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CHAPTER 1

Lewis Douglass

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
1854

Out the window of their home on a hill, thirteen-year-old Lewis Douglass could see who was coming. The rain would fall on the wagon pulling up the private drive a few miles outside the center of Rochester, New York.¹ The moonlight would glow on the strange lady coming through his mother's garden. The snow would cover the footsteps of the family walking to the door.

When the visitors reached the house, they didn't need to say who they were or why they were there. Lewis and his family knew. His father might open the door. His father was, people said, handsome, with light brown skin and his wavy hair parted to one side, although his brow seemed to naturally furrow, making him look more serious than he always was. His father was the famous anti-slavery activist Frederick Douglass, and white people seemed to appreciate his speeches more because he was handsome, lighter-skinned, and serious. The Black people who turned up at their house appreciated a friendly face that looked like them.

They were welcomed by Lewis's mother, Anna, whose eyes were larger

and more welcoming than his father's, although she could be stern, too. Lewis looked more like his mother, with big eyes, a long face, and darker skin.

The visitors would smell the food Lewis's mother had been cooking. She would want to make sure the guests had something to eat.² They might not have eaten in days.

Lewis and his brothers, Charles and Fred, made a fire and a bed and conveyed the people to a room when they were ready. To smell the newly cooked meal, to feel the warmth of the fire, to relax in a bed and think that they were safe tonight, and would soon be safe forever, were such welcome experiences. The Douglass home was less than fifteen miles away from Lake Ontario, from boats that could take them to freedom in Canada.

When the visitors were ready, they might share how they had come to be here. A woman from Kentucky might tell Lewis how, in Ohio, she had picked up her disguise of a Quaker with a black dress and large bonnet.³ A father from farther south might inform Lewis and his family that his own wife had been sold, and he'd escaped with their three-week-old daughter so she wouldn't be taken from him, too.⁴ A man might tell Lewis he had slipped onto a ship in Virginia, hidden in a space that wasn't larger than a coffin, and disembarked in Boston before crossing Massachusetts and New York in a carriage.⁵ Lewis's own father had escaped enslavement in Maryland by sneaking out of Baltimore on a ship.

These people had traveled through a land of shadows, and of dreams, and Lewis's home shone a light for such travelers, held ground for such travelers.⁶ Although Lewis had been born free, he knew of the held breaths, the fear of watchmen at the gates and slave patrollers in the forest. Behind their visitors was slavery, "already crimsoned with the blood of millions," as Lewis's father wrote, and in front of them, "the flickering lights of the North Star" and freedom.⁷

As Lewis and his family took in the visitors' stories, they knew to still hold their breaths. Lewis's family may have made their home comfortable, but in New York, someone could still arrest a runaway. The new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 said a man could come to Lewis's house and arrest these people and take them back to the South. Four years ago, just after the law had passed, a "party

of manhunters" came to Rochester looking for Lewis's father. His father didn't know whether the documents saying he was a free man mattered, whether these men cared that he was free. His father hid in the house and told his friends to keep an eye out for suspicious-looking white men.⁸ They had moved to this country house to be farther from the city, to create a place of safety. But could one be sure the hunters would not come another night? A night when fugitives might be hiding inside?

When the people were safely hidden in the house, Lewis and his brothers passed notes to family friends about the activities of the Underground Railroad and asked for donations so they could purchase a ticket for a boat trip across Lake Ontario.⁹

Lewis might shuffle them into a carriage or hide them under a blanket in the wagon and then follow the Genesee River north to where it emptied into the lake at the Charlotte lighthouse. The people would board a steamboat or schooner that Lewis trusted.

They vanished across the lake like the morning fog, never to return to Rochester, and one supposed they'd finally be able to take a breath. They would no longer be *runaway slaves* or *fugitives*, but free people.

Four years had passed since the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect, and Lewis had seen hundreds of people come through Rochester on their way to freedom. His mother made sure their home was always open, even if that invited danger in. For every person that they opened the door to, Lewis's mother and father could face six months in jail or a thousand-dollar fine.¹⁰ Lewis would not exist if his father had not escaped, and their family would not be here if not for those who had helped his father. So what was six months in jail or a fine if they could give one person freedom, one family a chance?

