



## CHAPTER 1

*“What* is this?” screamed Miss Susan to seven-year-old Harriet. Miss Susan, as the slaves were told to call her, had run her finger along the top of the dining room table. It had picked up dust.

“Answer me, you little brat!” It was the fourth time Harriet had tried to dust the furniture. She had done exactly as she was told, but for some reason she kept doing it wrong. And every time she did it wrong, Miss Susan grabbed the rawhide whip above the fireplace and beat her. Now, she was reaching for the whip again.

“But Miss Susan,” Harriet pleaded, her voice shaking, “I done swept and dusted just like you told me. I . . .” But it was no use. The whip was already cutting into her skin, leaving marks that would last the rest of her life.

“You are doing this on purpose just to be bad!” Miss Susan shouted as she hit tiny Harriet again and again. “No one could possibly be so stupid. Not even a slave child!” Miss Susan had taken Harriet from her original owner just that morning. She would try her out for a week first to see if she wanted to buy her. So far, things had gone terribly.

Suddenly, Emily, Susan’s older and kinder sister, burst into the room.

She grabbed the whip from her sister’s hand and said, “If you do not stop whipping this child, I will leave this house and never come back!”

Miss Susan stomped out of the room and slammed the door. Emily sat down and quietly asked Harriet to tell her exactly how she had dusted the room. Between sobs, Harriet explained that she had swept the floor and then immediately dusted the furniture just as she was told to do.

“But Harriet,” Emily asked gently, “Didn’t you wait for the dust from sweeping to settle first—just like you do when you dust at your home?”

Harriet looked up at Emily through her tears, not sure of how to answer this strange question. “At home? No ma’am. Ain’t no nice tables and such to dust. Just nine blankets on the dirt floor for my brothers and sister and me.”

Emily sighed and rested her hand on Harriet's trembling shoulder. The poor child really didn't understand. Emily hated the cruel way slaves were treated—particularly children. But this was 1827 in southern Maryland, and the whip ruled when it came to slaves, young or old. After patiently explaining how to dust, Emily placed the whip back above the fireplace, praying silently that it would not be used again on this little girl.

But much later that night, Harriet found herself in trouble once more. Even after a 15-hour day of cleaning and helping in the kitchen and gathering firewood outside in the cold, seven-year-old Harriet was put in charge of Miss Susan's infant son.

“And I'd better not hear a single sound from him,” Miss Susan said, “or you'll be whipped for the fifth time today.” With that warning, Miss Susan went to bed in the next room, the rawhide whip beneath her pillow.

Exhausted and terrified, Harriet did the best she could do. She rocked the child in the dark for hours, but Harriet finally nodded off. When the rocking stopped, the baby began crying, and Miss Susan rushed into the room with the whip.

After only a few days of this, Miss Susan returned Harriet to her original owner, Edward

Brodas, claiming that Harriet was too stupid and too lazy to buy. Mr. Brodas was angry about having a worthless slave returned to him, but Harriet was thrilled to be back home with her family and friends.

Harriet was particularly close to her father, Ben, whose own mother and father had been tied up in chains with many others and brought to America on a ship from Africa many years earlier. After dinner on Saturday nights, Daddy Ben would often tell the story his father had told him. The first night that Harriet (or “Hat” as her family called her) was home, her father told the story again.

“The slave traders kidnapped at least 500 of ’em,” he’d begin. “Then they were all chained together in the very bottom of a huge ship with no sunlight for weeks and weeks. Ain’t no room to move or lie down or barely breathe all that time. Smelled something terrible, and everyone was so scared and hungry and sick. Nearly 100 of them died before they reached Charleston Bay. But not my mama and daddy.”

Ben paused and looked proud, angry, and sad all at the same time. Harriet quietly went over and sat in her father’s lap, putting her small hand on his.

“But why didn’t they try to run away from those slave traders?” Harriet asked.

Harriet’s father looked at her for a long time

and shook his head sadly and said, “I suppose some tried, Hat. But if they were caught, they knew they’d be beaten and maybe killed. I reckon they were too afraid to even try.”

Harriet gazed into the fire wondering if she would have been too afraid to try and escape. Just before drifting off to sleep, she whispered, “I would have run.”

The next morning, Harriet woke up early. Her mother, Rit, was calling her name and telling her to get up and get ready. Get ready for what? Harriet wondered. She rolled over to see her sister and seven brothers still all sound asleep on the cabin floor. They were wrapped up in old blankets worn raggedy with use. Their beds were little piles of straw spread over the bare dirt floor. Harriet sat up and stared into space for a couple minutes. She was trying to remember a horrible dream she had been dreaming. In it, hundreds of black children walked in single file down a dark road. They were chained together at their ankles and their necks, and many were crying and bleeding. Beside them walked a tall white man with a whip in his hand.

“Hat! Hurry it up. You’re going over to the Big House this morning,” Rit called from the front room.

The Big House? A cold shiver went down

Harriet's back. "The Big House" was where her owner, Master Brodas, and his wife, Miss Sarah, lived. Being sent there usually meant you were either being sold or you were in trouble. Harriet pulled on her little dress—an old burlap feed sack with holes cut for her arms and head, but it was the only "dress" Harriet had ever known. She ran into the other room with a frightened look on her face.

"Why, Ma? What did I do? Master Brodas ain't selling me down South, is he?" Harriet had heard some terrible stories about the plantations far away in South Carolina or Louisiana where slaves did backbreaking work in cotton and rice fields. Down there, the masters were cruel and dangerous, and the bugs were huge and deadly.

