

A scenic landscape featuring a dirt road that curves through a field of purple flowers. A large, leafy tree stands on the left, with the sun shining through its branches, creating a bright starburst effect. In the distance, a small, dark vehicle is visible on the road. The overall atmosphere is warm and golden, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

# A PATH TO FREEDOM

A TALE OF ESCAPE IN  
1857

ENDURANCE

SURVIVAL

COURAGE

ADVENTURE

PERILOUS

EMPOWERING

A nail-biting historical fiction short story set in 1857, of a young slave boy and his mother seeking freedom after he learns he's going to be sold away. Follow him and his mother through their perilous journey as they lose all they have to follow the path of freedom. But will they find it?

# CHAPTER 1

## BREAKING CHAINS

The spring rain pattered on the tin roof as the sound of the banging metal awoke William. It was five in the morning, the time the overseers roused the exhausted slaves. He stumbled out of bed and pulled on his clothes. His mother was already out of bed and dressed. He only had two minutes to get out the door and head to work. William's mom was a maid; it was the best job a slave could have, and William was grateful for it. Because he was only eleven years old he worked in his master's house like his mom.

As William trudged toward the house in the still-dark sky, he thought about his years ahead of him. When he turned twelve, he would have to work in the fields. William was dreading that time. A lot had been happening in this year. William's dad had been sold away to another plantation, and his older sister died of typhus a few months ago. He was scared, though. Yesterday, a slave trader visited their master, and William had a hunch it was about him. He didn't let

his mother know; he did not want her to have another thing to worry about.

As William neared the mansion, he could see his master glaring at him. “William,” his master shouted harshly from his front porch, “you are to meet me here at four am tomorrow, sharp.” William’s heart pounded in his ears as he tried to figure out why he had to meet his master so early in the morning. Was his worst fear coming true? As William walked away, he overheard his master mutter to his wife next to him, “Only got four hundred, not much for a healthy one like him.” It was true, his nightmare was becoming reality. The whole day William worked, he could not stop thinking about being sold away to a faraway plantation without his mom, to a place where he knew no one.

A wolf’s howl broke his worrisome thoughts. William knew all too well that they were living near a forest teeming with danger, but on the other hand, a possible path to freedom. He also knew that if he was going to be sold deeper south it would be harder to escape.

When the clock struck ten at night, he raced out to meet his mother on their walk back to the slave

quarters. “Momma!” he cried racing to her. “I’m bein’ sold away tomorrow morning.” William’s mother embraced him as she tried to hold back tears. “I was thinkin’...” William whispered, scanning the area for any possible eavesdroppers. “William, run home and pack a small bag with some bread, dried meat, and a blanket and meet me at the edge of the forest,” his mom ordered, seeming to read the sentence he hadn’t yet finished. He raced home, hastily shoved some food in a blanket, tied it to a stick and ran to meet his mother. “We are a ten day trek from Pennsylvania, we’ll hurry,” his mother whispered.

Hours crawled past as they trudged deeper into the forest. Snakes slithered under their feet and thorny bushes nipped at their legs. As the sun rose upon the horizon, his mother stopped him from going any further. “We will rest until nightfall. There is a greater risk traveling without the cover of darkness,” his mother said. “But...” William started to argue, but he realized it wouldn’t be of any use. His mother was set on it.

They sat huddled under the cotton blanket William used as a crude sack to carry their food, but it was

useless now; the food was gone long ago. Hours seemed like days until the moon rose high in the night sky.

William and his mom dragged their cut and bruised feet for miles until they reached a small house with a lantern swinging on a post outside. “I have learned that these lantern signals are part of the Underground Railroad,” his mother whispered. “That means this is a safe house to ask for lodging for the night.” William nodded and proceeded with his mother to the front porch of the home. His mom knocked on the large front door only to be answered by the unusually silent forest. Then came the distinct sound of galloping hoofs. His mother banged hastily again until a strong Quaker woman pulled them inside.

The hoof beats seemed to stop at the house as the sound of shouting men followed. “Quickly, follow me,” the woman ushered. William and his mom followed this mysterious woman to a cellar with a trapdoor. The woman opened it and motioned for them to climb in. When they were inside, the woman closed the cover and slid a rug on top of it. A hard knock echoed through the house. William held his breath as the

sound of footsteps came nearer to the cellar. “I told you there’s nothin’ I’m hiding,” the woman said gruffly to the strangers. All four of the men murmured as the footsteps became quieter. As quickly as they came, they left.

The woman came to retrieve William and his mother a short time later. “Come,” she said, “I’ve food waitin’ for ya’ll.” They greedily ate the hot beans and rice that seemed to be leftovers from last night’s dinner. It had been their first proper meal in days.

After they were done eating, the woman came and took them to a small room. It housed three worn metal beds and a beat-up dresser. To William, this was paradise. He had never slept on a mattress before; back in the slave quarters he only had a straw mat and a woolen blanket for comfort. A short time later William was fast asleep.

## CHAPTER 2

# INTO THE UNKNOWN

Morning came too quickly for William. As usual, his mother was already awake and getting dressed. William pulled himself out of bed and slipped on his new cotton top and cloth shoes the woman had gifted him. A quiet knock came a few minutes later as the woman peeked into their room. “Ready?” the woman muttered. His mom nodded. They followed her to the back door where she handed them a small compass and a sack of food. “You’ll go north from here for five miles as a crow flies until y’all come to a lone barn with a lantern outside just like mine. God be with you, and watch for those sons of varmints.”

