

Chapter 1

THUNDER WATER

June 1857

HERE'S WHAT I REMEMBER of that night.

Up 'til then, we had a plan. Up 'til then, we were headed straight to freedom.

We were riding close to the border crossing between New York and Canada West. The three of us were tucked in the back of the wagon, buried beneath a shipment of woolly horse blankets. So damp and cool, our clothes felt wet. Nearby was a roar of water rushing, louder and louder, like guns exploding. Nobody seemed to hear it but me. I was the only one awake in the back.

“Stay way down under, should we stop,” one of the drivers had warned us.

Four silver dollars Grandpa Jacob paid them to drive us across the last leg north to a place called Buffalo. No telling how many eyes watching in such a border town, they warned us. Couldn't walk in plain sight there. Slavecatchers. Customs agents. Smugglers. White folks who'd turn you in because the colour of your skin up north brought good reward money. So we spent the last of our savings and took the ride.

Beside me, Levi slept deep, hot as a coal oven. Other slaves warned us about taking the underground road with Levi. Said he came from trouble and was headed that way again. I knew there'd been something between him and Master Tiller, but Grandpa swore Levi was the only man he knew crazy enough to guide us to freedom.

Crossing to Freedom

“Who’d want to bring a string bean like me — an old man of fifty — and a pea pod of an eleven-year-old boy with him across the country?” Grandpa laughed. “Nobody!”

The first I heard of these plans was the March night Grandpa woke me to run.

“Solomon, we got to leave the plantation right now. Think my legs gonna hold up if we wait one more year? Can’t wait for freedom to come to us. Gotta go where it is. You are strong enough to run on the underground.”

Seemed to me I was scrawny, bone with flesh stretched over it. Tupelo honey brown. My ears flapping too big for my face. Not like Levi. You never saw a bigger man. Built like a tree, Master Tiller bragged. My two hands couldn’t fit around his upper arm. Levi threw his head back and laughed whenever I tried to do it. Seemed he lived high up in the treetops. And now he was right here beside me, sleeping.

Grandpa and Levi drifted in and out. They’d been awake for days, always on guard. But I had slept through the two long days since we jumped on the wagon. All those miles were behind us now, about eight hundred from our Georgia plantation, Levi figured. So few miles left to go. When the wagon stopped for supplies earlier that day, and the drivers hopped off, nobody stirred. But my eyes flew open. I waited and waited for those drivers. Seemed they took too long. They didn’t throw any food in the back either, like they promised, when they returned. The wagon drove on into darkness. One turn in the road. Then another.

That’s when the noise began, a forever whirl that pounded louder and louder like we were headed straight into danger. I sat up to listen. One of the drivers’ voices drifted. “. . . hundred . . . gonna be rich . . .”

Thunder Water

There was some arguing back and forth between them. The wind of rushing waters whipped away most of what they said.

But I kept on listening. That's when I heard them say the name, then, “. . . tie that Levi down . . . Get the pistol read— ”

I sat up lightning-rod straight. In the next second I shook Grandpa awake. He came to slow. Soon as I touched Levi, he jerked, his eyes burning.

“You seen a ghost, boy?” Levi asked.

The words got stuck somewhere between my stomach and my throat. That's how it'd always been. There were things in my heart I never learned to speak aloud. Even thinking the truth or meeting the overseer's eye could earn me a whipburn. So I made myself numb, no thoughts at all. Looking like I didn't know anything. Then I was safe.

Grandpa turned my head toward his, trying to read my eyes. His long fingers held me still. “What's gone wrong, Solomon?”

I could never fool Grandpa. He knew me through and through without my ever saying much. Both men leaned in close so I could whisper what I overheard.

Levi's breath seemed to pass out of his body, leaving his chest flat. “Master put out the word about me far and wide. Never gonna forget what I did.”

He crawled out of the blankets toward the back of the wagon.

“Don't go without us!” Grandpa's voice rose up.

“You crazy, old man? If these men know about me so quick, then others know about me too. Must be posters everywhere givin' some reason for turning me in. If you are found with me, they're gonna drag you back too. You're not strong enough to take the beatin' we'll get. Go on alone. Be safer for you.”

Levi opened the back flaps. Came a sound like a roar. It built

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up, minute by minute, whisking our words away. Sounded like wind rushing wild.

“Must be near the Falls. Such a dangerous place!” he said. “Can’t cross there. We come the wrong way. They led us too far above Buffalo.”

“Then we’re sure not headed for the ferry crossin’ like we asked,” Grandpa said. “We are all in trouble. You can’t bail out without us, Levi. We three come this far. We’ll go on together.”

Grandpa crawled right up there beside him. Levi’s eyes lit like embers and around his mouth, such twitching. Grandpa Jacob breathed deep and slow and set his hand on Levi’s arm. Minutes passed. All the while, my ears were like open doors listening for the drivers’ voices over the thump of the wheels.

“For the boy.” Grandpa looked straight at him.

Levi sighed, opened the flap wide and turned to me. “Be light as a feather now.”

I hit the ground like a rabbit kicking its hind legs. Levi leaped down like a cougar running soundless from the first step. But Grandpa fell to the ground and rolled. It took some minutes for him to right himself.

We lit out for the woods at the side of the road. Such a scattering of feet and pumping of heartbeats. I prayed nobody heard either one. The thunder of the waters was so loud, you could have yelled and it’d sound like a whisper. Down the slope, we slid closer and closer to those roaring waters below. If the drivers ran after us, there was nowhere to go but straight into them. And neither Grandpa or I could swim.