

CHAPTER *N^o* 1



“Boats are bad,” Mamma had always said.
“They take you from your own place, where you belong, to a country far, far across the sea where you mus’ slave for a cruel white missus and massa.” All the more remarkable, then, that Mamma and Rachel were now standing on the deck of a great ship in the New York harbour, wishing to sail away on it.

“Name?” the Englishman in charge demanded of Mamma. Seated at a desk in the middle of the scrubbed deck, he stared at her quizzically before

dipping his quill in ink and holding it poised above his book.

Mamma grasped Rachel's wrist so hard her icy fingers left a pale fingerprint bracelet on her daughter's dark skin. It looked as though she were afraid that Rachel, if released, might run away. But Rachel knew better. Mamma, usually so brave and so bossy, was scared as a cat-trapped mouse and grabbing hold of her for comfort. Mamma was terrified of white people.

"Name?" the man repeated, clearly annoyed.

Rachel glanced behind her. There were at least forty more Negroes waiting in line behind them, thinly clothed and almost dancing with cold on the wind-swept deck. This man probably wanted to be through with his accounting of them so he could get to his hot meal and bed.

"Sukey, suh. And this here's my daughter Rachel."

"Sukey what?"

"Don' have no last name, suh," Mamma mumbled, staring down at the tummy bump of her

soon-to-be baby. She was still clutching Rachel's wrist for dear life.

"Were you slaves?"

"Yessuh, the both of us, at Massa Roberts' rice plantation near Charlestown."

"You can take his surname, then. I'll put you down as Sukey and Rachel Roberts." He wrote rapidly.

A little brown bird landed on the deck and hopped towards Rachel.

"If you please, suh . . ." murmured Rachel. She could just make out a very large R and very small O on the yellow paper. Although she couldn't read, she knew the shapes of some of the letters. She'd seen the missus write in her journal often enough.

"Yes, what is it?"

"We don't want his name. He never did anything for us. He only whipped us and called us bad Nigras. We don't want any reminders of him at all. If it please you . . ."

"Well?" A tiny teardrop of ink splashed from

the man's waiting pen onto the page.

Rachel glanced at the bird before saying firmly, "Our name is Sparrow. Sukey and Rachel Sparrow."

Mamma sighed in surprise.

"Sparrow be it, then." The man crossed out the R and O and wrote something else in their place. Rachel watched intently. Tossing back his mane of white hair, the man looked at her properly for the first time, as if she were a grown-up. "Your ages?"

"I'm around ten, I'm almost sure. I remember the siege of Charlestown, the terrible noise and fear of it. And Mamma's going on thirty."

"You speak very good English, girl." The man actually smiled, and his face creased like starched linen.

"I was a house slave, suh. I copied the missus, the way she spoke. Then, when we escaped, I copied the soldiers' wives."

"Good for you." A make-believe iron smoothed out his smile, and he went on with his writing.

“Where we goin’, suh?” Mamma asked timidly, afraid to interrupt his work.

“To Shelburne, Port Roseway, in Nova Scotia, woman, to a new, free life. Didn’t anybody tell you?”

“Oh, yessuh. I jus’ wanted to make sure they were right. You see, my husband, Titan, who works for the army, he’s on another boat. He’s gone before to put up wood houses for the settlers. We wouldn’t want to end up someplace else.”

“You shall not, I promise you.”

“Can we stay on board tonight, suh? We’re afraid to go on shore, afraid the massa will find us and drag us back.” That was the talk all over town: the slave owners were coming to claim their property now the war was ended. The scar above Mamma’s eyebrow seemed to blaze out now, a lick of crimson paint on her brown skin.

“You may. We’ll be turning no one away. We sail on the morning tide.”

The man waved his hand to dismiss them and gazed at the ocean till his eyes turned the same glass grey as the winter shimmer of water.

“Sukey and Rachel Sparrow, free Nigras in Nova Scotia,” Mamma whispered as they climbed below. She’d let go of Rachel at last. “I jus’ love the sound of that. Here’s your blanket, girl. Gird it round you to stop your shiverin’, and never mind the holes.”

Rachel nodded. Free Nigras. She didn’t even know what that meant. No massa to yell at her, perhaps, and no missus to pull her hair. If she were really lucky, there might even be enough to eat. She thought of all the food on the missus’ table in Charlestown and imagined herself stuffing it into her own hungry mouth. That was a mighty big imagining, and she sighed at the effort, pulling her threadbare blanket round her. It was awfully cold up here. She’d never suffered such cold. Even the wild, wet heat of summer on the plantation, with the mosquitoes stinging her skin raw, was better than this. She began the slippery climb down to the ship’s hold, hoping the future would be more to her liking than the past.