

PROLOGUE

# THE SLAVE

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“I used to be a slave.”

The first time Abraham Lincoln spoke openly about his origins was the year he assumed his new identity as a Republican. Until then he had been remarkably reticent about the facts of his personal life. He was one of the best-known political figures in Illinois, yet he kept an essential part of himself mysterious. By 1856 he had been a professional politician on public view for twenty-four years, more than half his lifetime a stalwart member of the Whig Party, and it was as a Whig that he had climbed rapidly in its ranks. At the age of twenty-seven he was elected to his second term in the legislature and his peers chose him as the Whig floor leader. He was dubbed the “Sangamon chieftain,” head of the so-called Springfield Junto that directed the state party and de facto coeditor of the leading Whig newspaper, the *Sangamo* (later the *Illinois Journal*), writing many of its editorials anonymously. He was the manager of Whig presidential campaigns in the state and a presidential elector to the Electoral College. He was the prime mover behind installing the convention system that selected candidates, enforcing party discipline, and using that system to drive out a competitor and make himself congressman. He had always campaigned on the Whig platform for economic development: internal improvements—federal and state financing of massive infrastructure projects—and the tariff to protect and encourage manufactures. He emphasized that he was one of “the people,” not “the aristocracy,” and felt hurt that he was once accused of being part

of the upper class because of his marriage to Mary Todd, who belonged to the Edwards-Todd family, the most distinguished in Springfield, living on Aristocracy Hill. Projecting himself as a self-made man, he believed himself to be and wanted to be seen as rising from the common clay. He was also determined to leave his past behind, even to bury it, as if hiding his humiliation. His impulse was to protect himself from revelations about his origins. As for the actual details of his early existence, he had been stone silent.

By 1856 he was out of office for the biblical length of seven years since his obscure one-term congressional term, wandering on a horse named Bob from county courthouse to courthouse in the Eighth Judicial District of Illinois. While he sharpened his skills as a lawyer before juries and read Euclid late into the night to deepen his understanding of logical argumentation, he also unsuspectingly gathered around him the network of political men who would help lift him to the presidency, his team of loyalists. In the meantime, the party of his lifelong attachment shattered. This shipwreck, leaving him adrift as a political Ishmael, was his miraculous chance. His political career had capsized before his party went under, but he discovered himself suddenly afloat.

Emerging from the Whig crack-up, which he observed from a distance like a great natural disaster, he was a more mature man who had absorbed the experience of his wilderness years. “It is a fact that Mr. Lincoln was a peculiar man, a wonderful, marvelous, and mysterious man to the world generally,” recalled William Henry Herndon, his law partner. On the one hand, “He was a marginal man, always leaving a blank on his paper, so that the future might write the future lessons thereon.” On the other hand, “Lincoln’s man”—Lincoln’s own platonic ideal—“was purely logical, and he followed his conclusions to the ultimate end, though the world perished.” He seemed paradoxical, but was of a piece. “While I say that Mr. Lincoln was ambitious, secretive, and somewhat selfish, do not infer from these words that he was a dishonest man, nor an insincere man, nor a hypocrite, nor a mean man, nor a base man. He was, on the contrary, full of honesty, integrity, sincerity; open, fair, and candid when speaking or acting. He was for Lincoln always, but with Lincoln’s intense honesty.” He learned the political values of time and patience, but often aroused criticism that he was too slow or too fast, vacillating or rash, on everything from the Emancipation Proclamation to military strategy. “He was self-reliant, self-poised, self-helping, and self-assertive, but not dogmatic by any means. He clung like gravity to his own opinions. He

was the most continuous and severest thinker in America.” But he was not always this way, not in the beginning, and it took decades for Lincoln to develop and realize his self-conception as “Lincoln’s man.”

Lincoln’s phoenix-like ascent was made possible in constant friction with Stephen A. Douglas. From his earliest days until the presidency Lincoln measured himself against his rival and obsessive object of envy, the “Little Giant,” flying toward the sun far above him, the most influential figure in Illinois, a power in the Senate, presidential hopeful, and wealthy from his real estate investments in Chicago and a Mississippi plantation. For nearly a quarter century, long before they would face off for the U.S. Senate in 1858, Lincoln and Douglas were fierce combatants in a contest that began with street brawls and a knife fight between their partisans in the muddy streets of Springfield. Douglas had already tried once, in 1852, to gain the Democratic presidential nomination, and he would try again and again. If any man from Illinois would be president, it was Douglas. Lincoln’s forward movement was always in pursuit of Douglas.

