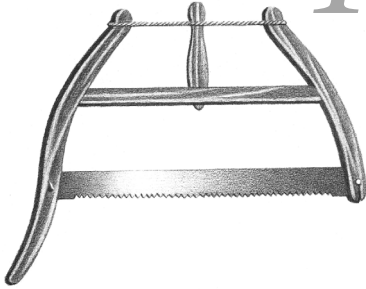


CHAPTER
No. 1



Rachel's stepdaddy, Titan, was building a new house for the family down by the shore. He'd been doing a deal of work for the most important man in Birchtown, Colonel Blucke, mending and making, and in return the Colonel had lent him some tools for his own private use. Titan had been busy, and Rachel loved to go down and see how the house was growing, like a fat, square August flower blooming out of the earth. It took her mind off other things, like Mamma's uncertain temper and the rotten, musty smell of where they lived now.

“You’re doing fine, Titan,” she said. “It’s not as good as our Maybe House, but it’s a heap better than the pit-cabin. When d’you reckon it’ll be finished?”

“Just one log on another till the job be done,” replied Titan, who never talked much.

“By fall, maybe? I’d hate to spend another winter in the pit.” She shuddered as she remembered the previous winter. It had been cramped and freezing cold. “I could help,” she went on. “I’d love to. I’ve done all my chores for the day, and my reading practice.”

Nathan Crowley, the white boy who’d taught her to read, didn’t come to Birchtown often now. It was too dangerous. The place was a buzzing wasp’s nest of Negroes angry at the whites who’d thrown them out of Shelburne and whites angry at the Negroes for being in Nova Scotia at all. These white men came from Shelburne every now and then to jeer at the Negro folk and make trouble. It had become a kind of pastime, like going to the fair. There

was little enough paid work, so they had scant else to do.

Rachel got down on her knees and held a log steady so Titan could saw it in half. “Thank goodness for trees.” She smiled. “They’re like enormous people with arms outstretched, aiming to protect us.”

“You imaginin’ again?” Mamma, baby Jem under her arm, had come down from the pit-cabin. “I jus’ taking this child over to Nanna Jacklin’s. Then you an’ me goin’ berry pickin’, girl.” Mamma pronounced it “*betty* pickin’.”

Rachel stood up and slung her hands along her hips. Mamma was always wishing her somewhere else just when she was getting comfortable. In fact, truth be told, Mamma could be the worst kind of nuisance, always arranging Rachel and what she was doing.

She scowled at her mother. “I’m already helping here.”

“You comin’ with me. I need a mess of fruit and then mebbe I make a pie wi’ some kin’ of

cornmeal crust. Titan love them pies in summer. Ain't that so, Titan?"

Titan flicked away a fly and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He went at the wood some more as though Mamma hadn't spoken, his face carved into downward lines, his lips a tight knot of concentration. The saw was none too sharp and he was having trouble making the first cut. Unwilling to behave for him, the log swung out sideways.

"See? I told you he needs me," said Rachel. She helped Titan rearrange the log.

But Mamma was already marching along the path to Nanna Jacklin's, her shoulders up and huffy, her back straight as a ramrod. "I need you more, girl. Time you listen some. You can't tell the deep of the well by the size of the bucket."

Mamma's sayings often didn't hold any sense at all for Rachel. She made a monster face and stuck her tongue out at Mamma's retreating back. But all the same, Titan was giving her one of his quick, curt nods, meaning she should go,

and she knew when she was beaten. She took off after Mamma, her neck clammy, her skirt sticking to her legs in the heat. At least she'd be able to eat some of those berries, grown big on sun and summer. They needn't all be kept for the pie. Even now she could almost savour the explosion of sweet, tart flavour on her tongue.