CHAPTER 2

George Garrison

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
MAY 1854

Just like he did most mornings, eighteen-year-old George Garrison left his family's home on Dix Place and walked to his job at G.P. Reed's music store in central Boston.¹ Along the winding streets in the city center, horses pulled carriages past shops that were opening, banks got ready for the day, and newspaper offices eagerly awaited messages on the telegraph wire. A few blocks from the music store was the office of the *Liberator*, the abolitionist newspaper George's father William Lloyd Garrison had founded and edited. This Wednesday, May 24, 1854, everyone was especially eager for information. On Monday, the US House of Representatives had passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act—"Another Triumph of the Slave Power," as his father's headline read—and soon it would be signed into law by President Franklin Pierce.²

At the store, George was supposed to be learning bookkeeping, but when he arrived at six o'clock in the morning, he would sweep and tidy before they opened. During the day, he would go pick up sheet music from publishers around the corner or tickets from the New Theater, Music Hall, or Melodeon that they could sell at the shop.³ Sometimes, he'd stay as late as eight o'clock in the evening to lock up.

George was a good worker, but he was much more interested in politics and political happenings than the music business. When he went on his errands, he could hear the murmuring of reactions to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The two new states were supposed to be free from slavery, but this bill said that people in the territories could vote on whether they wanted slavery—what was called *popular sovereignty*. To pass the bill in the United States Congress, the Southern pro-slavery states needed support from some Northern politicians.⁴ From the music store, George would hear the one-hundred-thirteen-gun salute fired to celebrate the one hundred thirteen House votes for the bill. Those people firing the guns, they were in essence celebrating slavery. Since the bill had already passed the Senate, when President Pierce signed the bill into law, he would complete the orderly constitutional process that would allow slavery to spread westward into new states.⁵

Even though they were a political family, George's father did not believe in voting, "as a matter of moral consistency." If his father voted, it meant he believed in the Constitution, which did not outlaw slavery. For him and those with similar beliefs, voting—even for anti-slavery candidates—meant supporting slavery until the Constitution was amended.⁶ Abolitionists like George's father who did not believe in voting or violence were called nonresistants or nonresistors.⁷

George felt stubborn and independent, something he got from his father, and although he and his father looked more alike than ever—with their pale skin, long faces and long noses, and deep-set, serious eyes—they did not think alike.⁸ George wanted to learn by doing, not by reading books. He was not going to be an editor, a writer, or an anti-slavery speaker. Those jobs did not appeal to him. George was supposed to be a nonresistor, but he was not sure it was the best way to achieve their abolitionist aims.⁹ People made laws like the Fugitive Slave Act and Kansas-Nebraska Act by voting. Even if the Constitution did not allow everyone an equal vote, nonresistors were turning their backs on a key part of the democratic process. "No union with slaveholders," his father said. States without slavery should not be made to be part of a country with slaveholders.

As George went about his work on Thursday, May 25, the

Kansas-Nebraska Act should still have been what everyone was talking about, but the evening before, as Democrats had celebrated their legislative victory, a man Black named Anthony Burns left his job at a clothing store around the corner from the music store. A police officer named Asa Butman arrested Burns because Butman suspected Burns was a runaway. The abolitionists did not consider Butman a regular police officer, though; he was a constable who was known to pursue bounties on runaway slaves.¹⁰ The *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* reported that Butman arrested Burns under the orders of a United States Marshal by a warrant issued by United States commissioner Edward G. Loring. If George's father ever needed evidence that the government supported enslavers, this was it.

The news of a man hunted down and arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law quickly spread to the Black community and white abolitionists.¹¹ George often went to the *Liberator's* offices at the New England Anti-Slavery Society, which it turned out was where all the excitement seemed to be stemming from now.¹²

The Boston Vigilance Committee, another anti-slavery organization, met to figure out a plan to free Burns. Three years earlier, Butman and another police officer had arrested a Black man named Thomas Sims under the same law, and the commissioner of the US Circuit Court in Boston sent him to Georgia to be enslaved.¹³ Unitarian minister and abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson was on the Vigilance Committee and blamed his fellow committee members for not doing enough to free Sims. Unlike George's father, Higginson thought the use of violence acceptable if he used it to free an enslaved person.¹⁴

Now, with Anthony Burns's case, the Vigilance Committee needed to let people know what was happening. Theodore Parker, another Unitarian minister who George loved hearing preach about anti-slavery on Sunday mornings, wanted the message from the Vigilance Committee to be clear.

