to read Whittier’s [“Hymn”] for everyone. Charlotte wanted to pass the task on to Rogers, but she knew he would not accept and that he’d insist she do it. Wasn’t she a poet who came from a family of speakers? She was, but that didn’t mean she enjoyed reading in front of people, even friends. “I believe the older I grow, the more averse I get to do anything in public,” she thought. She read it anyway, and tried not to let it ruin her day.

The soft moonlight poured over the ruins of old fort as Charlotte waited with Rogers for the next rowboat home, but she didn’t want to go. She wanted to stay with Rogers and

Higginson, and she wanted to see the shout and “grand jubilee” the soldiers had planned. But she had to go.

As the boatmen rowed from Beaufort to St. Helena Island and sang the hymns that had entranced Lucy McKim and other northerners, Charlotte had another chorus singing in her soul: “Forever free! Forever free!” For as long as she could remember, those words, the words in President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation were what she had hoped for. Her heart again swelled with happiness. Victory had not come; the war was not over and not all people were free, but this day was a victory had had felt like one. Later, she’d think that the who day “seemed, and seems still, like a brilliant dream.”⁹² She knew that the government had much more to do, but, she thought, today, January 1, 1863 is the day freedom was born in our land.⁹³