March: Book One – Chapter Summaries

Prologue (Pages 5–9): Bloody Sunday

The book opens not at the beginning of John Lewis's story, but at one of its most dramatic moments. Lewis stands at the front of a column of more than 600 peaceful protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. As the marchers move across the bridge, they quietly ask one another whether they can swim — a chilling detail that reveals they understand they may be thrown into the river below.

At the far end of the bridge, a line of armed state troopers waits for them, equipped with gas masks and accompanied by dogs. An officer shouts through a megaphone that the march is unlawful and orders the protesters to disperse and return home. When one protester asks to speak with the major, the request is denied. The protesters decide to kneel and pray. The officers do not wait — they advance immediately, unleashing tear gas and swinging clubs into the crowd. Racial slurs rain down from bystanders on the sidelines.

The final panels of the prologue grow dark. The last images show a pair of hands clutching at the pavement as their owner is dragged away, followed by a panel of pure blackness. The scene ends without resolution, functioning as a dramatic hook that establishes the stakes of Lewis's life story before the memoir proper begins.

Part One (Pages 10–45): Childhood on the Farm and the Trip North

The scene shifts abruptly to January 20, 2009 — inauguration day for Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States. John Lewis wakes up in Washington, D.C., turns on the television, and hears a news anchor describing the historic significance of the day. He gets in the shower and sings "Oh Freedom."

At his office in the Cannon House Office Building, Lewis is greeted by his older sister Rosa. Shortly after, a woman arrives with her two young sons. She has brought them from Atlanta specifically so they can witness the inauguration and meet Lewis. The boys are curious and ask him about the chicken figurines and knick-knacks displayed around the room.

This question transports the narrative into Lewis's childhood in Pike County, Alabama. His family lived on 110 acres of farmland that his sharecropper father had purchased in 1940 for $300. As a young boy, Lewis was given responsibility over the farm's chickens. He took this charge seriously — he learned each chicken's individual personality, gave them names, talked to them before feeding them, and read the Bible to them. He even preached sermons to them and baptized them in the manner he had learned at church. When a chicken died, Lewis performed a full funeral ceremony and resisted when his family wanted to eat the birds in his care.

One of the boys interrupts the story to ask Lewis why he became a politician instead of a chicken farmer. Lewis explains that he actually wanted to become a preacher. The narrative returns to his childhood: by age five, Lewis could read the Bible on his own, and he was profoundly moved by passages from the books of John and Matthew. Adults in his community teased him for dressing like a preacher and acting so mature, but that seriousness set him apart.

Lewis became increasingly devoted to school and learning. His uncle, Otis Carter — a teacher and principal — recognized potential in the boy and decided to take him on a trip to Buffalo, New York, in the summer of 1951. The journey itself was tense. Lewis and his uncle had to carefully plan every gas stop and restroom break, because many establishments in the South either refused to serve Black customers or offered only segregated "colored" facilities. One illustration captures Uncle Otis gripping the steering wheel, sweating and scowling as they drove through the South.

When they arrived in Buffalo, Lewis was amazed. He saw Black families living in houses alongside white neighbors — something unimaginable back in Alabama. The trip opened his eyes to the reality that the conditions Black Southerners endured were not inevitable. Although he missed his family and was glad to return home, Lewis felt permanently changed by what he had seen.

Part Two (Pages 46–62): Education, Injustice, and Inspiration

Back in Alabama, Lewis saw his world with sharper eyes. As he rode to school each morning, he passed the nicer schools attended by white children — better buildings, maintained playgrounds, newer buses. His own school sat behind a dirt yard and operated out of small cinderblock buildings. He also noticed that the prison work gangs he passed daily were made up almost entirely of Black men.

Despite these inequalities, Lewis loved school. His librarian, Coreen Harvey, encouraged him to read everything he could find, and Lewis devoured Black newspapers, magazines, and books. School was his passion, and when farm work demanded his presence, he would hide and sneak onto the school bus anyway. Each time he came home, his father reprimanded him — but never punished him.

In May 1954, Lewis heard about the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared that school segregation was unconstitutional. Lewis was ecstatic, certain that he would soon be attending an integrated school with far better resources. His parents, however, tempered his excitement. After a lifetime in the segregated South, they warned him not to get his hopes up and not to cause trouble. Lewis was frustrated — particularly with his local minister, who never spoke out against the injustices Lewis witnessed every day.

Then, one Sunday morning in early 1955, Lewis was listening to a Montgomery radio station when he heard a young preacher from Atlanta for the first time. The man spoke about using Christian principles to fight for social justice — connecting the teachings of the Bible directly to the struggle for civil rights. Lewis did not catch his name until the very end of the broadcast: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Lewis felt as though King was speaking directly to him.

That same year, a second ruling in *Brown v. Board* provoked fierce backlash. Southern senators, including James Eastland and Strom Thurmond, publicly vowed to defy the court. Lewis writes that lines had been drawn and blood was beginning to spill.

