

CHAPTER 1

April, 1791

“I AM NOT AN ORPHAN.”

Hope stood in front of the desk where Henry McIsaac sat writing in a ledger. On his desk were a stack of documents, an ink pot and a tray of quills. He finished the entry he was making, laid down his quill and raised his periwigged head. “To all intents and purposes, that’s what you are.”

“My mother is dead, but I have a father. He may not know I exist, but he’s still my father. And I have three brothers.” She felt her lower lip trembling. “A girl who has a father and three brothers is no orphan.”

“Much good they do you now.” Mr. McIsaac’s voice was cold. “You don’t seem to realize I’m trying to help you. You’re lucky to be offered this position. All that Ephraim Block expects you to do is take care of his mother, keep the cabin clean and cook the meals.”

As if that were nothing!

Mr. McIsaac picked up a document from the stack and placed it facing her on the desk. “According to the terms of your indentures, you’ll be bound for three years. In return for the performance of your duties, you will receive food, lodging and wages of three pounds per year, payable at the completion of the three years. By that time, your father may come to claim you. Or you’ll be old enough to marry.”

He handed her his pen. “Make your mark above the line at the bottom of the page.”

“I can write.” Leaning over the desk, she carefully printed each letter. H-O-P-E C-O-B-M-A-N. Mr. McIsaac had already written the date: 15 April, 1791.

He turned the paper around and looked at it critically, causing her to wonder whether she had made a mistake. Then he signed his name as witness to her signature.

Behind her she heard a knock on the door.

Mr. McIsaac looked up. “Come in.”

The door opened.

“Ah! Mr. Block.” Mr. McIsaac stood up. “You’re just in time.”

Hope watched as Mr. McIsaac walked around from behind his desk to shake the hand of the man who had just entered.

So this was Ephraim Block. He was a thin man with stooped shoulders. His reddish hair was tied back in a queue, and his skin was coarsened by the sun.

He flicked a glance at Hope. "Is everything ready?"

"As soon as you've signed here." Mr. McIsaac showed him the paper.

"Is everything correct?"

"Of course. You know that I practised law in New Jersey for twenty years before the Revolution."

When the document had been signed and sealed, Mr. Block turned to Hope. "I suppose you have a trunk you need to bring."

Hope did not answer.

"What?" said Mr. Block. "Are you mute?" He turned to Mr. McIsaac. "You haven't saddled me with a deaf-mute, have you?"

"Not her!" He laughed. "Matron at the Orphan Asylum says she never stops talking."

"That's good. My mother will benefit from some female society, though women talk nothing but nonsense most of the time."

"Matron told me I'd be leaving today," Hope said stiffly. "I have my bundle here."

"Then let's be off," said Mr. Block. "My property is eight miles west of Kingston. I can't leave my mother alone any longer than necessary."

Hope picked up from the floor a canvas-wrapped bundle

secured by a leather strap. It held a hooded cloak that had been her mother's, two handkerchiefs, a brush and a comb. These were her only possessions.

At the door, Mr. Block turned around and said to Mr. McIsaac, "By the way, have you any news about my case?"

"Not yet. If anything comes up, I'll let you know."

"I'll be in to see you next month, as usual."

Hope followed Mr. Block out the door. She did not want to leave Kingston, where there was bustle and excitement, with bateaux coming and going up and down the St. Lawrence River, and soldiers from the Tête du Pont barracks, handsome in their red coats. Most important of all, it would be easier for her father and brothers to find her if she lived in town, not in a log cabin in the wilderness. Because she was already half a year beyond the usual leaving age, the orphanage could keep her no longer. But why was there no family in Kingston wanting to employ a servant girl?

Her bundle over her shoulder, she trudged at Mr. Block's side past the ruins of old Fort Frontenac with its crumbling walls. A stiff breeze blew from the lake.

"There's no road," said Mr. Block. "We travel by canoe. With the wind rising, the water will be rough. I'll need you to paddle in the bow."

"Paddle?" She looked at him blankly, as if she had never heard that word before. "I don't know how to paddle."

"Weren't you raised on Carleton Island?"

