



Chapter One

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September 1850

A shadow grazed the moonlit yard and ducked into the regiment of pine trees blocking the western winds. Anna Brent pressed her nose against the cold pane and scanned the row of evergreens. Clusters of cones and needles bounced and swayed like the stuffed arms of a scarecrow in the breeze, and her mother's quilt fluttered on the clothesline beyond the porch. The shadow didn't reappear.

Boots tapped across the wood floor behind Anna, and she jumped. "What is it?" Charlotte whispered.

Anna stumbled back from the parlor window and turned toward her housekeeper. Charlotte's hair was bundled under a net snood at the nape of her neck, and tight ringlets dangled at the sides of her face to hide the rugged scars left by her former owner's knife.

Charlotte smoothed her fingers over her lilac skirt. "Did someone knock?"

"No, but I saw something outside." Anna glanced out the window again, but the night was still. "Are we supposed to receive another shipment tonight?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from Ben since Tuesday."

Their agent usually sent Charlotte a note before guiding runaways to their house, although some nights Ben himself was notified only hours before he had to deliver a shipment. On those nights, they would be surprised by a knock on the back door.

Anna nodded toward the hallway outside the parlor door. They had to be careful, for the sake of the others staying in their home. "You had best hide our friends."



Fear stole through the resolve in Charlotte's soft brown eyes, and Anna wished she could tell her that she didn't have to be afraid. "It's probably a bear rummaging for food."

"Of course," Charlotte replied. Then she lifted her skirt and rushed toward the steps.

Anna stared out the window and waited. Moonlight illuminated the clusters of deep purple-and-white calla lilies scattered around the front yard. Her father's wagon stood beside the porch—but her father was in Cincinnati for three days, ordering supplies for the mill.

She had been born in this house twenty-two years ago and had seen a bear only once, when she was riding a couple of miles north. The bear had bolted away from her and her horse, disappearing into the thorny bramble.

This time of year, though, bears weren't the only animals that pilfered food. Panthers hid in the craggy hills and wilderness, too, along with packs of wolves. She often heard the wolves, but she rarely saw one.

Whatever she had seen outside tonight hadn't darted into the trees like a panther or a wolf. It snuck through the yard, too big for a raccoon or skunk, yet too small to be a deer. And if it was a person, it was either a skittish guest or someone intent on trapping the men and women hidden upstairs.

Anna fidgeted with the bow on her bodice, her eyes fixed on the dark trees.

Slave hunters traveled north more often these days. Even though the scriptures commanded care of the poor and orphaned, many of her neighbors collaborated with the enemy and willingly betrayed runaways in their flight north. Instead of rescuing slaves, they swelled their pockets with blood rewards and reveled in the pleasure of their own freedom.

These days it was hard to know whom she could trust.

Something moved in the row of pine trees, and Anna strained her eyes to see if it was a person or an animal. The apparition darted toward the trees and then back again, hidden in a nest of needled branches.

Anna lifted the footstool from the entryway and carried it to the

hearth. The fire crackled beside her, and heat permeated through her layered skirts as she stepped up onto the stool. She gathered her skirts with her left hand and reached above the mantel with the other to pull down her father's Kentucky rifle.

In the kitchen downstairs, she tugged open the drawer that her father kept stocked with cartridges. Edwin Brent prized this flintlock more than the two hunting rifles he kept stored in their barn, saying it was more accurate than any modern gun. He'd never harm a person with it, but he was a deadeye for deer and fowl.

She slid three cartridges and balls into her pocket and then ripped off the end of a fourth foil cartridge, shook the black powder into the long barrel, and rammed the cartridge and ball into the gun with the rod. It took some people three or four minutes to load a rifle like this one, but her father had taught her how to load his gun in under a minute. And then he'd taught her how to shoot it.

