

## The Path to Freedom

### Chapter 1

*Splash! Splash! Splash!*

The ominous splashes almost made my heart stop beating. I thought the new patrols were arriving next week . . . did they feel the need to arrive already?

My heart pounded so hard; it was almost the loudest sound I could hear. To make sure this was not a false alarm, I got on my hands and knees and crawled toward the bushes. Ignoring a shiver that went down my spine, I peered at the shore (which was not far away) and my eyes widened with horror. The new, burly patrol guards were *here*, slowly getting off their rowboats with long, thin rifles.

“Zis is one *massive* forest, sir,” I heard one of the tallest soldiers say with a thick accent, looking sideways at his leader, who stood in the middle. The others nodded their agreement.

“I know,” their leader snapped impatiently with the same accent, glaring at the soldier. “But ve vill find zem. Ve vill find *all* of zem, take zem, and return zem to their masters. Search the entire forest!”

The leader’s soldiers nodded, changing the positions of their rifles so the muzzle was facing forward—not down—and slowly crept hungrily into the forest, where I, Serena Maeve Freeman, a 12-year-old black slave who narrowly managed to escape, was hiding.

I did not stop to think, even for a brief moment. I got up, almost tripped over a rock, and ran forward, as fast as my tired legs could carry me. After at least several minutes of running, I stopped, panting, listening to any sound that could be a threat . . .

*Silence.*

I sighed with relief and sank to the ground, flinching at the coldness of the dirt. Of course, I should not be surprised, considering the fact that it was early winter of the year 1850. It has been three days since I escaped from my master, and already there were minor troubles arising . . .

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When I was born to my family, my parents were already working for my former master, Matteo, on his farm. Soon after I was three, my sister, Amayah was born, and my mama worked in the kitchen while my pa chopped wood endlessly, and Amayah and I would work in the field, gathering crops—the easiest work of all for two young girls, thankfully. However, after Amayah turned seven (me being ten), it was as if my life turned upside down. My beloved Mama and Pa were sold to a different master, and my little sister to another. I was the only one left working for Matteo and his family out of *my* family, until, just two years later, an elderly woman started working in the fields with me and told

me there were escape routes to freedom that her brother once used, called the Underground Railroad. She explained to me that the closest one from Matteo's farm was located in the forest of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, about a couple of days' walk from where I worked. To find the path to my freedom, all I had to do was find the forest and continue travelling north—but it would not be that easy. There would be consequences, just as the woman kindly reminded me.

The next day, I was determined more than ever to escape. I asked permission for a short break and went into the kitchen with my little water bowl, pretending to get a drink. I went through the drawers, slipping a kitchen knife into my sleeve, *just* in case, and slowly crept away.

When I went back outside, I waited for the perfect time to escape. As soon as Matteo's wife—who was at the moment yelling at one of the other slaves—turned away, I knew it was now or *never*. I rolled down the hill of their farm as fast as I could, not stopping until I saw tall blades of grass that were tall enough to both shade and hide me.

After travelling and stopping only for little bits of sleep, I found myself standing in front of a forest with huge trees—and here I was, travelling barefoot with an article of ragged clothing that did not even look like a dress anymore, cold and tired from starvation.

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The next morning I woke up shivering and realized it was snowing, one of the first snowfalls of the year. Looking around, I suddenly panicked. How long will it take until the soldiers gain up on me? I started walking north—at least, I *thought* I was—then stopped. I was in the middle of *nowhere*. I did not have a compass or anything to lead me. So how was I supposed to get back on track? Where were the soldiers?

I shivered vigorously again, feeling a chill run down my spine. Sweat trickled down my forehead and I started breathing heavily, feeling as if the soldiers were right there, hidden somewhere in the bushes, looking for me. Or even looking *at* me, right at that moment. However, being cautious around any signs of soldiers wasn't the least of my worries. I was so cold and hungry; I needed food and water immediately. The only thing I could think of was to eat the snow that was sprinkled thickly on the ground for water and the edible bark of pine trees for food.

"Oh, God," I whispered a silent prayer, "please don't let me get caught. Help me find the Underground Railroad in time . . . but thank you. Thank you for looking after me. It is Your miracle that I am still alive."

I gathered a small pile of fresh snow on my hands and gathered it into my mouth. It made me colder, but I ignored the coldness and ate several more handfuls until I was satisfied, and with my kitchen knife, I sharpened it the best I could on a rock, wincing as it made these loud *screech*, *scrit* noises. Then, turning to the nearest pine tree, I meticulously cut up a small piece of the tree bark and turned the bark over so that the

white-yellow skin of the inside was facing downwards on the snow, and cut off the outside of the brown bark, and slowly chewed the soft white-yellow skin.

The skin was softer than I expected it to be, although it was rather hard to swallow. The meal was very small, but it did not matter because I had a small appetite anyway.

And then, that's when I heard the soldiers. *Right* behind me.

## Chapter 2

"Someone is 'ere," said one of the soldiers and I knew it was the Commander right away from his gruff voice. "I can *smell* it."

"Are you sure, Commander Kendrick?" said another voice, hinting uncertainty in his voice. "Zis is so deep in ze forest. An escapee? 'Ere?"

"Are you calling me a fool?" Commander Kendrick replied sharply, jabbing the muzzle of his rifle at the soldier, making him stagger backwards. "Zat is *precisely* vhy ve are 'ere. An escapee vould most likely be hiding in ze depths of ze forest, where it ees easier to hide. *Obviously*," he added.

I stood there, slowly turning around, my bare feet glued to the ground, shaking in terror, my knees wobbling. My heart was once again hammering in my chest, and my breathing got so quick and raspy that I had to cover my mouth with my hand. The soldiers were only about twenty-five meters behind me, slowly walking towards my way. One wrong move and I was *done* for.