On Friday morning, posters and fliers proclaimed the message across the city. Parker had made it plain and fiery. That night, thousands of people gathered at Faneuil Hall to hear speeches and discuss what to do.¹⁵

CHAPTER 3

Charlotte Forten

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS
MAY 1854

The news made Charlotte angry and sad all at once. The story of Anthony Burns's arrest in Boston on May 24 had traveled quickly to Salem, Massachusetts, where sixteen-year-old Charlotte lived. She had a new journal, and although she wasn't planning to write anything on the evening after Burns's arrest, this was too important not to make note of. For any "true friend of liberty and humanity," anyone who had the slightest inclination toward the abolitionist cause, his arrest had to arouse "feelings of the deepest indignation and sorrow," she wrote.¹

Burns wanted to be free—he wanted to walk the ground and breathe the air of the "Old Bay State," Charlotte's adopted home. She had never been in chains like Burns or like the more than three million people enslaved in the Southern and western states,² but she believed that every human being deserved freedom. Massachusetts was supposed to be a place of freedom for people who looked like Charlotte and Anthony Burns.

Slavery had effectively ended in Massachusetts in the 1780s,³ and with William Lloyd Garrison and his American Anti-Slavery Society in Boston, the whole state should have been firmly in the anti-slavery camp. The city was

supposed to be much less prejudiced than a place like Philadelphia, where Charlotte had grown up.

In Philadelphia, the government didn't allow Black and white students in the same schools. It didn't matter if Charlotte's grandfather James had made a small fortune in his business making sails for boats and that generations of her family had been born free. Men had taken Charlotte's great-great-grandfather from his family and life in Africa, placed him on a ship, and sold him into slavery in Pennsylvania more than one hundred fifty years before Charlotte was born, and that was why she would have to go to a segregated school.⁴ Charlotte's father did not think those schools were good enough for her, so she'd only ever had private tutors.⁵ She received an education, but it wasn't the same as being in a classroom, learning from other students, and feeling as though she had a right to be there, regardless of where her family came from.

Charlotte's family friend Charles Lenox Remond had offered Charlotte a place to live in Salem so she could attend public school. Charlotte loved it, even though she knew her ancestry still mattered to some of the other students. In truth, the fact that Charlotte had light brown skin still mattered to many people, especially those who were willing to aid in the arrest and imprisonment of a Black person simply because someone thought they looked like a fugitive slave.

Burns's arrest hardly made sense to Charlotte. He "was arrested like a criminal in the streets," she thought, even though he should have been free. Taking back his freedom—"freedom which, he, in common with every other human being, is endowed"—shouldn't have been a crime.⁶ It was *Burns's* body, *Burns's* life, *Burns's* freedom. No other man should be able to take that from him. And no other state should tell Massachusetts how to enforce its laws. Would the people of Boston uphold the state constitution that had effectively banned slavery almost seventy-five years earlier in Massachusetts? Or would they capitulate to the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and Southern Slave Power, disgracing themselves by sending Anthony Burns back to slavery?

"I can only hope and pray most earnestly that Boston will not again disgrace herself by sending him back to a bondage worse than death," Charlotte thought.⁷

That everyone wasn't an abolitionist sometimes frustrated

Charlotte, even made her angry. Everything in Charlotte's life had been tied to the anti-slavery cause. Charlotte sometimes thought of the Bible verse: "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them."⁸ For her, this meant to "Remember the poor slave as [though you are] bound [enslaved] with him."⁹ She knew she wasn't a slave, and that her experience of the world differed from that of Anthony Burns or her ancestors who had been enslaved.

Charlotte thought of Anthony Burns and hoped the city would redeem itself and release him.