"I was. In the Fort Haldimand barracks. Soldiers' families were quartered there."

"I can't believe you grew up on an island but don't know how to paddle a canoe."

"Why would I? There was nowhere to go."

"Carleton Island's no bigger than three square miles, and you never left it?" He sounded as if he could not believe his ears.

Hope felt her cheeks grow red. "The only time I've ever been in a boat was when the garrison soldiers brought Ma and me over to the mainland in a bateau."

"Humph!" He said nothing more until they reached the landing. It was swarming with people, for a bateau had just arrived from Montreal. The dark-eyed *Canadiens*, wearing their bright sashes, were unloading boxes and barrels onto the shore. They laughed as they worked, shouting to one another in French. Now there would be a night of revelry at the tavern before their bateau started back down the St. Lawrence in the morning.

Mr. Block did his best to ignore the *Canadiens*. He found his canoe among half a dozen that were pulled up on the limestone shore. He shoved the bow into the water.

"Get in."

She hung back.

"Hurry up. We have to get going."

"I can't swim."

"Can't swim, either! Oh, never mind. It's not as if we are going to cross the Atlantic. Just climb in and make your way to the bow." He took her bundle from her and placed it in the canoe.

Knowing she had no choice, Hope climbed in at the stern, scrambled hand-over-hand to the bow, knelt cautiously and gripped the sides.

He reached a paddle to her. "You can't paddle if you're hanging on to the gunwales. The best way to learn something is to do it." He climbed in at the stern and shoved off.

She dipped her paddle. Hope had seen plenty of Indians paddling canoes. She had some idea of how it was done.

"Deeper!" Mr. Block called out. As she dug in with her paddle, she felt the canoe move forward. "Use your shoulders!" he bellowed.

The canoe stayed close to the shoreline as they left Kingston behind. At first the water was not too rough. But the further they went, the bigger the waves grew. One moment the canoe was borne so high on a crest it seemed ready to take flight. The next, it slapped into a trough. Half the time, Hope's paddle flailed the empty air.

It felt like the longest eight miles in the world. Her shoulders hurt and her arms felt ready to fall off. It was hard to keep a grip.

"We're nearly there," Mr. Block called to her. The next instant a big wave hit the canoe broadside.

"We're tipping over!" she screamed. But they did not. Mr. Block righted the canoe. After that, Hope clamped her jaws shut. Never again would she let on that she was afraid. She dug her paddle more deeply into the billowing water.

As they passed a clearing in the woods, Mr. Block shouted. "See that cabin? Ours is the next one."

Hope looked shoreward. Outside a log cabin, a boy was splitting logs. He lowered his axe, looked straight at her, and then lifted one arm in a big, sweeping wave.

His wave warmed her like a ray of sunshine. If she had not needed both hands to grip the paddle, she would have waved back. For the first time in days she felt like smiling. Her spirits lifted at the thought that someone young and friendly would be living not too far away.

The clearing was followed by a stretch of woods, and then they came to another clearing. Mr. Block turned the canoe landward. "We're here," he shouted, and he brought the canoe to shore.

A log cabin stood a little back from the shore, far enough back for the garden in front, which appeared to be already dug for spring planting. Behind the cabin was a plowed field in which tree stumps were still rooted. The house had a stone chimney, a plank door with long black hinges and two windows, one on each side of the door.

So this was the place where she would spend the next three years keeping house, cooking meals and taking care of Mrs. Block. Why did she need someone to take care of her? This was the part that worried Hope the most.

She lifted her bundle from the bottom of the canoe. On wobbly legs she followed Mr. Block to the cabin. He pressed the latch and opened the door. Hope heard a woman's voice.

"You're late, Ephraim." Although cracked with age, it was a voice that expected to be obeyed.

Mr. Block stepped inside. "Sorry, Mother. It was a slow

trip back. The lake was rough.”

“You should have started sooner. Did you bring the girl?”

Hope felt a shiver of fear. Did that powerful voice belong to the woman who would be giving her orders for the next three years?

“Yes, Mother.” Mr. Block looked at Hope over his shoulder.
“Come in.”