"No, Hat. Nothing like that." Rit was smiling. "Miss Sarah needs some help and she says she figures you was just being stubborn with Miss Susan, and so she'll give you another chance. You get to work in the Big House!"

"But . . .," Harriet began. She knew her mother wanted her to have an easier life than working outside on the Brodas's farm. It was considered better and easier work to be in the Big House, but Harriet dreaded the thought of dusting tables and rocking babies again. She'd rather be slopping the hogs or working in the fields with her brothers.

“No ‘buts,’ Hat.” Rit was already handing her some cornbread and scooting her out the door. “You’re nearly eight years old. Too old to be at home not working. So don’t you get in trouble this time or Master Brodas is likely to sell you off far away.”

Harriet sighed and began walking up the hill to the Big House. At least she would be with her family at night. Maybe Miss Sarah would be nicer. And maybe she didn’t use or even own a whip. Harriet said a little prayer in her head as she knocked on the back door used only by the slaves.

A very old slave named Mary, who worked as the cook, opened the door and glared at Harriet for a moment. Then she pushed her toward the kitchen with, “Miss Sarah say you work in the kitchen today.” After that, Mary barely spoke to Harriet except to grunt out orders to peel potatoes, pluck chickens, chop vegetables, or gather firewood. At one point, Harriet drew up enough courage to ask Mary whether or not Miss Sarah owned a whip. Without even looking Harriet’s way, Mary barked, “You fixin’ to find out if you keep askin’ stupid questions.” After that, Harriet worked in silence.

Around 2:00, the meal for Master Brodas and Miss Sarah was ready to carry out to the long oak dining-room table. While Mary piled the food onto silver and gold serving dishes,

Fred (the Brodas's butler) and Harriet carefully brought food to the table. Harriet could not believe that such incredible amounts of food could be eaten by two people. Plus, she had never seen many of the foods she carried out: a cake with fluffy frosting, gravy, and mashed potatoes with lakes of butter. And one small bowl in particular was irresistibly intriguing to her—a bowl full of sugar cubes. Harriet had never even tasted sugar, but she had heard about it.

Master Brodas and Miss Sarah came into the dining room arguing about something having to do with the baby. Harriet and Fred stood still at the far end of table awaiting any orders from Master. But Harriet's eyes were glued to the sugar bowl. It was within reach, and both Master's and Miss Sarah's backs were turned to her as they continued to argue. It would be so easy . . .

In a split second, Harriet snatched a cube out of the bowl. And in that very second, Miss Sarah spun around and caught her.

"WHAT are you doing?" Miss Sarah yelled at Harriet. Harriet stood frozen, the sugar cube still gripped tightly in her small hand.

"Fred," Miss Sarah said, her eyes burning with anger, "bring me my whip. I will not have my slaves, my property, stealing from me!" She began walking toward Harriet slowly, pointing

her finger at her and saying, “You are in big trouble, little girl.”

Harriet let the sugar cube slide slowly out of her hand and onto the floor with a little tap. As Miss Sarah got closer, Harriet could think of only one thing—Run! Suddenly, she was flying through the kitchen, out the back door, and across an empty tobacco field in the cold October afternoon. Behind her, she could hear the fading screeches and threats of Miss Sarah and the running footsteps of Master getting closer. Harriet did not slow down. She ran with every bit of strength she had until, finally, Master’s footsteps began to fall further behind her.

Harriet ran until she was on the far side of the farm near the pigpens. Without a second thought, she scurried under the fence and slid into the deep pig mud. No one would think of looking for her here! As she lay still, trying to catch her breath, she felt as though someone or something was staring at her. Slowly, she lifted her mud-covered face. Only a couple feet from her was a giant sow, three times the size of Harriet, and the sow definitely did not look pleased to have found a little girl in her pen. Harriet knew that mother pigs could be dangerous, so she carefully slid away from the sow and huddled on the other side of the pen.

Harriet lay still in the mud for hours. The moon rose, owls called back and forth, and Harriet did not move. All night, she listened for the sound of Master's footsteps. Just before dawn, shivering with cold, she curled up next to several smaller pigs and fell asleep for a few hours. But she awoke in a panic to the sound of a voice and clattering metal. Ducking behind a pile of muddy hay, Harriet listened, her heart beating wildly. But it was only the old half-blind slave, Peter, coming to throw slop to the pigs. One, two, three buckets of leftover food and garbage were tossed into a long trough for the pigs. Then Peter was gone.

Cautiously, Harriet crawled toward the trough. She was very hungry, and some of the slop looked good enough to eat. In fact, much of it was food that Harriet had helped prepare the day before! Harriet squeezed in among the smaller pigs for her share. *These pigs eat better than I do*, Harriet thought bitterly as she ate.

All that day, Harriet hid in the mud and hay, coming out now and then to eat slop. After a while, the pigs ignored her, and even the huge sow (who Harriet decided looked quite a bit like Master) was no longer watching her. Twilight came, and the first stars came out. In the distance, she could hear some slaves singing, and she wondered if her family was worried about her.

Some time much later, Harriet awoke with a start. Footsteps! They came closer and closer. Harriet did her best to hide between the pigs, but the steps seemed to be coming right to her. Suddenly she looked up to see the outline of a tall man. He was holding something that looked like a whip in one hand, and he was reaching down to grab her with his other hand.