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Ruby sat dejectedly in the kitchen waiting for the pot of water she put on the stove to boil. Elizabeth had not been feeling well since her father's party a few days earlier so her husband had sent for the doctor. Ruby had been trying to find a way to get in touch with Dr. Clark and thought that this would be her chance, but her luck had not held. Clark Jr. came in place of his father who was away and wouldn't be back for a week.

Ruby sighed heavily as she placed a tea kettle, a cup and a small plate of biscuits on a tray to take up to Elizabeth. As she made her way upstairs she wondered if the son knew of his father's activities. The only way to find out would be to ask him. She would not think about the risk she was taking or the fact that she could be endangering not only herself, but also the Clarks. What was important to her right now was that if she did not escape from this life soon she never would.

When Ruby arrived Elizabeth watched her intently as she set the tray on the bedside table, prepared her tea just the way she liked it and handed her the cup.

"Ruby, are you happy here?"

Ruby was not surprised by the question. In fact she had been expecting it for quite some time.

"No, I am not," she answered honestly.

The two women gazed at one another, both thinking of how much their relationship had changed. Elizabeth sighed, setting her tea cup back on the tray.

"I don't understand you Ruby," she said in frustration. "You have everything a slave could ask for, far more liberties than any in this household, yet you are still unhappy. Why?"

"Because I don't have my freedom," she said, not bothering to lie.

A look of sadness crossed Elizabeth's face, "I had hoped you had given up that silly dream by now."

"Will that be all Miss Elizabeth, I still have to go to market this afternoon," she said, ignoring Elizabeth's comment.

"No, there's one more thing. I'm with child and I've decided that I want you to be the child's nanny," she said, sounding almost satisfied with herself.

Although she appeared calm, Ruby was seething with anger. There was no end to Elizabeth's selfishness. Well, Ruby thought to herself, it was her turn to be selfish. She would not be here when that child arrived. If she couldn't find a way to join Dr. Clark's next wave of fugitives north, she would find her own way.

"Yes, ma'am," was her only response.

Elizabeth sighed heavily, dismissing Ruby tiredly. She had hoped that the change in household positions would please Ruby, but it was obvious that there was only one thing that would make her old friend happy, and it was the one thing Elizabeth could not bring herself to give.

Elizabeth and Ruby normally went to market together but on those rare occasions that Elizabeth couldn't join her Ruby was given a day pass. Unfortunately she was also given a time limit on that pass. If she went over that allotted time someone was sent out to look for her, which was one of the reasons Ruby had not tried to escape before. Today, Ruby's pass allotted her just a couple of hours to go to market, get what she needed and come home. Only that was not what Ruby had intended to do. She walked to the marketplace, picked up a few items just in case she was questioned once she arrived back home, and then immediately headed for Dr. Clark's office a few blocks away. Fortunately, because she didn't linger in the market place she made it to the office in good time, but an "out of office" sign on the door put a halt to her plan.

She knew she couldn't chance waiting to see if any one would return soon. Her wait could be a few moments or a few hours. She needed to get back to the house before Elizabeth

became suspicious. If she hurried, she would make it home with time to spare.

As she wove her way through the crowded marketplace, Ruby's arm was gently grabbed from behind.

"What's the rush?" someone whispered into her ear.

Her heart nearly jumped into her throat. She slowly turned to see who would be so bold.

"Excuse me?" she asked, yanking her arm from the grasp of a man she didn't know.

"I asked what the hurry is," he repeated with a grin.

"Do I know you?" she gazed at him in confusion.

"Not yet, but you will."

Ruby waited for an explanation but he said nothing more, just stood gazing down at her. She met his gaze directly with her own, taking note of his neatly cropped hair, deep brown eyes, brown complexion a shade darker than her own, wide nose, trimmed mustache over a full, wide mouth, and clean shaven chin. The scent of soap, leather and sunshine emanating from him enveloped her. It was a sensual and comforting scent that gave her an unexpected thrill.

Seth didn't realize that being so near to her would affect him this much. His body reacted to her beauty and their close proximity in a way that excited and frustrated him. Nicholas and five runaways were depending on his usual clear head, he could not allow it to be clouded by this woman.

Ruby wondered at the change in his expression. He suddenly looked as if she had done something he didn't like.