Then came the murder of Emmett Till. A 14-year-old Black boy from Chicago visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, Till was kidnapped, beaten, and killed by two white men after being accused of speaking to a white woman. His mother insisted on an open casket, so the world could see what had been done to her son. Tens of thousands attended his funeral. The two men who kidnapped him were acquitted by an all-white jury, and the following year they confessed to the killing in a national magazine. Nothing was done. Lewis was shaken.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery — just miles from Lewis's home — for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. Lewis and his family followed the Montgomery Bus Boycott closely. Lewis was deeply inspired, and a few days before his 16th birthday, he delivered his first sermon to a congregation and was featured in a local newspaper.

Part Three (Pages 63–82): Nashville, Jim Lawson, and Nonviolent Training

The woman visiting Lewis's office asks about his college education, hoping to set an example for her sons about the importance of schooling. Lewis recalls how his mother found a flyer for the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, and encouraged him to apply. He was accepted and worked washing dishes at a restaurant to pay his tuition.

In Nashville, Lewis's desire to do more intensified. He applied to Troy State University — a school no Black student had ever attended — but received no response. Determined to challenge the university's segregation policy, Lewis wrote to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. After an exchange of letters with King's associates, Lewis received word that King wanted to meet him.

The meeting took place, and King told Lewis that challenging Troy State's enrollment policy would require his parents' support and would bring significant hardship on his entire family. Lewis brought the matter home, but his parents — frightened of the repercussions — refused to participate. Lewis wrote to King saying he would return to Nashville instead.

The woman and her sons depart, and Lewis receives word of a message from Jim Lawson. The narrative returns to March 26, 1958, and Lewis's first encounter with Lawson at a Nashville church. Lawson had spent time in India in the early 1950s doing missionary work and had been deeply influenced by the teachings and methods of Gandhi. He had since become a representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization, and was teaching students about nonviolent resistance as a tool for eradicating racism, poverty, and war.

Lewis was immediately captivated. He describes Lawson's words as liberating — "the way out," as he put it. He encouraged everyone he knew to attend Lawson's workshops.

The training sessions were rigorous and emotionally demanding. Lawson had the students take turns playing the role of protesters and aggressors. They called each other racial slurs, knocked each other down, and spit on one another — doing everything they could to prepare for the real treatment they would face in the streets. Illustrations in the book show the young activists sitting in rigid, dignified silence while speech bubbles around them fill with hate speech and insults. Lawson also taught them how to physically protect themselves and one another, and he repeatedly emphasized that they must always hold love in their hearts for those who attacked them. The hardest lesson, Lewis reflects, was learning to genuinely feel love for one's attacker.

Part Four (Pages 83–121): The Sit-Ins, Arrest, and the March on City Hall

Lewis and his fellow students — now calling themselves the Nashville Student Movement — identified department store lunch counters as their first target. Black customers were permitted to shop and spend money in these stores, but were forbidden from sitting at the lunch counters to eat. This hypocrisy became the focal point of their campaign.

The group began with test runs. They would sit at counters, request service, be refused, and then leave peacefully. These tests allowed them to work out their methods. On February 7, 1960, they escalated. When they were refused service, they stayed. Store management responded by closing the lunch counter and turning off the lights, leaving the students sitting silently at the counter in the dark. Hours later, a group of men arrived and began hurling insults and threats. The protesters did not respond. Eventually, the harassers grew bored and left.

After another sit-in, store owners asked for time to formulate a response, and the student group agreed to pause. Then the police chief delivered a warning: anyone participating in the next sit-in would be arrested. The students pressed forward anyway.

On February 27, 1960 — the climax of the book — protesters were attacked almost immediately. They were beaten, had food and drinks poured on them, and were subjected to sustained verbal abuse. Throughout it all, they did not fight back. Law enforcement arrived and, rather than arresting the aggressors, told the protesters to leave or face arrest. Lewis and many others refused to leave. It was Lewis's first arrest.

At trial, the judge refused to hear from the protesters' lawyers and fined each defendant $50 or 30 days in the county workhouse. Diane Nash stood before the court and declared that paying the fine would mean contributing money to a system built on injustice. The group refused to pay and chose jail instead. As they were led away, the students sang "We Shall Overcome." Lewis describes feeling not humiliated, but free — liberated in a way he had not anticipated. While they sat in jail, new protesters took their places at the counters.

Sit-ins continued. Black citizens organized a boycott of stores that maintained segregation. Jim Lawson publicly criticized the NAACP for being too cautious and conservative, and Lewis felt that even prominent figures like Thurgood Marshall did not fully grasp the urgency and energy of this new generation of activism. Out of this frustration, Lawson helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Then, on April 19, 1960, Lewis received a phone call: their lawyer, Z. Alexander Looby, had had his home bombed. Rather than retreating in fear, Lewis and thousands of other activists organized a march on Nashville City Hall. An estimated 3,000 people marched in silence through the streets. At City Hall, Diane Nash confronted Mayor Ben West directly on the steps, asking him whether he believed it was wrong to refuse service to someone based on the color

of their skin. West said yes, and publicly recommended that store managers begin serving Black customers.

That evening, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to the gathered crowd, urging the activists to stay the course and not grow weary. Store managers soon began desegregating their lunch counters.

The book closes with King's words — an encouragement not to despair — and a final image of Lewis's cell phone screen showing an incoming call, leaving the reader in suspense about what comes next in the trilogy.