



*Dina's Discovery* by Monique Duncan

Before the sun rose, when the sky was a deep, deep blue, Dina crept along the edge of the manor. She searched for a plant with large hairy leaves and purple flowers shaped like bells.

Wild comfrey didn't grow back home, but searching for it conjured up memories of long walks with Nana and lessons about healing plants. Nana knew the shape of every leaf and the smell of every herb. She healed open wounds, broken bones and sometimes even hearts. Nana had a special gift and she knew that Dina had it too.

Soon Dina spotted a few green clumps along the riverbank. She yanked handfuls from the damp, grassy ground and stared at the purple flowers that drooped from their stalks. Purple had always been Dina's favorite color. It bloomed in the meadows behind her village back home. It streaked the sky when the sun set. It wrapped around her shoulders when she listened to Nana sing, as she braided her hair for the very last time.

"What are you doing out here?" a familiar voice called from behind.

Dina's heart skipped.

"Answer me, girl!" The voice grew louder and was as sharp as a blade.

"I-I'm just gathering these leaves f-for Mr. Philipse, sir." Dina stuttered. "I-I'm getting his medicine ready for when h-he returns." Dina always stumbled over her words around Mr. Jansen.

"Why are you all the way out here?" he said.

Dina's hands shook as the overseer came closer.

"Th-there were n-no more in the garden," she said.



“Well, hurry up and get back. You have

work to do on the manor.” Mr. Jansen’s eyes pierced through Dina.

She nearly dropped the plants as she rushed back to the house.

There in the lower kitchen, Susan and Abigail churned butter.

“Why are you up?” Dina whispered. “You need to rest your ankle.”

“Don’t pity me,” Susan said. Her dark, sunken eyes held a familiar glow. They were just like Nana’s—full of strength and love.

“I have your medicine,” Dina said.

Dina stripped the flowers and rinsed the leaves. With a small stone, she mashed them into bits, adding a few drops of water at a time. Susan hobbled over to help.

Dina knew that it was no use going back and forth with Susan. The old woman may have been wrinkled and gray, but her will was stronger than steel. Besides, it was Susan who taught her that mashing comfrey into a thick paste mended wounds. It was Susan who cradled her at night and wiped her tears, when she first came to Philipsburg Manor. It was Susan who loved a scared young girl from the other side of the world, when her Nana couldn’t. Now Dina was a young woman, who looked for every opportunity to return Susan’s love.

Susan finally sat down and lifted her leg up on a wooden bench. Dina spread the green paste on Susan’s swollen ankle and wrapped it in cloth.

“Rest for a while,” she said. “I’ll tend to the rest of the chores with Abigail.”

Susan closed her eyes. The sun poured through the window.

Another day had dawned, bringing with it a flurry of early-morning activities. While Dina and Abigail worked in the house, Massy and Sue washed clothes by the river. Sampson and



Kaiser plowed the fields, and Caesar operated the

gristmill. It was business as usual at the Upper Mills.

By the afternoon, Dina went to the garden to check on Billy and Charles.

“How’s your hand doing Billy?” Dina asked.

Billy waived his bandaged hand in the air. “It’s much better now, thanks to you,” he said.

Dina smiled.

“I have something for you, Charles,” she said.

She handed him a cup of tea.

“The sage will help your aches and pains.”

Dina grabbed some vegetables from the garden. Before she headed back to the house, she stopped by the barn to get some fresh milk. As she crouched down next to a cow, a young man rose from behind a tall stack of hay in a dark corner of the barn.

Fear fluttered in Dina’s stomach. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I mean no harm,” said the stranger. “I’m from the city, just trying to get to my family.

“A runaway?” whispered Dina.

“Please, I hurt my hand and I’m hungry.”

Dina’s heart raced. “We don’t need this kind of trouble,” she said.

The young man held out his hand. Dina looked at the deep gash across it.

“Stay right here,” she sighed, then ran back to the house.

“You look like you saw a ghost,” said Susan.

“There’s an injured man in the barn,” Dina panted. “He’s trying to find his family.”

“A runaway?” gasped Abigail.

“He needs one of my special treatments,” said Dina.



Susan took a deep breath. “Be quick and

careful,” she warned.

“But—” Abigail said.

Susan shot Abigail a silencing glare and instructed her to finish cooking Mr. Jansen’s supper.

“Make his plate and keep him distracted for as long as you can,” she said.

By now the sun had set and dusk settled over the manor. Dina rushed to the barn with her healing paste, bandages, food and water. Susan kept watch from the house.

“Here, eat fast,” Dina said.

She handed the young man a few rolls with butter. Then she spread the healing paste on his wounded hand and wrapped it in a linen cloth.

“Wear this for a few days.”

In the dimly lit barn, Dina locked eyes with the runaway.

“I don’t know if you’re brave or a fool,” she said. “You could lose your life.”

The young man’s gaze matched hers. “What kind of life can I live in bondage?”

“So you don’t care about dying?” Dina continued.

“I want to die a *free* man.”

The young man’s words hung in the air. Like a ghost, as soon as darkness filled the sky, he disappeared.

What did it mean to be free? Dina could hardly remember. As she stood in the lower kitchen, the stranger’s words haunted her.

“Don’t you want to be free?” she asked Susan.

The old woman looked at Dina for a long while.



“My freedom was left on the red soil they

snatched me from,” said Susan. “When they shackled my arms and ankles, and threw me on a ship for eternity, my freedom was gone.”

Susan’s words were all too familiar to Dina.

“I couldn’t breathe on that ship. I was so sick from the smells and the nightmares—only God knows how I survived.”

Susan’s eyes stared off to a faraway place. A pale gray washed over her chestnut cheeks.

“We toiled this strange, new land by hand,” Susan continued. We built the mill, the barn, the church and this very house. We built this cage and learned to live in it.”

Dina’s face drooped.

“Pick up your face,” said Susan. “My body may never be free again, but where there is love, there is a special kind of freedom.”

Susan cupped Dina’s face in her hands and looked her straight in her eyes.

“No one can shackle my heart.”

As Susan’s words settled, Dina thought of all the people she loved and who loved her. She picked up Susan’s ankle and lay it across her leg. She slowly unwrapped the cloth bandage and cleaned off the green paste on Susan’s ankle. Then she rubbed it with a healing oil that she made from lavender roots.

In the stillness of the room, as Dina stared at the old woman, she knew that her heart was unbound and free.



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