William and his mom nodded and started on their way. It was mid morning when they reached the barn, but before they even knocked on the barn door, a large burly man stepped out to meet them. “My friend Lidia sent word to me that you would be stoppin’ by. Come with me,” he said. William and his mom followed the man to a rustic wooden wagon, weathered by time and



packed with hay. The man pushed the straw aside and revealed a secret compartment. It was just big enough to fit both of them. “My name is Bert. I’ll be transporting you all the way to Pennsylvania from here, and there’ll be numerous check points along the way set up by those pattyrollers, so I don’t want you to make a single sound until I come for you. You understand?” They both nodded and Bert closed the compartment. William and his mom felt a sudden jolt and then they were on their way.

A short time later, his mother quietly shook him out of his slumber. “William, wake up, we’re at a check point,” she breathed. William opened his eyes and listened. The sound of shuffling feet came closer and then stopped. William strained to hear the interrogative questions spewed by the patrollers at Bert, but all the hay muffled the conversation. After a few tense moments, the patrollers rammed their sharp pitchforks into the straw, checking for any runaway slaves. But William and his mom were safely hidden beneath the false floor. A few more words passed between Bert and the slave catchers and then they

were off again. William exhaled slowly, not realizing he had been holding his breath the whole time.

A few more hours passed before the wagon stopped. William and his mom squinted as blinding light poured into the compartment. “You’ve got ten minutes to stretch your legs and go to the bathroom before we’re on the road again,” said Bert as he opened the cover. “Stay close to me because there could be...you know.” William and his mom stumbled out of the wagon and headed for the nearby river. The cool water soothed William’s parched mouth as he bent down to drink.

William thought of the trip ahead of him. When they reached Pennsylvania he could maybe help his mom with her work or be an apprentice of some sort. William could almost taste the freedom that lay ahead of him and his mother.

Suddenly, the sound of crunching leaves scattered his thoughts. “Come back, NOW!” Bert fiercely whispered from somewhere behind them. William leaped to his feet and started running to the wagon. His mom, where was she? William glanced behind

him in time to see her trip on a rock and fall. William raced back and tried helping her to her feet, but she cried out in anguish and collapsed onto the forest floor. “Go,” his mother said, wincing. “Leave me, and go.” But William refused to part from her. “Stop where you are!” a voice spat from the forest. “I can’t go on baby. My leg, it’s broken. Please for my sake, go,” his mom pleaded. It crushed William’s heart to leave his mother, but he knew he could not save her. As he hastily stumbled back to the wagon, his hopes and dreams seemed to shatter into a thousand pieces with every step. As the wagon pulled away, a single gunshot echoed through the forest.

## CHAPTER 3

### MOVING ON

The cart sped through the forest as William huddled motionless under the false floor. After a few minutes, Bert said it was safe to come up. William slid the latch open and propped himself up on the sagging wagon bench. He thought of just curling up into a ball and giving up. Without his mom he had no motivation, love, or support. Where was he going to live once he reached freedom? Was he going to stay in one of those lice-infested orphanages until he was old enough to provide for himself? He already missed the warm kisses his mother would give him, and the song she would sing every night, just for William, even though she was exhausted from a hard day's work. But he couldn't give up, no, he couldn't; he had to make his mother proud.

A short time later, the wagon lurched to a stop in front of an old colonial house. Bert helped William out of the wagon and led him to a weather-beaten barn behind the home. Bert opened the doors with a creak

and led William to stacks of hay in the corner. Bert bent down and lifted a bale of hay from the pile. A large room was hidden behind the hay stacks! For a fleeting moment, William felt like a child playing hide and seek. Thinking of that drove a dagger into his heart. He and his mom used to hide from each other in the fields after work when William was younger. Whenever his mother would find him, William would laugh so hard he couldn't breathe.

“You alright?” Bert asked. His question was answered by silence. “I know, I understand,” Bert awkwardly replied after a few moments. Anger rose up inside of William. “Bert doesn't understand, he never lost his mother, did he?” William thought. “He doesn't feel the sadness that almost makes me wretch.” “You don't understand!” William scolded. “You didn't lose your mother! You have know idea what it feels like.” “Actually, I do,” Bert corrected soothingly, cooling the fire. “You do?” William sniffled as tears freely flowed down his face. “My mother died leading a slave to freedom when I was about your age,” Bert said with a solemn expression. “She was guiding him from a

plantation to this safe house. A few pattyrollers spotted them. My brave mother and the slave tried to run for it, but one of 'em pulled out his gun and fired. That shot was meant for the slave, but it missed and..." Now, tears were flowing down both of their faces. Guilt panged in William's heart. Bert was probably aching inside just as much as him.

After a few silent moments of remembrance, Bert announced, "I...was going to ask you this later, but I'll tell you now. Would you like to live with us in Philadelphia?" A wave of relief shot through William's body. Live with them? Absolutely! "Thank you, Sir, thank you!" William gushed, choking back tears of joy. "Get to bed, Son," Bert beamed as he motioned toward the secret room, "then tomorrow you'll be a free man."

## CHAPTER 4

### LIFE ANEW

William heard the old barn door creek open and Bert's footsteps crunching on the straw, stopping at the hidden room entrance. He lifted the hay and slid William's breakfast in, which included some bread and a small but hearty soup. After William finished eating, Bert motioned for him to follow, and they both climbed into the wagon.

After an uneventful hour, the cart stopped. "Take one more step and you're free," Bert proclaimed, his eyes glistening in the morning sun. William stumbled out of the wagon and turned his gaze to the vast field in front of him. The land looked different; it seemed to shine, caress the sun, as if it was made out of diamonds.

William spotted some of his mom's favorite flowers dancing in the breeze in front of him. He picked a few of the Virginia Bluebells and then carefully placed them next to the wooden cross he made, standing between Pennsylvania and Virginia. He then stood up,

lifting his eyes to heaven, the sunrise reflecting on the tears running down his face. He then whispered, “You’d be proud of me mamma, we’re home now.”

THE END