It was at one of those campaign events that the man who had been extraordinarily reluctant about discussing his past, sensitive about his social inferiority, blurted out a startling confession. “I used to be a slave,” said Lincoln. He did not explain what prompted him to make this incredible statement, why he branded himself as belonging to the most oppressed, stigmatized, and untouchable caste, far worse than being accused of being an abolitionist. Illinois, while a free state, had a draconian Black Code. Why would Lincoln announce that he was a former “slave”? The bare facts he did not disclose to his audience were these: Until he was twenty-one years old, Lincoln’s father had rented him out to neighbors in rural Indiana at a price of ten to thirty-one cents a day, to labor as a rail splitter, farmhand, hog butcher, and ferry operator. The father collected the son’s wages. Lincoln was in effect an indentured servant, a slave. He regarded his semiliterate father as domineering and himself without rights. Thomas Lincoln, who had led a harsh and unfair life, wanted his son to learn an honest trade as a laborer, perhaps trained as a carpenter like himself, considered formal education a waste of time, and sought to suppress any larger ambition as useless dreaminess. It was only when the self-made man finally identified himself as a Republican that he felt free to reveal himself as “a slave.” And then Lincoln completed his story, “And now I am so free that they let me practice law.”

Lincoln’s wry humor drove home his point about his getaway, but masked

the scar. Calling himself “a slave” was not a slip of the tongue, hyperbole, or metaphor. It was not just another of his funny stories, though he made it into a joke. He truly considered himself to have been held in bondage and escaped. Lincoln rarely if ever talked about his feelings, even to his closest friends, who tried to discern the signs. He hid his depths behind his simplicity. His authenticity was not deceptive but a veneer nonetheless. “He was simple in his dress, manners, simple in his approach and his presence,” recalled Hershon. “Though this be true, he was a man of quite infinite silences and was thoroughly and deeply secretive, uncommunicative, and close-minded as to his plans, wishes, hopes, and fears. . . . I venture to say that he never wholly opened himself to mortal creature.” It was no wonder. His captivity as a boy, he felt, was humiliating and degrading, imprisonment in a world of neglect, poverty, fecklessness, and ignorance. It was at the root of his fierce desire to rise. If he was angry with his father, he also knew that his father had been reduced to a dirt farmer and compelled to flee Kentucky to escape from slavery. “Slave States are places for poor white people to remove FROM; not to remove TO,” Lincoln said in 1854 in opposition to Douglas’s Nebraska Act. “New free States are the places for poor people to go to and better their condition.” Lincoln had been oppressed by a man who himself was oppressed. By crossing the Ohio River into Indiana, his father had made his own escape. Lincoln was a fugitive’s son—and a fugitive himself.

Even more startling than Lincoln’s self-description as chattel was his subsequent self-identification as a particular kind of slave—a fugitive slave, a runaway. In one of only two brief autobiographical interviews he ever granted, this one intended for circulation in support of his Senate candidacy in 1858, and given to his friend Jesse W. Fell, an Illinois lawyer and businessman who had advised him to challenge Douglas to debate, Lincoln offered this physical description of himself: “If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing on an average one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and grey eyes—no other marks or brands recollected.” Many, perhaps even at the time, might have missed Lincoln’s allusion at the end of his seemingly bland self-portrayal, though the politician and lawyer who had learned to wield words with surgical precision certainly knew his own intent and had undoubtedly ruminated on it. “No other marks or brands recollected” was not another of his amusing

jokes, but the exact language slave owners used to describe runaway slaves in newspaper ads. Lincoln had therefore identified himself not only as one of the fugitives but also mocked their owners. This was more than sympathetic projection; he believed he had his own fugitive experience and emancipated himself. He was an oppressed and stunted boy who achieved his freedom. If, with his disadvantages, he could do it, it could be done.

When he became a Republican and identified himself as “a slave,” he had begun emerging as the Abraham Lincoln identifiable in history. Four years later, at the Illinois state Republican convention nominating him for president, he would be given another identity, the “Rail Splitter,” the legendary ax-wielding laborer, common man of the people, establishing one of the most enduring icons in American history, though to the private Lincoln, who chuckled at the contrived image making by party handlers, it was a picture of himself from the time when he thought of himself as “a slave.” Like other runaways, he had remade his identity and never took it for granted.

Despite his standing for years among the Illinois Whigs, few people spotted him for greater things other than as a provincial figure except perhaps his wife. When a Sangamon County abolitionist, Samuel Willard, and his father were indicted for helping a fugitive slave escape in 1843 and sought an attorney, another conductor of the Springfield area Underground Railroad, Luther Ransom, advised, “There’s Lincoln; he always helps me when I call upon him for a man that is arrested as a runaway. He is too little known; you want one that is popular and has made a name.” “And so,” recalled Willard, “we failed to employ Lincoln and make acquaintance with him.” But he stumbled across him in the courthouse, a “gaunt-faced, awkward, long-limbed man, who took a law book from a case and sat down on a chair rather too low for him. I noticed the long leg thrown back and doubled up under the long thigh, like that of a grasshopper I wondered at his make-up. Someone called him Lincoln, and he smilingly replied. I had not heard the name before and remembered the man for his notable physical peculiarities.” Later Willard remarked that “no one could have guessed, even with the wildest imagination enlisted for the task,” at Lincoln’s future. Of the young lawyers Willard met in Springfield then, he seemed the least likely to become a national leader. “Lincoln will do for Sangamon County, or to go to Congress from this district; but if the lightning of a presidential nomination hits him, it will hit the wrong man; he has more risk of being hit by the real article.”

