

One

EVERYWHERE BEAUTIFUL FALL COLOURS MELTED INTO A thick stew of forest greens. Lydia and Sarah Redmond stepped carefully over the tree stumps and sharp rocks threatening to slice through the worn soles of their boots as they walked through the trees along the shore of Birchtown Bay on the northwest arm of Shelburne Harbour. Their route stretched past the growing clusters of Birchtown shacks and connected to the Port Roseway Road which, after three miles, would bring them to Roseway itself. The heavy fall frost caused their breath to steam and their hands to ache. Sarah pulled down her hat and fastened her thin, grey coat.

Lydia forged ahead, keeping up a good pace, balancing a weighty basket of potatoes on her head. A white kerchief tied in a knot at the back of her neck framed a coffee-brown face that was deeply wrinkled, but smooth and shiny around the bones. She had good teeth. The empty corn pipe on which she constantly sucked hung from her mouth. On her left hand she wore a ring made of wood and decorated with an intricately carved olive branch. As she walked, her feet came down hard and fast.

Sarah followed the five-foot body of thick flesh, watched it wobble inside an array of colourless cotton. Her grandmother was old, the guess was fifty, but a slave's age was hard to tell. Sarah viewed the woman with an uneasy tension—the kind that always exists between the young and old.

“Hurry along now. Time’s a wasting.” Grandmother waved her arm like a sergeant, a bag of laundry and rag purse swinging wildly by her sides while the basket of potatoes on her head sat motionless.

“Morning comes too early.” Sarah yawned. Her chestnut face was fixed in a knot—too pouty and childish for a girl of sixteen.

“We got lots to do this morning. Our first stop is at Prince and Beulah’s. Oh Lord, Prince is down with the fever. It has been a few days since our last visit and there’s no tellin’ what to expect. The fever’s carryin’ folks to Glory one after the other.”

“Prince is strong. He’ll be alright.”

“I hope so. I prayed this morning. We got a lot on our plates today. We also have to trade these vegetables at Cecil’s store and then go down to Roseway with Mrs. Cunningham’s wash.”

Sarah swung her baskets of beets, carrots and cabbages. She mimicked the old woman. “Get along, get along,” she murmured. “Being in Birchtown is the same as being on a plantation, someone always giving orders.” She pressed on, knowing that talking back would make her the worst of human beings—a sinner. She wanted to ask why Reverend Ringwood didn’t have prayers with her uncle, but old folks did not like questions—you got hard looks instead of answers. The one thing they did like was giving orders. Sarah had more to say, but she rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth instead.

But Grandmother was quick. “There’s no need for sass,” she said. “We have to make Roseway before the sun gets to burning. I hope it’s peaceful down there.”

Grandmother looked directly at Sarah and came to a sudden stop. “Hush,” she whispered. An unfamiliar noise disturbed the stillness and the forest shivered. Grandmother and Sarah struggled to slow their thundering hearts by hastily puffing in the cool morning air. Danger lurked all around. It could come at

a moment's notice in the form of slave hunters or other wicked men about. Saying or doing the wrong thing could get you whipped, jailed or shot.

They stood staring at each other in the dimness when the noise came again. Together, they stepped carefully from the trail into a stand of tall birch trees and crouched behind a huge rock. There, in a small clearing, was a white man on horseback. A long rope was tied one end to the saddle, the other around the neck of a Negro whose hands were chained. The women strained to make out who the men were, but they were too far away and dared not get closer.

Sarah gasped and in a low tone murmured, "Do you know them?"

"No," Grandmother said. "Stay down."

The white man dismounted and untied the rope from his saddle. He strained to pull the Negro along, for the man dug in his heels and had to be dragged. The white man pushed hard and forced his captive up onto the horse, which he then led under an oak tree with low-hanging branches. He tossed the long end of the rope over the thickest branch, tied it to his saddle and slapped the horse.

Sarah's teeth chattered and the veins in her neck jutted out. The Negro rose up from the horse and dangled several feet in the air as the two women watched in horror. The white man pulled out a long musket and stuffed it with shot. No sooner had they turned their faces away when a loud bang startled the air and the foul smell of gunpowder spread throughout the clearing. Off in the distance, the sound of cackling like a banshee hen rang through the woods.

It was some seconds before Grandmother came to herself. "The poor man refused to go along quietly," she said. "And that man ... Oh, Girlie, what kind of man laughs after taking a life?"

When all had settled, two pairs of eyes searched the deep woods. Deciding the danger had passed, Sarah stood up and sighed deeply. “What good is freedom, Ma’am, if all we can do is live in fear? It’s not right that we get treated this way, not here.” Her anger flared and she exploded with a gutsy squeal.

“You are right, but you must learn to hold that anger, Girlie. Choose the time to speak your truth and always with caution.” Steadying the basket on her head, the old woman cast her steely eyes on Sarah as she turned back to the trail. “And another thing, Girlie. Keep those eyes peeled. I hear that ol’ Boll weevil Carter is sniffing around for stray Negroes. It could have been him back there.” Her pipe rested in the small indentation in her bottom lip as she grunted between sucks. “He aims to take Negroes without certificates to the South and sell them back into slavery. We got our papers, but we can never be too sure. Wish it weren’t so, but this here freedom only lasts from minute to minute. Folks are disappearing faster than a fresh loaf of bread.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Sarah quivered at the mention of heartless Boll weevil. A devil, the slaves called him. Always something or someone to fear, she thought. This crazy life sure had its ups and downs.

