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April 1859

Whittaker, Michigan

Sixteen-year-old Belle Palmer's feet burned like they were on fire. She knew the pain came from all the walking she'd been doing in the too-large boots, and that the soles of her feet were probably raw and covered with blisters, but she couldn't stop and rest. It had now been five days since slave catchers had descended on their small party of Kentucky runaways, and Belle and her pa had been separated in the bedlam that followed as everyone ran for their lives. Five days of sleeping on the ground; five days of eating whatever she could find in the fields; and five days of being lost and alone. She'd come North looking for freedom and found only the freedom to starve. With no idea where she was or how to find someone she could trust, she had no choice but to keep moving. The White man who'd guided them into Michigan told them all what to look for should a disaster occur. Folks friendly to escaped slaves hung colored quilts out on their clotheslines; other houses had little Black-faced jockeys out front, and if the lantern in the jockey's hand was lit, it meant fugitives were welcomed. Belle had passed many farmhouses but had seen no such signs.

She'd also committed to memory the secret phrases Underground Railroad conductors sometimes asked to determine if a runaway was indeed who they claimed to be. She remembered all the corresponding answers but couldn't find anyone to ask her the questions.

The early April weather had turned colder last night. She pulled her threadbare coat tighter and forced back the tears filling her eyes from the agony in her feet. Her ugly, homespun trousers were no match for the Michigan chill and she shivered in the gray dawn air. She thought about home and what she'd be doing if she hadn't come North. She'd be just getting up from her pallet on the floor in her mistress's room and seeing to breakfast. Belle tried not to think about food because her stomach ached with emptiness.

The sudden sound of wagon wheels made Belle quickly seek cover in the thick undergrowth beside the narrow dirt road. Hidden by the weeds she prayed whoever it was would drive on by. Her heart was beating so loudly she just knew the sound of it could be heard back home.

"Hey, you, boy. Come on out."

The male voice froze her. She'd been seen. What should she do? Maybe if she didn't show herself the man on the wagon would think he'd only imagined seeing someone and move on.

"We know you're in there," called another voice— female this time. "We won't hurt you."

To Belle's ears, the girl sounded young.

"I'll bet you're hungry," the male voice added. "We can get you something to eat."

Belle found that offer so tempting she almost stood right then and there, but held off. Suppose they were slave catchers, she asked herself. Although she didn't remember hearing of any catchers who rode with young women, this was the North and maybe such things occurred here.

"It's going to get colder and colder today," the man pointed out. "Wouldn't you rather be someplace warm?"

Belle wanted that, too. Her nights of sleeping on the ground had taken their toll. Her clothes were filthy, her body, as well. She was tired, sore and sick to death of being lost alone in this strange land. For a few moments more she pondered his offers, then decided she didn't care if they were catchers or not; she just wanted to stop running.

Bolstered by the last of her courage, Belle stood to meet her fate. To her surprise, the young man and girl had brown skin just like hers. They were Colored, she saw with astonished eyes, and were more finely dressed than anyone she knew back home. The man had on a well-tailored brown suit, his female companion a simple gray cloak and matching bonnet that fit her as if it had never belonged to someone else.

He was walking in the brush toward her and even as Belle took a wary few steps backward, she realized he couldn't be but a few years older than she. He was handsome, too. The dark brown skin and matching eyes made up a face that had very pleasant features. "I won't hurt you," he assured her in a gentle voice. "What's your name?"

"Belle."

His brown eyes assessed her dirty face beneath her battered hat, and then her filthy, ill-fitting clothes. "That's a funny name for a boy."

She almost took offense, but being tall and thin, and dressed like a boy, she said instead, "Yes, it is, but I'm a girl."

He had the decency to look chagrined. "Sorry, miss." He then asked, "Are you seeking deliverance?"

Belle paused. It was one of the secret questions. Even though Belle knew how to respond she hesitated because the guide also warned them to be extremely cautious when approached by strangers; some folks, both Black and White, preyed upon runaways for monetary gain.

But with nothing left to lose, Belle replied, "Yes. Is deliverance near?"

He assessed her for a long moment more before offering, "Yes, it is."

Belle wanted to drop to her knees and weep with joyful relief. She knew he could see the sheen of tears in her eyes, but he left her her dignity by not calling attention to them.

"My name is Daniel Best and that's my sister, Josephine, back there on the wagon."