One of Lincoln's fellow boardinghouse mates from his congressional days, Nathan Sargent, a journalist and at the same time sergeant-at-arms of the House of Representatives, recalled that none of those who knew him imagined great things for the backbencher. "A future President was a member of that House, yet no one surmised the fact, and perhaps the last one to suspect such a thing was the individual himself. . . . He was genial and liked; but no one would have pointed him out as the future President, if called upon to select the man who was to be from among the members. Nor do I believe that he, if told to point out the future President then in that body, would have thought it possible that the lot was to fall to him."

Lincoln's marriage was indispensable to his rise, his sense of destiny, and his equilibrium. He was an almost comically awkward suitor who had a nervous breakdown over his inability to deal with the opposite sex. One socially superior woman to whom he proposed rejected him for having the manners of a bumpkin. Mary Todd, daughter of Henry Clay's business partner and political ally, from Lexington, Kentucky, was a rare woman of the Southern upper class who loved politics, and was described as a child as "a violent little Whig." She did not hesitate to offer her strong opinions at a time when women were supposed to remain silent and deferential on the subject. If anything, she was more ambitious for her ambitious husband than he was. His alliance with her gave him more than the social standing he desired. She steadied him, pushed him forward, defended him, and never lost faith in his star. She referred to their union as "our Lincoln party." Mary was high-strung, threw temper tantrums, and made embarrassing scenes. But she also gave Lincoln a family, respectability, a proper home, and passionately believed in him. Herndon hated her, calling her a "she wolf," and she would never invite him into the Lincoln home in Springfield, calling him "a dirty dog." Lincoln's young private secretaries John Hay and John Nicolay referred to her as the "Hellcat." But there would have been no Lincoln without Mary, and he knew it. He remained smitten and in wonder that she had selected "a poor nobody."

Lincoln had a deep private life about which he was reserved, but which he drew upon as a public man. His losses—the deaths of his mother, sister, and two sons—profoundly affected him. As the burden of Lincoln's mortality grew heavier, he learned to carry on despite it. The man who had suffered breakdowns was often famously melancholy, but never alienated,

though even among his closest friends he kept a distance. “I knew the man so well: he was the most reticent, secretive man I ever saw or expect to see,” recalled David Davis, the Illinois circuit court judge with whom Lincoln spent countless hours, was his campaign manager for president, and whom Lincoln appointed associate justice of the Supreme Court. Lincoln withdrew into himself, but his tragedies created reservoirs of compassion and resolution. In the darkest days of the war when nearly all around him lost heart, Ulysses Grant, his commanding general, would say, “The President has more nerve than any of his advisers.”

When he stepped onto the national stage in 1860, many of Lincoln’s contemporaries viewed him as little more than a simple provincial hack—“an uneducated man—a vulgar village politician, without any experience worth mentioning in the practical duties of statesmanship . . . this illiterate Western boor,” as James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald* put it in 1860. But they learned in time not to underestimate his political abilities. “He has proved himself, in a quiet way, the keenest of politicians, and more than a match for his wily antagonists in the arts of diplomacy,” Bennett would concede four years later. “He was the deepest, the closest, the cutest, and the most ambitious man American politics has produced,” observed Gustavus Fox, his assistant secretary of the navy. “Lincoln was a supreme politician,” wrote Charles Dana, his assistant secretary of war. “He understood politics because he understood human nature.” His timing and patience were governed by that understanding. “He never stepped too soon, and he never stepped too late.” Dana returned time and again in his memoir to Lincoln’s grasp of people. “He knew human nature; he knew what chord to strike, and was never afraid to strike it when he believed that the time had arrived.”

Before the eyes of those who dismissed him, even if they did not see it, the self-made man was constantly transforming himself through self-education and relentless political aspiration. “Politics were his Heaven, and his Hades metaphysics,” wrote Herndon. Lincoln was a new kind of man on the American scene, not just a self-made man, but the self-made man as politician, a new profession, the partisan regular in a newly competitive and disciplined two-party system. Lincoln was one of the first men in the first generation of professional politicians. He was not landed gentry, like most of the founders; nor was he successful as a merchant. In fact, he was a dismal failure as co-owner of a general store in New Salem and spent years digging out of debt.