

Ryann

A novella by Paul Dorset

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CHAPTER 1

Ryann flattened herself against the cold stone wall and closed her eyes. "Don't say anything," she whispered to herself as the crack of the whip could be heard once more from the other side of the curtain.

A young girl screamed out in pain, and a man's voice could be heard laughing. "Now that'll teach you. Just stay still will you and it'll all be over soon enough."

Ryann wanted to cover her ears but dare not move in case she gave her position away. Again she heard the crack of the whip and the crying, screaming, noise the girl made as the whip found its mark. "Just don't say anything."

She knew she shouldn't have wandered into the bedroom, but she had been curious. That was all. And it had been typical of Megan to follow after her. At least she supposed it was Megan. As soon as Ryann had heard the movement outside the room, she had quickly run to hide behind the curtain. And then, not twenty seconds later, Megan had been discovered. Ryann heard the pleading as the young man muttered something under his breath. And then she heard the familiar sound of a whip cracking and a girl screaming out loud. It could only be the master, Lord Cala. He was the only one that had a whip. Or his son. Of course it had to be his son. And that meant it would be even worse. No, she definitely had to remain as still as possible

and hope she was not discovered.

Another two screams and it was all over. The room fell quiet except for the silent sobbing of the girl. Ryann dared to lift her hand to her face and she bit into it, stopping herself from shouting out. She waited another couple of minutes and carefully peered around the edge of the long velvet curtain. Megan was lying face down on the bed with her simple dress half-torn, exposing her bare back. Ryann counted five deep cuts where the whip had found its mark. She wiped away a tear from her eye and crossed over to Megan. She bent over the shivering girl, reached out a hand, and whispered to her. "Come on, let's get you back to your room. Come on." Ryann carefully helped the young girl to her feet and let Megan lean into her as they walked together through the corridors, back toward their quarters.

"Twenty," Ryann repeated to herself as she counted the marks she had scratched out on the wall. She had made Megan as comfortable as possible in her bed and then returned to her own room. "Twenty." She slumped to the floor and turned her head so that her face touched the cold stone wall. Then she closed her eyes and savored the feeling of refreshing coolness.

Twenty copper coins was not a lot of money, but it was enough to exchange for her first silver coin. She smiled. Her first silver coin. Another nineteen and she could buy her freedom and leave the castle. How long would it take? She didn't know. She tried to do some calculations in her head but there were so many variables. She earned fifteen copper coins a week as a sclava for Lord Cala. But it cost her five copper coins for her room and the food she ate. Then there was the cost of new clothes from time to time. And also the cost of any punishments.

Ryann balled up her fists and tried to let the memory of Megan's beating wash over her. It would probably cost Megan three coins for her disobedience. And it would have cost Ryann

too, if she had been found. She sighed. She ought to give Megan one of her copper coins toward her punishment. That would make it nineteen left and then she wouldn't have enough for her first silver coin.

"Maybe a year," she said out loud. Maybe she would have enough money saved up after another year. If she was lucky and if she was careful. She prayed she would be lucky. She didn't want to end up like some of the other sclavas who were stuck in the castle for life, never able to pay off their debts.

Ryann got to her feet and wandered back to Megan's room and looked inside. "You alright?"

Megan looked up from the bed, still lying on her stomach, and nodded. "I'll be okay."

Ryann crossed over to Megan and sat next to her on the bed. "I'm sorry I haven't got anything I can put on your back. But maybe cook will have something a little later." Ryann wiped her hand across Megan's face and brushed back some hair from Megan's eyes. "Thank you. Thank you for not giving me away."

Megan gave a half-smile. "You would've done the same for me."

"That doesn't make it any easier. You know that. And next time don't follow me. You're too young to get into trouble like this."

"I just want to be free and to get out of the castle," Megan whispered. "I hate it here."

"I know you do. I hate it too. We all hate it. But getting into trouble just means it will take you longer to buy your freedom."

"We ain't never going to buy our freedom, Ree. Not ever."

Ryann ran a hand through Megan's hair. "Hush. Don't say that, Megan. It's the only way I get through every day here. I live in the hope that one day, one day, I'll earn enough money to buy my freedom."

