

Chapter 20: On the Hill

Chapter 20: On the Hill delves into John Lewis's entry into the U.S. House of Representatives, a momentous occasion marking the beginning of his influential political journey. As he and his family, including his wife Lillian and son John-Miles, make their way to Washington for his swearing-in, they bring a celebratory atmosphere to the trip. Aboard Amtrak, Lewis's journey is filled with joy, accompanied by a basket of champagne, jambalaya, and balloons, with friends joining in on the festivities. Reflecting on his past, as the train travels toward the nation's capital, Lewis takes a moment to appreciate the struggles that had brought him to this point, expressing a deep sense of gratitude for his previous hardships. The phrase, "The beatings, the arrests—it was all worth it," captures his recognition of how those challenges had shaped his path and ultimately prepared him for the weight of the responsibilities ahead.

Upon his arrival in Washington, Lewis is struck with nostalgia as he gazes at the Capitol dome, reminiscent of the first time he visited in 1961. His assigned office in the Cannon Building, though modestly furnished with red carnations and typewriters, symbolizes the humble beginnings from which his political career would rise. Although his office lacks modern amenities like phones, Lewis's unwavering determination drives him to adapt to the environment. He is surrounded by the Georgia delegation, affectionately known as "Redneck Row," and the group shares in a celebratory gathering in the Caucus Room, a moment filled with optimism and anticipation for the work that lies ahead. Lewis's political presence begins to take shape, even in these early, seemingly unremarkable moments, laying the foundation for his ongoing fight for justice and equality.

On the day of his swearing-in, Lewis faces the chaotic nature of the Capitol building, where he gets lost navigating its corridors but is helped by Senator Sam Nunn. Amid

the hectic pace of the day, Lewis connects with fellow freshmen, such as Joseph Kennedy II and Mike Espy, who share his sense of excitement about their shared mission. These early interactions with his peers highlight the solidarity and mutual respect within the Congressional Black Caucus, which would later play a pivotal role in shaping Lewis's political vision. Meanwhile, Love Collins and Richard Ossoff are hard at work staffing Lewis's office, eager to find the right individuals to fill crucial roles. Lewis remains calm and composed despite the frenzy, focusing on securing the future of his team and setting the tone for how his office would operate moving forward. Though some of his staff initially feel overlooked, Lewis's patient and measured approach ultimately leads to the appointment of Clarence Bishop as his chief of staff, who will go on to play a key role in balancing the demands of his political career with his vision for a more dynamic and youthful office environment.

As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that Lewis's time on the Hill is not just about rising to power but also about the ongoing struggle to find his political identity. The complexities of his relationships with colleagues, friends, and family begin to surface as Lewis works tirelessly to make his mark in the political world. While navigating the challenges of race, power, and community, Lewis also faces the constant balancing act of adhering to his personal principles while fulfilling the expectations of the political establishment. His role as a congressman requires him to deal with sensitive issues surrounding legislative policy, while at the same time, he strives to stay true to the values that have always guided him. By the end of the chapter, it's evident that Lewis has become a key figure within Congress, demonstrating the resilience and commitment to the causes he holds dear. His leadership in Congress is beginning to take shape, and this chapter marks a pivotal moment in his ongoing journey as an advocate for justice, equality, and social change in America.