SARAH KICKED A ROCK TO THE LEFT OF THE PATH. THE SMELL of gunpowder lingered, stirring an image in her that prompted an all-too familiar flashback: a troop of raggedy people and soldiers, deathly quiet except for a moan or two, their faces long and heavy with grief.

Sarah’s flesh tightened. Tiny goose bumps peppered her quivering skin as her heart beat in double time. In the swarm marched Grandmother, Uncle Prince, Aunt Beulah and herself. She strained to find Papa, but as usual, he was missing. In a short

time, the figures evaporated into a blur of washed-out colours. Sarah let out a string of curses at the nagging memories. The past was always stirring the present like an angry wind swirling a pile of leaves.

It was the end of September 1784 as best Sarah could tell. Fifteen months had passed since their arrival in Nova Scotia from St. James Goose Creek, a settlement outside war-ravished Charles Town, South Carolina. For Sarah, there was no more hauling water buckets to the fields on a yoke. She didn't have to plant crops, weed the fields or work at the Big House. She was free from the thick sweat of summer's heat and from Cecil MacLeod breathing down her neck and treating her like a beast. Had she not been able to fill her belly this morning? And as far as happiness... well, that was just a step away now that she had Reece Johnson's eye.

The first golden rays of dawn trickled through the thick canopy of towering trees. Here and there, Birchtowners were starting to fill the trail, on their way to Roseway in hopes of finding a day's pay. They greeted Grandmother with a nod and moved quickly past. It was not long before the old woman burst into her vibrant strains of "Go Down, Moses." Sarah joined in as she watched a flock of grey birds darting among the pines. She was inspired to say, "I wish I was an eagle soaring above the clouds. I would find me a safe place and have a fine time. Oh yes, I would."

The old woman responded in a tone that was gruff. "Birds are blessed all right, but a bird finds trouble if it's not on guard. I pray trouble never finds you, Girlie."

"Papa said that we shouldn't fear trouble. That trouble is shackled to change."

"Trouble is shackled to change all right, and a whole lot of other things."

“Trouble does not scare me. Not if it can make things different.”

The old woman fired back. “Don’t be getting big ideas, Girlie. Could be I’m wrong, but change does not come easy.”

“Why doesn’t it?”

“Because old habits die hard. They run deep—right to the marrow in the bones. Folks didn’t leave their old ideas and feelings behind in Carolina.”

Sarah nodded. “I suppose not,” she said.

Grandmother caught an expression of arrogance in the girl’s attitude. She too, had been full of confidence at one time. Yes Lord, a stubborn fighter. But she learned. A sad thought brought fear for the girl. Life’s lessons do not come easy, she thought, they always come with a price. The ridges on her back proved that. Her next words dragged mournfully. “We have more pressing things to dwell on this morning. Prince and Beulah’s baby is holding back. I don’t know what’s holding the child. She’s carrying low. It’s her time now.”

“The baby will come soon. And I’m sure Uncle Prince will be just fine.”

“We have to stay on our knees, keep sending up prayers,” Grandmother said after another long suck on her pipe. “It’s our job and the Lord’s order, Girlie, to keep this family strong.”

The pair continued on, knowing that something else was bound to catch them up, for in the heart of Birchtown lay misery so thick it stank like rotting flesh. The miserable makeshift shacks sprawled in all directions. To the left was the Thomas place. Across the way was the Joneses’ and, further on, the Haywoods’. Birchtown was lively at this hour with folks cooking over outdoor fires and doing the wash while others hauled carts and lugged bags and goods on their backs.

Lydia and Sarah circled the maze of shelters, sidestepping the roaming chickens, hogs and sheep. It was then that they noticed

Dinah Haywood standing a few feet from her shack in a frayed blue dress with a yellow rag tied around her head, bawling.

“Troubles, Dinah?” Grandmother asked.

“A man came and took my Isaac,” the woman wailed. “He accused him of being a runaway. He didn’t ask if he had papers, just shackled his hands. And he put a rope around his neck. Off he went with my man tied to the back of his saddle. It makes not a drop of sense. We free people,” she wailed. “We free.”

Sarah watched as Dinah fell to her knees in the mud, feeling the sharpness of the woman’s pain. She thought of the man hanging from the tree. Isaac Haywood? But she held her tongue and suppressed the tears, waiting to hear what Grandmother would say to the grief-stricken woman.

“What did the man look like?” Grandmother asked as she reached out and touched Dinah’s shoulder.

“He was tall. A lanky-looking fella in a brown coat.”

“No telling, but it could be Boll weevil Carter,” Grandmother grunted. “They say he’s here in Scotia. Ah, that devil. He’s up to his old ways, sneaking about looking for mischief or to make money.”

“Yes, yes. You said a mouthful there,” Dinah wailed, not letting up.

“I know your pain. The troubles never tire of finding us. I got them too. You’ve heard, no doubt, about my son.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I heard.”

“I’d stay awhile, but I’m in a hurry this morning. We will send up prayers for you and Isaac,” Grandmother said as she turned to go. “You’re welcome to come by tomorrow, Dinah, if you feel like talkin’.”

“No need to steal her hope. She’s got enough on her plate,” Grandmother said when they were far enough off for Dinah not to hear. “That ol’ Mr. Misery is as excited as a Manhattan

pickpocket in a crowd. You never know who he's goin' to rob next." She was silent for a long time before she turned to Sarah and muttered, "This place is as cruel as the weather."

Sarah looked at her hard, for everything about the place was a betrayal of promises. She longed for something better, but dared not speak it or even dream it. "Yes, it is, Ma'am," were the only words she could rally.