My hand still covering my mouth, I slowly walked backwards, planning to run for it as soon as I got the chance, but then, my heel tripped on a tree root, losing balance. My body staggered backwards, flailing to keep still when my left foot stepped on a thin, long stick.

*Crrrack!*

"Vhat's that?" the Commander hissed and spun around, and I hoped the tree branches between us would be enough to cover me, but it wasn't. The Commander saw me right through them. I was paralyzed with fear as the Commander sneered, his dangerous brown eyes menacingly locking with mine.

"Vell, vell, vell," he whispered, slowly walking towards me, like a predator stalking its prey, "vhat do ve 'ave 'ere?"

"It ees a girl, sir!" one of the soldiers shouted.

"A girl it ees," the Commander agreed, digging his hands into his pockets. All the soldiers had gathered around me into a half circle, with the Commander in the middle, facing me. It was as if I was having my David-and-Goliath moment, only I was not a boy and I didn't have anything to defend myself with . . . except for my kitchen knife, which was still hidden up my sleeve.

“Vell, zen,” the Commander began, “vhat is a young girl like you doing all ze vay up ’ere? Surely, zough, you are a slave and ’ave a master?”

I did not reply, but collapsed on the ground, shaking hopelessly.

“Back away,” he commanded, and his soldiers obeyed, taking several steps away from the semi-circle. “Come on then, girl, back to where you belong.” Commander Kendrick hissed, yanking me back to my feet and pulling me by the arm.

Now, I do not know how, but there was this blazing light inside me that told me I wanted to fight back and was never going back to my miserable life of slavery, and suddenly, I felt as if I had the courage of a lion. I yelled, grabbing the knife out of my sleeve, and stabbed the Commander right in the shoulder as hard as I could.

The Commander shrieked, his eyes boiling with rage. His shoulder was bleeding all right, only the handle of the knife sticking out, and it did not take long until all of his soldiers gathered close to help him. As for me, I did not waste any time. Without looking back, I ran for my life.

### Chapter 3

It has been more than two weeks since I escaped from the Commander and his small patrol, and I was back on track. I knew I was much closer to the border of Canada, and I had to get there before the patrol tracked me down and paid me for what I have done to their leader. I was not far from a massive, gray-and-black boulder, one of the landmarks that told me I was close to getting to the border when I heard a voice.

“*Psst*,” the voice said, and when I looked in the direction of the voice, I saw a young black woman hiding behind a tree. “Are you an escapee?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I nodded faintly, “I am, miss.”

The young woman smiled. It was a beautiful smile that warmed up my whole body. “My name is Harriet Tubman,” she whispered to me. “I work at the Underground Railroad and help innocent slaves like you escape.”

“Will you help me?” I asked, hope flooding through me.

“Yes, yes,” she answered with a worried frown on her face. “But we must hurry. You see those dark figures over there, down ahead? They are the patrol, with a Commander leading them named Kendrick. We must not be seen. Do you hear me? *We must not be seen*. Run on the count of three now, and do not stop.”

I nodded, acknowledging that I understood, and she started counting down: “*One . . . two . . . three!*”

I sprinted as fast as I could. It was not long before the patrol looked above them shouting, “It’s *her*, sir! It’s ze girl!” I was so afraid that they might catch me again that I almost stopped, but Ms. Tubman called out from somewhere beside me, “Don’t stop!

Keep running!” And so I did, but while I was, I heard the patrol shooting right at me, their bullets whizzing sharply by, barely missing me by an inch.

We eventually lost them, and when we finally reached our destination, I found the steep tunnel that went under the border and through Canada—which was hidden in the thick bushes—and went into it. Once Ms. Tubman and I got to the other end of the tunnel and heaved ourselves out, I slowly turned to face the angel God had sent me. “Thank you, Miss,” I said, smiling. “Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re very welcome,” Ms. Tubman replied, smiling back. “Now we must run for it. Get further past the border of Canada, and if you need any help, there will be more conductors to help you. And, by the way,” she added, “you remind me of someone that I helped not so long ago.” She smiled mysteriously.

Not knowing what she meant, I ran further into Canada, finding myself running with about a hundred other slaves. I ran to the biggest group of running escapees, knowing it would be much safer if the patrols were somehow able to attack. I looked sideways towards my right and saw Harriet Tubman encouraging a small child to run as fast as he could. I caught her eye and she beamed at me, then looked forwards dreamily as if she felt huge relief washing over her. I knew what she felt at the moment—because I felt just the same.

This was it. This was what I have been waiting for nearly all my life. I was finally on the path to my freedom!

## Epilogue

I was in my brightly decorated room at Gordon’s Orphanage for Girls, my new temporary home in Canada. I was staring out the window where one of the last heavy snowfalls of the year was taking place, when Mr. Gordon himself, a kind, pleasant white man—the director of the orphanage—knocked on my door and peeked inside.

“Good afternoon, Miss Freeman,” he said, giving a small bow. “I have very interesting news for you.” He was beaming.

“Oh?”

“You are getting *adopted!*” he announced, throwing both hands up in the air. “Very, very nice family. They are well respected in this town, a fine couple they are, and have already adopted a sweet girl who was here not so long ago. Come down and meet them!”

I nodded, slowly getting off my bed when I heard a familiar yet scarcely distant voice that took my breath away, making me numb.

“Serena? Serena, are you here?” called the voice.

My eyes widened, and I raced past Mr. Gordon down the stairs, happy tears streaming down the sides of my face, stopping just for a second to savour the moment.

Then I ran into the wide, open arms of the person who spoke, and gave the *tightest* hug I could give her . . .

. . . because it was none other than my long-lost sister, Amayah, who was the other girl that had been adopted into the family—and I was *finally* reunited with her.

THE END