"You have obviously mistaken me for someone else," she told him, turning and heading back into the crowd.

"Do you make it a habit of sneaking outside windows listening to private conversations?" he asked her retreating figure.

Surprise then realization registered on Ruby's face.

"You're the man from the garden," she said excitedly.

Happiness was the last reaction Seth had expected. She confused him even further when she grabbed his hand, looking pleadingly into his eyes.

"Take me with you," she whispered desperately.

This was not going at all the way Seth had planned. He'd been wondering for days how to find a way to get to this woman and learn how much of a threat she was to their mission. Then as he was returning the carriage Nicholas rented during their stay, he had seen her walking past the livery stables. He followed her to the marketplace, waiting for an opportunity to approach her. When she left shortly after, he continued to follow her all the way to Clark's office and knew then that she must have overheard too much about their plans.

When Seth didn't respond to her plea, Ruby gripped his hand tighter.

"You know I heard what was being planned. I want to go with you."

Seth looked around at the people walking nearby then pulled Ruby around the back of a nearby vendor's cart so they would not be overheard.

"What are you saying?"

"I want to go North with you," she said.

He looked down at her soft hands, clean nails, then up to her neatly coifed hair, pressed and spotless uniform and assumed that, unlike most of the runaways they lead north, she had never known a real day's labor in her life. She either would not make it through the arduous journey or she would only slow them down.

"No," he said without hesitation.

"I don't understand. Why not?" she asked in confusion, finding it difficult to believe she had gotten this close to her dream only to be denied.

"Because you're obviously a pampered woman who has probably never left her master's home with so much as a torn stocking, more than likely never picked anything from a field other than a flower and would only slow us down, and put us in danger." Seth knew he was being harsh, but he also believed in being honest.

Seth's refusal was more than Ruby could handle. She spent the past ten years of her life waiting for the time when she could

leave this life behind and return to her family. Now once again she was being told “no”. She had finally reached her breaking point.

“You don’t know a thing about me or my life,” she said angrily.

“You have not even bothered asking my name yet you think you know me. That’s fine. I won’t bother standing here trying to change your opinion of me. What I will do is walk straight to the sheriff’s office and tell him everything I overheard if you do not agree to take me with you,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

Seth looked ready to strangle her, “You wouldn’t.”

Ruby turned, walking away from him. He thought she was bluffing until she headed in the direction of the business district. He took off after her, grasping her arm to stop her.

Ruby breathed a silent sigh of relief. She was hoping he would stop her. She wasn’t sure if she could truly follow through with her threat.

“You’re serious?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” she managed to hide her relief behind a false mask of irritation.

“Why?”

“You aren’t giving me any choice.”

“You would jeopardize the chance for others to have freedom because you can’t?” Seth could not believe she would be that selfish.

“I will do whatever is necessary to be free. If that means making threats, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Seth could see the determination glowing in her beautiful hazel eyes. He had underestimated this woman. She said he had given her no choice, now she was doing the same to him. He sighed heavily, running his hand across his forehead in exasperation.

“Whatever decision you are considering should be made quickly. Joseph, the Elder family watchdog, is heading in this direction,” Ruby warned.

"If you come along, how are you going to get pass this Joseph?"

"He works for John Elder, I am owned by Elder's daughter, it will not be a problem."

She gave him the address, "Come to the back door tomorrow morning around ten so we can talk more."

"And if I don't show?"

"I will assume you are more willing to take your chances with the sheriff than with me," she told him and walked away.

The following morning Seth stood at the back door of Elizabeth's home debating whether or not he should take his chances that the woman was bluffing or just bring her along. Either way could threaten the safety of the others in the group. Sighing heavily, he knocked. He did not like being backed against the wall which is exactly what this bold woman was doing.

"You took long enough," Ruby snapped as she yanked opened the door.

"I could leave," he said, turning to do just that. He sure as hell didn't need this kind of trouble on a mission that could be bringing him and his brother together.

"No! Wait, I'm sorry. I'm just anxious to leave here." Ruby had been on edge since she left Seth at the marketplace the other day.

Seth stopped and turned back around.

"Come, we can talk over there," she pointed to a bench in the walled garden.

"Aren't you worried about being seen talking to me?" he asked.

