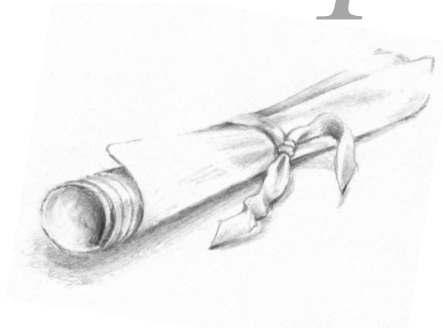


CHAPTER

N<sup>o</sup> 1



*It was hot as hellfire, close as a jail in the tiny pit-cabin, but Mamma, her sleeves rolled up, her fingers deep in the cornmeal pinching out fat wriggly worms, was singing:*

*Now farewell my massa, my missus, adieu.*

*More blows nor more stripes will I ne'er take from you.*

*And if I return to the life that I had*

*You can put me in chains, cos I surely be mad.*

“Amen,” exclaimed Titan. It sounded like a sneeze. Baby Jem, who sat on his knee, stared into his father’s face with astonishment.

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Mamma dropped the mealy worms one by one into the fire. They hissed as the fluid flew out of them and made little crackly explosions. Rachel was hot and tired. She didn't care to think about the worms, Mamma's song, or much else. She only wanted to know when they were going to get out of this awful place, which stank as bad as the midden outside. When they first came Titan had promised them a house, promised he would build it come spring, yet here they still sat, four months later, with their arms too cramped to unfold and their legs tied in knots from trying to take up less space.

"Aren't you boiling hot, Mamma?"

"Not near as boiling as on the plantation, where the air so steamin' and wet the 'squitoes near drowned in it."

"And this place gets smaller every day, I swear," Rachel complained.

"Nonsense, girl. 'Course it don't. You gettin' bigger, that's all." Mamma added water to the pot and set it over the fire. She had enormous stains,

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like spreading butterfly wings, under her arms, and the scar on her forehead stood out like a warning. Don't be crossin' me, it seemed to say. I taken as much as I can this day, and I ain't listenin' to no child nonsense.

"Are we ever getting a house, Mamma? Is Titan building us one? I know he's busy bringing in the shillings doing the building for white folks in Shelburne, but will there ever be a proper home for *us*?"

"Maybe," said Mamma, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. Titan, tired out from all his hard work, said nothing.

"When will it happen? Will it happen at all?" Rachel was getting flustered, could feel her little braids sticking out all over her head like porcupine quills. She'd been playing earlier with her Indian friend Ann-Marie and they'd each braided the other's hair. Ann-Marie had two beautiful braids, long and glistening. Rachel envied that soft straight hair almost beyond anything.

"Maybe I say, and maybe I mean. You can't

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take no more on your heels than you can kick off with your toes.” Mamma always did that, had the last word with some strange, mysterious saying that Rachel couldn’t quite catch the corner of.

Why, it’s nothing but a maybe house. That’s no good, thought Rachel, feeling miserable. Then Mamma spoke up again. “Talking of maybe, Titan, ain’t it about time you took yoursel’ off to that office and found out all ’bout our land?”

So Mamma was on her side after all!

Titan grunted. He peeled a sock off with one hand while holding on to Jem with the other. A poor ruined foot came into view, two toes missing where the old slave massa had cut them off. Titan rubbed his instep, removed the other sock, and made a ball of both socks together.

Mamma, stirring the pot, kept talking. “I remember when we come here they promised us freedom and a farm. ‘Freedom and a farm,’ they kep’ saying. ‘You be free Nigras now.’ Where’s the farm, I’m wonderin’. Freedom ain’t much use without it.”

“Can’t make head or tail of them papers,”

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admitted Titan, dropping the socks by the crate he sat on and scratching his big round head.

“What papers?” asked Mamma.

“The papers they make you sign.”

“To see if you good enough to own a farm?”

Titan grunted.

“Take the child with you to the white folk town. She read some. She show you how. She gonna set you straight as a yard of cloth.”

“Yes, I will, Titan. I’d love to come. I’ll stand in that office and read every word for you, I promise. And when we’ve signed where we need to, they’ll give us our rightful land.” Rachel’s words sounded brave and bright to her own ears, but privately she wondered if she was up to the task. Spelling her own name wasn’t exactly the same as understanding white men’s papers. She’d seen some before. Very small print on a very large page. She could hardly make sense of the little squiggly letters.

“We’ll see,” was all Titan said. Close-mouthed as usual, he left most of his words in the back of his throat. It was easier for him that way. Not so

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much explaining to do. But it sure was hard for Rachel to know his thinking.

“I’d love a farm.” She smiled, imagining it. “A house for us with four windows and a barn full of animals. Goats maybe. Oxen. Cows. I could milk the cows and bring cream in for baby Jem. Crops growing in the fields we could pick and eat ourselves. In the winter the snow would cover everything, and we’d be cozy inside. Remember, Mamma, when we first came, you thought the snow was salt and tried to pick some up to cook with.” For a moment she forgot the heat and the worms and the stench of the pit. She was too busy laughing.