Belle looked out at the girl who seemed to be carefully scanning the road ahead and behind, then heard her call out, "Come on, Dani. Bring him along before we're seen."

"He's a *she*, Jo," her brother called back.

Josephine responded with a contrite, "Sorry, miss."

Daniel then told Belle, "My sister's right. This is a well-used road and we need to get you to safety."

"Where?"

"Our house for now. My parents will know what to do. Come on," he said kindly.

Discreetly wiping at the tears on her face, Belle followed him back to the wagon where his sister offered up a winning smile. "Hello, I'm Josephine. Most people call me Jojo." Jojo was small and dark skinned. Long black sausage curls dangled from beneath the edges of her gray bonnet.

"Hello, Jojo. I'm Belle."

"Hello, Belle. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Well, I'm twelve, and Daniel's eighteen. He thinks he's a man."

"Quiet down, pest, and move over so she can get in."

Belle watched with amazement when Daniel pushed aside a few large bales of hay and opened a trapdoor in the bed of the wagon.

"It has a false bottom," he explained. "It's not very big or comfortable, but you can hide in here until we get safely home."

Belle looked at the space. It did look rather small, but she didn't think twice. She removed her hat, placed it on her stomach, and squeezed into the coffinlike space. There was just enough room for a thin person like herself to lie flat as long as she placed her arms tight against her body. She could feel cool air coming into the box. Knowing she'd be able to breathe made her relax.

Daniel asked, "Are you ready?"

Belle, lying flat on her back, looked up at him and nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'm going to close the door and put the bales back on top. We'll be home in under an hour."

"Thank you," Belle whispered genuinely.

"You're welcome."

With that said, the lid closed, plunging Belle into darkness.

It was a bumpy, jostling ride. After only a few minutes, Belle wanted to turn over and make herself more comfortable, but it was impossible; she was for all intents and purposes stuck like a too-fat duck in a too-small roaster. To take her mind off of her discomfort, she forced herself to think of other things. Where was her father? she wondered. Did he manage to escape, too, or had he and the others been caught by the slave catchers? Was he out wandering the countryside searching for her? She was terribly worried about him. He'd face dire consequences if he had been caught and sent back South because he'd run before. He could be sold, beaten or even killed for attempting to give her a better life. Her biggest fear was that she'd never see him again. Belle didn't want to cry because she couldn't raise her arms to wipe away her tears, but there in the dark, the tears came anyway.

The wagon came to a halt a while later. Still hidden, Belle hoped they were at their destination because the narrow space seemed to be shrinking and pressing in on her from every side. To her relief, she heard footfalls on the bed above, and then Daniel's voice.

"We'll have you out in just a minute, miss."

True to his word the door opened and Belle's eyes closed with relief. Daniel offered a hand out. Belle twisted herself until she could raise her arms, then grabbed hold. His grip was strong and sure; his skin warm against her own. Moments later, she was free, and he helped her down from the wagon as if she were a princess instead of a runaway he'd found hiding in the brush.

"Come on, Belle," Jojo called. "You have to meet Mama. Papa's away at a convention."

Belle forced her attention away from the handsome Daniel, now undoing the tack from the horses, then followed Jojo into the house.

They entered by way of the kitchen. A wary Belle looked around at the small, homey space with its cupboards, sink and sideboard of china, and found the interior no different from kitchens back home. How would Jojo's parents receive her, though? Would they really take her in?

Jojo said, "Come on, Belle. Mama's going to be so pleased. We never had a girl here before."

Belle swallowed her trepidation and once again let Jojo lead the way. The kitchen led to a parlor of sorts that had drapes on the windows and a large blue upholstered settee with a beautifully crocheted doily across the back. Having been owned by a seamstress, Belle knew fine needlework when she saw it, and the long, oblong piece definitely fit that definition.

"Mama, this is Belle."

Jojo's voice snapped Belle's attention back. She found herself looking into a pair of kind brown eyes reminiscent of Daniel's. She was a tall, gracefully thin woman, and had a smile that allayed all Belle's fears. Just seeing her made Belle know for certain that yes, she was finally safe. She dashed away more relieved tears, not wanting Jojo's mama to think she was a weak sniveler.

"Welcome to our home, Belle."

Belle nodded, then said politely, "Thank you."

"You're all alone?"

"Now I am, ma'..."