"Both Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Robert are out and the servants are doing their chores, but we do have to talk quickly because they will be returning soon."

"Why don't you start by telling me why you need to get away from here so badly," Seth asked.

"All right, as soon as you tell me your name."

"Seth."

"Seth, I'm Ruby," she held out her hand.

He accepted it, feeling a shock when their skin touched. She must have felt it also because they both gazed curiously down at their clasped hands then back up at each other. Clearing his throat, Seth slowly pulled his rough, calloused hand from the soft warmth of hers.

"You didn't answer my question," he said sounding irritated, not liking the effect she was having on him.

"Have you always been a free man Seth?"

"Yes."

"How would you feel if someone snatched that freedom away for no other reason than evil spite?"

Seth thought about his brother, Thomas, and how that was exactly what happened to him.

"I'd hate it and would do everything in my power to get my freedom back."

"Then you know exactly why I am doing this," she told him.

"Are you trying to tell me you were free once?"

"Yes. I was born a free person, lived as a free person until I was 8 years old and I plan on dying as a free person."

"Why now? You've obviously spent most of your life as a slave?"

"Just because I've lived as a slave all these years does not mean I've forgotten what it is like to be free," she said, desperation obvious in her tone of voice.

Seth understood, realizing that it must be the same feeling of desperation his brother was probably going through.

"How did you end up here?" he asked, curious to know more about this beautiful, well-spoken woman.

A look of sadness clouded her face, "It's a long story, one that we do not have time to go into right now."

Seth nodded. "We need to go over some details about the journey before I go."

"So you're taking me with you?" she said excitedly, her face lit up like a little girl that had just received a precious gift.

Seth chuckled. In a way, he guessed she had.

"Yes. You're to bring as little as possible, preferably just whatever clothes you are wearing at the time and an overcoat, if possible. Also, if you can get a hold of it, bring some dried food."

"We are constantly on the move until we reach Ohio and even then we're not completely safe," he further explained, "We travel under darkness and stay at safe houses or abandoned farms wherever we can find them. Although, since they added more restrictions to the Fugitive Slave Law, we haven't been as fortunate with the safe houses as we used to be. This means we have to make do with whatever we can, the ground, brush, caves, we're exposed to the elements often."

"If you are trying to deter me, it's not working. I'm hardier than you think," Ruby told him with a grin.

"Just want you to be aware of what you're in for."

She nodded in understanding.

"Do you have a plan to get away?" he asked.

Ruby hesitated in answering, "I honestly had not thought about it. This opportunity was unexpected."

"Well, you better come up with something soon. As you know, we're leaving in four days."

"Four days?!"

"Why do you sound so surprised? I thought you overheard all of the plans," he said suspiciously.

Ruby grinned sheepishly, "I had come out to the garden to clear my head. I ended up outside that window by accident and I barely heard a word, just enough to know what you all were planning, but not the details."

"So you were bluffing about going to the sheriff," he said.

"Yes. Without knowing where and when everything was supposed to take place, there wouldn't have been much to tell him. Also, I like Dr. Clark. I wouldn't want to get him in trouble for doing something so noble."

"You do realize that I still haven't told you where and when?"

"Are you going back on your word?" she asked nervously. She didn't know if she could bear being so close to escape and

have it snatched away. It was too devastating to even think about.

Seth didn't answer right away. He stood, walking over to a nearby rose bush, gazing thoughtfully down at the flowers. After a moment, he turned back towards her. She was truly beautiful, he thought to himself. As her expectant gaze met his, he wondered what she would look like with dirt smudged on her face, her clothing ripped and snagged by bushes and her neat little braided bun scattered all over her head. She would probably still be as beautiful as she was now.

"Do you know where the Crawford farm is outside of town?" he asked, walking back towards her.

Ruby nodded. She couldn't believe it. She was finally going to be escaping this life. She had waited over ten years for this but it seemed as if it were all happening so fast. She was filled with excitement and trepidation all at once.

"We leave from there at midnight in four day's time. If you're not there, we leave without you. We can't afford to wait for anyone."

"I understand."

He nodded then headed towards the gated entrance.

"Seth."

He stopped, turning towards her.

"Thank you," she said, fighting back tears.

"Don't thank me yet," he warned.