“Hey, girl, where you gonna grow crops on this rocky land? Or maybe you aimin’ to harvest stones,” retorted Mamma, stung, and the conversation, such as it was, rose up with the smoke from the fire and died.



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The next day it was pouring rain. Inside, the pit stank of mould and ashes. A rivulet broke through the plank roof onto the fire. The rain must have gathered in a pool till it was too heavy to stay outside, ripping apart the crack that they had left for the smoke to escape through. Steam hissed as water doused the flame, blanketing Mamma and the children in a dirty fog. Was there nowhere dry? Rachel felt damp as a cloth just out of the washing, Jem was crying non-stop, and Mamma was getting more sulky-faced by the minute.

“Where is that Titan? Didn’t he promise me he be home after work? Didn’t he promise he take the bebbly off my hands for a wad of time? You, girl, Rachel, you take that bebbly on your knee and bounce him round some.”

“Oh, Mamma,” groaned Rachel. “He’s covered in mud from lying on the floor. And anyhow, I’m so soaked I’ll just make him feel more uncomfortable than ever.”

Mamma, as usual, just ignored what she didn’t

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want to hear. It was as if Rachel hadn't spoken at all. "He want food but I ain't got nothin' for him. I ain't eaten near enough to make milk, and been sick too much. My breasts dry as a creek in summer, though the rest of me wet enough. Stick you' finger in his mouth for him to suck. I'll give him cornmeal mush if I ever get this fire goin' again."

Sighing, Rachel took Jem on her knee. He ceased his howling for a moment, then yelled louder. She knew she should love her brother but sometimes it was really hard. Feeling guilty, she wiped away his tears. They appeared again right away, like magic, so she pushed her finger in his little bud of a mouth, like Mamma had told her to. He bit it.

"Ow, you stop that, d'you hear, baby?" she snapped, yanking her finger out. "Don't you ever do that again."

Jem closed his mouth in amazement. Soggy from the rain and mud, he was an enormous and slippery load. Under his weight, Rachel's

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legs felt thin as sticks, just about ready to snap.

“How is it, Mamma, that this baby goes on getting fatter and fatter, while the rest of us are near dying from hunger?” she complained.

“Tell him a Buh Rabbit story, like I tol’ you when you was little,” suggested Mamma, as though that would help. “I use to tell you them stories on the plantation all the livelong day, to keep you from makin’ a racket while I workin’ for the missus.”

Rachel wasn’t in the mood to tell stories. And her brother was too young to understand them anyway. Instead she changed the subject. “I need to pee. Rain does that to me. But I’ll drown if I try to go outside.”

“Hold it in, then,” Mamma advised.

There was a faint noise above them as the trap door in the roof opened, letting in more rain. “Here you be, Titan, and it ain’t a minute too soon,” Mamma told him. “I was just ’bout to step out in the downpour an’ holler for you.”

Titan slid down into the pit-cabin. Wet as an

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otter, he looked even more wretched than the rest of them.

“What you been doin’ out so late?” asked Mamma.

Titan said nothing. He just found a small space in a corner, folded his long legs and arms into it as though he were a piece of cloth, and shut his eyes.

“Cat got you’ tongue?” Mamma was trying, with little success, to get the fire going again. She was short of breath from puffing and blowing on the embers.

One eye opened. “I been to Shelburne after I finished work. I made my mark on lots of papers that the white folk wrote. They say it’ll take a deal of time for us to get our land.”

Rachel remembered how Titan signed his name, with a tall quavering X like a daddy-long-legs. That wouldn’t get them anywhere, she thought with fury. He should have taken her with him, like he promised he would. Or maybe he really hadn’t promised. He talked so little it was hard to tell.

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“Next time, I want to come with you,” she said firmly. “I’ll help you, Titan, just see if I don’t. I know how to sign your name. T-I-T-A-N. And I can teach you to sign it yourself, so the white people take better notice of us. I can already imagine our four glass windows gleaming in the sun.”

“There won’t be no next time,” growled Titan. “I’m done. Now we’ll see.”

“There you go again, girl. Imaginin’ is for rich folks who don’t have nothin’ else to do with their time.” Mamma had to add her threepence worth, bringing Rachel back to earth with a bump. “Imaginin’ be a big conch shell on sand when tide’s gone out, full o’ empty sea noise. This ain’t the way I brung you up, to waste you’ time imaginin’.”

Rachel looked across at Titan, to see if he had anything else to say about their farm. But he just sat in his corner with his head down as the rain continued to drip in, steam sputtering along the rim of the fire. Maybe he’d even fallen asleep.

Jem opened his mouth and started to howl

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again. Rachel's belly growled like a mountain lion. Rachel wanted to talk more, wanted to be sure in her mind that they'd get their land one day. It was the most important thing in the world to her. But with Titan sleeping and Mamma's lips clamped shut, it appeared they'd come to the end of the conversation.