Ryann opened her eyes and looked around her. She had fallen asleep in Megan's room. She carefully got up and made her way back to her own room, leaving Megan asleep on the straw bed. Someone had lit the candle that was sitting on a box by the side of her bed, and Ryann went over to it and picked it up. Using the dim light for guidance, she crossed to the small trunk that was next to the end of her bed.

She put the candle down on the floor and opened the trunk. Inside was a tattered yellow nightdress, two dark brown dresses, and a small assortment of odds and ends she had managed to keep for herself. She pulled off her dress and slipped the yellow nightdress over her head. Then she closed the trunk and laid out the dress across the top. It would have to do for another day's use tomorrow.

As Ryann bent down to pick up the candle again, the seam of her nightdress strained and split open, causing her to curse out loud. "Damn, that's another piece of clothing I'm going to have to buy." She hadn't wanted to admit it, but she was growing out of everything. All of a sudden over the past few months she had needed new everything. She was sure she was already a full six inches taller than when she had arrived at the castle. "If only I could lose a little of my tummy too," she said, patting it as she walked back toward her bed. "Still, I think it's smaller than it was when I arrived. It must be the food." She laughed. "Or lack of it, certainly. A growing girl needs more than I am getting. Maybe I should use a little of my money to buy some more food from cook." Cook always wanted to earn a little extra money.

Ryann put the candle back on the small box and climbed into her hard bed. It was no more than a straw-filled sack that lay on the floor, covered with another sack for a sheet, but it was hers. Everything in the room was hers. She blew out the candle and ran her fingers through her tangled long black hair. Perhaps she

would get a chance to wash it tomorrow. Perhaps. She lived in hope of a lot of things happening tomorrow.

As Ryann struggled against the sleep that was trying to take her, she said her prayers and thanked God for the few things she had. When Lord Cala had brought her to his castle she had only the dress she was wearing and a small pack that contained the memories of her childhood. It seemed like forever ago now, but only a couple of months had passed. Everything she had known before coming here had gone. Now she was a sclava, and she would remain a sclava for as long as it took her to pay the twenty silver coins needed for her freedom.

She wiped a tear from her eye and turned over on her bed. And that was just how much money she needed to leave. She also needed money to survive outside of the castle. No one could live in Walthern without any money. Cook had whispered to Ryann that she had forty silver coins saved up, but even that wasn't enough to buy her freedom and survive outside for very long. And Ryann didn't want to live as a beggar. At least in the castle she had enough to survive; a small room to call her own, a few clothes, and food every day. She thanked God once more and then resigned herself to sleep.

"Wake up, Ree," Megan said, shaking Ryann's shoulders. "Wake up. It's already nearly light."

Ryann opened her eyes and stared up at the small frame of Megan leaning over her bed. "How are you feeling?"

Megan smiled. "I slept well enough. I just hurt some. That's all. Cook already smeared a little of her special grease on it though."

Ryann wrinkled her nose. "I can smell it from here."

Megan laughed. "Come on. We got things we need to do."

Ryann brushed some hair away from her face, wiped her mouth, and sat up. She could see the faintest glow of daybreak through a small crack in the wall on the far side of her room. "Okay. I'll be in the kitchen in a couple of minutes. I just need to get myself sorted."

"Well don't be long, Ree. You know cook don't like it when you're late."

Ryann watched as Megan turned and left her room. She pulled back the sack that covered her, and got to her feet. She took her dress from the top of the trunk and made her way to the washing room.

"What's for breakfast, cook?" Ryann asked, a few minutes later as she walked into the kitchen.

"There's no time for that, little one," cook replied, mopping her brow with her apron and blowing away hair that was hanging down over her face. "Master Bramwel has already called for his breakfast."

Ryann swallowed hard and looked around the kitchen. "Isn't there someone else who can attend to him?" she asked.

"He called for you, especially," cook replied. "Asked for the *little urchin Ryann*. Those were his exact words." She pointed to a tray on a table-top a few feet away. "So hurry along and take that up to the Master. And don't drop nothing. He'll have you whipped."

Ryann crossed to the table and picked up the tray. It was going to be a bad day today. She knew it already. When Master Bramwel, the son of Lord Cala, asked you to bring him breakfast, you knew it was going to be a bad day. She just hoped he spared her the whip.