When she stepped out the front door, strands of hair stole away from her braid and blew across her eyes and neck, but she kept both hands clenched on the gun. Hundreds of cicadas sang out in the darkness. Down the hill, the wheel beside the woolen mill dumped buckets of water back into the river, which hummed and splashed in rhythm along Silver Creek.

A wolf cried out in the forest behind the house, and goose bumps prickled her arms when an entire pack answered the call with chilling howls. Either they were stalking dinner or the wolves sensed trouble.

Anna moved to the edge of the wide porch, the gun propped on her shoulder, and pointed the weapon toward the rolling hills and woods. A single hit on the lead wolf should scatter the rest of the pack, but if it didn't deter them, it should also give her enough time to load her next cartridge and ball.

Her gun honed on the forest, Anna watched the oak and sugar maple branches bat at the dark sky. The wolves didn't wander onto her property, but their cries escalated into a frenzy until, in an abrupt finale, they stopped.



The pine trees rustled to her right, and Anna swung toward the noise. She'd shoot to kill if it were a bear, but if it were a bounty hunter, she'd have to set the gun to her side.

Even though her father had taught her to shoot, he'd also taught her that the battle against slavery wasn't a fight against her fellow man. It was a silent, steady fight against evil. Instead of blasting her enemies with force, she and a few other members of the Religious Society of Friends relied on a quieter strategy of persuasion—and deception—to protect those runaways who couldn't protect themselves.

She wasn't afraid to die, but she'd never had a slave owner threaten her guests before. If one did, God help her, she didn't know what she would do.

Seconds passed in silence as a cloud blanketed the full moon. Her finger wrapped around the trigger, she called out, "Who goes there?"

When no one answered, she lifted her gun and blasted a warning shot in the air.

From the row of trees, a baby cried out in the darkness, and Anna pointed her gun toward the cry. Then she lowered the gun.

"Who goes there?" she shouted again into the darkness.

This time a faint voice answered. "A friend of a friend."

The gun clutched in her fingers, Anna cautiously moved off the porch. The voice could belong to a catcher baiting her away from the house, or it could be a fugitive who needed her help. She walked through the tall grass, past trees and the hidden door of the root cellar west of the house.

"Show yourself," she demanded, as the clouds swept past the moon.

A fifteen- or sixteen-year-old mulatto girl stepped out from the covering of trees, her head bowed. In her arms was a baby loosely swathed in a linsey-woolsey blanket. The child squirmed in the girl's arms and cried out again.

Anna set the gun on the ground. "Why didn't you knock on the back door?"

The girl looked up, and in the moonlight Anna saw a fresh wound on her forehead. Dirt smeared her caramel-colored cheeks, and her

curly hair was matted to her head. Her voice trembled when she spoke. "I ain't knowin' if it the right place."

"What is your name?"

"Marie." The girl held up the baby, and Anna saw his fair skin. "And this is my chile, Peter."

"He's hungry?"

"Yessum."

The baby's cries calmed into a whimper.

"When did you and Peter eat last?"

Marie closed her eyes and then reopened them. "Yesterday mornin'."

"Your milk?"

Marie shook her head. "Ain't workin' no more."

Anna glanced around the yard and down the hill to see if anyone was watching them. It was one thing to house a runaway slave, but should she house a runaway who might have stolen a white child? She couldn't risk her anonymity or sacrifice the lives of her other guests if this girl was lying to her.

Another cloud passed over the moon, turning the yard black for a moment. When the light returned, Anna set her hand on the girl's shoulder, and Marie flinched.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

Marie nodded in response.

"How did you find our house?"

"Unca Ben done brought us up the river and showed me the way." Her fingers caressed the baby's head and then pointed toward the house. "He say look for a quilt, but I ain't seen no quilt."

Before Anna could tell her about the quilt by the door, the pounding of horse hooves broke through the quiet. Marie clutched the baby to her chest. "He comin' for me."

"Uncle Ben won't hurt you."

"Not Unca Ben." Marie pulled away from her. "Massa Owens."